

**Service is Sovereign:
Strategic Change and the Future of Library Services**

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Introduction

Again, let me begin by saying what a great honor it is to be invited to speak with you today, and to have the opportunity to extend our earlier discussion of “strategic investments” into the realm of library services. While my examples will again be drawn from the U.S. academic environment, and specifically from our experience at Illinois, I think it safe to say that all libraries are focusing on services as a strategic investment for the future – a development that I will refer to as the “service turn.”

The Service Turn and the Service Imperative

Commitment to service is nothing new to the library. Indeed, if there is one thing that I believe ties together the education of librarians around the world, it is the commitment to service – a commitment articulated decades ago in Ranganathan’s “Five Laws of Library Science.” Ranganathan suggests that the defining characteristic of the library is its dedication to service. “Books are for use”; not books are for warehousing. “Save the time of the reader;” not save the time of the librarian. “A library is a growing organism”; not the library is a monument to the past. “Books” – a proxy for “collections” that we would expand today to include journals, maps, manuscripts, archival records, data sets, digital resources, and more – have value not simply in their existence, but in their use. So, what is different today?

When we in the academy speak of a “turn,” we refer not to a physical motion, but to a change in mind-set. The “post-modern turn” is a phrase used to encompass new modes of thought in a variety of disciplines. The “digital turn” is a phrase used to encompass not only changes in publishing, but also changes in research methods. Both phrases have been applied to the library environment. Speaking of a “service turn” is my way of suggesting both that we see the future of libraries as being tightly coupled to the evolution of library services, and that we are in the midst of a fundamental shift in the way we approach the design, delivery, and assessment of library services.

Perhaps the simplest way of thinking about this is to suggest that librarians are shifting from making strategic decisions from the perspective of a “collections imperative” toward making them from the perspective of a “service imperative.” Making the “service turn” in your library means that you are committed to one simple belief: the library of the 21st century will be distinguished not by the content of its collections, but by the scope and quality of its services. I called it “simple,” but committing to the service turn, and making strategic investments based on that belief, challenges much of what we have said about academic libraries over the past 50 years.

There is no facet of library operations left untouched by the service turn. Here, you see the “Services” gateway on our Library Web site, and the way in which traditional functional boundaries between what we used to refer to as “public services,” “technical services,” “collections,” and “systems” have begun to blur owing, in part, to our organizational focus on service.

I do not mean to suggest that attention to services is new to Illinois. Far from it! The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library is well-known for its commitment to service, a commitment that reflects our core values of service to teaching and learning, service to inquiry and scholarship, and service to our community and cultural heritage. Over the past century, we have made significant investments in a particular vision of library service, however, and the challenges we confront today have to do precisely with the return on that investment in the 21st century, and with decisions that must be made about the investments we wish to make in the future. I am sure that you face similar challenges at your libraries.

The King is Dead, Long Live the King

For many years, U.S. academic librarians said that “Collections are King,” by which we meant that we believed users were drawn to our libraries because of our collections. Our libraries were driven by a collection imperative. We identified excellence in academic libraries almost wholly with the breadth, depth, and especially size, of our collections. The way our budgets were allocated, our professional staff assigned and reviewed, and our progress reported to our campuses and to the world, all revolved around the collection.

For many years, we said “Collections are King” with good reason. In the days before robust, international systems of resource discovery and document delivery, the breadth and depth of one’s local collection mattered in a way that today’s users may find difficult to understand. Access to distant collections could be difficult to obtain, interlibrary loan was imprecise and slow, and most scholarly work focused on local tools and resources. What content you had available to you near home defined much of what you could do in terms of scholarly research and so, indeed, collections were king.

Access to content is still of paramount importance, but today content is common. Call it “Info Glut,” or “Data Smog,” we are surrounded by content. Not simply the popular content that some argue makes up the lion’s share of the Web, but also the scholarly content to which more and more have access through resource-sharing agreements, licensing contracts, open access journals and archives, and large-scale digitization programs. Access to digital content has transformed our approach to collection development and management, as it has transformed our users’ approach to information seeking and use, and these changes will only continue.

