

## **Sustainability in Academic Libraries**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the concept of sustainability as related to academic libraries, and considers whether library leadership and management are doing enough to promote sustainability through the holistic consideration of the interactions between environmental, social, and economic factors. The core values of the American Library Association include sustainability, and there are several associations that outline the need for sustainability and provide suitable policies and guidelines surrounding sustainability for its successful implementation. However, based on the literature, owing to the complexity of sustainability, often only one of the issues is addressed at a time, with little consideration for their interactions with the other issues. This will not result in sustainable solutions, and it is necessary for library leadership to recommit to their values, promote a culture of sustainability, and live and breathe sustainability in all they do for the ultimate sustainability of their communities. Libraries could start by promoting environmental information literacy within their libraries, embracing open access and implementing 'green' measures in all aspects of the library and librarianship. Although there are often more pressing needs and concerns, the issues surrounding sustainability in academic libraries should be prioritized for the preservation and sustainability of scholarship and the long-term wellbeing of the community.

*Keywords:* sustainability, academic libraries, ALA, ACRL, policies, information literacy, leadership

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### **Sustainability in Academic Libraries**

Although sustainability is a current trend within librarianship, it is not a new concept. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 committed the United States over 50 years ago to “create and maintain conditions under which humans and nature can exist in productive harmony, that permit fulfilling the social, economic and other requirements of present and future generations” (Environmental Protection Agency, 2014, p. 1). The Environmental Protection Agency (2014) further advocates that since everything that we, as humans, need for our survival and that of our offspring depends directly or indirectly on our natural environment, it is necessary to ensure that we utilize our resources and live in a way that current and future generations will continue to be supported. To fully understand sustainability, it is necessary to understand how its three main pillars of environmental, social, and economic aspects interact. Generally, when sustainable solutions are found to protect the environment, communities are strengthened and prosperity is cultivated (Environmental Protection Agency, 2015). Similarly, Henk (2014) defines sustainability in terms of “ecology, equity and the economy” (p. 11), explaining that it is necessary for healthy economies to be developed while respecting the environment, with benefits distributed throughout society to support community self-sufficiency. Therefore, owing to the complex interactions between humans and the ecosystem, it is necessary to address challenges within all of these areas to ensure that potential solutions in one area do not cause problems in another, and that all aspects of sustainability should be considered when making decisions (Henk, 2014).

These definitions explain the need and theory of sustainability that is essential for communities to thrive on an on-going basis. The challenge is to ensure that sustainable measures are implemented. This is pertinent for all organizations, but especially libraries, since they are

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fundamental for “promoting community awareness about resilience, climate change and a sustainable future” (American Library Association, 2019a), and as such have often been seen as leaders in sustainability, promoting sustainable practices (Rowley, 2006; Tanner et al., 2019); nurturing resilience, community regeneration and sustainability through “economically feasible” and “socially equitable and environmentally sound” practices (Tanner et al., 2019, p. 365) built on sound policies. This paper will discuss the policies and core values developed to promote sustainability within academic libraries, and the role of library leadership in addressing issues surrounding sustainability.

### **Policy development**

Realizing the need to include sustainability within libraries, the American Library Association (ALA) initiated “Libraries Build Sustainable Communities”, a project in cooperation with Global Learning of New Jersey. This project defined the components of a sustainable community as: “economy - the management, or stewardship, of the resources; ecology - the relationship of the community with its environment, particularly natural environment; and equity - fairness to all” (American Library Association, 2019b, p. 1). Furthermore, the ALA has developed several policies surrounding sustainability including a resolution on the importance of sustainable libraries passed in 2015; the Environmental Issues Policy; and the following resolution - American Library Association Statement on Global Climate Change and a Call for Support for Libraries and Librarians adopted in 2017, which

“supports librarians, library workers, and educators, as they are guided by the ALA Policy Manual, in their roles for providing rigorous, robust, and accurate reference and referral services; access to data (both historical and current) and information resources, literature, and collections; and instruction in their use in assisting climate stakeholders’

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and library users' greater understanding of global climate change.” (American Library Association, 2019b, p. 1).

