

For Tuesday's Joint Session: Collaborations and *The Mirage of Continuity*

From Battin and Hawkins, "Setting the Stage" in *The Mirage of Continuity: Reconfiguring Academic Information Resources for the 21st Century* (Washington, Council on Library Resources and Association of American Universities), pp. 5-6.

For the past two decades, libraries and computer centers have radically altered both themselves and the higher education landscape, albeit in an incremental fashion. True transformational change continues to be constrained by the misguided belief that the technological revolution can be contained within the old organizational structures. Succumbing to the mirage of continuity that denies the need for financial and management reorganization and the belief in a technological panacea that will miraculously transform an historic tradition of knowledge creation and transmission by the simple substitution of digital for analog technology will only increase dysfunction and paralysis. To recognize the new conception of the library is to recognize and accept the inevitability of a new conception of the university.

The characteristics of digital technology both sustain and alter the habits, mores, and institutions of democratic society. This particular duality has created a mesmerizing appearance of continuity, most clearly reflected in conservative organizations such as higher education. The apparent ease of initial, incremental uses of technology readily obscures the fact that the fundamental differences between the characteristics of print-on-paper and digital technologies inevitably require a completely different set of social and institutional infrastructures. Information technologies have consistently enabled the continuation of traditional values and missions at the same time as their use actively encourages the unrestrained exploration of new frontiers in the creation of knowledge. Applications of this new knowledge in turn radically influence individual and organizational capabilities, thought, and behavior.

Traditional instructional and research methodologies, governance structures, and financial formulas for the higher education enterprise have been shaped by the characteristics of print-on-paper technology. Consequently, digital technologies, characterized by unrelenting change, irrelevancy of time and place, the need for unprecedented and often unwelcome collaboration, and the potential for unmanageable costs, simply do not fit comfortably into the existing infrastructure.

Ironically, the strongest barriers to creating an affordable and efficient array of digital information resources are the existing organizational and financial structures that have created and supported the development of our internationally admired higher education system. The most difficult challenge to be faced in an era of transformational change is the recognition that what has been our strength will become our liability if we do not act in time. The brittle books on library shelves, the deferred maintenance of campus buildings, and the Year 2000 computing conundrum are powerful cautionary examples of great assets becoming crushing liabilities.