

What Should We Do Next? Designing an Innovation Portfolio for Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Innovation is essential for academic libraries navigating the complexities of a rapidly evolving knowledge ecosystem. This article explores how structured frameworks, such as the Innovation Matrix and the Three Horizons framework, can guide libraries in strategically aligning their efforts with institutional goals while balancing immediate needs with long-term aspirations. By shifting the focus from reactive decision-making to intentional problem framing, libraries can prioritize opportunities that deliver meaningful outcomes for their communities. Additionally, the 70-20-10 rule for resource allocation provides a practical approach to balancing core services, exploratory initiatives, and visionary projects. Through this multidimensional strategy, libraries can foster a culture of thoughtful innovation, adapt to emerging challenges, and position themselves as leaders in shaping the future of higher education. The article emphasizes the importance of aligning goals with actions, cultivating agility, and embedding innovation as a core practice to ensure relevance, creativity, and impact in a changing academic landscape.

Keywords: academic libraries, innovation, strategic planning, three horizons framework, library leadership

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When we think about innovation in academic libraries, it often raises a series of questions:

- Who are we innovating for?
- What projects should we prioritize?
- Where do we find new ideas?
- When is the right time to act?
- How will we measure success?
- Do we have the bandwidth for this?

These questions can feel overwhelming, especially when faced with a vast array of possibilities. Yet, with limited resources, it's impossible to do everything for everyone – so where do we begin?

Academic libraries operate at the forefront of a rapidly evolving knowledge ecosystem, where innovation is no longer optional but essential. As demands increase, library leaders face the challenge of staying ahead of these shifts while preserving and improving core services. These pressures are further intensified by changing technologies, evolving user expectations, and the need to align with broader institutional priorities.

An innovation portfolio provides a practical framework for navigating this complexity. By offering a structured approach to collecting, mapping, and evaluating opportunities, it enables libraries to respond strategically. Beyond simply cataloging ideas, it helps libraries strike a balance – identifying which projects to prioritize immediately, which to cultivate over time, and how to allocate resources effectively.

In this article, I propose that libraries adopt a multidimensional framework to plan, investigate, and implement innovation efforts more seamlessly. When integrated into a broader organizational strategy, an innovation portfolio not only drives results but also fosters creativity and collaboration. At its core, this approach enables libraries to adapt to change and, more importantly, to lead it – ensuring continued relevance and value within the academic landscape.

The Challenges and Opportunities of Innovation

Innovation is often associated with the rapid pace of technological change or competitive commercial market pressures. In libraries, however, it takes on a distinct character. It's not focused on chasing trends for their own sake but rather fostering an

improvement-oriented mindset – grounded in effectiveness, inclusivity, and alignment with the library’s mission and values.

At its core, innovation in libraries is centered on serving communities better, supporting learning, and advancing knowledge. This might mean adopting new technologies, developing services, or addressing unmet needs. At times, it requires responding with fresh solutions to budget constraints, organizational setbacks, or institutional shifts. The sheer number of possibilities can make the process feel overwhelming.

A central question is how innovation should be structured. Should it be a top-down initiative guided by leadership’s vision, or emerge organically from frontline insights and user feedback? Should efforts rely on ad hoc experimentation or follow a formal process? Libraries can benefit from a mix of both approaches. Structured planning provides clarity and direction, while organic efforts foster creativity and responsiveness. Striking this balance is essential for fostering a culture where innovation thrives.

From a management perspective, innovation is more than generating ideas or launching initiatives; it is rooted in making strategic decisions that are transparent and meaningful across the organization. A well-crafted innovation plan provides clarity, enabling librarians, staff, and stakeholders to understand not only what the library is working on but also why these efforts are important.

Clarity is essential in the innovation process. Not every idea can or should be pursued, and thoughtful prioritization helps navigate differing perceptions and interests. By making decisions explicit and aligning efforts, innovation planning fosters a shared sense of purpose, empowering teams to contribute effectively and feel deeply invested in the library’s future.

Innovation can take many shapes, from experimenting with fresh approaches to rethinking how services meet changing needs. This creates tangible results but also signals to the campus, funders, and the broader community that the library is evolving and committed to making a difference.

At the same time, innovation works internally, shaping how libraries invest in spaces, technology, services, and staff development. An innovation plan goes beyond being a roadmap – it’s a commitment to align goals with actions, ensuring progress that resonates and endures.

Framing Innovation

To navigate the complexities of innovation, libraries must rethink how they frame their efforts. Innovation is often misunderstood as the pursuit of the next shiny idea or the deployment of the latest technology. While these endeavors can be exciting and may even elevate a library's profile, they rarely provide a foundation for meaningful progress. Instead, Greg Satell's (2017) *Mapping Innovation* offers a compelling framework, urging us to start not with new service ideas but with the problems we aim to solve.

