Developing Future-proof Library Collections

The Case of International Baptist Theological Study Centre

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*L*IBRARIES HAVE OFTEN BEEN A CENTRAL ELEMENT IN A RESIDENTIAL COMMUNI-ty of seminary students. It is not uncommon for seminaries with on-site living arrangements to provide access to the library to residential students around the clock. Especially in facilities with shared dormitories, the library can be a haven of rest for students in search of physical space and headspace for reading, writing, and studying. Many a seminary student will have fond memories of working in peace and quiet in secluded corners in the library. By providing these arrangements, the library fulfilled its mission of providing the students that they serve with the resources they need to complete their studies.

And then the pandemic struck. Students were forced to socially distance from each other. Many libraries closed their on-site facilities and limited lending services. Sometimes students were locked down into their dormitories, or even sent home. For many this was

an unmitigated disaster. If we can identify one thing that the pandemic did for seminaries worldwide, it was to highlight the importance of digital resources for seminary students.

With the experience of the pandemic fresh in our minds, many seminary libraries have been forced into forward thinking more quickly than normally would have happened. Confronted with the problems of only having limited electronic resources, many libraries had to scramble to provide at least a rudimentary service to their students. As a result, in many libraries, a process of evaluation and strategic planning for the future has now started. As many workplaces in the Western world move towards a more blended way of working, seminary libraries will have no choice but to follow suit if they want to remain relevant. As the community of distance-learning students continues to grow, seminary libraries have received a much-needed prod from the pandemic towards more innovative and future-proof thinking.

In what follows, I will first describe how my own institution, the International Baptist Theological Study Centre (or IBTS for short), has diversified its collection by formulating separate goals for our print and electronic holdings. I will then look at the impending paradigm shift from print-centered to digital-centered collections and suggest strategic ways forward to catalyse the change that many seminary libraries see on the horizon and may have no choice but to adopt.

The Case of IBTS

Our institution said farewell to our residential community when we moved from Prague, Czech Republic, to Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in July 2014. When I started at IBTS in August 2014, we were initially very busy with just finding our feet as a newly established Dutch organisation with a wider European inheritance. As the future of the institution as a whole was getting clearer, it became obvious that changes were required in our library setup in order to serve our students well. In Prague, we had acquired a small, albeit good, selection of electronic resources, some of which were not transferable to the Netherlands due to consortium mismatches. An analysis of our patron groups showed that the library services offered to our main target group (our distance-learning doctoral students) needed some drastic changes in order to justify the existence of the print

library. What is the use of a library when it cannot serve its main target group? In the search for a solution, I encountered the Digital Theological Library, which we joined in 2016, within half a year of its going live. The DTL currently provides our students with access to over 600,000 e-books and millions of articles, a staggering number that far surpasses the amount of resources held by almost any seminary library in the world.

After having taken care of our immediate need, we still had a print collection to consider. Our distance-learning students were (and still are) well-served by the electronic holdings of the Digital Theological Library, so the print collection was looking for its own right to exist. Fortunately, our denominational affiliation and the unique international identity of our institution provided us with a clear future. Even though the Angus Library and Archives at Regent's Park College, Oxford, and the Oncken Archiv in Elstal, Germany, have collections that supersede their national contexts, we are the only truly international Baptist institution in Europe and as such can be considered to be a veritable treasure chest of Baptist studies. Even though much of our material may not be unique or rare, the fact that it is held in a single collection makes our library collection unique and rare. As such, it was a very easy choice to bask in our strengths, designate our print collection as an international Baptist research library, and use our acquisitions budget solely to enhance our niche specialty of Baptist and Anabaptist Studies. Our specialty became our strength. The reason for the continued existence of our print library is that we offer an in-depth and unique collection of materials found in no other place in Europe under one roof.

A Paradigm Shift

In the aftermath of, or perhaps still in the midst of, the pandemic, many seminary libraries will see themselves faced with the same conundrum that I encountered when I started at IBTS. Many seminary libraries, however, may be unprepared to answer the main question asked by the pandemic: How can we best serve our student community when the need for access to the print collection is no longer self-evident? The answer to this question is really quite simple, but at the same time of such magnitude that it requires a paradigm shift in seminary libraries: our electronic holdings should take the place

of print holdings and become our main resource collection for our students. This requires two major changes in a classic seminary library setup: first, we need to grow our electronic holdings exponentially and sustainably; second, we need to seriously consider the purpose of our library space and our print collection. In what follows I will consider these two changes and identify some ways forward for seminary libraries who are willing to face this impending paradigm shift that the pandemic has forced upon us.

Growing Electronic Holdings

As demand for electronic resources increases, libraries are going to run into two major hindering factors. Since we have relied on our print collections for so long, it is financially impossible for a single seminary library to duplicate its entire print collection in electronic format. In addition, copyright limitations and publisher strategies will often make it impossible to legally acquire electronic versions of required textbooks, even if the financial means were available. For both of these hindering factors, our colleagues in the field have found excellent solutions to counteract this on a large scale.

