Equity and Access in Higher Education and Academic Libraries Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 global pandemic has exposed deeply rooted inequities and the precariousness of institutional structures across all socio-cultural and geographic spaces. Overwhelmed by the public health crisis, governments and non-governmental organizations have introduced numerous policies to stem the spread of COVID-19 with varying degrees of success at the local, national, and international levels. Similarly, academic institutions have responded to this crisis by developing policies that address the immediate needs of their respective constituencies and institutional partners. Although these policies vary in scope and intent, we are troubled by developments on a number of fronts. These include:

- Marginalization of institutions with limited resources, underrepresented communities, and indigenous voices in the post COVID-19 institutional frameworks;
- Promotion of “e-first” collection development strategies that are governed by licensing law that disrupt the flow of information and undermine indigenous publishing cultures around the world, especially in the Global South;
- Over-reliance on large-scale, dominant publishers and distributors of academic content, thereby intensifying the marginalization of small and traditional publishers and of scholarly communities based in other parts of the world;
- Over-reliance on large-scale commercial publishers whose profit-driven business models endanger the collection, preservation, and distribution of robust ephemeral materials such as those generated by emerging political and social justice movements, subaltern groups around the world, and by non-governmental organizations and other advocacy organizations that support them. As a result, these primary source materials will likely disappear, even though they will be indispensable to the research and teaching of these events in all disciplines; and
- Disparities in online teaching and access to learning environments that disproportionately affect communities of color, people with disabilities, and students from rural and low-income areas.

We acknowledge that academic institutions and associations, as well as library consortia, are facing budgetary constraints in their efforts to maintain services and programs during the time of COVID-19. Furthermore, administrators are managing expectations from local constituents while acknowledging that more needs to be done to improve conditions nationally and globally.

Global collections have become a distinctive corpus that showcases the value and identity of academic and special libraries while supporting their missions on research and instruction. Recently, specific academic groups like the Association of Jewish Libraries (AJL), the Africana librarians Council (ALC), the Committee on Libraries and Information Resources (CLIR) of the Association for Slavic, East European, & Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), the Committee on South Asian Libraries and Documentation (CONSLAD), the Committee on Research Materials on
Southeast Asia of the Association for Asian Studies (CORMOSEA), the Middle East Librarians Association/ the Middle East Studies Association (MELA / MESA), the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM), have crafted and approved statements in response to these policies and their particular impact for each area. In addition, the Council on East Asian Libraries (CEAL) is drafting a similar statement on collection development and acquisition amid the COVID-19 pandemic, in collaboration with the North American Coordinating Council on Japanese Library Resources (NCC), the Society of Chinese Studies Librarians (SCSL), and the Modern Greek Studies Association Library Committee (MGSA).

We support the efforts of these groups without any reservations and further recommend the following steps to help alleviate shared areas of concern:

- Provide temporary membership fee waivers to historically Black and Hispanic-serving colleges and universities, lesser-resourced institutions, and indigenous organizations to participate and access resources available from large-scale digital depositories (e.g., HathiTrust Digital Library) and international consortia (e.g., Center for Research Libraries);
- Reevaluate “e-resources first” strategies and other current collection development policies, including a recommendation to incorporate in-country publishing data to formulate long-term collection development policies, and to support library and archives-based special collections;
- Increase access to online teaching and learning tools, and to resources for communities of color, people with disabilities, and students based in rural and low-income areas;
- Selectively redirect funding from the purchasing and licensing of mainstream commercial academic content to the collaborative acquisition, preservation, digitization, discovery and open-access dissemination of endangered content and marginalized voices from the world’s social justice movements;
- Increase partnerships with in-country publishers and memory institutions to increase and highlight marginalized voices and groups; and
- Develop diverse staff with relevant linguistic and cultural competencies to promote equity in librarian hiring/retention and collections at all levels.

Written by Joint Area Studies Task Force members, July 31, 2020, on behalf of the following associations:

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We, librarians, students, faculty, academic organizations, executive boards and committees, and professional organizations, endorse this statement.

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