In this context, "problems" are not obstacles to overcome but opportunities to define purpose and direction—clear, meaningful challenges that drive progress. These may involve tangible issues, like streamlining access to digital resources, or broader needs, such as adapting to evolving research practices or promoting equitable access to knowledge. By framing problems thoughtfully, libraries can channel their efforts toward what matters most, creating intentional strategies that align with their mission and deliver impactful outcomes.

Rather than asking, "What's new?" Satell (2017) encourages us to ask, "What's the real issue we're addressing?" This reframing shifts innovation from a scattershot, reactive exercise to a deliberate process of discovery and intentional action. At its core, Satell's argument underscores that there is no universal formula for successful innovation. Each library must define its unique challenges and craft a tailored playbook to address them. This approach is not based on accumulating the perfect set of tools, methods, or technologies but rather anchoring efforts in a clear understanding of the problem and activating a thoughtful plan to solve it.

This shift from idea generation to problem framing is transformative. It moves libraries beyond the question of "What should we do next?" and instead centers on the far more essential question: "What's needed now?"

So how do we move this concept from theory to practice? Satell (2017) proposes two guiding questions:

- How well is the problem defined?
- How well is the domain understood?

These questions, while deceptively simple, offer profound insights into the innovation process.

The first—*how well is the problem defined?*—asks us to consider whether we fully understand the challenge at hand. A well-defined problem is clear, specific, and

measurable. For instance, “improving user access to digital resources” is a focused challenge, compared to a vague objective like “improving library services.” Without this clarity, innovation efforts risk becoming misdirected or scattered, wasting valuable time and resources.

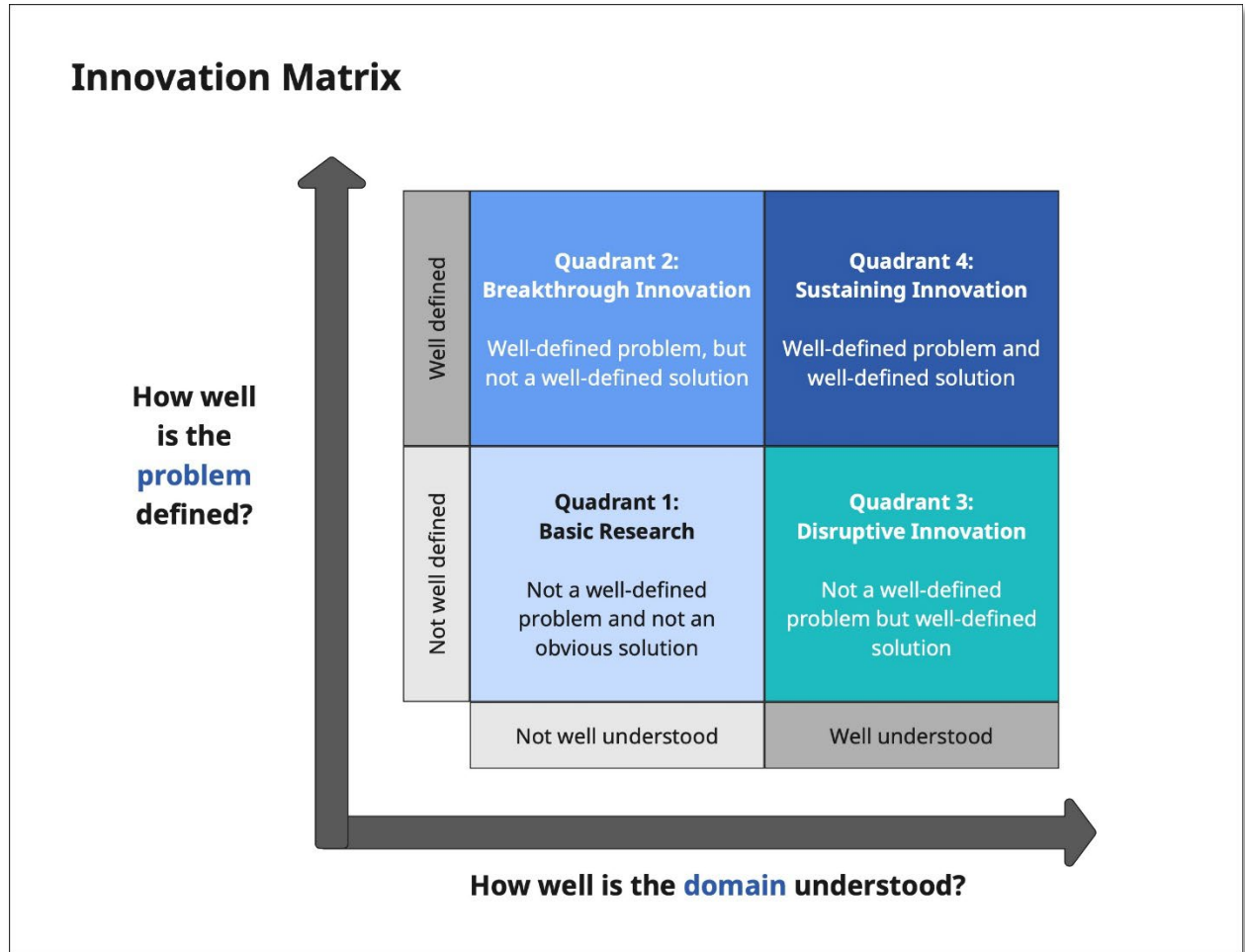
The second — *how well is the domain understood?* — shifts our attention to the context, expertise, and tools required to address the problem. A well-understood domain reflects a clear grasp of what’s possible, who else is working in the space, and the resources or methods needed. For example, a library exploring technologies like machine learning or computer vision might find the domain unfamiliar, necessitating further research, collaboration, and exploration before moving forward. In contrast, a library with established expertise in data science may find it easier to experiment with a service idea, as the domain is well-charted and the necessary talent is already in place.

