

# From Plimsoll Line to triple bottom line: adding value through partnership

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of the paper is to argue that university libraries need to rethink their relationship with their parent institution.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Personal view based on managerial experience in universities.

**Findings** – Libraries must focus first on institutional mission and align their mission and strategy to that.

**Research limitations/implications** – The limitations of the paper are that this paper is only based on a single point of view.

**Practical implications** – Rethink approaches to relationships with the parent body.

**Originality/value** – It is an original point of view which is at least worth reading to see if it has value.

**Keywords** Management, University library policy, Student services, Learning services

**Paper type** Viewpoint

## Introduction

Samuel Plimsoll was a Victorian politician and social reformer now best remembered for the Plimsoll Line, a mark put on a ship's hull to show the safe level of loading a cargo ship which ensured buoyancy.

It now provides a nice metaphor for how most libraries operate – full of a cargo of historic collections and only just staying afloat in difficult waters caused by severe financial pressures.

A much better line to follow is the triple bottom line (usually abbreviated as TBL or 3BL). The term was coined by Elkington (1994) and is an accounting framework which has three parts: social and environmental (or ecological) as well as the more conventional financial. These three divisions are also sometimes called the three pillars of sustainability or three Ps: people, planet and profit. Interest in TBL accounting has been growing in the commercial, governmental and third sectors and a growing number of organisations have adopted the TBL framework to measure their performance in a broader context than the financial.

This divergence in approach can be illustrated through the approach to mission statements. The following two mission statements are taken from a middle ranking UK research university and its library. The institution has been chosen randomly but is quite typical (Note[1]):

Our Mission is to deliver world class research and teaching, educating our graduates to become future leaders and innovators, and benefiting the wider population through our research, enterprise and influence.



[To further this we will]:

- Promote research of international excellence and impact through the development of our intellectual and physical capacity.
- Deliver high quality, professional education that is intellectually challenging, offering excellent career prospects, a supportive environment for personal development, and equality of opportunity to anyone with the academic ability to benefit.
- Encourage a culture of creativity, enterprise and innovation, maximising the beneficial economic and social impact of our intellectual assets.
- Raise our international profile by developing strategic partnerships, increasing the visibility of our research and teaching, strengthening our alumni networks and influencing policy on global issues.

Such a mission statement may be considered unexceptionable and appropriate.

The mission statement of the library of the same institution is also unexceptionable and typical of many of such statements:

[Our mission is]:

To provide access to the world's knowledge through excellent services, 24/7, for the advancement of education and research at the University of xxxxx.

Therefore the library will:

- Understand, anticipate and support the information needs of all library users.
- Collect materials and enhance services to make quality information readily available and accessible.
- Provide advice, advocacy, expertise and skills training in using and exploiting information sources.
- Deliver a technologically-rich study environment conducive to quiet concentration or collective working.

These two statements then perfectly demonstrate the gulf between libraries and their parent bodies. The mission of the university is to deliver research and education with economic and social impact and international visibility. The mission of the library is to provide access to knowledge which partially supports two of the four university goals – but does not explicitly reference these goals and is confined to library users rather than all members of the university. So long as the library mission statement relates only partially to the mission statement of its parent body, the library will remain that more or less necessary overhead rather than an integral partner to the institutional mission.

### **The library role**

The University Library is a large and complex operation with a large budget, a large staff, long opening hours and a large but varied client group with complex and varied needs which has been seen as essential to the delivery of research and teaching. Libraries are by and large well managed, financially reliable and have committed and dedicated staff. Providing for the needs of these users is and will remain the core activity for the library and its staff. In the past, senior members of the university were regular users of the library, as they pursued research. These staff would sit on senior committees, including budget allocation committees and

would more or less happily increase the library budget year on year, as they could vouch for the benefits of the library from personal experience. With the arrival of electronic services, fewer and fewer senior academics visit or rely on the library and are less and less aware of either its value or how it is adapting to new information environments. Libraries in turn have embraced the digital information world, but all too often on the “Build it and they will come” model. Libraries need to cease assuming that they are by definition an essential service and start to consider where and how they can help to deliver the institutional mission and/or enrich its delivery by other departments. This implies a renewed focus on partnerships. And it is in that search for partnerships within the organisation that libraries can develop a role as an essential component in the delivery of the university mission.

