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*Article*

## **The Academic Library: Cowpath or Path to the Future?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper relates the traditional academic library to the expression, “don’t pave the cowpath”. Originating in the IT world, this expression means to not integrate technology into an established practice without assessing whether the process is still effective or still needed. Even though sustaining technologies have simplified information retrieval and library tasks, library organizational structure and processes remain pretty much unchanged. This article discusses the cowpath that academic libraries have followed for decades and the challenges disruptive technologies pose to the traditional model. It looks at how one academic library rejected tradition, got off the cowpath and created a different kind of academic library—one that is innovative and fits the mission of an experimental new college.

The expression “don’t pave the cowpath,” popular in the IT world, is often interpreted to mean that technology should not be applied to an established practice without thinking about whether that process is still effective or still needed. The technological solution may be the path of least resistance, but it may not be the best way. Perhaps the process needs to be changed or even eliminated. This saying can be applied to the library world with regard to sustaining practices (i.e., practices that improve a process without changing the underlying methods) versus disruptive practices (i.e., practices that radically change or eliminate the underlying process). The library has faced significant technological changes over time, but many of the changes have been more of a sustaining nature (Lewis, 2004). For instance, libraries replaced traditional card catalogs with online MARC records that allowed for faster and easier retrieval of library information; however, these MARC records were based on the same fields used in the card catalog. This is an example of paving the cowpath. In this instance, technology was applied, but the underlying structure remained the same.

Jerry Campbell (2006) states that even with the introduction of new technology, “academic libraries have continued to operate more or less as usual” (p. 20). Lewis (2004) argues that disruptive technologies are the biggest threat to the academic library today, but these technologies are revolutionary and have the potential to blaze a new path for the academic library, whether wanted or not.

This paper first examines the theory of disruptive technology innovation and the future of the academic library and then presents an overview of a library model created specifically for an experimental new community college started in 2012 by the City University of New York (CUNY). Guttman Community College had the opportunity to start from scratch and create an innovative library services model built on the pedagogy of the school and the uniqueness of the student population. By implementing innovative technology and practices, Guttman's library hopped off the cowpath and forged its own unique path.

### **Sustaining vs. Disruptive Technologies**

There is a distinction between a sustaining technology and a disruptive technology. Christensen (as cited in Lewis, 2004) states that even though “both types [of technologies] result in change, they have different characteristics, and bring very different kinds of change” (p. 68). Lewis (2004) explains Christensen’s definition of a sustaining technology in the following way:

Sustaining technologies improve the performance of established products along dimensions of performance that mainstream customers in major markets have historically valued. Sustaining technologies improve products or processes, and they can be driven by new, and sometimes even revolutionary, technologies, but what is important is that the improvements result in accomplishing the same thing, only doing it better. (p. 68)

Sustaining technologies are an example of a cowpath, where technology was applied, but the path remains the same. According to Lewis (2004), “established organizations [e.g., the academic library] are generally good at change that involves sustaining technologies. They know the needs of their customers and how to work with and listen to them. Service models are effective because they have been refined over long periods” (p. 69).

Disruptive technologies are very different. These technologies do not improve a process or service, but in most cases actually eliminate it. Christensen (2012) explains why disruptive technologies are crippling the giants of industry (e.g., Polaroid, Digital Equipment):

The theory explains the phenomenon by which an innovation transforms an existing market or sector by introducing simplicity, convenience, accessibility and affordability where complication and high cost are the status quo. Initially, a disruptive innovation is formed in a niche market that may appear unattractive or inconsequential to industry incumbents, but eventually the new product or idea completely redefines the industry. (para. 2)

Based on Christensen's definition, the smartphone is an example of a modern disruptive technology as it is replacing the laptop and the camera. Similarly, video streaming websites, such as Netflix or HULU, have edged out traditional video rental services such as Blockbuster. According to Levie (2011), cloud technology could prove to be the ultimate disruptive innovation.

Disruptive technologies can also be found in the library world. Some say that Google is replacing the library catalog and commercial databases (Advisory Board Company, 2011). The OCLC Report “Perceptions in Libraries” (De Rosa et al., 2011) found that 83% of students start their research by using a search engine such as Google. Of the 2,229 students in the study, not one student reported using the library website (as cited in Advisory Board Company, 2011, p. 17). This one-click access available through modern search engines fits Christensen’s definition of a disruptive technology.

