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# Wright State University's Service Ideal Statement and Depository Libraries: More Questions Than Answers

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## **Wright State University's Service Ideal Statement and Depository Libraries: More Questions Than Answers**

**Bert Chapman\***

The desire to gain maximum output from limited personnel and financial resources is prompting libraries continually to reevaluate their programs and services.<sup>1</sup> Such performance evaluations stem from libraries facing increasing pressure from parent agency administrations and external funding sources to provide documented justification for funding requests and, by implication, their existence. Libraries such as those at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio are responding to these real or perceived pressures by compiling institutional philosophy or customer service statements as a means of stating who they are and how they propose to carry out and implement their respective institutional missions.

Determining service ideals for any library, regardless of federal depository library status, is an elusive task comparable to former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's description of obscenity as something he could not define but which he knew upon seeing it.<sup>2</sup> The Wright State University service ideal statement, which it describes in personalized terms as a customer service commitment, includes overview statements defining an overall commitment to service excellence followed by pledges to deliver such excellence in the areas of general services, collections and electronic information services, reference and research services, information delivery services, and special collections services.

Wright State's regular introductory commitment to excellence asserts that it will provide resources to meet customer research needs. It goes on to stress that it will provide various levels of service in the categories of general services, collections and electronic information services, reference and research services, information delivery services, and special collections. Samples of promised service performance levels include maintaining quiet in designated study areas, cataloging materials accurately and promptly, responding to online reference inquiries within one working day, reshelving current periodicals within an hour of use, and responding to telephone questions within 24 hours.<sup>3</sup>

The overall intent and value of Wright State's statement as a general purpose declaration of service objectives is laudable and one in which professional librarians and support staff can concur with in broad outlines. This document, though, contains weaknesses which must be examined. Despite its laudable intentions, a significant shortcoming is the absence of an independent and external assessment mechanism to evaluate how well or poorly service statement claims meet reality. Without such assessment, this and similar documents can be subject to local institutional pressure or manipulation to reflect compliance with proclaimed goals when such compliance may not occur.

A more immediate concern for depository librarians is that the general nature of this statement fails to account for the often detailed and complicated issues inherent in providing users with access to government information. Individual depositories wishing to adopt a service policy for their collections need to ask and try to answer a number of different questions. Examples of such questions to include in a prospective depository library service policy may include:

- Does the local depository include the physical and electronic storage space to meet current and future users' government information access requirements at this institution?

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- Will the administration of the local depository library be able to provide and maintain adequate financial, equipment, and personnel support to meet present and future users' government information needs in traditional and emerging information formats?
- Will local depository administration provide sufficient resources to facilitate staff training to make effective use of emerging technologies in government information provision?
- Do local depository administration and staff recognize and accept that depository library status requires a commitment to meet the government information needs of their congressional district as well as the government information needs of parent institution users?

Reference services for government information users must meet unique requirements. Individuals searching for government information tend to be looking for very specific forms of information such as economic statistics, laws, legislative histories, and regulations. Finding this information requires librarians with the training and skills necessary to know which print and electronic sources to use in locating this information and being able to explain the process of accessing and using these sources to those needing this information. An additional component in providing government information reference service is recognizing that there are correct and incorrect answers to individual users' government information requests and that there are usually not "substitute" sources for answering specific government information reference questions.

Depositories wishing to develop a local service policy statement also need to know the contents of their collection, the types of government information reference questions they receive, and their ability to provide users with access to electronic government information through local holdings and equipment or through other depository libraries. Issues for individual depositories to consider are whether they can provide workstations capable of providing graphical Internet access, running multimedia workstations, and if they have personnel capable of training users in the use and manipulation of software packages such as Adobe Acrobat and system applications such as Java which are becoming increasingly common on electronic government information products.

A service statement for individual depositories must also decide how to publicize available resources and services. Will publicity be confined to parent institution information outlets, or will it also encompass local and regional media and business and service organizations featuring potential users and beneficiaries of government information?

Individual depository libraries may choose to use, develop, and implement a service philosophy document comparable to Wright State's based upon a perceived trend for adopting such policies at other libraries.<sup>4</sup> Depositories choosing to adopt such statements should carefully consider whether they possess the institutional political will, resources, and commitment capable of producing a service policy that is realistic and sustainable. Adopting and failing to adhere to the promise of an unrealistic customer service policy is more damaging to institutional credibility than refusing to embrace popular trends to adopt such a service document.

The Wright State service quality statement is a useful declaration of intent for primary library users at the parent institution while recognizing its lack of an external assessment instrument as an important shortcoming. For depository libraries, though, this document leaves more questions than answers. The specific institutional mission focus of this statement, along with the broad user education requirements and congressional district service mandate of government information service, limit its relevance and effectiveness for depository libraries.

Incorporating a document such as the Wright State University service policy into a useful instrument for depository libraries requires asking, researching, and rigorously analyzing questions such as those mentioned in this writing as applied to local financial, staffing, technical, and political realities. Additional factors to examine in developing and implementing a depository library service policy include assessing the current strengths and weaknesses of the government documents collection and determining the types of government information reference questions asked by students, faculty, and local users. Documentation for such questions may come from GPO inspection reports, local or other external assessments, and through instruments such as historical or future user surveys to assess the fulfillment of

depository responsibilities by any federal depository library.

Desiring to provide their users with the best possible service is a laudable goal depository librarians share with all librarians. This service statement makes many noble gestures in its aspirations to fulfill this objective. Depository libraries wishing to adopt service statements for their government documents collections, though, need to go beyond the pronouncements of the Wright State statement and comprehensively examine their collections, resources, and the issues raised in this essay before preparing and implementing their own policy statements for government information services.

#### **NOTES AND REFERENCES**

1. Two examples of recent literature on library service measurement are Peter Herson & Philip J. Calvert, "Measuring Service Quality at University Libraries in New Zealand," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 22 (September 1996):387-391; Vicki Coleman et al., "Toward a TQM Paradigm: Using SERVEQUAL to Measure Library Service Quality," *College & Research Libraries*, 58 (1997): 237-251.
2. *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 378 U.S. 184.
3. Susan Wehmeyer et al. "Saying What We Will Do, and Doing What We Say: Implementing a Customer Service Plan," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 22 (1996): 179-180.
4. See GODORT Federal Documents Task Force, "Service Levels at Depository Libraries," *Documents to the People*. 20 (1992): 31-32 for a relatively recent presentation of possible service level standards for depository libraries.