

2026 Top Trends in Academic Libraries

A Review of the Trends and Issues

This article explores the topics and issues that trended in academic libraries over the past two years. It draws on research and initiatives from librarians across the profession, highlighting the challenges libraries face. To focus on the most pressing current trends, topics that have been covered in previous Top Trends or Environmental Scans are specifically excluded unless new and significant developments warrant review; see the 2024 Top Trends and 2025 Environmental Scan for previous topics covered. For this year's report, we cover the new challenges academic libraries faced, including radical political and regulatory shifts in academic institutions, developments in artificial intelligence (AI) disrupting traditional research methods and tools, and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Title II whole-scale redesign of websites, digital repositories, and future collection and intake processes. The report also highlights a bright spot: the Data Rescue Project, a grassroots volunteer community launched in 2025 by data librarians to recover and house at-risk public data from shuttered government websites.

Responding to Federal and State Legislative Actions

Academic libraries, and higher education broadly, continue to be significantly impacted and shaped by legislation and administrative action at both the federal and state levels in the United States. Among the sweeping changes¹ aimed at higher education by the Trump administration in early 2025 were significant cuts to grant programs underpinning funding for many US research institutions.

In March 2025, a series of executive orders paused many grants from the National Science Foundation (NSF),² National Institutes of Health (NIH),³ National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH),⁴ and Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), as well as enacted significant reductions in personnel at these agencies and others. Overall spending on scientific research, a substantial source of revenue for many institutions, reached the lowest level in more than a decade.⁵ The administration's proposed budget released in May and the eventual Budget Reconciliation Act called for further deep cuts to these agencies and others while specifically targeting programs like TRIO initiatives⁶ and eliminating new Graduate PLUS loans.⁷ Specific elite institutions were also targeted under the premise of cracking down on alleged antisemitism, with nearly \$6 billion in funding being threatened.⁸ Many of these institutions have since reached independent agreements with the Trump administration to restore their funding.⁹

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While many of the US government funding actions have been paused¹⁰ or ultimately reversed¹¹ following legal challenges, the shock and uncertainty ultimately led to layoffs at many institutions, including layoffs of library workers.¹² Library budgets across the higher education landscape are declining,¹³ and a worsening financial picture for institutions is likely to continue this trend.

Cuts to the Department of Education itself further impacted higher education programs, such as TRIO, and threatened particular impacts on Historically Black Colleges & Universities (HBCUs). Reinstated workers returned to work on December 15, 2025, facing a significant backlog.¹⁴ A wave of state-level legislation targeting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in higher education has also continued, with bills passed in Kentucky¹⁵ and Iowa¹⁶ and advancing in other states. Academic librarians in these states have seen impacts on their work as a result of these new laws¹⁷ and may struggle to follow professional best practices¹⁸ following their implementation.

Attempts to dismantle the Department of Education particularly impact data collection for institutions of higher education.¹⁹ Already in motion and of significant impact to academic libraries, the Academic Libraries section was officially retired from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) statistical survey following the 2024–25 year.²⁰ For smaller institutions and particularly those who are not ACRL or Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members, this dataset has served as a valuable resource for benchmarking as well as a tool for conducting research on library funding.

Budget Cuts, Closing Programs and Institutions

Since 2020, 75% of academic libraries have experienced a budget cut, with some facing cuts greater than 10%.²¹ Library funding had been in decline even before COVID-19, with library spending per student at four-year institutions having dropped by 20%.²² In the face of a potential demographic cliff, threatened tax hikes, and funding cuts to the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), library budget cuts are likely to continue and may lead to mergers, consolidations, or closures.

The decline in and precarity of federal funding, enrollment decline, and the potential for loss of income due to the higher endowment tax rate passed by Congress in 2025 contribute to schools shuttering programs, particularly in the humanities. In 2025, Boston University suspended doctoral admissions to the humanities and social sciences, West Virginia University eliminated twenty-eight undergraduate and graduate majors and programs, including all of the foreign language degree programs,²³ and the University of Chicago cut \$100 million in expenses by cutting staff positions and scaling back the number of doctoral students or pausing the graduate programs in general.²⁴ The threat of budget and program cuts force academic libraries to remove resources in those fields, risking gaps in collections and inconsistent access to the humanities and social sciences.

