Tracking Transformations in Academic and Research Library Services

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As information and research materials move from printed to electronic venues, the provision of academic and research library services must change as well in order to meet the demands of changing user patterns. In order to study these trends in the U.S. and Canada’s largest academic and research libraries, the authors conducted a survey of the Association of Research Libraries’ (ARL) members during May and June, 2011 to investigate whether and how ARL members have reconfigured their staffed service delivery points and any branches that report to the main library. The survey enjoyed a 47% response rate (59 members) and became the basis for the publication, SPEC Kit 327: Reconfiguring Service Delivery (ARL, December 2011).

Introduction

As the web emerged in the last decade, technological advances began to rival growth as a constant in most libraries from the very small to the very large. Library administrators, when faced with such phenomena as the increased provision of electronic content (especially journals in the sciences and ebooks in all areas), the graying of the profession, and in many cases, reduced budgets, began to reconfigure their service provision—sometimes radically—in order to respond to such factors and provide the materials and services that their constituents require. In this present day when the future of libraries is not assured in the digital age (Dunaway, 2012; Michalko, Malpas & Arcolio; 2010; Staley & Malenfant, 2010). All make valuable reading. While one report takes the matter as a given (Dunaway, 2012), the others warn of specific (but different) dangers. Michalko, Malpas and Arcolio (2010) focus on risk management within libraries and list risks related to library human resources (particularly cross training and reallocating existing staff), dataset management (engaging with research faculty and retooling library infrastructures), inhibitive organizational cultures, the attraction and retention of qualified staff in this competitive environment, and ill-qualified library managers requiring additional skills. Staley and Malenfant (2010) focus more on outside threats that could be in competition with libraries and include (among other things) outside purveyors of scholarly content delivered to student handheld devices, open access textbooks (called online open education resources, OERs), and the decline of standard dissemination channels coupled with the proliferation of open peer review/open access publications (for a selective number of the risks and threats together, see Table 1 below). In the face of these rather tumultuous and certain changes in the information landscape, libraries are beginning to align more closely with the missions of their institutions, to use their digital spaces more fully, and to offer users deeper, and more extensive learning opportunities. These objectives have resulted in changes in library service provision.

Literature review

Many research reports have suggested that the future of libraries is not assured in the digital age (Dunaway, 2012; Michalko, Malpas & Arcolio; 2010; Staley & Malenfant, 2010). All make valuable reading. While one report takes the matter as a given (Dunaway, 2012), the others warn of specific (but different) dangers. Michalko, Malpas and Arcolio (2010) focus on risk management within libraries and list risks related to library human resources (particularly cross training and reallocating existing staff), dataset management (engaging with research faculty and retooling library infrastructures), inhibitive organizational cultures, the attraction and retention of qualified staff in this competitive environment, and ill-qualified library managers requiring additional skills. Staley and Malenfant (2010) focus more on outside threats that could be in competition with libraries and include (among other things) outside purveyors of scholarly content delivered to student handheld devices, open access textbooks (called online open education resources, OERs), and the decline of standard dissemination channels coupled with the proliferation of open peer review/open access publications (for a selective number of the risks and threats together, see Table 1 below). In the face of these rather tumultuous and certain changes in the information landscape, libraries are beginning to align more closely with the missions of their institutions, to use their digital spaces more fully, and to offer users deeper, and more extensive learning opportunities. These objectives have resulted in changes in library service provision.
In the digital age, library users often approach accessing a library’s services on its webpage through a simple browser search rather than navigate its structure through its many links and pages; similarly, library managers have learned that users often approach accessing the services in a physical library by inquiring at the first service point they see. While evaluating the questions asked at a security desk next to the door, Mosley (2007) revealed that regardless of purpose, signage, or branding, many library users are still asking questions of the “first official-looking desk or person they see (160).” Along with a changing information landscape, this awareness that library managers can no longer assume that their users understand their traditional structures has led to a reinvention of library service provision that consciously strives to be more visible by employing more social media, more virtual structures to augment the physical ones, and more marketing.

A definitive systematic overview of the overall changes in service provision in academic and research libraries has yet to be written; however, individual initiatives have emerged and are well documented. One of the first changes in service provision, the information commons movement was introduced in the 90s and evolved over time from a resource-intensive concept into a more learning-theory-and-service-related movement as time went on. The movement is so strong that the latest Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Standards for Libraries in Higher Education (2011) suggests adopting a commons framework when conceptualizing matters of library space overall. The authors identified three book-length works (Forrest & Halbert, 2009; Bailey & Tierney, 2008; Beagle, 2006) and three recent review articles (Heitsch & Holley, 2011; Beagle, 2010; Sullivan, 2010) primarily detailing North American efforts, although the concept of the information/learning commons has been adopted worldwide. Additionally, the authors identified a number of recent articles covering recent projects in ARL libraries concurrent with this research.