This focus on problem framing serves as a compass for innovation planning. Ambitious, bold ideas may inspire us, but thoughtfully framed problems help define our direction and coordinate our actions. By prioritizing the challenges that truly matter to their communities, libraries can ensure their efforts are purposeful, effective, and aligned with their mission.

The Innovation Matrix

Building on the two questions — *how well is the problem defined?* and *how well is the domain understood?* — Satell (2017) introduces the Innovation Matrix, a practical tool for navigating efforts. This framework categorizes opportunities into four quadrants, each necessitating a unique approach to planning and execution. By applying this matrix, libraries can better identify the types of challenges they encounter and develop strategies tailored to address them effectively.

Figure 1. The Innovation Matrix



Each quadrant represents a unique type of innovation, shaped by the clarity of the problem and the familiarity with the domain:

Quadrant 1: Basic Research

This quadrant involves problems that are not well-defined and exist in unfamiliar domains. It's about exploration and discovery – learning what's possible before narrowing the focus. For libraries, basic research might include investigating how they can meaningfully engage with the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This could involve exploratory studies to identify areas where library services, collections, or partnerships align with specific SDGs, as well as experiments to determine how libraries can act as

facilitators of interdisciplinary collaboration around global challenges. Since the role of libraries in SDG-related engagement is still emerging, this work requires foundational research to define goals and build capacity before actionable strategies can be developed.

Quadrant 2: Breakthrough Innovation

This quadrant involves problems that are well-defined, but the solutions remain unclear. It's about tackling complex challenges that require creative problem-solving. For libraries, breakthrough innovation might include developing a comprehensive ecosystem for research data management. The challenge is clear: researchers need streamlined support to store, share, analyze, and preserve their data while meeting institutional and funder requirements. However, the solution involves integrating diverse platforms and tools, such as data repositories, metadata standards, analysis software, and preservation systems. It also requires addressing the complexities of big data and dynamic datasets – ensuring real-time processing, scalability, and interoperability.

Quadrant 3: Disruptive Innovation

This quadrant involves well-defined solutions applied to contexts where the problem is not yet fully understood. It's about leveraging existing capabilities in novel ways to challenge the status quo. For libraries, disruptive innovation might include extending their digital preservation expertise into software curation and preservation. The solution – libraries' established workflows for managing digital objects – is clear, but applying it to software raises new questions: Which tools hold long-term educational, research, or cultural significance? How can preserved software remain accessible and functional over time? This effort disrupts traditional preservation boundaries, positioning libraries as leaders in safeguarding not just knowledge, but the tools that create and interpret it.

Quadrant 4: Sustaining Innovation

This quadrant involves problems and solutions that are both well-defined. It's about making incremental improvements to enhance existing services. For libraries, sustaining innovation might include refining study room booking systems. The challenge – ensuring equitable access to spaces for students – is well understood, as is the solution: a robust reservation platform. Incremental improvements, such as real-time availability updates, automated reminders, integration with campus ID systems, and team-oriented features like shared calendars and group notifications, ensure the service remains user-friendly and supports collaboration effectively.

By categorizing innovation opportunities into these four quadrants, libraries can gain a clearer picture of their innovation portfolio and a structured way to approach different challenges. This framework moves beyond reactive decision-making, providing a method to prioritize efforts based on the nature of each problem. It shifts the focus from "What can we do?" to "What do we need to solve?" – a subtle yet critical distinction that drives purposeful and sustainable strategies.

The Innovation Matrix is more than a diagnostic tool; it guides the evolution of innovation efforts, ensuring alignment with the library's mission and the changing needs of its community. For example, a project might start in the Basic Research quadrant as an exploratory idea, transition to Breakthrough Innovation as the problem and solution take shape, and ultimately settle into Sustaining Innovation as a refined, indispensable service. This progression ensures libraries can adapt to emerging challenges while continuing to uphold their core commitments.