Our collections were once masterpieces, sharply differentiated from one another through strategies that allowed us to amass many materials that were not widely available. By contrast, users today confront an information environment where almost anything may be no more than a click away. Through our partnership with the Open Content Alliance, Illinois has made thousands of volumes available to anyone with an Internet connection, and we have committed, along with our partners in the Google Book Search Project, to do the same for millions more. Outside the confines of the special collections that will continue to distinguish individual libraries for years to come, content is common, and will become more so.

When content is common, we lose our role as the access point to content for many of our users, who choose to go first to search engine giants, Web portals, or social networks. When content is common, we face questions about our value to our campus and community: “Why do we need to fund the library when everything is available on the Internet?” When content is common, we hear from users around the world, as we did in the 2005 study by OCLC, that they bypass the library because “the library brand is books.” When content is common, we see elected officials proposing drastic cuts to public library budgets, arguing, as did the Mayor of Bridgeport, Connecticut, that “Libraries are not essential services.” When content is common, service must be sovereign.

Services, like collections, have been greatly influenced in recent decades by advances in technology and other changes in the user environment. Let me now highlight selected trends in academic library service, and suggest how each reflects the broader change I have called the service turn. Through this brief review of an enormous topic, I hope to suggest ways in which you may help your library to make the service turn.

Service Programs in Academic Libraries

As I noted earlier, there is nothing “new” about a commitment to library services. Indeed, many discussions of innovation in libraries over the past generation have focused on service: reference service, instruction programs, liaison services, information commons, and more. Recent discussions of “Web 2.0” applications in libraries, including blogging, tagging, and social networking, focus on the ways in which new technologies can enhance the delivery of services. What is the difference between these discussions and the shift in perspective I have called the service turn?

One difference can be found in the distinction between service *activities*, and service *programs*. Taking a programmatic approach to the design, delivery, and development of library services forms the foundation of any attempt to meet the service imperatives of your library, campus, and community. Raising your vision of library services to the program level is the first step in making the service turn.

We are all familiar with service activities. We answer questions. We catalog books. We teach classes. We digitize texts. We circulate materials. We do these things one at a time, every day, and we count how many times we have done them. What assessment we have traditionally done on library services has focused on activity: how many reference questions were answered and how long did each answer take; how many classes did we teach and how many people attended? We have applied the same approach to assessing the services provided in newly-defined library spaces – information commons and research commons – how many logins per day, and what percentage of machines in use; how many users and of what type? We have adapted this approach to liaison services – how many “contacts” did each librarian have in a semester? We have brought this model forward to services made possible by technology, including digital reference, online learning, social computing, and participation in virtual worlds. How many? How much? How often? These are important questions, and I do not discount them. We use these measures to justify the dedication of budgets, personnel, and space to libraries when an increasing amount of the materials we once housed have moved to remote storage facilities or to the Web. There will always be value in measuring the level of activity, but the future lies in assessing the impact of programs.

In order to assess the impact of service programs, you must first distinguish them from service activities. Let me take a few moments to identify the characteristics of a well-defined library service program. These characteristics suggest a rubric that may be applied to any library service, and distinguish even the most narrowly defined program from the most regularly-used set of activities. As I review them, you might consider how they apply to traditional programs such as reference services, to more recently identified programs such as information literacy instruction, or to emergent programs such as scholarly communications or data services.

A library service program begins with a **mission**. That mission aligns the service program with the strategic plans of the library and the campus, as well as with its core constituencies and historic purpose. In a public library, the mission may align with community concerns.

A library service program has identified **goals**, sets **benchmarks** for performance, and is evaluated based on its **outcomes**. Goals, benchmarks, and outcomes provide a framework for evaluating service programs far more robust than the more common rubric of frequency of use. Service program outcomes may be phrased in terms internal to the library, but it is increasingly common to see them associated with broader outcomes identified as necessary or desirable by our campus or community.

A library service program is based on staff **expertise**, and is structured in such a way as to provide appropriate support for staff wishing to exercise (and further develop) that expertise. Embracing new service programs may require you to recruit for new types of expertise or develop it internally. More difficult, the decision to discontinue an existing program may lead you to re-assess the need for expertise previously prized. Recruiting and retaining the expertise required to enhance service programs may require you to review position descriptions, revamp your continuing professional development programs, or contract from sources external to your library.