Combined service desks are another important innovation emerging in United States and Canadian academic and research libraries, although they are by no means as well documented in the library and information science literature. Wang and Henson (2011) report that “there is a large body of work about the changing nature of reference services, fewer articles about removing librarians from the reference desk, and very few articles about combining reference and circulation services (91). Although Wang and Henson are most concerned with the combination of reference and circulation service desks in preparation for their project at Georgia Tech, the authors’ research survey revealed many options for combined service desks that reflect the microcosm of library units that have evolved over time. These might include reference with circulation and/or more services such as interlibrary loan, reserves, periodicals, technology assistance, or media services or the combination of many subject research desks into one large research services service point. However, in U.S. and Canadian large academic and research libraries, the combination of reference and circulation desk, usually in

### Table 1. The future is not assured.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outside Threats</th>
<th>Risk Management in Libraries</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Breaking the Textbook Monopoly:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Library Human Resources</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty members, sympathetic to student high investment, embrace online open education resources.</td>
<td>Difficulties in cross-training and relocating existing staff.</td>
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<td><strong>Bridging the Scholar/Practitioner Divide:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Open peer-review becomes the norm for many fields. Online publications, by scholarly societies in partnership with trade and professional associations, are open access.</td>
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<td><strong>Everyone Is a Non-Traditional Student:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Dataset Management</strong></td>
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<td>The interwoven nature of work/life/school is accepted in higher education as life spans increase and students cannot afford tuition in one lump.</td>
<td>Difficulties in engaging with research faculty and retooling library infrastructure</td>
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<td><strong>I See What You See:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Inhibitive Organizational Cultures</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Large touch screen tables positioned beneath cameras and projectors are standard equipment on campus as photocopies are now.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Increasing Threat of Cyberwar, Cybercrime, and Cyberterrorism:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Attraction of a Qualified Staff in a Competitive Environment</strong></td>
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<td>College/university and library IT systems are targets of hackers, criminals and rogue states, disrupting operations for weeks.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Meet the New Freshman Class:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The digital divide, parental unemployment, and frequent moving mean that some will need remedial information literacy classes.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Right Here with Me:</strong></td>
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<td>Students talk through their homework with their handheld devices which can find material for projects, locate team members for device-based meetings, and record notes for absent members.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Scholarship stifflies:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Ill-Qualified Library Managers</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>The systems that reward faculty members continue to reward conventionally-published research while at the same time, the standard dissemination—especially university presses—implode.</td>
<td>Difficulties in Conveying Needs for Retraining</td>
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combination of a tiered-service model for reference services is the most common.

Media are also undergoing transformations in academic and research libraries in numbers large enough to be noticed. Although the trend seems largely undocumented at this writing, media are being mainstreamed into many library open stack arrangements and serviced from combined service desks alongside other services. In the United States, the Association for College and Research Libraries issued their Guidelines for Media Resources in Academic Libraries (2012) that calls for a librarian assigned to the media collection along with ample budgets and full library cataloging for media, but does not address mainstreaming into a library’s open stacks or servicing from a combined services desk. It chooses instead to mention (but not suggest) closed stacks that provide enough space for growth and security to deter theft (7.0). However, in an authoritative Library Trends article devoted to increased patron access and resource sharing of media, Bergman (2010) notes that while the closed stack model with limited student access still exists, there does seem to be a slow but steady move towards open access. She does not mention combined service desks.

Embedded librarians—or as they are also known as personal, or blended librarians—are becoming a more common and significant force in the large academic and research libraries of the United States and Canada as revealed in our survey. Called embedded librarians after the United States’ journalists who were assigned to units during the Iraq War, these librarians focus on deeper relationships and collaborations with faculty and students by virtue of their placement in the trenches—those offices, laboratories, and classroom as well as on webpages or in online course spaces—wherever learning occurs. Enabled by social technologies, embedded librarians thrive on promoting research and provide advice throughout the research cycle beyond a simple initial recommendation of books and articles. Their immersion into their patrons’ work sharpens and makes them valuable institutional assets. The authors identified two book-length works (Kvenild & Calkins, 2011; Bell & Shank, 2007) and several articles about this library movement.

Survey methodology

As noted previously, of particular concern in this survey are two broad categories of library-staffed service points, staffed service desk and branches (defined broadly) that reported to main libraries. While the authors acknowledged that a trend towards consolidating and reconfiguring library-staffed service points existed before they conducted this research, with their survey instrument they hoped to reveal some of the newest changes in order to track and explore what is emerging.

