



Branch Libraries and Discrete Collections

A SPEC Kit compiled by

Karen S. Croneis
Associate Dean for Collections and Information Services
University of Alabama

Bradley H. Short
Music Librarian, Gaylord Music Library
Washington University–St. Louis

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SURVEY



SPEC Kit 255

Branch Libraries and Discrete Collections

Executive Summary

Introduction

Branch libraries exist in academia for many reasons. Prompted by changing circumstances and evolving technological capabilities, libraries periodically wrestle with the question of centralizing or decentralizing services and collections. After weighing a complex set of trade-offs concerning user needs and organizational realities, institutions decide to add, close, or merge collection locations.

The 1983 SPEC Kit on branch libraries (*Branch Libraries*, SPEC Kit 99, Nov.–Dec. 1983) illustrated—and this survey confirms—that there is no single best course of action.

Both reports reflect the technological capabilities of the day. In 1983, libraries used automated circulation systems to combine branch library operations and provide intellectual integration of in-house library collections. The current generation of technological tools gives libraries the ability to integrate resources from both inside and outside the library. Internet gateways and websites significantly influence the ways patrons perceive and use libraries. User attitudes and behaviors are changing in ways libraries do not yet fully understand. Nonetheless, libraries are compelled to look once again at issues of centralization and decentralization.

This survey attempted to characterize not only “branch libraries,” but also “discrete collections” housed in main libraries. The two terms are used interchangeably throughout this report. The results provide a snapshot of current definitions, subject areas, services, and administration of these collections. They also document the reasons and influences for changes, both past and anticipated.

The survey was distributed to the 122 ARL member libraries in the summer of 1999. A total of 54 responses (44%) were received. Fifty-one institutions reported having over 400 branch libraries and other discrete collection locations, excluding law, medical, government documents, and special collections.

Definition of Terms

Institutions use a variety of terms to refer to collections in separate locations. All but 16 of the 51 responding libraries use a combination of terms. “Branch library” is used by 76% of the respondents, “unit” by 24%, “reading room” by 20%, “departmental library” by 18%, and “subject library” by 16%. If the actual number of collections is used as the measuring stick, there are by far more branch libraries (47%) than any other designation. Departmental library (11%) is a distant second, followed by unit (9%), reading room (7%), and a handful of other terms.

From the comments gathered in the survey, a definition of what constitutes a branch library begins to emerge. The definitions given by respondents most often emphasize the concept of separateness: separate location or building, separately housed collection, or separate unit or services. A typical branch is outside and often geographically distant from the main campus library, but still within proximity to the department, school, or college that it serves. Branch libraries most often house subject-based or subject-specific collections. In some cases, branch libraries refer to sister libraries on branch campuses of the same governing institution. Lastly, branch libraries often offer the same level of public service as the main library of the parent institution and have a direct administrative relationship with the main library.

Subject Areas

There were no surprises regarding the breakdown of subject areas covered by the discrete collection locations. Of the responding institutions, 82% reported having locations that serve science and technology, 75% arts and humanities, and 61% social sciences. A tally of the actual number of discrete collection locations yields the same order: science and technology (41%), arts and humanities (17%), and social sciences (16%). A hypothetically “average” institution has 15 discrete collection locations:

four science and technology, two arts and humanities, two social sciences, two combined collections, two area studies, one undergraduate, and two other collections, of which media resources and maps are the most frequently mentioned.

Services

Reference, bibliographic instruction, and circulation services are offered in the discrete collection locations of all responding institutions. Other services routinely offered in addition to this minimal level include reserves (98%), web pages (94%), and copy services (82%). Almost two-thirds of the respondents provide interlibrary loan (65%), while significantly fewer offer acquisitions (41%) and cataloging or technical services (35%).

Administration

Reporting Relationships. Not surprisingly, the vast majority (90%) of discrete collection locations report to one level or another of the main campus library administration. Among the remaining 10%, branch and departmental libraries are most likely to report to another unit.

Staff. Approximately 2,250 FTE employees work in discrete collection locations in the reporting libraries. Of these, 26% are professional librarians, 43% support staff, 22% student assistants, 5% clerical staff, and 4% other professionals. Professional librarians work in discrete collection locations in 88% of the responding universities.

These 2,250 FTE represent 27% of all library staff in the reporting institutions. The distribution of staff in discrete locations mirrors very closely the distribution of employees among the total staff. Professional librarians account for 25%, support staff 43%, student assistants 25%, other professionals 5%, and clerical staff 3%.

Past Changes

Forty-three percent of those responding (22 libraries) reported a total of 45 changes in discrete collection locations during the past five years. Specifically, there were 11 additions, 19 closings, and 15 mergers. These institutions reported 18 changes in science and technology locations, 10 in social sciences, 6 in arts and humanities, 5 in combined collections, 3 in area studies, and 3 in undergraduate collections.

The changes reported for undergraduate collections were all closures. There were a few additions in each of

the other subject areas. Social sciences collections were most likely to be merged, accounting for 40% of all mergers. Most surprising was the fact that 58% of all closings were in science and technology subject areas.