### **Sustainability activities and core values**

In addition to these policies at the forefront of sustainability, the ALA has several activities to promote sustainability, including the IRRT International Sustainable Library Development Interest Group, and Sustainability Round Table (SustainRT) (American Library Association, 2019b). Furthermore, the ALA has provided several resources on ‘green’ libraries that emphasize resource stewardship. Typically, libraries could be considered inherently ‘green’ since their resources are shared with their larger communities. However, libraries can be an example in their communities in reducing their environmental impact by employing sustainable practices in daily operations, reduced or minimized resource consumption, and green buildings (American Library Association, 2019b). To further support this in the United States, the ALA included sustainability as a core values of librarianship in 2019 to “include practices that are environmentally sound, economically feasible and socially equitable” (American Library Association, 2019a).

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Currently, climate change is at the forefront of sustainability and it is fundamental to develop carbon neutral economies and societies (Henk, 2014), and collectively reduce the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere. Librarians need to be innovative, and ‘develop new practices...as well as a new understanding of the natural world and our relationship to it’ (Henk, 2014, p. 11). But, are academic libraries and librarians doing enough with their collective voice for sustainability advocacy? Academic libraries have responded to sustainability challenges by implementing several practices in the different areas of sustainability including the

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development of “sustainability thinking and development”; “teaching, learning and research services”; and “community engagement, outreach and partnerships” (Pun & Shaffer, 2019, p. vii). Many of these practices have been based on goals set by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016) and the United Nations sustainable development goals (SDGs) (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2020). Information literacy, which is also an important current trend within libraries, is fundamental for sustainable development, as it is necessary for communities to be able to critically evaluate all information sourced from reliable sources to make informed decisions. The ACRL framework provides core concepts of information literacy and provides libraries with a baseline to develop and assess information literacy during instruction, assignment, coursework and curricula (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2016). The SDGs are a framework of the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, focusing on environmental, economic, and social development, and libraries are fundamental in achieving the goals of this agenda (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2020). The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) has been working on the development of the UN 2030 Agenda, “advocating for the inclusion of access to information, safeguarding of cultural heritage, universal literacy, and access to information and communication technologies” (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, 2020, p. 1). This further shows the relationship between sustainability and another trend, open access, highlighting the need of accessibility to quality peer-reviewed information as argued by Suber (2016), in addition to information literacy (Henk, 2014). Furthermore, it is necessary to have “well-trained librarians with access to high quality collections” (Henk, 2014, p. 12).

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### **Role of library leadership**

The challenge is to ensure that sustainable measures are implemented and that librarians are trained well. This will take tremendous effort on the part of leadership to ensure that the correct steps are taken to begin reaching some of the sustainability goals. According to Ha (2014), it is essential for leaders and managers to be change agents; librarians will need to address the important questions of why, what, who, when, and how and will need to understand the different types of changes including planned, unplanned, incremental or marginal, transitional, or transformational. Library leadership will also need to develop a sustainability culture, fundamental to the success of a change process (Ha, 2014). Leadership will further need to manage resistance to change. Essentially, librarians will need to recommit to the core ALA values wholeheartedly, and review all operations to confirm that they coincide with these values (Henk, 2014).

