

Building Windmills Together: Reimagining Library–Vendor Partnerships in an Era of Transformation

The Chinese proverb, “*When the winds of change blow, some build walls and others build windmills,*” offers a powerful metaphor for the future of academic libraries. The winds facing libraries today are stronger than ever: rapidly advancing artificial intelligence, evolving models of scholarly communication, escalating costs of information resources, growing expectations for research support, and persistent financial pressures. Libraries and vendors can respond by resisting change, protecting long-standing practices, and preserving familiar transactional relationships. Or they can choose to harness these forces—working together to create innovative services, expand access to knowledge, and strengthen the research enterprise.

For me, building windmills means embracing partnership over transaction. The most successful relationships between libraries and vendors are no longer defined simply by purchasing books, journals, or databases. Instead, they are collaborative partnerships that enable institutions to advance research, teaching, student success, and community impact.

Throughout my career in academic librarianship, I have witnessed a remarkable transformation in how libraries create value. As the administrator responsible for collections, licensing, and multimillion-dollar library budgets at a large public HBCU, I have learned that libraries are increasingly expected to demonstrate measurable institutional impact. We are no longer evaluated solely by the size of our collections but by how effectively we support faculty scholarship, student achievement, research competitiveness, and institutional strategic goals.

Meeting these expectations requires a different relationship with vendors.

Today's library vendors are not simply providers of content; they are collaborators in developing research infrastructure. Research intelligence platforms help universities measure scholarly impact and identify collaboration opportunities. Open access publishing agreements expand the visibility of institutional scholarships while reducing financial barriers for researchers. Analytics tools inform strategic planning and accreditation efforts. Artificial intelligence platforms are beginning to reshape literature searching, evidence synthesis, and research workflows. These innovations become most effective when libraries and vendors work together to ensure technologies are implemented thoughtfully, ethically, and in ways that genuinely meet institutional needs.

Rather than asking, “What product should we purchase?” libraries increasingly ask, “What problem are we trying to solve?”

That shift changes everything.

Over the past several years, I have had the opportunity to negotiate transformative publishing agreements, implement research intelligence services, evaluate emerging technologies, and collaborate with vendors to maximize the return on limited financial resources. These experiences have reinforced an important lesson: successful partnerships are built on shared goals rather than contracts alone. The strongest vendor relationships involve listening, flexibility, transparency, and a commitment to helping institutions achieve meaningful outcomes.

This perspective is particularly important for Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

HBCUs have long demonstrated how innovation flourishes despite limited resources. Library leaders at HBCUs often balance ambitious institutional priorities with constrained budgets, making strategic collaboration essential rather than optional. Every purchasing decision represents an opportunity to strengthen research capacity, improve student success, or expand equitable access to information. Vendor partnerships that recognize these realities—and work collaboratively to develop sustainable solutions—can have an outsized impact on institutional transformation.

In many ways, HBCUs have become experts at building windmills. Rather than allowing resource limitations to become walls, we seek creative partnerships, leverage consortia purchasing, embrace open scholarships, and maximize every investment to benefit our campus communities. These experiences demonstrate that innovation is not solely determined by institutional wealth but by vision, collaboration, and strategic leadership.

Artificial intelligence represents perhaps the strongest wind currently reshaping higher education. While AI presents exciting opportunities to improve research efficiency and discovery, it also raises significant questions regarding ethics, bias, privacy, intellectual property, and information literacy. Libraries are uniquely positioned to guide institutions through this transition because our mission has always centered on helping people navigate information responsibly.

However, libraries cannot accomplish this work alone.

Responsible AI adoption requires vendors to prioritize transparency, protect user privacy, communicate clearly about how AI tool's function, and collaborate with libraries to provide meaningful professional development. Likewise, libraries must engage vendors not simply as technology providers but as partners committed to responsible innovation. Together, we can help faculty, students, and researchers use emerging technologies thoughtfully while preserving the core values of librarianship.

Building windmills also requires courage.

Change often challenges long-standing assumptions about how libraries operate, how collections are built, and how scholarly communication functions. It requires librarians and vendors alike to embrace experimentation, learn from failures, and remain responsive to evolving user needs. The strongest partnerships are those willing to adapt continuously rather than defend outdated models.

As someone who has worked across collections, scholarly communication, research support, grant-funded innovation, and community engagement, I have come to believe that the future of librarianship depends less on predicting change than on preparing organizations to respond to it. Libraries that cultivate strategic partnerships, invest in emerging technologies responsibly, support open scholarships, and remain centered on the needs of their communities will continue to thrive regardless of what new winds emerge.

The Charleston Conference has long represented a space where librarians, publishers, vendors, and scholars engage in the difficult—but necessary—conversations that shape our profession. As a first-time attendee, I hope to contribute to these conversations while learning from colleagues who are also committed to building windmills rather than walls.

The winds of change will continue to blow. We cannot control their direction, but we can decide how we respond. By embracing collaboration instead of isolation, innovation instead of fear, and partnership instead of transaction, libraries and vendors can transform disruption into opportunity. Together, we can ensure that change strengthens—not weakens—the essential role libraries play in advancing knowledge, supporting research, and serving our communities.