How will these disruptive technologies affect the traditional academic brick and mortar library? Disruptive innovation theory holds that existing, successful companies almost always lose to attackers armed with disruptive innovations, even when the new technologies are actually worse than the established ones. This is because the new disruptive technologies are often cheaper and easier to use and are available to a wider audience. Some library professionals see an abrupt end to traditional models (Advisory Board Company, 2011). This crisis for the academic library has been discussed for 30 years, but not much has happened (Campbell, 2006). The academic library is in transition mode, caught between the institutionalized past and the electronic future.

## The Library Culture and Change

Lewis (2004) says that librarians need to create a new culture. Predictions abound about the tenuous future for the academic library due to disruptive technologies and unsustainable costs (Advisory Board Company, 2011; Campbell, 1993, 2006; Breitkopf, 2012; Lewis, 2012). According to Campbell (2006), if the academic library mission is changed dramatically, there is the risk of “being vilified as cultural barbarians by the general academic community” (p. 28). Campbell (2006) states:

Perhaps because they were the guardians of authoritative knowledge, libraries became cultural icons. As much as any other human institution, they developed a mystique that symbolized knowledge, wisdom, and learning. The buildings that housed libraries were awe-inspiring architectural creations that added to the mystique, and books—with their distinctive, ancient aroma—became objects of art and reverence. Consequently, simply asking questions about the future of libraries, let alone working to transform them for the digital age, almost inevitably evokes anguished, poignant, and even hostile responses filled with nostalgia for a near-mythical institution. (p. 28)

Organizational culture refers to the basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a given group that helps the organization succeed and solve problems (Schein, 2010). Libraries have encountered many technological changes over the past few decades, but the basic organizational culture has not changed (Campbell, 2006). Many libraries today are still dominated by rows of books, a reference desk, and a circulation desk and traditional staff roles such as cataloging and acquisitions. Technology has not changed why things are done or if things should be done (Campbell, 2006). Most college and university libraries are not organized around the mission of the library, but are department and process oriented (e.g., technical service, public service, reference and instruction). In libraries, there is an adherence to tradition and decades of institutional memory that has led to a resistance to change.

Jeffrey Phillips (2010), consultant to Fortune 500 firms and author, discusses why companies do not innovate. These reasons refer to firms or businesses, but can easily be applied to libraries. Phillips says that companies do not innovate because they are too busy today with no time for innovation. There is also resistance to change. It is hard to overcome the inertia of the way things have always been done and takes too much work to relearn and unlearn. Employees may be hesitant to innovate for fear of impacting another team or even someone’s job. The result is that companies, or in this case libraries, continue to follow the cowpath, disregarding or avoiding new technology innovations that would require redefining the field.

## The Community College Library That Rejected the Cowpath

As already discussed, change and innovation are very difficult when you are dealing with a traditional institution like a college library. But, what if a college had the opportunity to start from scratch and create an innovative library built on the philosophy and pedagogy of the college? What if the predictions about the future could be heeded and implemented without fretting about tradition? What if the unwritten rules of library culture could be discarded and replaced with a fun, relaxed place designed for collaboration and social learning?

The City University of New York (CUNY) had that opportunity when it opened a new community college campus in 2012. This was the first new college for CUNY in over 40 years. The new college, Guttman Community College, looked at the research regarding the future of academic libraries and the warnings about disruptive technologies, and created the Information Commons—referred to by the students as the Commons. In fact, the students make it very clear that “this is the Commons—it is not a library.”

Located in Manhattan just a few blocks from the Empire State Building, the new college and library opened its doors to the inaugural class of 300 students in August 2012. Next year the school will double its enrollment and will continue to grow until it reaches around 5,000 students. It is hard to believe it is a college library as you walk through the high-tech Information Commons (IC) with students eating lunch, breakfast and/or dinner while working in groups with laptops at the Mediascapes (see Figure 1). The Commons had no trouble meeting the accreditation library standards, even though this library is not built on tradition, in any sense of the word.



**Figure 1.** Students working collaboratively at a Mediascape station.

## The College Model

Because the library's mission is linked to the mission of the college and to better understand the library services model, it is important to give a brief overview of the philosophy and pedagogy of the college. During the opening session of Guttman Community College<sup>1</sup>, Mayor Michael Bloomberg stated: "Helping to make this New Community College a reality fulfills a pledge I made three years ago. And in launching it today, we're creating a potentially game-changing model for community college education in New York and throughout the nation" ("Mayor Bloomberg", 2012).

The educational model was created based on research and with the goal of rethinking community college education. One of the concerns about community college education is that the student graduation rate is dismal. A report sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation stated that only 20% of students entering a community college graduate with a degree within three years (Johnson & Rochkind, 2012). In large urban schools, the rate drops to 16% and the rates are even lower at CUNY. Many students go to community college and use up all of their financial aid while racking up debt and never finish a two-year degree. In New York State, only 35% of full-time community college students get a two-year associate degree after six years and in New York City, where a much higher percentage of students qualify as low-income, the six-year graduation rate is just 29% (Hilliard, 2013).