By understanding how these quadrants interact and evolve, libraries can adopt a flexible, adaptive approach to innovation. Integrating this model into strategic planning enables libraries to build portfolios that are ambitious yet actionable, fostering both immediate impact and sustainable growth.

Applying the Matrix

To see how the Innovation Matrix works in practice, let's consider a potential journey through its quadrants. Imagine your library is interested in establishing a makerspace but has little experience with the required technology or service models. Specifically, you're exploring 3D printing. While other locations on campus already offer this service, they are limited to specific majors, such as engineering or architecture, and operate on a fee-based model. You suspect there may be broader interest across the campus community, but you're uncertain about user needs or whether the investment would be worthwhile.

This scenario begins in the Basic Research quadrant. Here, the problem – how to provide makerspace services that broadly meet the needs of your campus – is not well-defined, and the domain is not well understood, as your library lacks in-house expertise or experience with 3D printing. At this stage, the goal isn't to launch a full-fledged service but to explore and gather foundational knowledge.

To move forward, you might begin by collecting insights from other libraries and campus partners who have implemented similar programs. Additionally, acquiring a

basic 3D printer could enable your team to experiment and gain hands-on experience. This type of exploration is invaluable for understanding how the technology works, identifying potential challenges, troubleshooting issues, and uncovering unique applications within your specific context. This exploratory phase turns abstract unknowns into actionable insights, providing a solid foundation for informed decision-making.

Once your team has developed a solid understanding of the technology, the project may transition into the Breakthrough Innovation quadrant. At this stage, the problem becomes more defined: how to effectively integrate 3D printing into your library's infrastructure and workflows. The domain is now better understood, as your team has gained familiarity with the tools and their potential applications.

The focus shifts to addressing complex logistical and technical challenges. How can you connect multiple machines into a cohesive system? What workflows will ensure ease of use for patrons while minimizing staff burden? At this point, the concept evolves from a small-scale experiment into a fully functional and accessible service. Breakthrough innovation requires creativity and strategic problem-solving to bridge the gap between technical understanding and delivering a seamless, effective library offering.

The next phase brings us to the Disruptive Innovation quadrant, where the focus shifts to rethinking how the service is positioned and delivered. With technical knowledge and workflows now established, the challenge becomes creating a unique value proposition within your campus context. While existing campus 3D printing services might cater to advanced, discipline-specific needs with high-end equipment, the library could distinguish itself by becoming an entry-level provider. By offering free access and emphasizing experiential learning, the library could attract a diverse audience, from first-time users to interdisciplinary explorers.

This approach aligns seamlessly with the library's mission to democratize access and foster creativity across disciplines. In addition to helping users process files, the library could design an environment that encourages hands-on engagement, allowing users to actively participate in the design and learning process. By prioritizing skill-building alongside access, the library disrupts the status quo, opening 3D printing to a broader audience and positioning itself as a hub for innovation and discovery.

Finally, in the Sustaining Innovation quadrant, the focus shifts to maintenance, refinement, and ongoing improvement. At this stage, the service is established but still requires deliberate attention to remain effective and efficient. Incremental

enhancements – such as upgrading equipment, expanding the range of materials, or streamlining user workflows – ensure the service continues to adapt to evolving needs and expectations.

This journey through the quadrants demonstrates how the Innovation Matrix equips libraries to navigate complex opportunities. Rather than forcing every idea into a one-size-fits-all model, it emphasizes understanding and tailoring each initiative to its unique requirements. By mapping opportunities through this framework, libraries can align innovation efforts with their goals, resources, and broader institutional contexts, ensuring that progress is both deliberate and sustainable.

While the makerspace example illustrates how the Innovation Matrix can guide a specific project through its lifecycle, the framework's adaptability extends well beyond individual initiatives. Libraries can use it to address challenges across various domains, from education and research to cultural heritage and outreach. This broader application unlocks the potential to reimagine the library's role as a practitioner and thought leader for innovation across the institution.

Innovation, however, is rarely a straightforward journey. While structured frameworks like the Innovation Matrix provide valuable direction, the path itself is often dynamic and unpredictable. Goals may shift as new challenges arise, opportunities emerge, or priorities evolve. Sometimes the road is clearly marked; other times, it is obscured, requiring the creation of new paths entirely. This demands an agile mindset – one that values exploration, iteration, and the willingness to embrace detours as part of the process. By adopting non-linear goal setting, libraries can remain open to discovery, adjust their strategies to meet emerging needs, and ensure their efforts are both impactful and resilient in the face of change.

Broadening the Application of the Matrix

The Innovation Matrix is more than a framework for planning; it's a lens through which libraries can reimagine their potential across diverse areas. Whether focusing on education, the research enterprise, cultural heritage, or outreach, this model offers a structured way to align opportunities with strategic goals. Let's explore how each quadrant of the matrix might inspire innovation.