The survey asked respondents to consider changes in their staffed service points during the last three years. Having offered that background, respondents were then asked to provide details pertaining to one or two of their alterations—including whether the drivers for the change were physical or philosophical, a modification in financial or staff resources, an opportunity afforded by an advancing technology, or an opportunity to increase collaboration and/or outsourcing. Questions about user participation in the creation and assessment of each innovation followed. There were ample text boxes for further explanation included with most of the questions. At the end of the survey, respondents were asked whether they anticipated any further modifications in the next three years and to briefly characterize these future projects. Additional comments and/or supporting documentation such as articles, related organizational charts, or other documents and/or websites were also sought.

The survey was conducted between May 9 and June 13, 2011. Sixty respondents at 59 of the 126 ARL member institutions completed the survey for an overall response of 47%. Forty-three replies came from public universities, fifteen from private universities, and one from a national research institution. Six of the public universities were Canadian; the rest of the respondents were from institutions in the United States. All respondents were evenly distributed geographically throughout both countries.

To study all the changes in staffed service points that the survey afforded, the authors both read each respondents’ answers as a case study and also considered the compilation of responses for the patterns that emerged. For the purposes of the survey, the authors studied ARL libraries’ staffed service outlets, both service desks and branch libraries, to learn whether they had been newly added, closed, consolidated, or otherwise reconfigured during the last three years. Rather than a longitudinal account, the results amounted to more of an inventory or snapshot of the year 2011. A comparison of variables such as size of library, enrollment, budgets, number of staff, and even total number of branch libraries and/or staffed service points was beyond the scope of this analysis.

Changes in library service points and branch libraries

The survey first asked whether any staffed service point in the main library or branch library that reports to the system had been added, closed, consolidated, or otherwise reconfigured during the last three years. Fifty-two respondents (88%) answered yes; seven (12%) answered no. When asked to quantify changes in their libraries, 47 respondents reported 149 changes to service points, 27 reported 53 changes to branch libraries. These changes were both minor and major in scope. The respondents who changed service points reported more consolidations (56)
and reconfigurations (53) than closures (27) or additions (13). The respondents who changed branch libraries were more likely to close them (27 branches), than to consolidate (11), reconfigure (9), or add (6) them.

Each of the fifty-two respondents provided details for one service delivery configuration (survey questions 3-17). Twenty-one provided details for a second service delivery configuration (survey questions 18-32).

Although the survey recorded reconfigured changes made in the last three years, there was diversity in the changes that the respondents had made. While seven respondents reported that no changes to either service points or branch libraries occurred during the last three years (and two of the seven did not anticipate changes in the next three years), on the other side of the spectrum, several respondents confirmed that changes in service points and/or branch libraries have been a constant feature in the organization for as much as 15 years or more.

In terms of service point additions, the most commonly reported was the creation of a consolidated service point combining reference with circulation and/or more services such as interlibrary loan, reserves, periodicals, technology assistance, or media services. The second most common was an learning commons—or, because commons are well established in ARL libraries—enhancements of the services offered through the commons. The third most common was the creation of consolidated/central research desk—perhaps many small reference desks consolidated into one central unit, or the combination of a reference desk and other units such as government periodicals or maps. The fourth most common addition was an interesting category that the authors termed embedded librarians/virtualizations. Only a small category at present but maybe a harbinger of future configurations. Examples include virtualizations (defined as replacing a service point or branch library with its virtual counterpart) of many kinds—library collections, physical service points, and embedded library service providers for strategically targeted groups of users. Although the ownership of the virtualizations will be the library in most cases, the ownership of a virtualization may be shared or even owned by a department instead of being a wholly owned subsidiary of the library. There were only a few additions of branch libraries in new educational facilities reported, a fact consistent with the lean budgets that most institutions are experiencing. In one case, a library took over the management of a branch library from a university department.

In terms of service point closures, the most commonly reported was the reference or service desk closed in the making of a consolidated service point followed by the closure of a service or research desk closed in the making of a central research desk. Interestingly, closures as a result of consolidated media service points appeared often enough to make a special note. In some cases, media

service points were closed after the media was moved from a closed stack into an open stack arrangement. In other cases, media services were closed as a result of a consolidation with circulation desks or other “older” library technologies such as microforms, periodicals, or music media. Concerning branch library closures, science branch library closures outnumbered other branch library closures, some respondents noting a connection between diminished gatecounts and the ease of electronic delivery of science periodical material that accounted for this trend.