To address this problem, Guttman Community College developed a unique, non-traditional program with the goal of increasing the three-year graduation rates to 35%. It is an experimental institution within the City University with the overarching goal to enhance student academic achievement and the timely attainment of degrees. Because Guttman is being analyzed as a possible model for community colleges nationwide, an extraordinary amount of assessment is going on at the school. In addition, Guttman Community College has received grants from numerous foundations, including the Guttman Foundation, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Foundation, and the Robin Hood Foundation.

There is a structured, proactive intake process that includes informational sessions, an interview, and a contract that students must sign to ensure that they understand the expectations of the college<sup>2</sup>. The student population is very diverse and a large percentage of the students are low-income, underprepared for college, and first generation students attracted to the college because it is an open access institution at which all applicants with a high school diploma or GED are accepted. Students must attend school full-time their first year<sup>3</sup> (even though many students still have jobs and families) and must attend a three week Summer Bridge program, which introduces the

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<sup>1</sup> The college opened in 2012 with the name The New Community College (NCC). The name was changed to Stella and Charles Guttman Community College in June 2013, after a large gift was given to the new school from the Guttman Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see the Admissions Department's website at <http://guttman.cuny.edu/admissions.html>

<sup>3</sup> See <http://guttman.cuny.edu/academics/firstyearoverview.html>

college model, team building, and study skills. The students are assigned a “Student Success Advocate” (SSA); the SSAs provide seminars for the students on how to be a successful student and are the central point of contact for counseling and advising.

With learning communities and instructional teams, Guttman provides a student-centric approach with proactive counseling support during this critical First Year Experience (FYE). The learning environment is positive, nurturing and very proactive. Each student is assigned to a Learning Community (a House) and the student stays with his or her cohort all year. The school has paid Peer Mentors (full-time students who have completed at least one year at a CUNY community or senior college). The Guttman College philosophy states that students learn best by doing and that learning is active, not passive. To facilitate the inquiry-based, hands-on approach to teaching, the classrooms have mobile furniture, laptops, and Smart Boards. Rarely does a teacher lecture at the front of the class but acts as a facilitator of classroom discussions and student reflections. Even the introduction to art is activity-based with the students exploring the wonderful museums and galleries of New York City. In addition to the learning community, there is a virtual community with the students using ePortfolio technology to practice cognitive skills, such as reflection, self-evaluation and self-presentation.

One big difference in this school compared to other community colleges is that all students immediately take regular credit-bearing courses, including students who are underprepared. Remedial help is woven into the curriculum and the support system (“The New Community College”, 2012).

Another big difference in the school is the instructional team as the center of the pedagogy. The utilization of the instructional team results in constant communication among the faculty and staff in regards to curriculum issues, student behaviors, problems, and attitudes. There are no departments and the curriculum is interdisciplinary and integrative. Each student learning community includes faculty, librarians, Student Success Advocates, and Graduate Coordinators (graduate students from the CUNY system). Curriculum issues, student progress, attendance and behaviors are discussed at these meetings. If a student misses a day of school, the proactive counseling kicks in and the student is contacted. Sometimes, all the student needs is a bus or subway pass or a word of encouragement.

### **The Library Services Model: Heeding Predictions**

Guttman Community College had the opportunity to jump off the cowpath and build from scratch an academic library based on some of the best thinking of librarian experts. There are many variations of the Information Commons concept, but for this new college the Commons had to be the center of all learning activity outside the classroom. It had to have workspaces for a variety of group and social learning activities and had to be rich with technology, while still meeting the research needs of Guttman's students.



In addition to reviewing the research related to the future of the academic library, the innovative best practices at the University of California Merced Library were scrutinized (Advisory Board Company, 2011). It also should be pointed out that even though the innovations implemented at Guttman have been very successful (i.e., the Commons is the centerpiece of the college community with almost 100% use by the student population), these innovations were designed specifically for the school's model and cannot be generalized to all academic libraries.

### **Access not ownership and resource sharing.**

Research findings show that instead of large collections of uncirculated books taking up valuable space, collections should be shared across consortia (Advisory Board Company, 2011). UC Merced has a minimal physical collection, but has rapid access to 36 million physical books and 1.7 million digitized books held by the other University of California campuses. The Harvard University Library Task Force Report of 2009 states that Harvard needs "to embrace a model that ensures access to—not necessarily ownership of—scholarly materials needed by faculty, students, and other library users, now and in the future" (as cited in Advisory Board Company, 2011, p. 9).