### **Local and global sustainable solutions in academic libraries**

Academic libraries are meeting some of the challenges of sustainability in different ways both locally and globally, but it seems that these are mostly small initiatives, with some exceptions of large-scale projects initiated in libraries with the intention of pervading the whole campus and community. For example, Michigan State University (MSU) has been implementing sustainable changes in their libraries, and across their campus (Tans, 2017). MSU Libraries have a Library Environmental Committee that works with several different departments, including MSU Sustainability, across the university as a leader in sustainability with the implementation and leadership of several projects including, but not limited to, energy conservation and waste reduction through active recycling programs that encourage student engagement, sustainability instruction, and staff seminars to ensure the staff are well trained (Tans, 2017). At Oregon State

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University Libraries and Press, they have attempted to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions by reducing food waste at landfills through a compost collection program initiated by the library (Hussong-Christian, 2016). At the University of Calgary, instruction on sustainable information literacy has been introduced as a first-year course, with the goal of students becoming well-organized and knowledgeable leaders with the ability to make complex decisions (Stoeckle & Campbell, 2019). According to Tanner et al. (2019), some Chinese universities have included sustainable building designs for their libraries, and implemented carefully considered measures to enhance resource conservation and reduce energy consumption on a large scale, as well as several smaller projects, including but not limited to training librarians to “take ownership of sustainability priorities and solutions” (p. 371). There are several other similar examples, but these all seem to be small steps in the large and complex sustainability issue.

### **Are academic libraries doing enough?**

Economic sustainability in libraries has been brought to the forefront with the impact of the current 2020 Covid pandemic (Machovec, 2020). For example, resource sharing, which is an important aspect of academic library sustainability, has been negatively impacted with budget cuts, and limited staffing, limited access to essential technology, and the temporary closure of some facilities in the United States (Machovec, 2020). Therefore, it is necessary for library leadership to look for further sustainable solutions to become resilient and help their communities thrive, even for the eventuality of unplanned change, as mentioned previously. Furthermore, to reiterate, it is necessary to consider all the factors of sustainability concurrently when implementing solutions going forward. In China, many libraries have focused on economic and social development, with little consideration for environmental sustainability (Kang, 2018), negatively impacting effective long-term solutions. Kang (2018) further emphasized that



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libraries in China are essential as an example at their colleges and universities, suggesting that this inequity would negatively impact local communities. For academic libraries to be sustainable, it is necessary to implement all of the following (Kang, 2018): environmental literacy education, promoting a 'green' image, carrying out an energy audit and reporting the findings, training eco-librarians, disposing of hazardous materials properly, integrating sustainable practices into daily operations, encouraging sustainable resource consumption and environmentally preferable purchasing, and ensuring buildings meet required environmental standards. Although not related directly to their libraries, a study of universities in Australia and Austria found that in their annual reports, they focused primarily on economic aspects of the universities, followed by social aspects, and with limited focus on environmental aspects (Schaffhauser-Linzatti, 2018), indicating that insufficient focus is being given to all aspects of sustainability, despite the accessibility of knowledge, training, and leadership mentorship. In more impoverished countries, such as South Africa, many academic libraries are facing additional challenges hindering long term sustainability. These challenges include no commitment from leadership, no established standard practices, policies or procedures, limited resources, limited skills and training, no funding, limited collaboration and antiquated technology, as described for digital collections (Masenya, 2020), but could be applied to all aspects of sustainability. This indicates a dysfunctional system unable to address inequities effectively in any of the areas of sustainability, resulting in a failure to ultimately enhance sustainability in academic libraries and their communities.

### **Conclusion**

It is clear that although there are several policies, association activities and core values in place to enhance sustainability within academic libraries, the problems and issues surrounding

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sustainability are not being considered holistically by leadership. Therefore, the fundamental interactions between the economy, equity and ecology, are not being. By not considering and accounting for these complex interactions, the goal of sustainability will not be successful. It will take a considerable effort of change management in leadership for this challenge to be met. It is necessary for leadership and librarians to recommit to their core values and find individual ways to actively live to these values. If each librarian did this, through their advocacy, a movement would be started that would gain momentum, hopefully attaining sustainability for future generations. Sustainability takes transformational leadership and advocacy, and should be prioritized. Academic libraries, locally and globally, should be at the forefront of change management to ensure scholarship and communities thrive sustainability with ecology, equity and economics in balance.

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