Consolidations, the most common service point reconfiguration figured prominently into all of the additions, closures, and other reconfigurations reported—although the authors discovered that the word consolidate may not be standardized into the library lexicon as respondents seemed to prefer other terms such as integrate, combine, merge, or expand. Although the ways that library service points could be consolidated seemed nearly limitless, print collections could either be integrated into precise call number order with considerable difficulty or more easily consolidated whole into transplanted stack or storage arrangements. Concerning branch library consolidations, several libraries reported consolidations in science branch libraries, consolidating the smaller, less trafficked ones into larger ones or the main library.

In terms of otherwise reconfigured service points, the authors created four categories out of the many reported by respondents: staffing reconfigurations, hours reconfigurations, organizational reconfigurations, and aesthetic remodeling. The many new configurations in service points and branch libraries encourage changing staff patterns to take advantage of all the local resources, including retirements and even serendipity in lean times. Typically each closed service point and/or branch library frees personnel to be reassigned to other areas. Staffs pushed to the brink of barely covering a multiplicity of service points in an old configuration can find relief in newly reconfigured spaces affording institutions the ability to do more with less. Because patrons have virtual 24/7 service expectations that are very difficult to maintain in the physical world, experimentation with open hours was widely reported. The more creative and involved the schedule, the more difficult it becomes to communicate. Online newsletters, blogs, personal email, and RSS feeds are all virtual means employed to improve communication. Organizational reconfigurations figured prominently in the survey to reflect the service point and/or branch library reconfigurations. Often the result of a library strategic plan to realign the structures of an institution, organizational changes also emerged through the opportunities for new relationships that may have developed. Lastly, aesthetic remodeling also figured prominently in this category. Examples include actual changes to a service point’s counter space or location, enhancements to existing learning commons installations, whole branch library
remodels, changes or improvements in the technology offered, or patron-friendly improvements such as comfortable reading room furniture or more group study rooms.

Driving factors in service delivery reconfigurations

In addition to the reported changes in library service points and/or branch libraries, the survey asked respondents to consider the driving factors that served as the impetus for the reconfigurations that were described. The survey listed a broad range of factors that reflected external, more concrete drivers such as changes in physical facilities, financial or staff resources, and/or the availability/application of new technologies; internal, less tangible drivers such as changes in service philosophy or responding to user demands; and drivers beyond the library such as collaborating with an outside partner or outsourcing delivery of a particular service. At the end of the section, respondents were provided with an opportunity to briefly describe other factors that might have influenced their reconfigurations. In most cases, respondents indicated that more than one factor drove the decision to reconfigure library services.

Although given the current economic downturn, changes in financial and/or staff resources might be expected to be the most significant driver in the decision to reconfigure library services, based on the nearly three-quarters of the responses received, ARL libraries are driven most by a changing service philosophy to provide better customer service. Additionally, just over half of the libraries responding to this question indicated that user demands are a driving factor. Frequently, descriptions of a change in service philosophy accompanied the physical reconfigurations reported, such as the creation of an information/learning commons, providing centralized one-stop consolidated service points for users, making services more friendly, and making the best use of librarian time by changing to a just-in-time model as opposed to a just-in-case model. A change in service philosophy could also be expressed in a library’s internal organization, documentation, or routines. One responding library noted a changed service philosophy in its development of baseline expectations of levels of reference service in various subject areas so that service desk staff will know when to refer users to subject specialists.

Physical changes to buildings or facilities were reported by 43% percent of respondents, making this the third most significant driver of service reconfigurations. While a few fortunate libraries managed to open new facilities in new or renovated building spaces, others relinquished space to other departments by closing or consolidating branch libraries. Other examples of physical changes include relocated service desks, learning or collaboration spaces, and more seating.

A little more than 40% of the responding libraries reported that changes in financial or staff resources were significant drivers of service reconfiguration. Of these respondents, those experiencing stagnant or declining funding far outnumbered those receiving augmented funding over the last three years. Likewise, as reported by respondents, staffing levels were more likely to have taken a downturn than an increase—leaving libraries with staffing levels diminished by retirements without replacements and/or even lower levels of hourly part-time employees as funding was recaptured to cover budget cuts. Here, the consolidation of service desks appears to be a major method of providing services with less and freeing librarian time to be able to spend more time providing more research-intensive services.

About one-third of respondents indicated that the availability or application of new technologies was a driving factor for their service reconfigurations. Accounts of projects peppered throughout the responses described such technology-rich services as multi-media equipment and software added to collaborative workspaces to meet the needs of students and faculty, web-based software to schedule appointments with librarians, the addition of specialized software to produce improved library instruction, pathfinder information, and collection information that could be searched over the web or integrated into course management systems.

Only about 25% of respondents found that the opportunity to collaborate with a partner outside the library was a significant driving factor. Most commonly, this partner was the parent institution’s information technology unit. In other cases, libraries partnered with discipline-specific departments, student services, and/or the provost’s office to develop ideas and generate funding for a reconfiguration.

