

Library Services in Non-Library Spaces

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SURVEY RESULTS

Executive Summary.....	9
Survey Questions and Responses.....	15
Responding Institutions	54

REPRESENTATIVE DOCUMENTS

Publicizing the Service

University of Alabama	
E-mail from Criminal Justice Librarian to Criminal Justice Faculty.....	58
E-mail from Criminal Justice Librarian to Criminal Justice and Sociology Faculty.....	59
University of Alberta	
Librarian On-Site: An Information and Reference Service for Engineering Students and Staff.....	61
Librarian On-Site! flyer.....	62
University at Buffalo, SUNY	
Letter to the editor of Dialogue. UGL Satellite of Love	63
University of Florida	
Library News. Librarians Take Reference on the Road	64
University of Minnesota	
Mobile Librarian for Education.....	65
University of Texas	
News. Librarians Take Information on the Road	66
Virginia Tech	
College Librarian Program	67
Pamplin College of Business. Staff Directory	70

Service Schedule Information

University of Massachusetts
 The Librarian Is In at FURCOLO72

University of Minnesota
 Schedule an Appointment73

North Carolina State University
 Reference Librarian for Management and Economics. Office Hours75

University of Texas
 Librarian on Location76
 Ask a Librarian: Call or Visit77

University of Washington
 History Librarian. Fall Quarter Office Hours79

University of Western Ontario
 Allyn & Betty Taylor Library. Research and Instructional Support80

Pilot Project Reports

University of Alberta
 Proposal for Liaison Outreach Services to the Faculty of Engineering82
 Librarian On-Site! user survey form83
 Librarian On-Site! user survey results85

Rutgers University
 Librarians Without Borders. Report of the Pilot Project of the Outpost Services Team.....89

SELECTED RESOURCES

Journal Articles 109



SURVEY RESULTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

During the past decade, many academic libraries have seen declines in gate counts, use of print material, and in-person reference transactions. Changes in scholarly publishing and information technologies have dramatically impacted the manner and the degree to which students, faculty, and other library users use library facilities. The balance between print and electronic resources is shifting towards the latter and fewer users need to visit the library to find the information they need. Given the growth of wireless connectivity, students don't need to come to the library to work individually or collaboratively. They can do that in a number of spaces ranging from computer centers to student unions.

While libraries provide a wide range of virtual resources and services to meet new user demands, surveys and other research reveal that users find the library information environment increasingly complex and difficult to navigate. Library users want assistance at time of need and in their space. They also value personal contact with library staff as a way to ask questions and resolve problems.

Research libraries and librarians continue to seek new strategies for providing services to library users, including expanding services beyond library facilities and offering in-person library services in non-library spaces. This survey presents library administrators with an overview of what types of library services are being offered in institutional

non-library spaces, the nature of the spaces, what type of library staff are participating, and how they are being marketed and funded. The scope of the survey focuses on regularly scheduled library services in non-library spaces and excludes course instruction and traditional library instruction services delivered in departmental classrooms.

Seventy-five of the 123 ARL member libraries (61%) responded to the survey. Forty-one of these (55% of the respondents and 33% of ARL member libraries) have offered or are offering scheduled, in-person services in academic departments or other institutional spaces outside of the library.

Background

A review of the literature shows that the provision of in-person library services outside the library has been somewhat limited, but it is not a new phenomenon. This is confirmed by the survey results: 20 of the 41 libraries (49%) that offer some type of service have done so for five or more years. However, the fluidity of this practice is demonstrated by two groups of respondents. Of the 20 libraries that began service more than five years ago, 12 (60%) have expanded service to additional locations within the last five years. At the same time, 11 of the 41 libraries (27%) have begun offering such services only within the last two years.

Regardless of the longevity of these services, first contact has typically been with faculty. The early adopters most often moved out to academic

departments, hospitals or other clinical settings, and computer labs. A significant number of more recently begun services follow this pattern, though the institutions that have initiated services within the last two years seem to be focusing more on where students gather, such as residence halls, study halls, and student unions. Of those services located in departmental spaces, the subject areas served cover a broad range of academic endeavor, led by the social sciences and descending through the disciplines to the fine arts and area studies.

