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Optimizing Library Services — Crystal Ball Gazing: Academic Library Services in the 21st Century

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The old perception of “library as warehouse of knowledge” is challenged by the new awareness of “library as place.” Just as the college and university environment is changing from the model of the lecturer at the podium, patiently imparting his knowledge to students, to a more dynamic and interactive learning experience (Adelsberger, Collis & Pawlowski, 2008, p. 253), the shift of information format from hard copy to multimedia and digital challenges those old perceptions of the library; it is a fundamental change in how libraries collect resources and conduct business (Breeding, 2013, p. 18). Technology holds a pivotal role in these shifts; “implementing successful technology changes requires attention to the people involved” (Garofalo, 2013b, p. 180). And those people involved are not just library staff and librarians, but the users of the library — staff, researchers, students, and community.



“Web-based resources and applications have taken on a dominant role in the daily workflow of researchers, students, and librarians alike” (Bailey and Back, 2013, p. 62). How can we best integrate these resources and applications into the library’s workflows and mission so that we provide the services our users need? “Academic librarians have done an amazing job of retooling both themselves and their libraries” (Woodward, 2009, p. vii). Perhaps if we can gaze into that crystal ball a bit and change our perspective, we can reinvent how we think about what we do, and then better focus on the academic library services for the 21st century.

Reinventing the library may seem a daunting task. We can become overwhelmed thinking about change and how to adapt to it. And with change hitting academic libraries from numerous fronts, pondering how best to deal with technology changes and impacts, along with what services we can best offer, can be challenging to achieve. If we consider a basic foundation of libraries to be that libraries connect people with resources, and then take the time to muse on how we can continue to cover that basic, we should realize that services for the 21st century academic library are not that difficult to visualize.

There are many articles discussing how libraries can demonstrate their value and assess their performance, whether in the library, in the classroom, or virtually (Jackson and Hahn, 2011; Matthews, 2014; Ritterbush, 2014; Angell, 2013; Heath, 2011; Gutierrez and Wang, 2012). Assessment and value are important, but that aside, I would state first

and foremost, academic libraries should strive to connect with researchers and students and make the library’s services engaging for all. Libraries are a place, a place students and researchers go to reflect, collaborate, find information, study, seek assistance, and more.

Keeping engagement in mind, what services can academic libraries offer in the 21st century to meet their users’ needs, perceived or not? “One means to remain relevant and viable is for libraries to redefine how they advance learning and scholarly activities and promote how they are still essential” (Garofalo, 2013b, p. 181). Libraries explore how best to incorporate new formats and technologies in providing services, as evidenced by the incorporation of mobile technologies in reference service provision (Hahn, 2011), and social media for outreach and marketing (Garofalo, 2013a). The transformation of libraries into information commons, an informal learning space where “an entire academic community” shares space and resources (Woodward, 2009, p. 110), is an effort to meet the needs of the 21st century library user.

Beyond the research resources and digital content and technological tools, today’s academic libraries should strive to identify the expectations of the students and researchers. We know that our library users have high expectations, and we generally meet those expectations. What services can we provide that help us better develop connections with those who have not yet used the library, that help us engage with those students?

The personal librarian model is one model that has been successfully adapted in various means and at many libraries in efforts to foster a method to engage with students. **Bennett** (2015) and **Green** (2014) discuss how a personal librarian can positively impact library users. **Shelling** (2012) describes a short-term personal librarian project that resulted in “unexpected positives” (p. 143), such as team building and learning more about their users. But the bottom line with personal librarians is personalizing the library experience, ensuring that “students know the library has not just books but also familiar-looking people who know their names and want to help them” (Kolowich, 2010, para. 5).

At **Mount Saint Mary College**, we successfully integrated personal librarians into the College Writing course for freshmen in a 2013 pilot project. As **Hardesty** (2007) recommended when discussing librarians and student success, our project incorporated

a partnership between the librarians and the College Writing teaching faculty, with information literacy instruction woven into the semester’s coursework. We contacted our students directly, developed online tutorials and assessments, and conducted in-class sessions, all with the focus on engaging and connecting with the students while imparting information literacy foundations.

The campus so embraced the idea of a “Personal Librarian” that faculty across campus approached librarians at the Reference Desk as well as during meetings and other chance encounters, all wanting to know when they would get *their* “Personal Librarian.” The pilot’s concept recognition and the developed goodwill helped our efforts to enlarge the pilot and incorporate it into the campus Learning Communities when the College implemented its First Year Experience (FYE) in 2014. We built upon the pilot’s success and developed a collaborative facet of the general education program that involves all first year students. We have currently reworked the “Personal Librarian” in the FYE for the Fall 2015 semester, and we will be assessing our impact on and engagement with first year students at the semester’s close.