Institutions are identifying these threats and, as a result, are exploring mergers or consolidations. The number of schools participating in mergers and acquisitions tripled since 2016.²⁵ In extreme cases, some schools have been forced to close, leaving students, faculty, and collections in limbo.²⁶

As a result of these factors, libraries are now facing unprecedented challenges. Even if their institution is financially safe, library leadership may seriously consider the possibility

of their library merging in the next decade.²⁷ Libraries in shuttering institutions will have to consider the future of their collections, in particular those valuable items within special collections and archives. Library materials can be considered assets and subject to auction in bankruptcy proceedings, resulting in previously accessible rare materials to be sequestered in private collections.²⁸ For mergers and consolidations, libraries may have to renegotiate vendor licenses to cover multiple campus locations and increased student populations. Vendors may interpret the merger or consolidation as a loss of revenue, leading them to charge a one-time “expansion fee.”²⁹ Additionally, library leaders must walk a fine line by communicating changes to the campus community while avoiding disclosing information that could harm the legal aspects of the merger.³⁰

Structural Issues Facing Higher Education

Beyond the immediate budgetary and administrative challenges imposed on postsecondary institutions by recent political upheavals, higher education must also grapple with many simultaneous structural issues. Existing processes are increasingly unsustainable in light of recent political shifts, and the consequences of years of deferred maintenance, aging infrastructure and obsolete technologies, and the enrollment cliff are impacting academic libraries’ ability to carry out day-to-day services.

Discussions of the deferred maintenance of the aging buildings at Canadian and American campuses are regular fixtures of higher education reporting and continue to plague fiscal planning. The consequences of years of deferred maintenance have led some universities to suspend in-person classes.³¹ Even elite institutions are not immune. Maintenance costs for the University of California and the California State University systems combined are more than \$1.5 billion each year and continue to grow.³² Harvard University projected spending up to \$400 million annually to address deferred maintenance for the next fifteen years.³³ Some universities have alleviated the financial burden of deferred maintenance through government agreements.³⁴ However, reports of universities reallocating money from maintenance to fund core services indicates that deferred maintenance will remain a thorn in university budgets for the foreseeable future.³⁵ For libraries, this has greater implications as long-term preservation plans are subject to the regular and appropriate maintenance of spaces and equipment used for collection storage. Deferred maintenance is a problem that compounds with time, leading to larger and costlier repairs while negatively affecting the health and safety of current students and staff.³⁶

Another major structural issue affecting academic libraries is growing technical debt and technological obsolescence. The cost of constantly fixing aging or clunky software systems in the United States is more than \$1.52 trillion.³⁷ Academic library workflows are interrupted as many employers rely on collaborative software from Microsoft or Google, in addition to the complications that arise from having vital metadata stored on external cloud servers. Beyond straining regular workflows, certain library collections are particularly susceptible to technological obsolescence as the viability of, for example, video game or film collections are dependent on the accessibility and usability of consoles and operating systems that are no longer in the market. Furthermore, in the absence of physical media, maintaining digital access to streaming services already comes at an exorbitant cost.³⁸

The enrollment cliff also remains an issue for higher education as universities compete to enroll students from a decreasing applicant pool. Although some universities have continued

to see growth in their student bodies,³⁹ the projected decline in the number of high school graduates in some states is more than 30%.⁴⁰ These numbers have led to predictions of as many as eighty colleges closing between 2025 and 2029, doubling the average annual rate of closures.⁴¹ A secondary issue parallel to the enrollment cliff is a decline in students who pay full tuition without financial aid, further exacerbating budgetary shortfalls.⁴² This had led to the closure of satellite campuses, program cuts, and layoffs.⁴³ Some universities have responded by streamlining application processes and expanding offerings for nontraditional students.⁴⁴