In the Basic Research quadrant, where problems are not well-defined and the domain is unfamiliar, libraries can embrace exploration and discovery. For education, this might involve studying how students engage with generative AI tools, uncovering

behaviors and unmet needs that could shape future services, instruction, or platform subscriptions. In the research space, libraries could investigate how scholars interact with open data repositories, identifying patterns and barriers to better inform repository design and consulting efforts. This aligns with broader policy shifts toward open innovation and open science, such as those articulated by the European Commission (2016), which call for more participatory, transparent, and collaborative approaches to research and knowledge production. Cultural heritage teams might experiment with augmented reality to create new ways of engaging users with special collections. Meanwhile, outreach initiatives could explore supporting student creatives and aspiring entrepreneurs, providing access to tools, mentorship, and programming for showcasing their work or developing business ideas.

Breakthrough Innovation, where problems are clear but solutions remain elusive, challenges libraries to think creatively. In education, libraries could develop adaptive learning experiences that use analytics to personalize resources and support students' unique learning needs. For research, the development of dashboards to visualize faculty research metrics could tackle a pressing need while addressing technical and usability hurdles. In cultural heritage, crowdsourcing platforms for enriching metadata might improve archive discoverability while engaging broader audiences. Outreach efforts might include crafting digital literacy programs designed to combat misinformation using innovative teaching tools, experiences, and pedagogies.

The Disruptive Innovation quadrant calls for rethinking established practices by applying existing capabilities in bold new ways. In education, libraries could create interdisciplinary immersion labs – dynamic spaces where students from diverse fields collaborate on hands-on projects, blending technology, creativity, and problem-solving. For research, libraries could revolutionize publishing services by enabling the creation of dynamic, multimedia-rich outputs that integrate interactive visualizations, datasets, and immersive storytelling. This approach pushes the boundaries of traditional academic publishing, redefining how research is shared and experienced. Cultural heritage teams could develop immersive exhibits that seamlessly integrate physical artifacts with augmented and virtual reality storytelling, allowing visitors to interact with history and explore deeper questions about context, meaning, and preservation. For outreach, libraries might establish mobile innovation labs in partnership with local agencies, delivering tools and workshops to underserved communities. These labs could equip individuals with practical skills like testing their water and air quality while fostering a deeper understanding of environmental science and its impact on their daily lives.

The Sustaining Innovation quadrant focuses on refining and improving existing services. For education, libraries could seamlessly integrate course reserves and instructional modules into the institution's learning management system, creating a streamlined pathway for academic support. In research, libraries might enhance repository workflows by improving metadata quality and implementing analytics tools to better track impact and usage. For cultural heritage, cleaning and updating archival metadata would improve discoverability and align collections with evolving research needs. For outreach, partnering with student affairs to enrich finals study break programs through wellness activities and curated resources could provide meaningful support during high-stress periods.

These examples illustrate the adaptability of the Innovation Matrix, providing a flexible framework to guide diverse efforts. By aligning opportunities with their respective quadrants, libraries can move beyond reactive decision-making to embrace purposeful, tailored strategies that enhance the probability to deliver meaningful results. This matrix not only encourages the generation and framing of ideas, but also the thoughtful exploration of how libraries can redefine their roles in an ever-changing world.

Balancing Horizons

Innovation is a journey that requires balancing immediate needs with bold, long-term ambitions. While the Innovation Matrix offers a way to categorize challenges and tailor strategies, the Three Horizons framework complements it by introducing a crucial dimension: time. Together these tools enable libraries to map not only which projects to focus on but also when and how to allocate resources for maximum impact.

The Three Horizons framework, first introduced in *The Alchemy of Growth* (Baghai et al., 2000), helps organizations balance their efforts across the short-term, mid-term, and long-term. It provides a structured lens for thinking through where to invest energy, ensuring we address present challenges while laying the groundwork for future opportunities. By integrating this temporal perspective alongside the Innovation Matrix, library leaders can create a dynamic roadmap for innovation.

