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Foreword: A Few Reflections on the Evolution of Institutional Repositories

Clifford Lynch

With institutional repositories well into their second decade of deployment, the sort of examination of where we have been, where we are, and where we might be going represented by the essays in *Making Institutional Repositories Work* feels very timely.

In early 2003 I published an article titled “Institutional Repositories: Essential Infrastructure for Scholarship in the Digital Age,” where I tried to make the case that such services most essentially provide a framework (often, perhaps, of last resort) to manage, provide access to, and preserve new forms of digital scholarship otherwise at risk, to nurture innovation in forms of scholarly communication, and to facilitate the preservation and reuse of evidence underlying scholarly work. This vision stands in contrast to a well-articulated alternative view that casts institutional repositories first and primarily as mechanisms to support a transition of the traditional scholarly journal literature to open access models.

This dialectic—still unresolved—is well illustrated in the chapters of this volume. There is much coverage of the relationships between repositories and various developments that have advanced the cause of open access. One very nice property of this approach is that it’s actually possible to measure progress toward success quantitatively, as opposed to the subjective assessments and very long view of nurturing new forms of scholarship. I was delighted to see coverage of the repositories in the context of electronic theses and dissertations (ETDs), but this discussion also underscores how

long it takes for changes in practice to enter the mainstream in the academy: ETDs are now well into their *third* decade.

The importance of research data has only really received the serious attention it demands in the last decade, and various funder mandates surrounding the availability and reuse of data are just now taking hold, at least in the United States. It remains to be seen how we will ultimately find balances between the roles of disciplinary and institutional repositories in managing research data, discipline by discipline. For many purposes, I continue to suspect that disciplinary approaches are superior *when they are available and can be relied upon over time*. But it's clear they aren't always going to exist when scholars need them, and I continue to worry about the long-term financial commitments to repositories at all levels.

Other kinds of new digital materials continue to attract interest, including, for example, open educational resources (OERs) and how they relate to both the future of textbooks and various kinds of online instruction delivery. Institutional repositories are going to play an important role here.

There continue to be opportunities and compelling reasons to more systematically document and share the contributions to intellectual and cultural life that arise from our educational and cultural institutions. I have made this argument at length elsewhere¹ and was delighted to see developments in institutional repositories placed firmly in this context in the opening to Part 6. This is about institutional mission and the way that repositories can help to advance that mission.

There are very interesting convergences taking place between library publishing programs, university presses, repositories, and the digital humanities; here it has finally become very clear to scholars that a reliable, stable (institutionalized), credible management framework for new digital forms of scholarship is absolutely critical to legitimizing these new forms as core work rather than fringe experiments. Some of these developments are covered here, and I hope this helps to give them broader visibility and consideration.

It still feels to me like we are doing too much to try to “sell” the use of institutional repositories to all faculty simultaneously; this makes sense mainly in the context of responding to various open access mandates. I think we need to much more carefully explore and understand the potential

roles and contributions that an institutional repository can make to faculty members over the full arc of their professional careers.

Finally, let me note one more highlight from this collection of essays, which we might view as a recognition of the growing maturity of institutional repositories. This is the increased attention to thinking about institutional repositories as a *system*, and perhaps even more importantly as components and subsystems in broader national and international systems that support scholarship. The final part of the book frames these opportunities well, and major current programs like the Association of Research Libraries–led SHARE initiative also build on this kind of thinking. I believe it will be an important future direction, accommodating an increasing interest in not only managing the huge and ever-expanding body of scholarship, but of also trying to actively understand its shape and growth analytically.

NOTE

See Lynch, C. A. (2008). A matter of mission: Information technology and the future of higher education. In R. Katz (Ed.), *The tower and the cloud* (pp. 43–50). Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE. Corrected version is available online at www.educause.edu.