Guttman Community College is part of a large university system (City University of New York) of 25 colleges that offers many possibilities for resource sharing. The Guttman library model calls for an access, not ownership, model of library resources. Why purchase books to take up precious space when students already have access to over eight million books and thousands of electronic books, journals and databases from the other CUNY libraries with just a click of the mouse? In addition, Guttman has a partnership with the New York Public Library (NYPL) and its holdings of "more than 51 million items, from books, e-books, and DVDs, to renowned research collections used by scholars from around the world" (<http://www.nypl.org/help/about-nypl>).

The role of the Guttman Information Commons is focused on research and discovery from anywhere—from classrooms, the Commons, the train, Starbucks, or home. Books and services are shared. Most of the cataloging is not done on site, with many of the books arriving ready to be shelved from vendors or CUNY central cataloging. Purchasing is also accomplished collaboratively.

### **The library as a social learning space: a place for more than books.**

The Taiga Forum, a community of senior academic library leaders, predicts "most library space will be taken over by functions that have nothing to do with library collections or services" (as cited in Advisory Board Company, 2011, p. 7). Changing patron needs should define the academic library space (Advisory Board Company, 2011). A library should not sacrifice reader accommodation to shelving the collection: "the crowding out of readers by reading material is one of the most common and disturbing ironies in library space planning" (Advisory Board Company, 2011, p. 42).

The Commons at Gutman is not a space filled with rows of books, but is a place for social learning and collaboration: a library, computer facility, auditorium, student union, and classroom. A Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) activity was recently held in the Commons for National Writing Week. Students throughout the entire college used the Mediascapes to tweet about why they wrote. This activity was a big success and the President of the College participated and learned to tweet. During poetry month, all classes, even math classes, started with a poem. Students tweeted poems and stuck “pocket poems” (short poems on post-it notes) throughout the school. “Poetry Corner” was set up in the Information Commons, and the culmination of poetry month was an activity with the students reciting their own poetry.

“Math Meetup” is part of the Commons. Faculty members work with students needing remedial math help in this space. This is coupled with a “Math Game Night” once a week. In addition, there is student-led chemistry tutoring in the Commons. Student work groups are well attended. Social learning occurs often in the evenings with videos shown on the big screen in the Commons. The videos are often linked to the curriculum. For example, *Bronx Princess* was shown during the semester that the focus was on immigration.

Because the college is small and located in Manhattan, where space is at a premium, the students have claimed the Commons as their workspace, student union, and lunchroom. Students come to the Information Commons because it is a relaxed, social learning environment. The physical design of the library at Guttman has allowed us to accommodate the needs of the new library user.

### **Collaborative approach to information literacy.**

The knowledge and skills required for information literacy involve more than just library research skills; what is needed is greater input by the teaching faculty (Saunders, 2009). Librarians are often not perceived as having the expertise to give the faculty teaching support (Advisory Board Company, 2011). Librarians need to partner more fully with faculty in instructional and assignment design; librarians must be sure that they have learned the pedagogical theory to support that role (Saunders, 2009, p. 109). The librarians at Guttman partner with the faculty in assignment design and information literacy learning outcomes because they are part of the instructional team. The instructional team model at Guttman is a unique, comprehensive type of embedded librarianship. Each House (student learning community) has an instructional team, which includes a librarian, Student Success Advocate, and the teaching faculty. Mandatory, scheduled meetings are held weekly during release time. Since the librarians attend all the instructional team meetings and are involved in the curriculum, they do not have to wait for the faculty to ask for help. The librarians build very strong relationships with the faculty and are an important part of the instructional team, sometimes co-teaching alongside the faculty. The librarians often complete the student assignments first to gain insight into the difficulty of the assignments, as well as the resources and time needed to complete the assignments. The librarians and teaching faculty share the same objectives; through ongoing consultation and collaboration

course learning outcomes are linked to the information literacy institutional learning outcomes.

This author and two colleagues recently presented at the annual CUNY IT Conference<sup>4</sup> and were asked a provocative question: “Could you do your job without a library?” Without hesitation, the answer was “Yes”. Information literacy (IL), which is at the heart of the Guttman model, can be taught without being linked to a physical place. Librarians have a unique role, since they are part of the instructional team. The librarians have a very thick binder with all the lessons, activities and assignments for the semester. Having the curriculum and the learning objectives laid out this way assists the librarians in the curriculum mapping of information literacy skills. Information literacy does not focus on the training of library skills, but embeds literacy into the academic curriculum through faculty collaboration. Information literacy skills are not taught in isolation, or even in the library, but at point of need in the classroom. The focus is on discovery and active learning.