Peer reference is another service that falls under the engagement umbrella. As **Bodemer** states, “student learning can be enhanced by the informality inherent in peer-to-peer interaction” (2014, p. 164). Peer reference is simply using student assistants to staff the reference desk, generally implemented more to deal with librarians’ expanding workloads than to provide more engagement with students.

A welcome consequence of peer reference is the student-to-student connection. Students at the reference desk may be seen as more approachable by other students, with peer reference workers meeting an immediate information need as well as easing any transition with a librarian referral. “Student endorsement of peer-led sessions provides clear evidence that participating attendees perceived them as useful and valuable” (Bodemer, 2014, p. 172).

Support of the distance learner is another service area for the 21st century that involves engagement. As delivery of learning continues to shift to incorporate the online learner, academic libraries can examine ways to best meet their needs. “Libraries may have to modify their structure and reorganize duties” (Garofalo, 2013b, p. 192), but many of the services online learners need are already in place at academic libraries — a library website with links to resources, remote access to research databases, an online contact method, and library

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resource guides that contain links, tutorials, multimedia, and instructional materials.

Providing learning support to online learning can lead to a more user-centered experience, where the “information literacy instruction, the digital resources, and the library resources are relevant to each student” (Garofalo, 2013b, p. 190). Whether that support is through chat and email reference, embedded librarian programs, online tutorials, or something totally different, academic libraries can find ways to bring services to the virtual learners who may never set foot in your building, much less on your campus.

Perhaps instead of wondering which academic library services would be of use to researchers, faculty, and students, we instead reached out to engage with our community directly to discover what services they might like to see in our libraries. Many methods of such data gathering are available, such as online and mobile surveys, paper questionnaires, focus groups, and face-to-face interviews. Simple open-ended questions may be the easiest way to offer library users a conduit to express their ideas and suggestions.

Providing a means for the library community to participate in the creation or revision of library services offers an engagement opportunity, too. The data and the interactions themselves can help librarians understand how the needs of our various community constituents differ. Taking the time to review the services library users themselves want to see in their libraries not only provides us with valuable data to analyze as we reflect on services to develop, but also gives us the opportunity to engage with those using the library.

Although we may receive suggestions for services outside our mission, we will gain insight into service areas desired by those for whom we provide service. Some may be as simple as “move out from behind the desk and engage students more proactively to inform students of library programs and services that can serve their need” (Yoo-Lee, Lee, & Velez, 2013, p. 510). Others may be more involved and require financial resources. And no doubt many will focus on the use of technology.

As Iglesias (2013, p. xiv) states, “there is obviously a huge change happening in librari-

es.” The services academic libraries provide to their community will continue to change and grow “as libraries move increasingly from centers of physical information bearing entities to entry points to greater information resources” (Iglesias, 2013, p. 10), and libraries will continue to reach out to better engage with researchers, faculty, and students. “Libraries have repeatedly shown themselves able to respond to the changing need of their customers” (Woodward, 2009, p. vii). Spend a little time gazing into that crystal ball; the focus will still be on the people of our campus, with the methods of meeting their information needs changing as required.

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I am sure that **Michael Pelikan** was at the **Long Arm panel!** See his column, this issue, p.73 about the need to teach **Identity Literacy**.

Did y'all see the **debate** Friday afternoon at the **Conference** this year? The proposition was **Resolved: Altmetrics are Overrated**. It was a fabulous show of intellect and style. **Maria Bonn** and **Derek Law** took pro and con sides and **Rick Anderson** who likes to debate himself but couldn't because he was the moderator. The debate and many of the sessions will be online shortly. www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/

Bob Holley talks about the pleasure of reading in his column, this issue p.58. At our library, we have a **Browsing collection** of materials, books, DVDs, etc. Used to be that we professional librarians selected what was put in the collection. There was little circulation. So we decided to let the younger group of librarians and patrons take charge of the Browsing collection. We were not thrilled with the selections **but they circulated wildly!** Go figure.

Just heard that our long-time friend, colleague and vendor **Jay Askuvich** is no longer with **Midwest Library Service**. We had a wonderful relationship with **Jay**. He was a wonderfully fabulous person, and he will be sorely missed. **Midwest** will have a hard time filling his shoes!

Another last minute rumor! Great news! I remember when **Christian Boissonnas** started **Acqnet** at one **Charleston Conference!** **Acqnet** will now be the **new AcqNet list at lists.ala.org**. All subscriber addresses have been moved to the new server. <http://lists.ala.org/sympa/info/acqnet>. Postings for the list may be sent to acqnet@lists.ala.org. The list will continue to be moderated. The moderators may be contacted at acqnet-request@lists.ala.org. **AcqNet Moderators are Xan Arch, Dracine Hodges, and Keith Powell.**

Have a good ALA everybody! Happy New Year! 🐼