Fewer than 10% of respondents indicated that the opportunity to outsource a particular service was a significant driver in the reconfiguration process. Among these reconfigurations, one library transferred the responsibility for student printing to the university’s information technology unit. Another library merged the billing part of their access services unit into their university’s accounts receivable in order to facilitate better payment options for fines and replacements. Additionally, and two libraries opted to participate in collaborative 24/7 chat reference services that provide users with around the clock reference assistance.

Slightly more than a third of the responding libraries described other factors that were significant drivers in the decision to reconfigure library services. The common theme to nearly all of these was the more effective and/or efficient user of physical library spaces. Whether addressing the need for more collaboration space or more
space for computers in a learning commons, returning branch library space to a specific department, or merging library functions into one service desk, these responding libraries chose to deal with their space issues at one level or another.

**Discussion with examples of some of the more innovative changes**

Because respondents were very generous with additional comments and/or supporting documentation such as article references, related organizational charts, and/or other documents and websites, the authors thought some case studies could serve as representations of the survey results and showcase individual library reconfigurations. From the many examples they received, they selected two learning commons (University of British Columbia and Boston University), two consolidated/integrated service desks (Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of Alberta), two examples of media services reconfigurations (North Carolina State University and Kent State University), and two examples of embedded research librarians/virtualizations in university departments (University of Virginia and University of Illinois). Overall, they hoped to feature examples that emerged during the time period of the survey. Although there is no book length treatment of consolidated/integrated service desks at this writing, the authors also tried to avoid examples that had already been included in a book length treatments of information commons (Forrest & Halbert, 2009; Bailey & Tierney, 2008) or embedded/blended librarians (Kvenild & Calkins, 2011; Bell & Shank, 2007).

The following are summaries of the actual survey responses showing the new configurations from the selected institutions.

**LEARNING COMMONS**

**University of British Columbia**

**Chapman Learning Commons**

**Vancouver, British Columbia V6T 1Z1 Canada**

**YEAR IMPLEMENTED:** 2002; reopening after reconstruction 2008

**What was the program initiative and how was it implemented?** At the University of British Columbia, the Chapman Learning Commons at the main library was closed and then reopened with the new building, renamed the Irving K. Barber Learning Center. This fortuitous situation allowed for the juggling of services and enabled the installation of new equipment/software to an already-thriving learning commons. Additionally, after reconstruction the Chapman Learning Commons was farther away from the front door and now situated in a multi-purpose building, with library services less visible from the entrance. Library administrators had to rethink how its services would be delivered and how they would be marketed.

**Physical or philosophical change?** The physical change brought about philosophical change. Previously, there was an emphasis on an intermediate reference service that was no longer a factor, the questions easily diverted to a new combined research desk within the Center for Art+Architecture+Planning and Science/Engineering. With the marketing of the integrated services and the new equipment/software, more demand was created. The “coaching corner” was moved off the desk to make room for technical inquiries. The technical questions continued to increase and became more and more complex.

**Impact on staff resources?** When the endowment fund was discontinued, the budget for staffing decreased from 15 staff to 12.

**Take advantage of new technologies?** Learning technologies prompted administrators to add Centre for Teaching and Learning Technology staff to the service desk. More sophisticated technologies, including wireless, generated many more and more complex questions by students. Students demanded multimedia equipment/software for their assignments and projects and staff were recruited to respond to those needs.

**Unexpected benefits and/or challenges?** 1. Chapman Learning Commons integrated services meet user needs efficiently and effectively. 2. New funding model permits more targeted recruitment of staff who have the desired technical and customer service skills. 3. Shifting the academic coaching “off the desk” was a better fit for the Learning Commons’ mandate.

1. The more technical services offered, the more services are expected. 2. We had difficulty finding staff that has both the technical and customer service skills/attributes. 3. Libraries never seem to be able to keep up with the demand for additional and updated equipment/software.

**Boston University**

**BU Common@Mugar**

**Boston, MA, United States**

**YEAR IMPLEMENTED:** 2009

**What was the program initiative and how was it implemented?** At Boston University, the reference desk on the first floor of the main, Mugar Memorial Library, was moved and reconfigured during a remodel incorporating an information commons approach and was renamed Research Center.

**Physical or philosophical change?** The renovation creating the Research Center was driven by the library’s
need to reconfigure the library first floor and the Information Services and Technology’s (IS&T) need to update an old large basement computer lab serving the campus that was even less attractive than the library’s outdated facilities.

The head of reference and instructional services had been following the information commons model and advocating that this was a logical direction for the library to move in—addressing the need to renovate the library’s first floor and services. The first floor housed a very large and increasingly less used print reference collection—that we reduced by four-fifths. After consultation with library staff, the decision was made to continue providing walk-up reference service in reconfigured space among offered services.