Navigating AI Integration: Adoption, Ethics, and Critical Discourse

The adoption and use of AI in higher education and academic libraries is reshaping how educational institutions operate and engage with students.⁴⁵ This is evident in the increase of AI integration in research tools and library products, the development of AI literacy frameworks, and the push for professional development surrounding the ethical use of AI. Del Castillo and Kelly found that though many library professionals have engaged with AI tools such as ChatGPT for instructional purposes, it is more out of the need to keep current in the field.⁴⁶ A countermovement rejecting AI adoption and use has surfaced, opposing the pressure to be optimistic of AI, the opaqueness of AI integration in research tools, and the frequent outputs of misinformation.⁴⁷

Whether libraries are racing to adopt embedded AI tools or are forced to do so by publishers and vendors, AI-powered technologies are transforming how research is conducted and how academic integrity is maintained. Proponents of AI discuss its integration into Library Information Systems (LIS) as a means to improve access to library resources, while vendors such as Clarivate, Elsevier, and EBSCO tout embedded tools that feature natural language search, summarization, and metadata enhancement for users.⁴⁸ A deep dive into Primo Research Assistant found that natural language queries were somewhat effective though the overview summaries were less than ideal, attempting to summarize nonrelevant sources in a way to answer the query.⁴⁹ Although these interactive tools aim to improve automation and productivity overall, issues such as lack of transparency, bias, and inaccurate output still raise concerns. Extensive assessment of AI tools used in libraries needs to be undertaken, not just to reflect on the needs and values of the institution but also as a way to discuss the ethical outcomes of this use.⁵⁰

The discourse surrounding AI literacy in academic libraries often emphasizes the inevitability of generative AI adoption, positioning it as an essential skill for students and library workers. The integration of AI in library instruction ranges from using it to enhance student's ability to finding relevant literature to replacing human instruction with AI instruction.⁵¹ Although library instructors are leveraging AI in their classrooms, many agree that a huge chunk of time is built around ethical use. AI literacy frameworks developed by Barnard College, Stanford University, and the ACRL are just some examples of how AI is defined as potentially necessary and desirable, even while acknowledging unethical implications.⁵² At the same time, library instruction provides librarians with the opportunity to explore the unethical aspects of AI, such as authority, bias, and copyright with students in class.⁵³ Critical dialogue surrounding AI literacy narratives and AI tool integration is rapidly evolving.

Final Rule on ADA Title II

Libraries have long strived to make their web content accessible, with varying degrees of success. In 2026, the US Department of Justice's (DOJ) final rule, "Nondiscrimination

on the Basis of Disability; Accessibility of Web Information and Services of State and Local Government Entities” went into effect, bringing regulatory clarity to accessibility obligations of public academic libraries under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.⁵⁴

Although the DOJ has interpreted Title II to cover web content, the final rule establishes a mandatory standard for the first time: Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 Level AA.⁵⁵ The most obvious place where the final rule will impact libraries is on their public-facing websites. This standard is overdue, as a recent analysis of one hundred university library websites found that 80% contained accessibility errors.⁵⁶

The final rule also extends accessibility requirements to digital content licensed from third parties. Vendors have responded: Springshare has updated LibApps products to meet the WCAG 2.1 standard and EBSCO has committed to meeting the standard for its ebook platform, but the responsibility also falls on content creators to ensure all material produced outside these templates is compliant.⁵⁷ Furthermore, inconsistencies remain. Hovious and Wang found that EBSCO and ProQuest reportedly deflect responsibility for accessible HTML and PDFs of academic articles on their databases, claiming accessibility of scholarly material is up to journal publishers, not the vendors.⁵⁸ Negotiating for accessible licensed content is a proactive, recommended approach by the ARL to help libraries meet legal obligations and ensure vendor accountability.