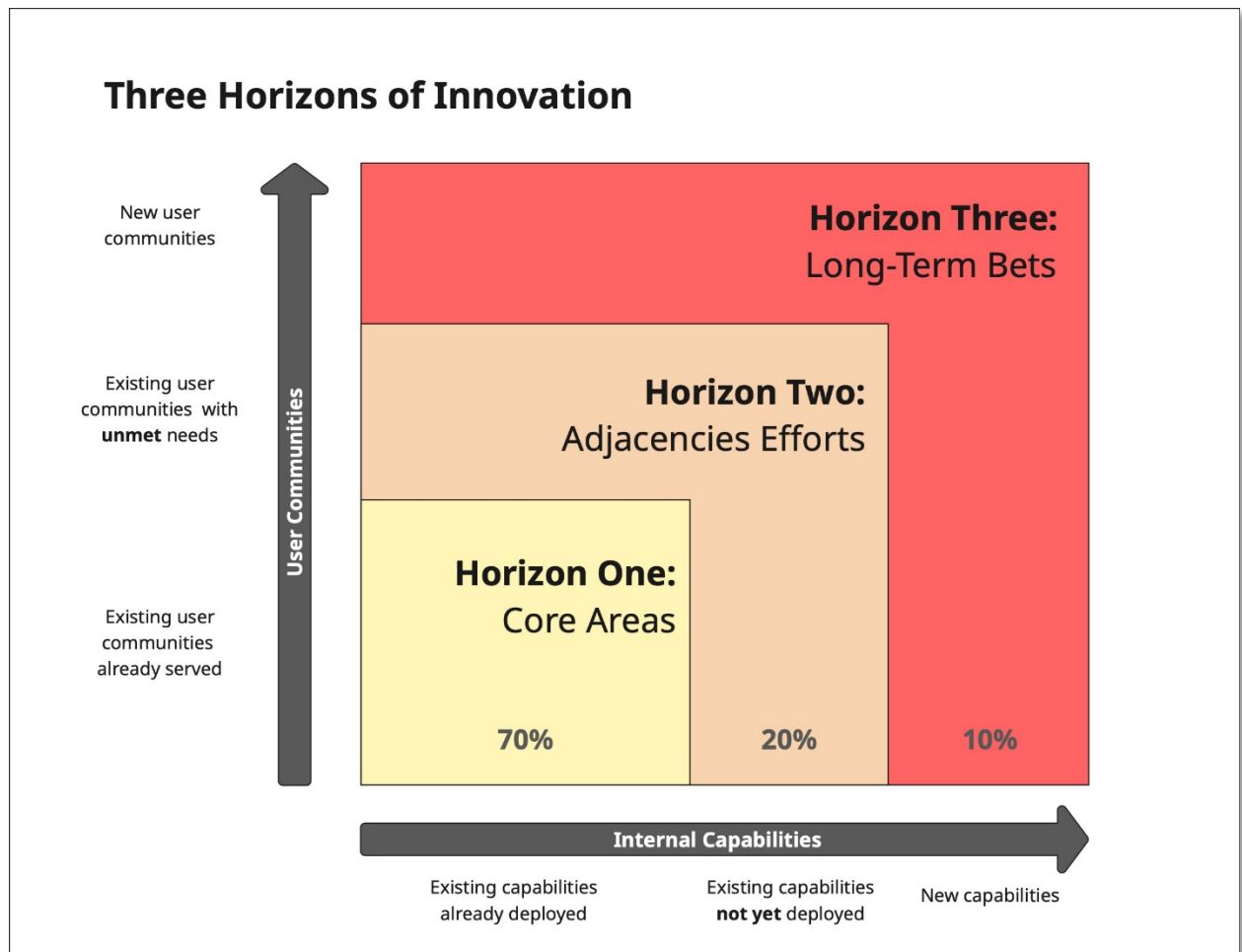
At its core, the Three Horizons framework is built on two primary axes:

1. *Capabilities*: this axis measures whether the library's current expertise, tools, and resources are suited to the project.

2. *Users or Customers*: this axis evaluates whether the library is addressing the needs of its existing community or exploring new user groups.

Using these axes, the framework divides innovation efforts into three horizons.

Figure 2. The Three Horizons Framework



This figure illustrates the relationship between the time frames, capabilities, and user focus of each horizon. Horizon 1 represents short-term, core activities; Horizon 2 bridges present strengths with adjacent opportunities; and Horizon 3 positions libraries for transformative, future-focused initiatives.

Horizon 1: Core Activities

These are the foundational services that support a library's day-to-day operations and meet the needs of its current users. Horizon 1 is about refinement – incremental improvements that ensure services remain efficient, effective, and aligned with immediate priorities. For instance, libraries might enhance course reserve systems to streamline access to materials or optimize metadata workflows for better discoverability. These activities, which typically make up the majority of a library's efforts, sustain mission-critical operations.

Horizon 2: Adjacent Efforts

This horizon bridges the gap between core services and future possibilities, focusing on extending existing capabilities to new audiences or introducing new capabilities to current users. Horizon 2 is where libraries experiment and expand, piloting initiatives that involve moderate risk but offer meaningful returns. Examples might include developing interdisciplinary collaboration spaces, launching pilot programs for citizen science, or integrating data visualization tools into research support services. These efforts not only address emerging needs but also build a foundation for sustained growth.

