The Future of Latin American Library Collections and Research

Acosta-Rodríguez, Fernando

Published by Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/100442

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3439676
Keynote Address
It is a great honor for me to have the opportunity to speak to you today, to return to my roots here in SALALM, where I have made many lasting friendships with library and bookdealer colleagues from whom I have learned so much over the years. Perhaps I can give a little bit back with my remarks today. I hope so.

It is wonderful to note that SALALM has been alive and well for fifty-five years. During these five-plus decades, change has been our constant companion, and one of SALALM’s many strengths has been the organization’s—and its members’—capacity to recognize change, regroup and adapt to it, and to incorporate change into its character and mission. The ambitious agenda for this meeting clearly demonstrates the breadth of interests and expertise among the membership and highlights the many opportunities ahead.

Today I would like to talk with you about changes and challenges I see from my current perspective as the University Librarian and Vice Provost for Library Affairs at Duke University. The title of my presentation is derived from the many times I have been asked if we “still need libraries,” or if “we should change the name” to reflect more accurately what happens in libraries these days. My response is always the same: that it has nothing to do with the word “library” and everything to do with how we define that word and how the definition has changed, particularly in the past decade. The old interpretation of “library” was narrow; the new meaning is very broad, and our mission is expanding all the time. So it is time to take a fresh look at the work of libraries and discard the old image.

First, I want to share some information on trends in area studies that I have collected in preparation for two recent public presentations: the first to the Council on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) at the meeting of the Asian Studies Association, as part of a panel on “The Future of Foreign Language Collections in Transformational Times: What is at Stake?” and, second, to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) membership in a session on “Recalibrating Research Libraries’ Approaches to Global Collections and Expertise.” In both cases, I was reporting on and interpreting dynamics that come to bear on area studies librarianship and global resources. I hope that the conclusions I drew from my preparation for those presentations, and from the comments they elicited, will
be of interest. I will also offer some advice and raise some questions that might inform a conversation among us later.

I will discuss some general trends. WorldCat may be an imperfect tool, but an analysis of its contents can give some indication as to trends in collecting area studies materials among the member libraries. In the two previous talks I mentioned, entitled “Are Our Worries Over? Signs of Hope for International Collections and Services,” and “Are We There Yet? Trends in Global Collections and Services,” I provided an update on the state of area studies collecting, particularly following the establishment of the Global Resources Program at ARL, now the Global Resources Network hosted by the Center for Research Libraries (CRL). The conclusions I drew in those presentations have relevance for SALALM and for today’s discussion, so I will share some of them with you today.

As I told the CEAL audience, for some time the area studies library community has worried that area studies materials are under-collected by research libraries and used by relatively few researchers, and thus even further threatened as budgets tighten, measures of use (potential or actual) negatively influence collection development decisions, and libraries make an inevitable transition to ever-increasing reliance on digital resources. Furthermore, there is concern that the specialists who identify, acquire, process, and create access to such materials are in short supply, and the pipeline is very narrow. Fears that future scholars who want to use non-English resources will find only sparse collections have added urgency to our mission to address this situation. As a result of these concerns, and thanks to the efforts of many individuals, numerous cooperative projects have been created and have borne fruit in many cases. We know much more now than we ever have about the nature of our collections. We have employed technology to build robust new means of access, and we are doing a much better job of sharing the materials we have. However, there is still a nagging sense that we are falling behind, that area studies collections will be lost in the transformation to a digital world.

Now we have new worries about the rising costs of access to electronic information, and especially the impact on our ability to continue to acquire traditional (print) resources. We are concerned about the availability of full-text databases—whether they are being developed for, or in, all countries, on compatible platforms, and how they will be archived. We see faculty turning to new kinds of resources, for example, new media and visual materials, and we wonder how to acquire or license and provide ongoing access to those sources, which are proving to be increasingly important to the broad field of cultural studies and beyond. Research and teaching interests have expanded greatly, and interdisciplinary collaborations are also putting pressure on the ability of libraries to satisfy the wide-ranging needs of scholars and students, ever more quickly. New topics and new technologies: how do we keep track of it all, identify the sources, and pay for everything? Also, there is the duality of our
world, in which we continue to acquire print materials and primary resources while dedicating more of our funds to licensing digital access. We worry that our parent institutions do not fully appreciate our cause, our needs, and our concerns in the larger budget struggles.