Counteracting Financial Limitations

Since electronic holdings in libraries have only existed for just a couple of decades, it is no surprise that they have not reached the same maturity as our print holdings that have often existed for many decades or even centuries. In most cases it is not possible for a single library to organise the required financial investment to bring its electronic holdings up to level with its print holdings. The only way forward is cooperation. The Digital Theological Library (DTL) is an example of what this could look like. The traditional model for a library is to license or purchase electronic material themselves directly from the publisher, making these holdings available to their own patrons. The DTL is a very different type of model: it is a born-digital library that is co-owned by a limited number of institutions. These co-owning institutions each contribute towards the annual budget that is used to fund operating costs (staff and electronic systems) and to acquire or licence electronic materials from publishers and ven-

dors. These electronic holdings are then made available to the patrons of the co-owning institutions. My own institution (IBTS) does not own electronic holdings but, because we are a co-owner of the DTL, our students have access to the entire electronic holdings it offers. The annual acquisitions budget of the DTL exceeds our full annual library budget, which only goes to show that it would have been impossible for us as a small institution to provide our patrons with access to the same amount and quality of electronic holdings as the DTL is now doing for us. Without cooperation, we would have had to seriously question the viability of our small institution for our small group of distance-learning postgraduate students.

Counteracting Copyright Limitations and Publisher Strategies

Any librarian who has ever worked in electronic acquisitions will know that publications will not always be available for library purchase. Sometimes they are tucked away in expensive packages, sometimes the publisher is not very good with offering electronic resources, sometimes a publication is too old. In the past, this meant that it was impossible to acquire this publication in electronic format for our library collection. Nowadays, fortunately, a solution has been found for this problem that works in tandem with US copyright: controlled digital lending (CDL). The principle is that a library is allowed to digitise a publication, put the print copy in permanent storage, and then circulate the digitised version in their electronic library in a controlled system, thus allowing only one electronic copy to be put on loan against every print copy held in storage. This will allow seminaries with specific denominational courses to make older and niche material available to their students in electronic format. The most conspicuous example of this is the Books To Borrow collection of the Internet Archive, which at the time of writing already contains over three million volumes and is steadily growing. The DTL has integrated CDL into their holdings and has set up a digitisation programme of their own. Discussions on the legality of CDL in a non-US context are ongoing, but the principle has been embraced by the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), who argue that "there is a strong socio-economic case for enabling Controlled Digital Lending in libraries around the world."

Repurposing Library Space and Print Collections

So, what happens to the print holdings once our electronic holdings provide our students with what they need to complete their studies successfully? This is a difficult and confrontational question in the light of the personal attachment that many seminary administrators, librarians, and students often have to their library space and print collection. If we accept the necessity of the paradigmatic shift towards making our electronic holdings the main set of resources with which we serve our mission as theological libraries, this may lead some to the point of view that a seminary does not need a library if it can tap into the collections of projects like the Internet Archive Books To Borrow section of the DTL. However much it pains a librarian to admit this, in some cases this will be the only viable option for a seminary. The print collection could be donated to the DTL or to the Internet Archive for inclusion in their CDL programmes so that the material will still remain accessible to the future students of the seminary.

However, we must not overlook the continuing strength of the library space and its quiet working spaces for a residential student community. For seminary libraries with a secure future and a largely residential community, it could be enough to adjust the balance between print and electronic acquisitions in favour of the latter and to continue to use the library space as a haven of rest where quiet study is made possible. For seminary libraries with a gradually growing and largely non-residential community, it might be wiser to limit the acquisition goals of the print collection and choose a clear focus. Some may want to focus on strengthening their reference collection, while others may want to specialise in a certain theological topic in line with their identity. The strength and weaknesses of the existing print collection should be analysed in order to identify the most relevant section or topic. If there is ample space, it might not be immediately necessary to weed the existing print collection, but it might be an intentional choice of a seminary that has chosen a clear focus for their print collection to transition older parts not consistent with the new focus into a CDL collection. Should library space be an issue, then the argument is stronger to convert stacks into study space by donating parts of the print collection to the DTL, the Internet Archive, or another CDL partner.

Conclusion

Even before the pandemic, our institution proved that it is possible and beneficial to fully embrace the described paradigm shift. International cooperation and creative thinking have substantially changed the playing field and made it possible for IBTS to have a pandemic-proof library in place even before we had contemplated the possibility of a pandemic. As the pandemic will undoubtedly fade away at some point, it would seem easy for seminary libraries with a residential student community to quickly revert to business as usual, especially since a paradigm shift is never an easy thing to live through. In many cases, it will be difficult to garner support among seminary administrators and even librarians. However, I would argue that the benefits of cooperative projects, the progressively more blended nature of Western work experiences, and the developments in education towards less residential and more distance-learning programmes will eventually force us all into this paradigm shift, whether we want to accept it or not. Since the pandemic has not been a pleasant experience for any of us, it is better to let such a paradigm shift happen on our own terms than to be caught on the back foot again. I hope that the strategic ways forward that I have sketched in this chapter will be of assistance to my colleagues worldwide as we try to come to terms with a changing library landscape in order to lead our libraries into the future.

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