Changes reported in 1999 for the previous five years revealed that additions accounted for 24% of the changes, closings for 42%, and mergers for 33%. Changes reported in 1983 for a comparable five-year period present a different picture: additions accounted for 32% of the changes, closings for 27%, and mergers for 41%. The difference between the 1999 and 1983 numbers illustrates dramatic trends, especially in additions and closures. New additions are not as common today as they were in 1983, while branch closures have become more common.

A comparison of subject areas involved in changes shows less variation. In 1983, changes occurred in science and technology areas 41% of the time, arts and humanities 21% of the time, social sciences 20%, and combined collections 10% ("Area studies" and "undergraduate" categories were not used in the 1983 survey). Using the same four categories, the percentages for change reported in 1999 for subject areas are science and technology 46%, social sciences 26%, arts and humanities 15%, and combined collections 13%.

Decision-making Factors

Many factors contribute to the decision-making process. Participant responses separated the most important factors fairly clearly, although the reasons to add new locations varied more than those to close or merge branches. As expected, the need for additional space is a significant issue for most libraries.

When adding a location, an academic or program change, service or access considerations, and political or administrative considerations of the university were most frequently cited, in this order, as the motivating factor. These priorities would seem to indicate that, in most cases, the library is responding either to academic changes on the local campus or a change in programmatic direction by the institution. Presumably, additional locations for library services are a physical manifestation of an academic or programmatic decision, and thus the library is a partner in the academic or programmatic process.

A weighted average of all responses, however, reveals that the cost or funding of the project is the most influential factor in deciding about adding locations, followed by

political or administrative considerations of the university and service or access considerations. An academic or program change tied for fourth place in the weighted rankings with technological or computer considerations. The differential between ranking by the raw number of respondents and the weighted ranking underscores the wide variety of factors influencing the addition of collection locations.

In contrast to the many reasons for opening an additional location, the most cited and most influential factor for closing branches was cost. Cost or funding was mentioned 14 times as a motivation for closings. The next most frequently mentioned factor—political or administrative considerations of the university—garnered only six votes, followed by an academic or program change with five. The weighted averages of reasons for closing collections yielded a similar, though not identical, order. Costs or funding averaged 1.58; political or administrative considerations of the university averaged 1.60; and political or administrative considerations of the department or school averaged 1.88 (the smaller the weighted result, the more influential the factor). The similarity between number of responses and weighted averages suggests that neither academic nor programmatic decisions are the driving factors for closing branch library services. It is, perhaps, disheartening that decisions to reduce library services are not based mainly on the same sort of academic or programmatic process that governs the addition of library services.

The influence of decision-making factors on mergers was the same for both raw number rankings and weighted averages for all seven categories. Cost or funding was most influential, followed by service or access considerations, political or administrative considerations of the library, and academic or program change. Clearly, the library has the most influence and control in the area of merging collections. "Considerations of the library" rated sixth out of seven factors when it came to closing branches (with technological or computer considerations being last) and seventh out of seven in respect to adding locations. Mindful of the costs of decentralization, libraries appear reluctant still to add locations unless there are academic or programmatic reasons to do so.

Details of New Locations

On all but three campuses, new locations were funded

in a combination of ways. Of 14 respondents, 9 (64%) said that new and/or additional funds were available to cover increases in the budget, while 7 (50%) used existing library funds, and 6 (43%) mentioned an ongoing commitment or endowment. One-time university funds, outside funding, and other sources were also mentioned. New locations were also added by assuming administrative control over or by a change of institutional status in existing libraries. On 11 campuses, circulation is the only service provided in every branch. Reference services (9 respondents), web pages (8), bibliographic instruction (8), copy services (8), and reserves (8) are also often provided. Only one new location includes acquisition and cataloging services.

Details of Closed Locations

Closing a location requires the disposition of collections, space, and services. All but one library employed a combination of strategies to dispose of collections. All 11 responding institutions shared the strategy of merging the material with another existing collection. Weeding or disposal was the second most common strategy. Three campuses transferred collections to remote storage, gave them to another library or institution, and/or replaced them with electronic resources.

Vacated collections space was most frequently taken over by the hosting academic department or school (73%). This suggests that on some level the academic department served by the library began competing for the same physical space. In many of these cases it would seem that the library and its services were deemed dispensable. Surely in some of these scenarios, departments became torn between the desire to maintain the convenience of adjacent library services and coveting additional space for classrooms and faculty offices. In two cases the library took over the space. In one case it went to the university. In no case were facilities torn down.

In all but one case the services previously provided by a closed location were moved to another location (91%). In 3 of 10 libraries, electronic library services were also substituted for former onsite services. Only one institution ceased to offer the services previously provided.

Details of Mergers

As in the case of locations being closed, the collection space vacated after a merger was usually taken over by

the academic department or school (71%). In two reported cases, the department and main library share the vacated space. In one, the department and the university share it.