Impact on staff resources? The Research Center adopted single reference librarian (with a single work-study information student answering the telephone and providing basic directional and cataloging help) staffing model staffed by nine bibliographers, two part-time reference librarians, and two other librarians 70 hours weekly—abandoning outdated staffing (four people) model that the traffic no longer required. It also introduced appointments. The Research Center includes two meeting alcoves: One is used for student-initiated half hour appointments with librarians (thirteen scheduled hours weekly) and other is staffed eight hours weekly by Writing Center student tutors.

Take advantage of new technologies? IS&T used thin client technology to install 200 computer stations over three floors in the library and then removed their outdated PC-based basement computer lab with 128 computers elsewhere on campus and 48 PCs in the library. The library used a subscription to appointment.com to provide web-based student initiated appointments with librarians including text descriptions of needs.

Unexpected benefits and/or challenges? 1. Better quality reference transactions with students overall. 2. Appointments allow a higher profile for library reference with faculty and administrators aware of the appointment service. 3. The Writing Center approached the library with a partnering plan to provide a tutoring service in the reconfigured Research Center.

Librarian resistance to student-initiated appointments without a text description of need was unanticipated. The accommodation of the text description greatly reduced librarian reluctance with the appointment model. Note: The appointments are not intended as consultation, but as an extension of the increasing instructional role of reference transactions and less fact-based; students requiring further assistance can be referred to the appropriate subject specialists.

CONSOLIDATED INTEGRATED SERVICE DESKS
Georgia Institute of Technology
Atlanta, GA, United States
YEAR IMPLEMENTED: 2011

What was the program initiative and how was it implemented? At Georgia Tech, we consolidated three separate service points into a single service point. Government documents and microfiche, circulation, and reference were all separate service points in the library. Beginning Fall 2011 these service points will be consolidated into a single “library service desk.”

Physical or philosophical change? Comments from users indicated that there is a desire for a more efficient and streamlined user experience for checking out materials and getting reference assistance. In addition, a single service allows library staff to broaden their skill sets by becoming cross-trained on both reference and circulation processes. The philosophical change was to provide a “one-stop shopping” experience for users.

Ranganathan’s law is certainly holding true at Georgia Tech. The library is indeed a “changing organism.” A desire to improve user experience, as well as maximize librarian time allocation has resulted into the consolidation of three service points into a single, combined service point. However, at the same time, a new learning commons is being built to include a separate information service point with advising and other non-library activities also part of the suite of services. The new learning commons service point will be managed and staffed by the library. So, as some service points consolidate (circulation and reference), other service points are being added to reflect the evolving responsibilities of the library.

Impact on staff resources? In an era of scarce resources, all units, including the library are being asked to operate in a more streamlined and efficient manner. Although the desk consolidation project will not result in a financial savings, the fact that librarians will not be spending as much time at the reference desk is a new way of operating. The hope and goal is that librarians will have more time to devote to user and faculty engagement.

Although this change will not affect any reporting relationships, combining services impacts almost all members of the circulation, reference and special formats (maps, microfiche) departments. There is an increased awareness about how the “other side” operates, and cross-training will occur across both circulation and reference processes.
Take advantage of new technologies? N/A

Unexpected benefits and/or challenges? 1. Very efficient experience for users. 2. Increased cross-training for staff, thereby broadening the skill sets to anticipate a wider variety of user needs and requests. 3. An opportunity for a new library service desk redesign to create a more aesthetically-pleasing experience for users.

1. Agreeing on a design (The project requires many different constituencies agreeing on space for staff needs, materials, and aesthetic issues, as well). 2. Funding (Building a new service desk is not an incidental cost and our analysis suggested that in order to create a truly transformative aesthetic experience, a custom mill-work solution was required. Grant funding offset the direct cost to some degree, but funding the project is still a large challenge). 3. Staff buy-in (It takes time for staff who have traditionally worked in different cultures (circulation and reference) to accept and buy into a new service philosophy. Combining cultures has been a challenge but training and teambuilding has helped this process).

University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alberta,
T6G 2R3 Canada
YEAR IMPLEMENTED: 2005, ongoing

What was the program initiative and how was it implemented? At the University of Alberta Libraries, the reference and circulation desks were integrated so that all public services operations are done from a single service point in all of our unit libraries. The transition occurred in the larger unit libraries first and then extended to the smaller ones. This change in service provision was initiated to improve service for users and also created opportunities for support staff and librarians to be promoted to more senior positions.

Physical or philosophical change? Because evaluations of the units before the change showed that there was an irregular delivery of services within the system, we wanted to make changes that would standardize and improve service offerings to our users. As a philosophical change, we wanted to simplify how/where users need to go to find our services.