The ARL, which weighed in on the DOJ rulemaking, continues to advocate for born-accessible content, and this call was reportedly reflected in the final rule.⁵⁹ The final rule clearly applies to digital archival collections including born-digital, digitized collections, and institutional repositories (IRs). Given that most IRs depend on self-depositing, quality control to ensure compliance of all uploaded material is a challenge.⁶⁰

The final rule establishes exceptions, such as that of preexisting web archives and social media posts. Separately, compliance is not required if it causes a fundamental alteration to the service or imposes an undue financial and administrative burden. Ward speculates several possible ways these exceptions could play out.⁶¹ However, the ARL recommends that libraries consult with counsel and their information technology (IT) departments to understand their obligations.

Human Resources in Academic Libraries

The changing political climate has necessitated a change in recruitment practices at academic libraries and an increasing movement away from DEI initiatives at many academic institutions.⁶² However, even while many colleges and universities have scaled back or eliminated their DEI initiatives in alignment with the current political climate, Green found 61% of academic library candidates listed DEI initiatives of a prospective employer as very or critically important.⁶³ Similarly, the promotion of DEI practices was rated a 4.2 out of 5 in importance in Lowe et al.⁶⁴ Recruiting and hiring teams at academic libraries must bridge the gap between government and institutional policies and academic librarians’ desire for diversity, equity, and inclusion to recruit a wide candidate pool for open positions. Academic libraries who are unable or unwilling to continue to promote DEI initiatives may put themselves at a disadvantage in recruiting and hiring.⁶⁵

Job candidates rate salary, medical benefits, time off, and retirement options among the most important benefits associated with an academic library position.⁶⁶ Job location also has

a significant impact on job seekers, with many not looking to relocate outside of their current region for sociopolitical and personal reasons.⁶⁷ The increase in housing costs associated with higher interest rates, inflation, and a rising number of employees taking care of aging parents and family members make relocation difficult. Further, the sociopolitical climate of a location plays a factor as candidates may view a location's attractiveness based on the political attitude toward libraries in the location.⁶⁸ The steady increase in tenure erosion⁶⁹ and tenure firings⁷⁰ compound the higher education exodus.⁷¹

Despite rising challenges with job satisfaction, certain factors may make librarians less likely to change employers than in the recent past. Many of the same factors affecting new job candidates also come into play for retention of library faculty and staff, with salary and location among the most significant factors in retention.⁷² Many mid-career librarians discover that finding positions within their geographic location, and for wages that align with the required qualifications, is becoming more difficult, with many institutions not adjusting salaries along with inflation.⁷³ A limited job market in an academic library employee's current location, along with national and international competition from candidates for posted jobs may lead to "involuntary staying," where academic librarians remain employed in a role in which they are unhappy.⁷⁴ Work environment has a significant impact on academic library employees' job performance and satisfaction, with autonomy, clear duties and goals, development opportunities, and sense of purpose cited as important factors for job satisfaction.⁷⁵

Data Culture, Data Curation, Data Impact, and Data Rescue

Many academic libraries have developed research data services to meet researchers' needs over the past two decades. ACRL's new book, *Data Culture in Academic Libraries*,⁷⁶ projects this library service model will move further from traditional consultation and workshop training to data culture cultivation through partnership building, community engagement, and a rededication to DEI. Ithaka S+R's 2025 report,⁷⁷ *Researcher Challenges and Experiences with Data Services*, found researchers are often unaware of or have different understandings of library data services and thus underestimate their utility. Although uncertainty regarding data reuse permissions and deficiencies in sharing systems continue to be key obstacles to data intensive work, researchers have clear preferences for overcoming these barriers. They favor data services that are "1) individualized, localized, or bespoke; 2) contain a strong instructional component; and/or 3) have memorable branding."