I understand the worries because I used to be a worrier. I was a major worrier about the crisis in foreign acquisitions, but it is time to put those old concerns aside and to focus on the successes we have had in expanding access to scholarly resources, capitalizing on technological means, and carving out a broader role for area studies. It is also important to ensure that area studies library operations are front and center in the new directions research libraries are taking. The future is bright and the opportunities are numerous. Here are some trends I see. Even some of those worries can work to our advantage.

From the crisis in foreign acquisitions, addressed by the Global Resources Network and its component projects, including the Latin Americanist Research Resources Project (LARRP), have come many digital projects that put area studies at the forefront of new developments that expand access for scholars to the materials they need, and which also strengthen the collaborations that have long characterized Latin American studies librarianship. This is especially important in the transition from print to digital, as we participate in the development of new models of digital dissemination. The area studies library community has provided leaders for these initiatives and has developed, and continues to develop, models that have broader applicability.

From the image of few users of exotic materials in strange languages, area studies has been transformed by interests of faculty from across the disciplines whose work involves new topics, new media, and new collaborations. Area studies specialists are the original interdisciplinarians, after all, a fact that should be emphasized at a time when so many universities are making interdisciplinarity a strategic goal of academic programs. This is an opportunity to address a different set of needs and to work closely with other subject specialists and vendors.

Universities are globalizing and encouraging cross-departmental, cross-school, and interinstitutional collaborations with an international focus, such as global health. More and more universities are establishing campuses abroad. This highlights the collections on Latin America and other regions as well as giving us opportunities to work with new and different groups of faculty and students.

The potential for increased outsourcing—of cataloging, for example—provides libraries with the opportunity to reallocate resources and deploy staff in new ways, while strengthening the relationships with book vendors who are providing new, valuable services.

Area studies collections are special collections. Foreign-language collections are integral to research libraries. It is our duty to collect broadly, to support the needs of researchers, and to consider the scholarly record internationally.
As libraries focus on expanding access to their distinctive collections via digitization projects, area studies will become more visible.

Finally, university librarians are paying attention. The theme of the ARL meeting in late April 2010 was “Globalization of Higher Education and Research Libraries” and featured presentations with a global focus on intellectual property, scholarly communication, partnerships across borders, multicountry universities, and other topics. The panel on which I participated, “Recalibrating Research Libraries’ Approach to Global Resources,” addressed such questions as the following: Are ARL libraries going to continue to build comprehensive collections of global publications and resources from all world areas? Is this an element that defines the research library in relation to the academic and research programs at our institutions? Are there opportunities for new forms of collaboration in the acquisition, cataloging, housing, use, and preservation of our global collections? How are we going to recruit the staff who have the subject, language, cultural, and technical skills to support global collection development? In addition, ARL has established a new task force to determine ways in which the organization can become more international. These are all good signs.

In his invitation to speak, Fernando Acosta-Rodríguez asked that I share some “big picture reflections.” I believe that our new Duke University Libraries strategic plan, *Sharpening Our Vision*, can help focus those reflections. The plan is a concise framework, carefully and thoughtfully constructed, that contains/supports the key elements of the work of research libraries today. I am sure it is similar to the strategic directions of other libraries. These dynamics are pervasive, and Latin American studies librarians will see a role for themselves in each area. I would suggest that we look for more ways to integrate our work with that of others, rather than maintaining a distance. In many ways, the organizational chart is just a bureaucratic convenience. Through cross-departmental and cross-unit engagement, libraries, like universities, avoid silos; our work within the library and within the wider university is increasingly collaborative, as it has long been within SALALM interinstitutionally and internationally. This is evident from a brief examination of Duke’s strategic goals, and this look will also convey the relevance of my subtitle today: change, adaptation, transformation.

**Improve the User Experience:** Understand library users’ research and library experiences and use that information to shape collections, spaces, and services.