Impact on staff resources? Five years ago when the initiative was launched, a great deal of time went into the planning and implementation process for librarians and support staff. First, we articulated what service offerings should be provided at the service desks, and competencies were established for the tasks that librarians and support staff were to deliver. Some new positions needed to be designed and advertised. A full training program was delivered prior to the service change and on-going training became an established practice. Some staff did have reporting relationships and unit structures that changed. However in this most recent shift (the last 4 libraries), staff needed training but there we no reassignments of units or reporting structures.

Take advantage of new technologies? The downward trend in circulation patterns was a major fact in the decision making coupled with advances in self-service enhancements in circulation self-signout and in fines payments.

Unexpected benefits and/or challenges? 1. There were new opportunities for support staff, upgraded positions; 2. Librarians are more actively involved as models and mentors to desk staff; 3. Some renovations to accommodate the single desk area improved to physical layout.

Although there are always challenges to large undertakings, the last shift had the benefit of the four larger libraries already having made the transition.

CONSOLIDATED MEDIA SERVICES
RECONFIGURATIONS
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC 27695-7111 United States
YEAR IMPLEMENTED: 2007

What was the program initiative and how was it implemented? A separate staffed service point for Media and Microforms was closed and the materials were moved to open shelves, reserves, and a satellite shelving facility. Microform reader printers were moved to the Digital Media Laboratory. A related move of the Digital Media Laboratory to a location adjacent to the high traffic Learning Commons area enabled the Learning Commons staff and student workers to handle some media and microforms needs.

Physical or philosophical change? In general, the Libraries is moving towards a combined service point approach/philosophy whenever possible, but an awkward physical layout of the main library building presents obstacles.

Impact on staff resources? The Libraries experienced a 10% permanent budget reduction in 2009-10, which had a significant impact on collections expenditures as well as staffing/hours of service at certain service points. The 2.5 FTE support staff positions from the Media and Microforms unit were assigned new responsibilities within our Access and Delivery Services.

Take advantage of new technologies? Digital media is becoming more widely available in the library collection (licensed streaming video, for example). Library
computers and loaned laptops could “play” digital media at any location in the building, reducing the need for a dedicated “media center” space. Use of the microforms collections was decreasing, due in part to the greater availability of online journal backfiles and more full text online. NOTE: The Libraries’ heavily used Technology Lending Service (laptops, iPads, ebooks, mp3 players, etc.) is also service from the main service desk now, along with Course Reserves. This is a busy point at which staff need to be trained in a wide variety of functions.

**Unexpected benefits and/or challenges?**
1. Reduced operating expenditures resulted in greater efficiency.  
2. Two full-time staff positions could be redeployed to areas of greater need.  
3. Media/audiovisual materials in the collection were presented to users in a more visible and integrated way.

An initial difficulty was that a few heavy users of microfilm were unhappy with the new location of the reader-printers.

**Kent State University**  
**Kent, OH 44242-0001 United States**  
**YEAR IMPLEMENTED: 2011**

**What was the program initiative and how was it implemented?** Audio-Visual service point was closed services now delivered through Circulation.

**Physical or philosophical change?** Decision to increase the “one-stop shopping” possibilities for users.

**Impact on staff resources?** Two support staff were reassigned—one to Circulation and one to Receiving. Both took about 80% of their former responsibilities with them. Reporting relationships changed for both staff members. The one who moved to Circulation helped form our 24/5 team for the third shift.

**Take advantage of new technologies?** N/A

**Unexpected benefits and/or challenges?**
1. Convenience for users.  
2. Melding of audio visual collection requests into existing circulation workflow.  
3. Transfer of one staff member to 24/5 schedule.

1. Adjusting large number of bib and item records to show new location and loan rules.  
2. Determining physical location and integration of AV materials.  
3. Introducing the handling and circulation of AV equipment into Circulation responsibilities (cameras, batteries, tripods, etc.)

**University of Illinois**  
**Urbana-Champaign, IL 61801 United States**

**YEAR IMPLEMENTED: 2009**

**What was the program initiative and how was it implemented?** The Library and Information Science Library was closed and a virtual library established, along with an embedded librarian service approach for the subject specialist, and the integration of core collection materials into remaining physical units.

**Physical or philosophical change?** The decision to close the LIS Library was taken within the broader context of the discussion of service needs explored as part of our New Service Models program. Among the distinctive aspects of the LIS Library example were the growth of interdisciplinary approaches to LIS teaching and research, the growth of the LIS teaching and research mission beyond the traditional focus of the LIS Library on professional librarianship, and the increasing significance of distance learning and e-learning programs in LIS programs on campus. These are more fully described at http://www.library.illinois.edu/nsm/comm_lis.