A library service program must have clearly defined **constituents**. It should be designed and delivered in collaboration with campus or community **partners**. Who uses or will use the service, and why? How does the service complement others provided on campus or in your community?

A library service program must be **flexible** in its application so that a **spectrum** of activities may be developed around the guiding mission that allows the program to have clear value for a variety of participants, from students, to scholars, to community members. Library service programs must have the capacity to evolve in reaction to the environment of which they are a part. One reason why service programs must be flexible is because they must be **relevant**, in some form, **to all users**. Because these programs are flexible, and may be adopted, to different degrees, by different user groups, the assessment of service programs must be likewise flexible, including quantitative and qualitative approaches to the question of quality and impact.

Finally, a library service program must draw upon a **research base**. That research base may come from library and information science, or from the study of management, education, or another field. We should think of the library as place where research and practice meet, and service programs should be guided by what research tells us about our users, and what it tells us about best practices in the area of concern. Susan Gibbons of the University of Rochester has concluded that the library of the future must embrace an “R&D culture,” and Amos Lakos of the University of Southern California has

suggested that this commitment represents the first step in moving toward “evidence-based library management.” This perspective is crucial to making strategic choices about service programs.

When we discuss new approaches to library service, we still talk sometimes about service activities, but the more engaging discussions revolve around the definition of service programs. It is to two such programs that I turn next.

Student Services and Scholar Services: Emergent Programs in the Academic Library

For many years, services have been delivered to users of U.S. academic libraries through a liaison model that emphasized close connections between well-defined disciplines and subject specialist librarians. There have been several variations on this basic theme – with librarians referred to alternately as “departmental librarians,” “bibliographers,” “liaisons,” “subject specialists,” and “field librarians” – but all share certain key features, including:

1. the identification of subject specialist librarians with documented responsibilities for providing library services and collections appropriate to the faculty and students in defined fields of research and teaching; and,
2. a commitment to fostering effective communication and collaboration between subject specialist librarians and the faculty and students in liaison departments.

More recent liaison service models emphasize outreach to the faculty and students through a variety of means, and focus attention on services that may be delivered in the physical and virtual spaces that are home to our users, rather than requiring users to come to us. OCLC’s Lorcan Dempsey has referred to this as the need to put our services more “in the flow” of user routines. This focus on outreach and engagement with faculty and students in non-library spaces was probably the earliest example of the service turn in academic libraries.

While still effective in many ways, the traditional liaison service model has faced challenges in adapting to new realities in the academic environment, including: the rise of interdisciplinary research and teaching; new attention to co-curricular educational programs; different approaches to undergraduate education; changes in the scholarly communications process; and emergent technologies that allow students and scholars to revisit their approach to information gathering and library use.

While traditional liaison programs continue to form the foundation of academic library service programs, we also see a variety of new programs that I will suggest are particularly significant for the future of academic libraries. As this represents the section of my talk most closely related to issues specific to a particular professional environment, I would be happy to go into greater detail about them during discussion.

The first of these new service programs is rooted in the decoupling of liaison roles from traditional disciplines and departments in support of a broader view of “student services.” Where the focus for liaison services over the past several decades has been on subject expertise related to discrete fields of study, and especially on the management of collections meant to support those fields of study, we now see more attention to liaison roles based on relationships with student groups or campus-wide instructional programs. At Illinois, we have hired a librarian whose responsibilities focus on what we call “multicultural outreach services.” Her work is not tied to a specific discipline, but to educational programs aimed at students coming from racial and ethnic groups traditionally under-represented in U.S. higher education, and at students coming from abroad. At the University of Chicago, a “Class Librarian” is affiliated with all students in a given year of study, regardless of program focus. At the University of Kansas, an “undergraduate initiatives librarian” is responsible for developing service programs associated not with an academic department, but with student services programs such as Residence Life. Similar positions have been established across the U.S. for librarians supporting interdisciplinary programs such as First-Year Experience, Writing Across the Curriculum, and Undergraduate Research.