Horizon 3: Long-Term Bets

Visionary and high-risk, Horizon 3 projects aim to create entirely new capabilities for audiences that may not yet be fully defined. These are the boldest initiatives, where libraries imagine and prototype transformative ideas – for example, experimenting with augmented reality to create interactive cultural heritage exhibits or exploring how to support emerging research fields like synthetic biology. Though smaller in scope, these efforts ensure libraries remain agile and forward-looking, ready to meet developing challenges.

By structuring innovation efforts across these horizons, libraries can allocate resources strategically, balancing immediate demands with future opportunities. Horizon 1 sustains the library's current role, Horizon 2 prepares for near-term evolution, and Horizon 3 invests in transformative, long-term impact.

The dynamic nature of innovation means projects often evolve across horizons as they mature. For instance, a Horizon 3 idea, such as supporting synthetic biology research, might begin as speculative exploration but transition to Horizon 2 as partnerships and capabilities develop. Over time, it could shift into Horizon 1 as a fully integrated core service. This fluid progression underscores the importance of regular reassessment and adaptability in strategic planning.

By incorporating the Three Horizons framework into their innovation portfolios, libraries can strike a balance – addressing present needs, nurturing growth, and advancing toward bold, future-focused goals. This temporal perspective ensures libraries remain relevant and take a leadership role in shaping the future of knowledge and discovery.

Integrating Horizons and the Matrix: A Tangible Example

The interplay between the Three Horizons framework and the Innovation Matrix offers a powerful way to guide projects as they evolve over time. Let's illustrate this dynamic progression with a practical example: a library exploring how team science and open science principles intersect with citizen science initiatives. This example demonstrates how innovation efforts can transition across horizons and quadrants, maturing from speculative exploration to an established service.

Stage 1: Horizon 3 + Basic Research

The journey begins in Horizon 3 and the Basic Research quadrant. The library starts by conducting focus groups, interviews, and other data-gathering activities with researchers, citizen scientists, and community stakeholders. These efforts aim to uncover shared goals and challenges in integrating professional research practices with community-driven science, guided by open science principles.

At this stage, the problem or program is not yet well-defined, and the domains – and how they might collectively connect – remain unfamiliar. The focus is on gathering insights, identifying opportunities, and building a foundational understanding of the underlying ecosystem. Potential outcomes include exploratory findings or a preliminary roadmap that outlines possible directions and identifies key obstacles.

Stage 2: Horizon 2 + Breakthrough Innovation

With a clearer understanding of the challenges and possibilities, the project moves into Horizon 2 and the Breakthrough Innovation quadrant. Here, the library pilots a collaborative platform to connect researchers and citizen scientists. The platform could include tools for data sharing, real-time collaboration, and transparent publishing of results.

This phase addresses complex logistical and technical challenges, such as ensuring data integrity, designing equitable workflows, and fostering inclusivity across diverse user groups. The project begins translating exploratory ideas from Horizon 3

into actionable, structured solutions that advance both library services and collaborative science.

Stage 3: Horizon 1 + Sustaining Innovation

As the platform demonstrates its value and gains traction, it transitions into Horizon 1 and the Sustaining Innovation quadrant, where the focus shifts to refining and institutionalizing the service. Incremental improvements might involve streamlining workflows to enhance usability, integrating tailored training modules for both researchers and citizen scientists, and expanding the platform's capabilities to support a broader range of scientific disciplines. Through these refinements, the project becomes a standard service embedded within the library's core operations, effectively meeting ongoing user needs while remaining aligned with the library's mission.

This progression underscores the complementary roles of the Three Horizons framework and the Innovation Matrix. While the horizons offer a sequential perspective – balancing immediate needs, near-term opportunities, and future-focused initiatives – the matrix provides a problem-centered lens, categorizing challenges based on problem clarity and domain familiarity. Together, these tools equip libraries with a clear and adaptable roadmap for navigating the complexities of innovation.

The Leadership Imperative

Innovation in libraries requires deliberate leadership, strategic resource allocation, and a clear commitment to balancing immediate needs with future ambitions. For library leaders, the first step is deciding how much of the organization's overall resources to dedicate to innovation. Once this commitment is established, the 70-20-10 rule offers a framework for distributing those resources effectively.

The principle is straightforward: allocate 70% of the innovation resources (time, money, and people) to core activities in Horizon 1, 20% to exploratory adjacent efforts in Horizon 2, and 10% to visionary, high-risk projects in Horizon 3. Popularized by Google as part of their approach to fostering sustained innovation (Schmidt & Rosenberg, 2014), this model offers libraries a way to balance immediate priorities with the pursuit of groundbreaking ideas. It ensures that innovation efforts are not only distributed thoughtfully but also aligned with organizational capacity – prioritizing the refinement of essential services while carving out space for experimentation and bold, future-focused initiatives (Startup Bell, 2024).