Anticipated Changes

One in three (36%) of the reporting institutions plan to change the number of discrete collection or branch locations in the coming five years (2000–04). Of the changes, 13% will be additions, 21% closings, and 66% mergers. Just over half of the changes (52%) will occur in science and technology subject areas, 21% in arts and humanities areas, 15% in area studies, and 11% in social studies. Libraries are also planning renovations and improvements in social sciences (26%), area studies (26%), science and technology (21%), undergraduate libraries (11%), combined collections (11%), and arts and humanities (5%).

Use of one-time university funds and existing library funds are the most common funding strategies anticipated for adding collection locations. Three respondents expect funds from ongoing commitments or endowments. Two expect new and/or additional funds to be added to the budget. Only one expects to secure outside funding.

All respondents plan to merge collections from closed locations with another collection. All but three expect to combine this strategy with weeding or disposal of resources (67%), replacement with electronic resources (44%), transfer to remote storage (33%), or shipment to another library or institution (33%).

Impact of Electronic Resources

More than half of those responding (53%) said that the availability of electronic resources is influencing the planning process for future discrete collection locations. Many campuses have moratoriums on new branch libraries as a matter of policy, and, maybe as a consequence, respondents did not talk specifically about adding, closing or merging collection locations. Instead, comments focused on ways to improve services to branch constituencies.

Comments touched on four primary topics: increased number of electronic resources, improved access to digital information, continuing demands on space in physical facilities, and the changing nature of scholarly communication. Every response incorporated at least two of these factors, underscoring the complexity of the electronic information environment.

The library's ability to make resources widely available

often depends on the technical capabilities of the institution. "As the campus infrastructure improves," wrote one respondent, "more resources will be available to the desktop and services will be delivered from a central point to remote locations." Many echoed the theme of access by remote users, whether those users are across the street or on the other side of the globe. As a specific example, the use of Ariel and other document transmission technologies will allow library resources to be delivered to the researcher's office.

The increasing availability of electronic resources is causing libraries to carefully consider the space needed for collection growth. Maintaining both print and electronic collections places even greater demands on libraries' limited on-campus space. The availability of electronic resources (e.g., via JSTOR) is influencing the selection of materials to be transferred to storage facilities. Among institutions intentionally looking to replace print with electronic information sources, selection decisions are based, in part, on the percentage of the print collection that can be transferred offsite. User behaviors and needs are also changing. At least one library is downsizing its print collection in favor of electronic resources at the request of users who want more group study space.

Technology is having a profound impact on scholarship and scholarly communication. One person noted "the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of research and teaching," particularly in the sciences. Another respondent offered the opinion that "desktop delivery of journal contents reduces the need for departmental libraries that consist primarily of journals." Yet a third person suggested that "the availability of online resources and document delivery services may make print collections obsolete in some disciplines."

The future of branch libraries and discrete collection locations was on the minds of many answering the survey. One respondent articulated a vision of a "library system which occupies fewer, more consolidated locations, and [which] includes, as a cornerstone, electronic distribution of many services to the researcher's desktop." Another suggested that "reading rooms on and off campus will be more service- or access-oriented than collections-oriented." That idea has been implemented by one institution in which branch collections duplicated the main collection. While it appears that no branches were closed, collections in each location were weeded and now consist of small

core print collections supplemented by desktop access to a “virtual library.”

Evaluation Process

Only a few institutions reported a formal evaluation process for deciding which branch locations to add, close, or merge. However, 57% reported using some method of evaluation. The two most frequently used techniques mentioned were cost and benefit analysis (52%) and service-use data analysis (48%). Other techniques reported were collection-use data analysis (38%), departmental user surveys (34%), locally developed guidelines (28%), focus groups (24%), published guidelines (21%), and campus-wide user surveys (14%).

The variety and number of methods of evaluation suggest that libraries are attempting to use objective measures when looking at the future of collections. Yet, as reported earlier, the most influential decision-making factor, at least for closures and mergers, is money.

Observations

This survey covered a complex and evolving set of issues that are difficult to quantify or summarize. The relationship between a hosting department or school and its branch library underscores this complexity. It is often said on university campuses that the library is every department’s second priority. When given the choice between space for departmental needs and space for a branch library, the faculty choose offices, laboratories, and classrooms over the library time after time. Branch libraries are considered a source of pride and status for a department or school, but they require resources—most notably space—that outpace a department’s ability to provide them, both on an ongoing basis and in an attempt to meet increasing demands. If space were not an issue, then the library would have the opportunity to focus on providing needed services and could create a sense of place whether real or virtual.

The impact of technology upon the future of libraries will be profound. We are beginning to see some effects in branch libraries. Many branch library services are no longer necessarily bound by a physical location or building. While our understanding of branch libraries is strongly tied to the idea of bricks and mortar, opportunities and capabilities to deliver focused services to a specific community on the university campus (and around the world)

are greater today than ever before. The challenge is to develop tailored services and resources that meet current user needs and that can easily be modified or transformed as user demands change.