### **The just-in-time model of acquisitions.**

Academic libraries do not have the money to keep building huge collections in open stacks with low circulation (Advisory Board Company, 2011). The costs are unsustainable. There are limits to funding with prices continuing to escalate. Even Harvard can no longer harbor “delusions of being a completely comprehensive collection, but must develop their holdings strategically” (as cited in Advisory Board Company, 2011, p. 9). Libraries can no longer afford to purchase resources “just-in-case” they might be needed some day; the trend is to purchase “just-in-time”, when the customer needs it (2010 Top Trends, 2010; Advisory Board Company, 2011). Libraries are starting to use patron-driven acquisition models in which records of titles that the library does not even own are integrated with the library’s catalog and the book is only purchased when a customer requests it (Mutter, 2012). Print collections are under utilized, with 50% of most collections never circulating (Advisory Board Company, 2011).

Even though the Guttman Community College founders visualized a totally electronic library with no physical books, this was not possible due to the accreditation standards which specifically state that electronic resources cannot supplant physical resources (New York State Board of Regents, 2009, p. 19). Therefore, Guttman has a small special collection of approximately 2,000 books that were selected by the faculty and linked to the curriculum. The collection will grow, but will be capped at around 4,000 physical books. The shelving circles the perimeter of the room and does not take away from the student workspaces. Acquisitions are based on the just-in-time model and not the just-in-case traditional model. Every syllabus in the college lists the student texts, books, and resources used to develop the curriculum and the most important related books and videos. These syllabi are the basis for collection development, which

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<sup>4</sup> Vee Herrington, Teresa McManus, and Arthur Downing presented “Designing Next Generation Academic Libraries: Three CUNY Case Studies” on November 29, 2012 at the CUNY IT Conference 2012. <http://www.centerdigitaled.com/events/CUNY-IT-Conference-2012.html>

resulted in an extremely relevant collection. Future plans for acquisitions of materials for the Commons includes patron driven acquisition (PDA) of ebooks.

### **Other innovations at the Guttman Information Commons.**

Often innovations do not involve technology, or even money, but rather, a change in mindset. For example, the Guttman Chief Librarian recently moved from a spacious office tucked away in the back of the Commons to a very small maintenance office so she could be close to the students. The old office was turned into a quiet study area to further accommodate student needs. In addition, there are no work silos in the Commons since staff is cross-trained to do all jobs. Customer service is more important than bibliographic control. Other beliefs that the model was built on include:

- 1) Run the library like a business. Without good customer service, there will be no customers, just books on the shelf.
- 2) Take risks, promote constantly and be proactive.
- 3) Investigate alternative purchasing options to get books requested by patrons in an expedited manner.
- 4) Greet customers with a smile, say hello, get up, and never point.
- 5) Give a customer something—if the library doesn't own it, buy it, borrow it, or suggest an alternate source.
- 6) Have fun, be less status quo; constantly look for value added services, and forget negative signage.

### **Conclusion**

There are many issues facing academic libraries today including the threat of disruptive technologies, unsustainable costs and declining usage. Tradition and resistance to change (following the cowpath) make it hard for libraries to be truly innovative. The library cowpath has been paved with wonderful sustaining technologies, but as Christensen (as cited in Lewis, 2004) points out great companies and organizations (like the academic library) are threatened by disruptive technologies. The future is not the same for all academic libraries. There should not be a “one size fits all” academic library, but rather each should reflect the goals, mission and pedagogy of its’ institution.

Even if academic libraries embrace change, the outcome is still uncertain because of the variable of disruptive technology. No one knows or can predict what the next disruptive technology will be. However, libraries must redefine their future, with an eye on the goals of the institution and an ear toward the input of their customers. It is possible to get off the cowpath and create a different kind of academic library, like the Information Commons of Guttman.

Why did this innovative model of library services work at Guttman? It also worked at UC Merced, which is vastly different from the experimental community college in Manhattan. One simple explanation is that it is much easier to build a library from scratch than to change a culture that has been around for decades. In both institutions there was nothing to change, since the libraries were conceived and created from the

ground up. School leadership totally supported the model and it was in the strategic plan from the beginning. Unfortunately, most academic libraries cannot start from scratch and still have to deal with the trappings of the present.

It is easy to talk about change and new roles, but the reality is that with change comes resistance and turmoil. To quote John Dewey: "The path of least resistance and least trouble is a mental rut already made. It requires troublesome work to undertake the alternation of old beliefs" (Dewey, p. 136). Heeding the theory of disruptive technology, David Lewis (2004) would probably urge librarians to jump from the cowpath and follow the path of the students.

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