Recognizing researchers' preference for local data support, the NIH Generalist Repository Ecosystem Initiative (GREI),⁷⁸ after several years of advocating for the established seven generalist data repositories,⁷⁹ recently established partnerships with US research universities and colleges.⁸⁰ Institutions favor generalist repository features, such as support for all file types, ORCID, DataCite metadata schema, DOI, and multiple license options, as well as practical considerations, such as being able to meet funders' requirements and community standards and sustainability. The most common service models for these generalist-institutional data repositories are self-deposit with limited library curation and metadata support.⁸¹

Led by the California Digital Library and ARL, the Machine Actionable Plans (MAP) pilot project concluded in 2025.⁸² The project developed ways to automate connections among multiple scholarly administrative and output processes while fostering relationships to support research data management. MAP has great potential to help institutions streamline their data

services and implement plans for integrating persistent identifiers, generative AI technologies, as well as other academic systems.⁸³ In recent comments to the US Office of Science and Technology Policy,⁸⁴ ARL recommended that federal agencies require machine actionable data-management plans (maDMPs) as a standard component of grant applications.⁸⁵

Academic libraries participated in the Implementing Data Evaluation in Academia Working Group initiated by Make Data Count (<https://makedatacount.org/>) and HELIOS Open (<https://www.heliosopen.org/>).⁸⁶ The working group developed a suite of maturity model, practical implementation guides, and case studies on data evaluation in academia.⁸⁷ Together with Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA; <https://sfdora.org/>) and Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA; <https://www.coara.org/>) efforts, these tools enable institutions to make systematic changes to advance open scholarship practices, including research data. The need to measure the academic and social impacts of open access scholarship is being met by institutions such as the University of Texas Libraries,⁸⁸ which have begun to develop tools to automatically collect citation data from multiple open repositories and systems.

During 2025, federal government data was at risk due to radical decisions by the current administration. In response, data librarians initiated the Data Rescue Project,⁸⁹ providing a viable, sustainable infrastructure and specialized curation tools. The project also developed resources to guide nonprofessional volunteers through the rescue process. As the public witnessed the vulnerability of digital information and real-world examples of critical data loss, the data librarian community demonstrated the immense value of the stewardship skills they have espoused for decades, resulting in real social impact during this historic moment.

Environmental Sustainability in Academic Libraries

Post-secondary institutions have a responsibility to educate future stewards of our environment about the accelerating climate crisis. For academic library workers, this includes heightening awareness on climate change and resource depletion. Hamad et al. give evidence that academic library workers facilitate climate literacy and encourage library workers to use targeted outreach and embrace diversity to increase climate literacy.⁹⁰

In the past, environmental sustainability in academic libraries was seen in terms of “green,” energy-efficient buildings, waste reduction, and recycling.⁹¹ For today’s academic libraries, environmental sustainability also includes collection programs such as print-on-demand and collaborative collecting, reducing reliance on print collections, and providing access to digital resources through open access initiatives and digital programs.⁹² In addition, the ARL identified campus decarbonization as one way for academic libraries to reduce their climate change impact.⁹³

The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) give an excellent blueprint for academic libraries to be more sustainable.⁹⁴ The SDGs have prompted numerous initiatives from the American Library Association (ALA), who formed a task force for achieving the United Nations 2030 SDGs and have included sustainability in their core values and conference planning.⁹⁵

Unfortunately, Tribelhorn says very few libraries take sustainability seriously, prompting a need for library leaders to set an environmental agenda and prioritize the climate crisis within academic libraries.⁹⁶ Indeed, library leaders must promote sustainable and green initiatives in their libraries⁹⁷ and “recommit to their values, promoting a culture of sustainability through continual assessment to benefit their communities in the long term.”⁹⁸

Initiatives such as the Sustainable Libraries Initiative⁹⁹ give hope that sustainability can be prioritized for all types of libraries and that library administrations incorporate the SDGs into library policies, as environmentally responsible academic libraries ensure they remain relevant institutions prepared for future environmental challenges.

Final Note

In response to external and internal pressures, the higher education ecosystem evolved rapidly in the past two years. These pressures, challenges, and evolutions are expected to continue for the foreseeable future. Academic librarians will, however, continue to use their expertise to help their students, faculties, and communities navigate the increasingly complex and clouded information world. Librarians will adapt and innovate and, all the while, continue to advocate for intellectual freedom and the sanctity of the human need to explore and to learn. //

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