
An Interview with Keith Webster

Atla Annual 2025 Closing Plenary Speaker

Keith Webster delivered the closing plenary address to conclude Atla Annual 2025. Webster, the Helen and Henry Posner, Jr. Dean of the University Libraries at Carnegie Mellon, is a professional futurist, and regularly consults with not-for-profit and professional organization boards. His professional interests include AI and data-informed community engagement, research evaluation, and the future of scholarly communication.

In preparation for the conference, Atla Marketing and Communications Coordinator Katie Thorman interviewed Webster about his experiences. The following interview has been edited for clarity and length.¹

You bring a unique dual perspective as a library dean and a futurist. How do you see these roles informing your vision for the future of libraries?

I think being both a dean and a futurist gives me an exciting vantage point. I get to see firsthand how deeply grounded libraries are in tradition, in scholarship, and in community. I can also use my skills as a futurist to look ahead and imagine what things might be like in years to come. Balancing these roles helps me guide Carnegie Mellon's libraries towards embracing bold innovations—the sort of work we are renowned for in open science and AI—while simultaneously keeping our work deeply rooted in human values and meaningful scholarly practice. It's easy to get excited about the future, but we need to remember why we are here to do the work that we do.

As someone whose background is not specifically in theological librarianship, what value do you think an outside perspective like yours can bring to the community?

I think that being an outsider is quite valuable because it allows me to bring some fresh eyes and some different ideas to the conversation. Also, as you note, I don't have a theological library background. I deeply appreciate the mission driven work that theological librarians perform. Coming from perhaps a more mainstream research

library environment, I can share some of the strategies, successes, and many failures that hopefully will spark new thinking or offer pathways that theological libraries might not have fully explored yet, or maybe are just at the beginning of thinking about again. It's difficult at this stage to talk about libraries today and libraries in the future without thinking about AI, and how that might either disrupt or enrich the work that we do.

Thinking of AI brings us to your plenary talk titled “Reimagining the Sacred Space.” Can you explain a bit more about what sacred space might mean to you in the context of libraries and technology?

Sacred space isn't about religion. It's about creating environments that deeply resonate with people—spaces that foster meaningful connections, opportunities for reflection, and capacity for growth. In the context of libraries and technology, I think that a sacred space is one where tradition and innovation coexist beautifully. It's where scholars can encounter deeply rooted ideas, where students are inspired, and where communities are formed through shared curiosity and discovery.

Technology doesn't diminish this sacredness. I think it expands the possibilities and allows libraries to become dynamic, evolving spaces of scholarship and community building, and libraries are deeply important to students. We are generally viewed as the primary non-classroom academic space in our institution where students come to do serious work—the work that matters. Therefore, I think we can really talk about our mission in that broad context. I see this metaphor of sacred space as describing the work of libraries in a quite profound way.

Why do you think it is so important for theological libraries to think boldly about technology and innovation in this moment?

I think, undoubtedly, we are at a pivotal moment of rapid technological transformation. For theological libraries, embracing technology ensures that they will remain vital and relevant, not just preserving the richness of the scholarly tradition, but actively shaping its future innovations like AI and digital transformation. Open scholarship platforms can dramatically enhance accessibility, amplify scholarly voices, and foster deeper connections within communities of faith and learning.

I think it's important to recognize that libraries, for centuries, have embraced transformation or revolution. In the first industrial revolution in the UK in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, libraries were established at the heart of the communities they served by the owners of mills and mines to provide space for education and recreation for their workers and their families. During the nineteenth century, we also saw libraries embrace the industrialization of science and communication. What they were seeing was due to a multiplicity of factors: the expansion of universities, the industrialization of printing, and the growth of research and libraries, which were established to manage the products of research and scholarship. Then, the digital revolution of the 1960s through the 1980s brought another opportunity for libraries, and we embraced the growth of things like online catalogs and the emergence of digital texts made possible through the internet.

Now, we're on the cusp of another industrial revolution, one that is going to be grounded in autonomy. AI is a great example of that, and I have every confidence that libraries will once again step up and thrive during this period of innovation and transformation. But for theological libraries, I think it will be really focused on connections within their communities.

In your plenary talk, you will be exploring different possible futures for theological libraries. Why do you think scenario planning might be such a powerful tool for navigating this kind of change?

I've worked with and used scenario planning for many years. I think it's tremendously powerful because it expands our thinking beyond immediate challenges and by envisioning multiple possible futures, we can become more proactive rather than reactive. We can use scenario planning to help us identify new opportunities to anticipate risks and to cultivate resilience and adaptability so that we can thrive, no matter how the future unfolds.

There are a number of ways that we can develop scenarios, but a common one—one that I will illustrate briefly in my talk—is using a simple two by two matrix where we identify a couple big drivers of change and map those against each other to create four different worlds. If we've identified the drivers correctly, then we can extrapolate from where we are today to understand that each of these four worlds contains a scenario, let's say ten years from now. To say it's

plausible doesn't mean that it is a definite future world—and the reality is that the future ten years from now is likely to contain bits of each of those four different worlds—but we can recognize that these are plausible, and therefore, they are possible. In turn, we can make decisions today that reflect the implications of that potential long-term state. It allows us to understand the investments that we need to make now, the capacities that we need to double down on, and the blind spots that we need to be aware of so that when the future happens, we've given ourselves the best chance of success.

We need also to recognize that we are not passive bystanders in the future. Once we've identified our scenarios, we might have a sense that there is a particular one that aligns best with our values or our view of the mission of our organization, and we can be agents of change. We can try to tilt the future in our preferred direction while recognizing that other futures may well happen, and we need to be ready to respond to those if they do eventuate.

NOTES

- 1 This interview was previously published at <https://www.atla.com/blog/interview-with-atla-annual-plenary-speaker-keith-webster/>.