For libraries, this might mean dedicating the bulk of innovation efforts to improving critical operations, such as enhancing metadata workflows or streamlining repository services. A smaller portion could support adjacent efforts, like piloting interdisciplinary collaboration spaces, while the smallest share targets transformative projects, such as developing augmented reality applications for cultural heritage or exploring synthetic biology research partnerships.

Allocating innovation resources in this way enables leaders to focus not only on what the library should achieve but also on how to structure innovation efforts sustainably. It signals a clear direction: resources are not spread thin across countless projects but intentionally concentrated to maximize impact at all levels of innovation.

Leadership's role doesn't stop at setting the allocation. Effective leaders align funding, staff time, and organizational capacity with strategic priorities. They also manage expectations, understanding that Horizon 3 efforts may take years to deliver transformative results, while Horizon 1 initiatives sustain the library's current mission. Automating routine tasks or rethinking workflows in Horizon 1 can free up bandwidth for Horizon 2 and Horizon 3 projects, ensuring that short-term needs don't stifle long-term aspirations.

This structured approach supports the dynamic nature of innovation. Projects naturally evolve as they move across horizons: a speculative Horizon 3 exploration might transition to Horizon 2 as a pilot program and eventually become a fully integrated Horizon 1 service. Regular reassessment of the innovation portfolio ensures continued alignment with user needs and institutional goals, enabling libraries to adapt to change while remaining forward-looking.

Ultimately, dedicating resources to innovation and distributing them according to the 70-20-10 framework signals that libraries are not merely keeping pace but actively shaping the future. By fostering a culture of experimentation and purpose, leaders can ensure their libraries remain essential to discovery, learning, and progress.

It's equally important for leaders to maintain an array of projects across different quadrants of the Innovation Matrix and at various stages of the Three Horizons framework. A well-balanced portfolio should always include a handful of moonshot, long-term exploratory projects that push boundaries and explore new imaginative possibilities. However, these visionary initiatives should not overwhelm the portfolio, ensuring that enough attention is devoted to efforts with more immediate and tangible impact. Balancing ambition with pragmatism enables libraries to innovate sustainably while staying responsive to their communities' evolving needs.

Conclusion: Cultivating a Culture of Thoughtful Innovation

Innovation in libraries requires the same rigor and prioritization as other critical areas like strategic planning, diversity initiatives, fundraising and marketing campaigns, and facilities management. It is not a supplementary activity but a core practice that ensures libraries remain essential. By embedding structured approaches like the Innovation Matrix, Three Horizons framework, and the 70-20-10 rule into their organizational strategy, library leaders can navigate complexity and balance immediate needs with visionary ambitions.

This is a moment of opportunity for libraries to transcend their historical roles and embrace a proactive, deliberate approach to change and innovation. By shifting from reactive decision-making to cultivating a dynamic portfolio of ideas and projects, leaders can strike a balance between bold experimentation and essential service refinement. In short, this approach transforms innovation from a scattershot endeavor into a continuous process of experimentation, growth, and impact.

Key Takeaways:

- **Frameworks Foster Focus:** Tools like the Innovation Matrix and Three Horizons framework allow libraries to map their efforts strategically, aligning short-term actions with long-term ambitions.
- **Resource Allocation Matters:** The 70-20-10 rule offers a practical guide for distributing time, money, and people effectively, ensuring that core services are sustained while carving out space for exploratory and transformative work.
- **Embrace Agility:** Innovation is rarely linear. Libraries must cultivate a mindset that values iteration, discovery, and the flexibility to adapt as challenges and opportunities evolve.

To succeed, it is vital for libraries to maintain a wide array of innovation projects at different levels, scales, and scopes. While near-term outcomes are satisfying and necessary, focusing exclusively on the immediate can leave organizations unprepared for the future. Long-range ideas and exploratory efforts must always be in the works to ensure libraries remain adaptive and agile, ready to respond to emerging challenges and opportunities. This diversity of innovation efforts strengthens resilience and positions libraries as leaders in a constantly evolving landscape.

Equally important is recognizing that the innovation journey is not always a straightforward path. Goals may shift as new priorities emerge, requiring leaders to adapt and adjust. By embedding non-linear innovation into their culture, libraries can remain open to detours and unforeseen opportunities, turning uncertainty into a strength. This adaptability ensures that libraries stay resilient and responsive to the evolving needs of their communities.

Looking ahead, libraries have the potential to evolve into true innovation laboratories and institutional think tanks – hubs for creativity, collaboration, and interdisciplinary breakthroughs. By embracing structured innovation planning, libraries can not only adapt to a shifting landscape but actively shape it, taking a pivotal role in addressing the most pressing challenges and opportunities in higher education.

Ultimately, the commitment to thoughtful innovation empowers libraries to move beyond the question of "What should we do next?" and toward a future where they are catalysts for discovery, equity, and progress. This journey begins with a single step: embedding innovation into the DNA of their operations through deliberate frameworks, one idea, one experiment, and one breakthrough at a time.

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