**Impact on staff resources?** Several staff and student positions were reassigned leaving only three people with designated responsibilities: a full-time librarian, a full time staff person, and a half-time graduate student.

**Take advantage of new technologies?** The establishment of the virtual service point was facilitated through the greater use of RSS feeds, LibGuides, and Moodle course management software.

**Unexpected benefits and/or challenges?**
1. Identification by users of the most highly valued services.  
2. Implementation of new technological solutions to user need, e.g., specialized discovery tools, RSS feeds, and e-learning environments.  
3. Implementation of “embedded librarian” approach emphasizing placement of library expertise “in the flow” of teaching and research in the liaison program.

1. Ongoing confusion regarding reasons for library closure.  
2. Continued need to demonstrate library commitment to faculty and students in the affected field.  
3. Need to take a consistent approach to changes, especially the re-definition of faculty and staff responsibilities, across service model changes that are defined by individual experiences and opportunities.

**University of Virginia**  
**The Curry Library Innovation Commons (CLIC)**  
**Charlottesville, VA 22904**  
**http://curry.virginia.edu/about/clic**  
**YEAR IMPLEMENTED: 2009**
What was the program initiative and how was it implemented? The education library had long occupied a space within the education school belonging to that school. In collaboration with the Curry School, the library space was reconfigured to something like a learning commons. Except for the reference handbooks, the juvenile book collection, and a small area to hold recalled books, the physical collections were moved to the main library creating an open space for student and faculty collaboration. The computer lab was retained and equipment was purchased. The facility is now maintained by the school.

The reconfigured library space serves as a collaborative area and is staffed by library personnel who provide instruction and reference service. Now service is a hybrid of embedded and traditional librarianship, accommodating reference and instruction but not circulation and tech services. This has freed up tremendous amounts of staff time to explore services: videos, more online tutorials, providing a newsletter, and much more consulting, etc. The staff that remain no longer check-out or shelf books. The focus is more on subject librarian tasks and materials selection.

Physical or philosophical change? The Curry School did build a building about the same size as the old one which now has a research purpose much more than a classroom purpose; the whole building now emphasizes collaboration. The reconfigured library space services as a collaborative area and is staffed by library personnel who provide instruction and reference service.

Impact on staff resources? There were five position in the original library—two professional and three staff positions. One professional and one staff remained with the new installation and one professional and two staff positions were moved elsewhere in the library system.

Take advantage of new technologies? Services are moving from face-to-face to online; the new configuration allowed for time to implement new technologies including an online newsletter, consultation via Skype, and the increased use of online tutorials and webpages. They are also transition to cloud computing.

Unexpected benefits and/or challenges? 1. Not having circulation services allows much more time to deal with other services. Unlike circ transactions, consultation and teaching time can be scheduled. 2. “Business” was cut in half allowing time to produce a well-received newsletter. 3. Moving the collection presented an opportunity to weed duplicates and materials no longer deemed valuable.

1. There was a lot of push back from the Curry School faculty and students. This was not unexpected, but the relation was underestimated. It would have helped to have had more input and buy-in from students. 2. Working out new workflows for ILL and returned books. 3. Physically moving the collection, updating catalog records, removing ownership stickers, etc., in a very short time.

Conclusion

Although reports (Dunaway, 2012; Michalko, Malpas & Arcolio; 2010; Staley & Malenfant, 2010) suggest that the future of the library is not assured in the digital age, this research demonstrates that many large research and academic libraries in the United States and Canada are seeking to improve their continued utility by providing efficient services for users, extending staff resources to their fullest extent, and implementing the many advantages that technology affords.

In considering library service provision as a whole, this research identified four emerging structures or models from the survey responses: learning commons, consolidated/integrated service desks, consolidated media services configurations, and embedded librarian/virtualizations. Harbingers of the future, the newest configurations were tagged “embedded librarian/virtualizations” because they show how virtual configurations are beginning to meld with physical processes to stand in for old physical structures. This research also showed that new service philosophies appear to be the most important drivers for service delivery reconfigurations, followed by user demands. Examples include “one-stop shopping,” a more efficient and streamlined experience for users, greater collaboration, and personalized service. Interestingly, respondents noted that a change in service philosophy often accompanied a physical change such as a consolidation of a service desk or the creation of a learning commons.

As libraries continue to evolve in new configurations, they are becoming more flexible, more technologically agile, more collaborative, and more service oriented--all in the pursuit of offering their users the most efficient and up-to-date services and materials available. In conclusion, this research shows that far from being marginalized into oblivion by competing forces, today’s libraries are adapting in order to respond with the materials and services that their constituents require.

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References