While many of these librarians are among those adopting new technology tools, it is important to note that advances in technology are not driving these new approaches to library services. They are being adopted because they have the greatest potential to enhance those services. Student services librarians may be the most likely to adopt “Web 2.0” technologies, but their approach to their work would represent an important innovation in academic library services even without the availability of new technology.

By contrast, changes in technology are essential drivers in the second of these new service programs, which some in the U.S. refer to as “scholar services.” Just as student service programs are related to broader changes in the campus environment for teaching, learning, and student support, scholar service programs are related to broader changes in the design, conduct, and dissemination of research. Often discussed under the broader rubrics of “e-science” and “scholarly communications,” and often building on service activities that existed in discrete areas for years, these programs may include data services, digitization services, and services related to intellectual property management. They may include instruction in how to access and make use of large data sets, as well as in how to apply appropriate metadata to a personal collection of digital content. At Illinois, our concept of the “scholarly commons” is founded on the idea of “bringing people together in support of scholarship,” and our service program is being designed in collaboration with campus partners from the areas of information technology, graduate education, and faculty development, as well as from campus research centers and interdisciplinary academic programs. At the University of Kansas, a similar program brings together geographic data services, statistical consulting, and digital publishing. At Ohio University, a “faculty commons” in the library provides a common space for a variety of campus faculty support programs. There is no prevailing

model for “scholar service” programs in the U.S. at present, but early efforts share a commitment to providing a range of support services to faculty members confronting changes in their teaching and research programs influenced by advances in information technology and broader shifts in the scholarly environment.

Finally, we must consider innovations in the design and use of library space. The idea of the “information commons” may already be familiar to you – technology-enhanced spaces that allow users to access a suite of hardware and software tools in an environment where information services and technology assistance are equally available. At Illinois, we have pursued the idea of a “learning commons,” where our vision for the space is not driven by the tools we can make available to our users, but by the ways in which our service program goals dovetail with those of campus partners such as academic advising, housing, career counseling, writing skills, and student health. One way of thinking about this would be to say that the Learning Commons service program is defined by the common objectives for student learning shared by its partners. We are now exploring the idea of a “Scholarly Commons” that, like the Learning Commons, will find its direction not from the catalog of technology tools made available through this service environment, but from shared commitments to providing support to faculty in an environment where the very definition of scholarship is in flux.

New approaches to students, scholars, and space; I chose to highlight these programs not just because they represent some of the most innovative discussions of library service in American academic libraries, but because we pursue them at Illinois as part of broader strategic planning processes guiding both our library and our campus. In order to bring together the multiple facets of our commitment to the service turn, I will spend the remainder of my time on a short introduction to the campus-wide discussion of library services that we have pursued over the past year.

Strategic Thinking About Service Programs: A Case Study in Progress

Earlier today, I introduced you to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the largest of the 3 campuses making up the University of Illinois system. Some of you may be familiar with Illinois, either through our top-ranked Graduate School of Library & Information Science, which has extended its reach globally over the past decade through its distance education programs, or through the Mortenson Center for International Library Programs, which has provided professional development opportunities to hundreds of librarians from around the world. If you are familiar with Illinois, you are likely familiar with our distinctive, departmental library service model.

For over a century, our approach to library services has been tied to a specific service model: the *departmental library*. The departmental library is defined by its collections, their alignment with the teaching and research needs of specific disciplines, and their management by librarians with expertise and experience in the fields of inquiry central to the concerns of liaison departments. At their best, departmental libraries provide

access to the universe of information most relevant to the academic pursuits of the faculty and students in liaison departments, and are led by librarians expert in providing library services, as well as in acquiring and providing access to the materials needed for the collection. This model served our users well for years, but it has strained to meet the challenges of the contemporary information and higher education environments.

Recognition that our departmental library service model required attention dovetailed with the arrival of a new administration on our campus, and the establishment of a more strategic approach to campus planning and budgeting. The campus strategic plan emphasized interdisciplinary initiatives, including informatics, health sciences, and environmental studies and sustainability. It emphasized the establishment of strategic initiatives at the college level, as well, and the coupling of college-level initiatives with their counterparts at the campus level. Finally, it emphasized the establishment of metrics, benchmarks, and regular processes of reporting progress toward established strategic goals. Collaboration across academic units was rewarded, and efforts were made to ensure the most efficient use of resources in support of strategic goals. “Bigger” was no longer thought to always mean “better.” For a library tied to a service model developed in the early 20th century, one that promoted narrow views of traditional disciplines rather than flexible approaches to the delivery of collections and services to students and faculty navigating new scholarly landscapes, and one that reported its success through measures of input, rather than impact, this was a brand-new world.