### Teaching and private study

The university library is one of a diminishing number of public spaces on campus open to everyone, well heated and well lit, a safe space and typically open for a huge number of hours each day. At the same time, libraries increasingly offer a range of spaces from teaching areas to quiet study areas, from armchairs to Internet terminals. Providing this range of study and teaching spaces is a basic activity. It is perhaps rarer to actually discuss with client groups the nature and number of spaces they might need at different times and to build in sufficient flexibility to match user requirements. With the growth of new teaching methods such as MOOCs, the library might also consider in engaging in discussions with users over whether and when and how it could provide online collaborative study spaces.

The cost of textbooks can be prohibitively high. However, digital content offers new routes to the creation and use of teaching materials. One such route lies with open educational resources (OER). In the USA, SPARC is leading a movement to create open teaching content and librarians are seen as an integral element in and are “playing a transformative role in shaping the campus conversation” (Allen *et al.*, 2014). Some university libraries such as Temple University and University of Massachusetts Amherst have gone so far as to offer small grants from the library budget to academic staff to assist in moving courses to OER to create digital textbook materials for their students. Typically, these grants are awarded by a committee or group made up of a mix of faculty, administrators, academic support staff and librarians. Most importantly, this is a partnership initiative and not simply a library initiative.

A quite different area of possible partnership can be seen in the Digital Tattoo Project at the University of British Columbia (Mitchell and Underhill, 2014). The goal of the project is to provide peer support for students to help them to frame responsible, judicious and analytical approaches to how they develop and manage their online identities. It teaches what to share, with whom and how best to take part across varied networks, both as a consumer and as a creator:

It is essential in this digital age to encourage learners to think about their presence online and educate learners about their rights and responsibilities as digital citizens. Students create the content of the site acting as authors/bloggers, workshop facilitators and video producers (Sullivan, 2013).

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The topics covered and wide-ranging and include issues as varied as cyberbullying, privacy, collaborative online learning, copyright and digital identity, as it impacts career prospects.

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## Research

Most universities will see research and research outcomes as a critical success factor. There is a huge amount libraries can offer to match this ambition. First, it is astonishing how few universities would be able to provide a comprehensive statement of research outputs in any one year. Library staff can not only do this, but can add outputs to – and often manage – the institutional repository. They can offer guidance on open access, on copyright and on green and gold publication and on a variety of legal issues relating to research outputs. In partnership with the computing service or research service, data management services can be offered. This should not be seen as an attempt by the Library to “own” the data, but to make it clear that the library staff have skills in areas such as metadata tagging, intellectual property rights (IPR) and archival policies which can partner with and enhance whatever management structure the university chooses for this activity. Similarly, however, the university repository is managed, library staff have the skills to find, acquire and tag existing publications from members of staff to increase their accessibility and visibility.

There is a growing number of open access Web sites where scholars and their publications can be placed – Google Scholar Citations, [Academia.edu](http://Academia.edu) and ResearchGate are but three of these. The library staff can engage with departments to ensure that individual academic staff have profiles on an agreed set of these sites. Again, there is a partnership benefit. Such sites give higher visibility; higher visibility leads to higher citation. In turn, this leads to more research grants and better research excellence framework (REF) results, as well as international visibility. It is a clear partnership in which the bibliographic skills of library staff are firmly mapped on to the institutional mission.

## Estates

It is one of the oddities of university finance that little account is usually taken of what are seen as fixed costs. Heating, lighting, water and even local authority taxes are typically top-sliced as an inevitable overhead. These are rarely, if ever, devolved to the faculty, far less the departmental level.

