

Dynamic Research Support for Academic Libraries (ed Starr Hoffman)

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Overview

In this lively and diverse account of the broadening role of research support in academic libraries, editor Starr Hoffman makes the case for libraries to think collaboratively and creatively in a rapidly changing environment. In the preface, she argues that all sizes and kinds of academic libraries are shifting to broader forms of research support, 'research' being taken to refer to a wide variety of scholarship across all disciplines. The book sets out to consider new models of research support, and to inspire practitioners to think more deeply about how we identify, and then successfully meet, the needs of our particular user base. In this, the contributors have done a good job.

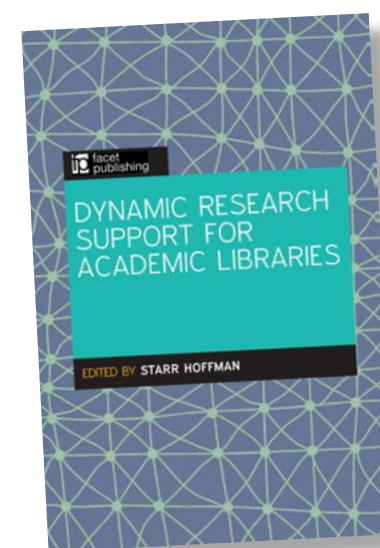
Layout and approach

The book is divided into three parts: Training and infrastructure; Data services and data literacy; and Research as a conversation. An introduction to each part lays out the theme or theory of that section, and is followed by several case studies, providing illustrative examples of new models of research support.

This approach works well: in addition to setting out the core points, the introductions serve to inspire creativity and questioning around how academic libraries function. The case studies are taken from libraries around the world, representing a variety of experiences, and include practical information around decision-making processes, project development and implementation.

'A vision for supporting research'

Starr Hoffman's excellent introduction is recommended reading. Entitled 'A vision for supporting research', she writes about the expanding and changing nature of research support. This is relevant for all academic libraries, regardless of size; 'research' should be thought of at its broadest level, 'the pursuit or creation of new knowledge' (p xii). She writes compellingly about the need to encourage a 'culture of exploration' where library professionals feel free to experiment with new ideas, technologies, and methods of support. So, too, must we begin to see 'risk as positive' – if a project fails, we must see it as an opportunity to learn, adjust and try something new. In the dynamic research environment, responsiveness to our users' needs is vital, where we adapt our services as needed. Hoffmann connects the process of response and risk to assessment of our services and their effectiveness. Assessment should be less a circle, and more a spiral – as we collect data on the usage and benefits (or otherwise) of our services, we continually evolve.



In the light of these new, heightened expectations, how does the academic library organise and manage their resources sustainably? Starr argues we must replace the mantra of 'doing more with less' with 'doing less, deeper' where we focus on our specific strengths, and prioritise what we do based on user needs, and rigorous self-assessment.

This approach serves as a backdrop to the book as a whole.

Approach

'Training and infrastructure' covers issues of library infrastructure and training librarians for new support models. Consideration of the unique needs of a particular user community is emphasised.

'Data services and data literacy' explores research data management practices, a topic deserving of more attention in the literature. The case studies here focus on the importance of showing students real-world usage of data in the wider world, in research and decision-making and in policy formulation.

Starr Hoffmann writes another excellent introduction to the section 'Research as a conversation'. That idea – that knowledge is created on the solid foundation of pre-existing research – is not new, but is ever-relevant. Libraries have always supported key elements of this process – now, developments in open access have provided many different ways that libraries can support new research. Information literacy skills have become ever-more important in the discovery and education process, and new delivery models are needed which assist users at their point-of-need.

The case studies are diverse, with an international focus and a broad range of projects covered. They include developing a new model for Mexican libraries, the Biblioteca Digital Ovidiana project in Spain (<http://ovidiuspictus.es>), training researchers in managing data for better results and longer-term access, supporting GIS in non-traditional disciplines, open access initiatives and metadata enhancement through name authority in the UNT Digital Library (<https://digital.library.unt.edu/about/digital-library/>).

The case studies serve to give practical examples related to the themes introduced in the section introductions. At times, I felt some of the more detailed case studies were hard to fully engage with unless you worked in that area.

Assessment

I greatly enjoyed this book, in particular the well-crafted and engaging introductions. There was much on which to reflect, and prompt new ways of thinking and working in the library sector. A particular strength of this title is its broad appeal to any library engaged in research support.

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