

# A Vision for UCB Library Services Under the Specter of Austerity

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## Introduction

UC Berkeley's libraries have accumulated a vast store of knowledge over the past 150 years, representing an incredible diversity of subject expertise embodied in library staff, exceptional library spaces, innovative services, and unparalleled collections. It is not hyperbole to suggest that the Library represents the very heart of the University. In addition to creating a collection that will be used by scholars far into the future, the Library provides direct support for the teaching and research mission of the University, centering its collections and services around the current and future needs of our patrons, including faculty, students, staff and community members.

As we envision a future for the Library in the context of recurrent budget cuts and unreliable funding, let's center the dialogue on our riches and our strengths. Collectively, we come to this exercise with an ethos of support for the UC Berkeley community, and a recognition that a public university is key to a democratic and just society.

## Let's Reject Austerity

The University is currently promoting a vision of austerity. They've stated that the Library now faces a \$5 million structural budget deficit which apparently warrants the closing of libraries, reduction of hours, elimination of in-person reference services, the shrinking of instruction for undergraduates, and the diminution of the print collection, especially works in non-English languages. The Library is moving increasingly adrift from established library services to new service models that don't meet the needs of our campus community.

We suggest a renewed vision and approach that incorporates learning from the past, and builds and extends the strengths of our library people, services, spaces, and collections to truly serve the UC Berkeley community now and into the future.

## How Did We Get Here?

The Library is continually asked to provide excellent collections and services to a growing campus of faculty, researchers, and burgeoning student population—which has increased 25% over the past ten years. And the Library is expected to deliver such services despite the steady reduction in the number of librarians and library staff providing direct services to our users. Essentially, library workers repeatedly have been asked to “do more with less.”

The October 2013 Report of the *Commission on the Future of the UC Berkeley Library* recognized that “the centrality of the Library to the range of learning and research at Berkeley warrants a serious strategy of major reinvestment.” Yet many of the key financial commitments to support these crucial library services remain unfulfilled. And while faculty, students and library staff are asked to accept austerity as a *fait accompli*, there has been no detailed explanation of how the Library arrived at a \$5 million budget shortfall. In the past five

years, the Library already has administered three permanent cuts to its collection budget totalling \$3 million. We have been led to believe that for the past two years the Library has offset the deficit, in part, by spending down its reserves. What is needed, however, is a complete and transparent analysis of Library finances that provides a full accounting of how it arrived at such a financial predicament at a time when the State Legislature has actually *increased* funding to UC Berkeley. While the Library has engaged in several strategic planning exercises in recent years, we believe that the first step in re-envisioning the Library again should be a clear financial reckoning, including how endowments and gifts are being spent. This analysis must explore new recurrent expenses that have not been adequately funded by campus and which may be contributing to the Library's budget deficit, including:

- The increase in salaries for administrators;
- The true cost of “transformative open access” agreements that lock in publisher price increases;
- The increased expenditures from the continued prioritization of licensed electronic content;
- The move to approval plans that replace selector expertise with for-profit vendor discretion;
- The true cost of a UC-systemwide adoption of a new integrated library system and the tradeoffs to losing local control of the catalog; and
- The Library-borne (as opposed to campus-supported) costs related to COVID-19 service changes (such as the electronic reserves program), and to what extent the Library has been more heavily burdened relative to other campus units.

## The Impact on Collections, Services, and Staff Morale

In recent discussions among library staff, we identified a number of shared concerns regarding a future with even greater financial cuts, including a splintering of library services and a loss of longstanding library values; weakened relationships and collaborations among library employees and between library staff and patrons; the decreased ability to support unique collections crucial to departmental research; reduced liaison assistance to faculty; a loss of libraries and library space; and excluding library staff and librarians from determining specialized priorities and services. The theme that emerged was that library services, people, and spaces must be collectively supported for the good of our campus community, and the public. Library morale sinks as we are asked to do significantly more with fewer resources; abandon our libraries as the student population explodes; pare down services as we attempt to assist students and faculty with increasingly complex research and instruction needs; and narrow our collections by relying on corporate purchasing templates while students demand increased sensitivity in support of DEIJ objectives.

## The Way Forward: Preserve Existing Wealth While Judiciously Exploring New Services

It is time to realign the Library's core values to support the University's teaching and research mission.

We assert that the way to address growing demand for new library programs, services, and products is **not** to abandon our accumulated capital (collections, spaces, and, crucially, the people) but, rather, to embrace and herald these while judiciously cultivating new funding sources to address increased demands. Librarians and professional staff are trained to create “access points” into our local collections, across our networked environment, and among the dedicated people who work here. We offer a vision of integrated library services with multiple access points: in-person and virtual reference services; warm and inviting library spaces; in-person and online instruction to connect with patrons; cataloging, curation, and preservation services that tap into local expertise and library-controlled infrastructure; and expanded subject and skills-based training.

To this end, we call for a library-wide assessment of the UC Berkeley Library's strengths and deficiencies, a truly transparent cost/benefit assessment of Library investments, and renewed dedication to preserving our existing people, spaces and collections in service to the University's mission of education and research. Some specific suggestions include:

- Articulate a clear focus on core priorities and identify 1-2 innovative projects while pushing back against new unfunded initiatives as the expected library services;
- Review the 2013 report from the *Commission on the Future of the UC Berkeley Library* to understand ongoing challenges and options to address them;
- Prioritize our patron constituency, including the "community patrons," as a public university. Balance allocation of staffing in resuming services in physical spaces with online services to meet diverse student and faculty needs;
- Facilitate closer supportive working relationships between librarians and library staff that deepen lasting collaboration for developing and maintaining outstanding library services.

Implementing the above will require genuine involvement of library staff—perhaps in consultation with a library advisory board composed of committed students, researchers, and faculty (beyond the Academic Senate Library Committee) in decisions about the Library's future. There is too much at stake for our students and faculty and for the wellbeing of the University and State of California not to marshal a renewed effort to address the Library's current crisis.

UC-AFT Unit 17 Bay Area Chapter