Evaluating and assessing library services are increasingly important for justifying budget expenditures and for improving those services. The better we understand what users want and how they do their work, the more successful we will be in meeting those needs—and thus in demonstrating the value libraries add to the research process and student learning. Acting quickly to improve services, basing recommendations on data when possible, and encouraging
innovation will all ensure that the library, its staff, and their responsiveness are recognized and appreciated.

**Provide Digital Content, Tools, and Services:** Offer services and scholarly resources in formats that best fit user needs.

It is a priority to increase the library’s capacity to create, acquire, and manage digital scholarly content in a diverse range of formats, as well as to facilitate its discovery. Digital content in some cases is replacing print (journals, for example) and, in others, content is reformatted to be more widely accessible through digital means.

**Develop New Research and Teaching Partnerships:** Encourage new strategies for interacting and working with users, collaborating with other groups, and embedding staff and services at the right place in users’ workflows.

Whether through e-science, e-scholarship, or e-publishing initiatives, librarians have many opportunities to partner with faculty, departments, programs, and institutes on campus to develop innovative projects and services. This is a new and welcome role. It offers a vantage point from which to understand how the library might configure or reconfigure its services, and how individual librarians and library staff might become more directly engaged with users. It also encourages cross-departmental collaborations within the library and a flexible organizational model.

**Support University Priorities:** Articulate how the libraries’ collections, services, and initiatives align with the university priorities of excellence in research and teaching, internationalization, interdisciplinarity, and knowledge in the service of society.

As University Librarian, it is critically important to me that the library be seen as the intellectual center of the campus, and that our collections and services transparently and actively support the university’s directions. The better we understand those priorities, the more we can reflect them in our work, our planning, and our external communications.

**Enhance Library Spaces:** Ensure that the libraries’ physical spaces are developed in coordination with the evolution of the teaching and research needs of the university.

In addition to the question of whether we should change the name “library,” another I am frequently—even more frequently—asked is whether we still need physical libraries. I can only speak directly for Duke, where many more people than ever are coming to the libraries and staying longer. Our extensive building and renovation project, in which we nearly doubled our space, resulted in a dramatic increase in visits and also in the number of print books being checked out, a fact that for some reason comes as a surprise to many folks. We are always watching for ways to adapt the space; for example, given the heavy emphasis on interdisciplinary work and a reliance on more e-resources in the sciences, we integrated three science branches into the main library, one each summer, over the past three years.
In conclusion, to me the big picture for libraries looks like this:

• increasing engagement for staff beyond the physical walls of the library—within the university, the region, nationally, internationally

• staying on top of new trends in scholarship, publishing, and library services, and sharing that knowledge, integrating it into our work, anticipating, identifying, and adapting to changes

• increasing focus on assessment and accountability

• encouraging and rewarding creativity, innovation, and collaboration

• increasing focus on “going where the user is”—for example, delivery to mobile devices

• not being afraid of trying new things, even if they might fail—we will learn from the experience

• viewing collections not as print and digital, but just collections, integrated means of conveying information and sharing scholarship

• reaching the point when the most innovative ideas and services become a natural part of our daily work, not perceived as add-ons to our “regular” work

• budget pressures help identify what we can stop doing in order to do new things; early retirements gave us the opportunity to consolidate functions and reallocate positions to new services

• ensuring that staff have the requisite skills and training to meet the challenges we face

• library staff will bring diverse experiences and take different paths to library work

• library as place, library as collection

Now is a good time to take a hard look at SALALM’s stated mission, given the changes in scholarly communication, publishing, and libraries. According to the website, the mission assumes the existence of a user (of bibliographic information, publications, collections, cooperation) but does not explicitly mention a focus on the changing needs of researchers, students, and teachers and the new means by which libraries address them—all themes so evident in this meeting’s agenda. Nor does the impact of the rapidly evolving role of libraries and librarians or the expanded scope of publishers and vendors appear in SALALM’s mission, although the actual work of SALALM recognizes these changes.
As we celebrate SALALM at this 55th annual meeting, I encourage you to make sure that the mission adequately represents the organization’s achievements and aspirations, in light of the environment in which we are living and working, and that it reflects the change, adaptation, and transformation of the new definition of “library.” SALALM has much to celebrate and still more to anticipate.