But libraries tend to occupy large spaces, be open for long hours, have much through traffic from stacks to toilets and so consume large amounts of power and water as well as being expensive in terms of local taxes. It took several years to establish these costs at Strathclyde University (Law, 2009), but they proved to be very large, running into several hundred thousand pounds annually. There is then huge scope for working in partnership with the Estates Department to make the library greener, more economic to run and even to release space elsewhere on campus which may reduce local taxation. An excellent recent example of this comes from the Bodleian Libraries who were highly commended in the Environmental Association of Universities and Colleges (EAUC) Green Gown Awards of November 2014 (EUAC, 2014). Sponsored by the CISCO and British Telecom (BT) education partnership, these awards celebrate innovative approaches to sustainability in higher education. The Bodleian Libraries partnered with the University Estates

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Service to invest just over £300,000. This delivered recurrent energy savings of £170,000 and of 925 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>. The project is now seen as a flagship for the university's work on carbon reduction and the awards ceremony highlighted the importance of internal partnership.

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### Catering

Libraries have been fighting the battle over preventing the consumption of food and water in the library for years. Almost inevitably they lose. It is easy for a library committee or senate to appear student friendly by relaxing what is seen as a bureaucratic rule. But again, with imagination, this can be turned to advantage. There are obvious opportunities for putting vending machines with approved and/or healthy food and drink into spaces where one can encourage students to gather, rather than having litter and noise all over the library. Obviously, this can be done in partnership with the university catering department or the Student Union. The University of Stellenbosch also turned the battle over water bottles in the library to its advantage when it lost the battle to ban this. With great imagination, the Library started to sell its own brand water and was able to use the bottle's label to carry information about everything from loan periods to opening hours.

### Human resources

University libraries are one of the largest departments and, hence, employers on campus and as a result have much to do with the human resources (HR) department. The two departments tend to work closely together on the routine daily processes of recruitment, staff management, appraisal and retirement. But even here, there is scope for expanding partnerships and, hence, the visibility of the library as a partner. For example, given the wide range of library activities, there is a readily met potential need for student internships, which can ease the financial situation of students, engage them as exemplars and advocates and help show that the university supports its students.

Thus Columbia University has one form of internship which supports research training while adding to library online resources by offering six internships. The Columbia University Libraries' Graduate Student Internship Programme is designed to enrich graduate studies and professional training in primary sources through an introduction to archival work, supplemented with a programme of lectures, workshops and tours. It claims:

[...] to give training in archival processing practices under the supervision of curators and archivists by arranging, describing, and cataloguing collections in one's area of research and interest; creating finding aids, once a collection has been processed, for online publication; learning to uncover primary source collections relevant to one's research and to better understand the nature, origin and uses of primary sources (Columbia University Libraries, 2014).

The University of Bolton runs an intern scheme for graduates The Graduate Internship Scheme provides a fixed-term employment opportunity for students who have successfully graduated to degree level from the university. The 2014-2015 Library intern will support the roll-out and re-launch of the Library's Reading List Online Service, working with the collection and development manager to integrate the service with other essential library services (Bolton University, 2014). The University of

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St Andrews Library offers internships in its Rare Books Department to assist in developing research skills (University of St Andrews, 2014). Southampton University runs a “Temp Bank” which offers part-time employment in the University – including the Library (University of Southampton, 2014). Other work includes catering, domestic, telephone operations, administration, occasional driving, manual work and working as a porter or campus guide. Here, again, the library is working in partnership with HR to help the student experience.

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### **Alumni and fundraising**

One of the early lessons learned in library fundraising is that one should not compete with the university’s own fundraising – often run by the alumnus office. Partnership yields much greater rewards. It is also quickly learned that the first rule is to identify the cohort of graduates or friends or companies who might be interested in having or maintaining a link with the university. The obvious routes of some form of membership or library access have been used for many years with varying but usually limited effect.