I have already described one attempt made since the establishment of these new priorities to identify the impact of investment in the library – the ROI study – but we have also engaged in a thorough review of our service model and service programs during this time, a process we refer to as “New Service Models.” While there were certainly economic reasons behind our desire to review the departmental library structure, I can look back at this process as an important example of our embrace of the service turn.

The New Service Model process was launched based both on our strategic plan and that of the campus and represented an accelerated formalization of changes we had been making over the past decade. It was clear that our traditional approach to library services would not allow us to move effectively into areas of importance for campus leadership. At the same time, we had received significant feedback from users through surveys, focus groups, advisory boards, and other means, that our departmental library structure was not well suited to the day-to-day needs of students and faculty. Our strategic plan emphasized enhancement of user services as a priority, and it was clear that our progress toward that goal would be limited unless we were bold in our thinking about new ways of designing and delivering services.

The New Service Model process was informed by input from a broad range of our staff and our users. Following an open call for suggestions about what we might “do better or

do differently,” our leadership group received almost 70 discrete ideas for change. Some were not feasible, some were not wise, but many demonstrated that our faculty and staff were fully committed to looking anew at a service model that did not meet the needs of the 21st century campus. Others, I must be honest, suggested that we had a significant minority of faculty and staff who remained wholly committed to our traditional service model. Balancing traditional commitments with novel approaches to meeting emergent needs became a critical component of our thinking about the future of library services.

Following a review of these initial ideas, and using strategic plans as our guide, we produced a list of almost 30 ideas worth pursuing and presented them to the Library and the campus. Several ideas were widely embraced almost immediately, but others required extended discussion. We held three open meetings at different campus locations to foster discussion and debate and to share around the campus our thinking about the strategic priorities for a research library in the 21st century. We held these meetings over several months during 2007-08, and also met with concerned faculty around campus. The process was enlightening, and there were few proposals that were not strengthened, if not entirely re-shaped, by those discussions.

One of the suggestions accepted almost immediately was to close our City Planning & Landscape Architecture Library and integrate its collections and services into a complementary unit. Time will not allow me to detail this process, but it was one in which we worked with our users to shift their thinking about what is valuable in a library from the collections available to the services available. Discussions about the future of library services to the students and faculty in the departments associated with the CPLA Library have yielded new insights about the priorities of these academic programs and about the full range of services in which they may be interested – a range not fully explored under our previous service model. In the absence of a departmental library to serve as the (increasingly unused) nexus of interactions between library and users, we have engaged in a forward-thinking discussion of new models by which those services that are essential to the success of our faculty and student users may be pursued in new physical and digital environments. For these users, at least, we had made a service turn. Moreover, for our librarians, used to a very traditional model of library service, we had set the stage for the sort of “re-examination of ideas” that Michael Stephens and Michael Casey remind us is one of the most essential – and most often forgotten – features of thinking about what some in the U.S. still refer to as “Library 2.0”.

As the academic year concluded, we prepared a “final report” on the New Service Models process that outlined a set of strategic commitments and operational changes that we believe will allow us to better meet user needs, reduce duplication of effort and expense, and achieve economies in staffing and resources that we will be able to deploy in support of currently unmet strategic concerns. The fact that leadership at the library and campus level is supportive of allocating savings to service initiatives rather than simply placing those resources back into the collections budget represents another

historic change to Illinois practice, and further evidence of our turn from a collections imperative toward a service imperative.

I have taken too long with this talk already, I'm afraid, and have done only partial justice to this important topic. Let me conclude by saying, again, that it has been an honor to talk with you today. I am especially grateful for the opportunity to speak with you twice and to suggest how thinking about strategic investments in collections and services must be complementary facets of a broader approach to strategic thinking about the future of the library. I would be pleased to try to answer any questions you may have or to engage in discussion about any of the points in my talk.

Thank you very much.