Special collections and digitisation then offer a lateral approach to finding the cohort committed to the university. The Europeana Newspapers Project digitising millions of pages of early twentieth-century newspapers depends on the knowledge, skills and ambition of librarians. It is a public good project which is predicated on public funding to make content accessible. But when carefully marketed, it has had a huge public impact. The Berlin State Library cleverly linked its Europeana newspaper digitisation project to the centenary of the start of the First World War and received valuable media coverage. More importantly, a huge number of individuals were prompted to bring family documents, papers and letters to the Library for advice on their future curation. In a similar manner, an appeal to graduates for the papers of parents or grandparent relating to a general topic such as the First World War or a specific one such as tourism in Scotland in the first half of the twentieth century would yield not only a large new special collection but would also identify a cohort interested in the university for the alumnus office to approach. Almost inevitably bequests, grants and a share of the alumnus office revenue will follow as well as a harmonious partnership.

### **Corporate visibility**

The library can also be active in enhancing the visibility of the institution and its staff. As a large public space it has or can achieve the capacity to act as a venue to display exhibitions, whether from internal resources such as special collections, whether from cultural exhibitions touring the country or whether from university groups, for example, for student photographic competitions. It can offer a venue for public lectures by academic staff on current research activity or Town and Gown lectures by visiting speakers, again on the basis that the library building is already open. A Friends of the Library group would also naturally use the library as a venue for events. Parenthetically, this opens the way to a small revenue stream, whether from room hire, catering or ticket sales. Again, this is best done as a partnership with other departments.

Internally, the work and publications of academic staff can be showcased as they are produced. In the 1980s, Edinburgh University adopted the initially risky practice

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of having a monthly exhibition of newly published staff monographs. It displayed only those publications donated to the library; a small number which quickly grew as such donations became normal practice, as envy drove academics to donate their works!

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### **Public relations**

Managing and policing social media is unlikely to be a library responsibility, but it should certainly be an active partner in this area. There is huge scope for developing Wikipedia entries about special collections material; there can be Youtube guides to the use of information retrieval tools and services. Twitter feeds, Facebook and blogs can keep the community informed of everything from early closures to special events or fines amnesties. Working with charities supported by the university, much can be achieved through partnerships. The library might have a day when all fines are given to Red Nose Day, or the student bursaries fund or to sponsor a member of staff in the London Marathon. Again, this demonstrates that the library is engaged with the wider community – and can be used to generate positive local media coverage.

### **Student services, learning services, IT services, external relations, etc.**

There is a whole range of other service departments in most universities. In some cases, the library is already formally administered with some or all of them. Again, there is a host of partnership potential opportunities from offering support to the University of the Third Age, to information technology support desks in the library, to Skype and chat reference services for overseas campuses or European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students (ERASMUS) students, to offering click and collect services from thesis binders or audio visual (AV) services, to managing podcasts. The possibilities are huge. But the key point here as elsewhere is that these partnerships are built as a direct response to the university mission statement and can be promoted as such.

### **Conclusion**

In Charles Dicken's novel *Hard Times* (Dickens, 1854), the narrowly utilitarian schoolmaster Mr Gradgrind insists: "Now, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else". Evidence based practice has become virtually a mantra in current professional thinking, a trend of which Mr Gradgrind would wholeheartedly approve. However, in *Hard Times*, there is also scope for innovation and imagination.

It might be argued that the sort of projects and initiatives described above are very time consuming and are distractions from the significantly large daily routine of a university library. However, it is the contention of this paper that if we focus on the library's daily round at the expense of the institutional mission, if we fail to be seen as potential if not essential partners in a huge range of corporate activities, if we ignore sustainability and the environment, the waters will rise ever higher over our Plimsoll Line until libraries sink without trace. The projects described above demonstrate clearly that some libraries are forging some internal partnerships some of the time. If more libraries would align their mission and vision with a clear understanding of their role in delivering the organisational mission of the parent

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body and *not* focus on independently developed library priorities they can move happily from the Plimsoll Line to the TBL.

### Note

1. These two mission statements are taken from the web but are not cited. They are routine, standard and normal. There is then no intention to single out the university or its library as examples of bad practice, as the point being made is that almost all libraries are failing to make the links to institutional priorities.

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