One of the most interesting things revealed in the survey are the major factors involved in the libraries' decisions to initiate the services. Eighty percent of the respondents indicated that individual librarian initiative was a major factor in starting the services. A changing service philosophy (65%) and user demand (58%) were the next highest reasons. Only a third of the respondents indicated that a decision by the library administration was a major consideration in initiating the services and only one indicated that the closing or merging of a branch library drove the decision. The high percentage of services in non-library spaces initiated by individual librarians indicates that such services are entrepreneurial and opportunistic in nature.

Seventeen libraries (42%) reported that a service in a non-library space had been started but, at some point, discontinued. Space constraints or reassignment of the space by the department, low use of the service or a prevalence of non-library-related questions, and changes in staff assignments or the departure of the library staff member who initially instigated the program were the reasons most often reported.

Services Offered

The survey asked respondents which library services are provided in which locations. The locations—in order of frequency used—are offices or workspace in departments, hospitals or other clinical settings, computer labs, residence halls, study halls or commons, career centers, student unions, writing centers, and research labs. A variety of other locations were also mentioned, including community centers, continuing education centers,

and a student athlete study center. There is some understandable variation in service offerings across the locations. While provision of reference service and individual or group consultation ranks high across all locations—especially in departmental offices—workshops and demonstrations rank highest in computer labs, career centers, and hospitals or other clinical settings. Technical assistance is most often available in departmental spaces, computer labs, research labs, and writing centers.

There appears to be no consistent name for library services in non-library spaces. Slightly more than a quarter of the respondents use no particular name; the terms most often used are outreach (29%) and office hours (23%). Some more descriptive names include Librarian On-Site, Librarian on Location, Librarian in the Atrium, The Librarian Is In, Mobile Librarian Services, Field Librarian Program, MyLibrarian Project, House Calls, and Clinical Medical Librarian. The lack of a standard nomenclature reflects the entrepreneurial, ad hoc nature of many of these out-of-library services.

Although these initiatives are largely driven by individual librarians, 66% of the survey respondents report that the user community was involved in planning for these services. This input included negotiations on space, equipment, and service hours; technical assistance; and help with publicity.

Staffing and Other Resources

Respondents were asked to indicate both the number of librarians and other staff members participating in these services and the total number of hours per week that the service is offered by a librarian or other staff. The responses were broken out across all the service locations. Librarians provide service in all locations. The location with the highest number of participating librarians is office or workspace in an academic department (28 responses). Sixteen of the libraries (57%) that provide service there have just one or two librarians involved, but nine (32%) have between three and nine participating librarians, and three (11%) have twelve to fifteen. The total number of weekly service hours provided in this location ranges from two to

forty, with 56% of respondents staffing up to seven hours per week and the rest staffing eight or more hours per week. Hospitals or other clinical settings, computer labs, and residence halls are the next most popular locations staffed by librarians but typically there are only one or two librarians involved. Service in these locations is available fewer than eight hours a week in all but a couple of cases. Other library staff—which includes student assistants—provide service in fewer locations. They most often staff services in residence halls, departmental spaces, student unions, and computer labs and typically work less than eight hours a week.

In addition to providing services in non-library locations, participating library staff members have a wide range of other responsibilities in the institutions in which they work. In the case of librarians, the vast majority carries a standard load of public service duties. These include reference/information services, instruction, collection development duties, and departmental liaison duties. The regular duties of other staff who participate in these programs primarily involve reference/information and instruction.

Not surprisingly, there is the same wide variety of special names or titles for participating staff as seen above in names for these service programs. Some are, indeed, specialized and emphasize the non-library space aspect. These include Field Librarian, Mobile Librarian, College Librarian, and Outreach Librarian. Others are more traditional, including Information and Education Services Librarian, Subject Librarian, and Liaison Librarian. When on duty in a non-library space, participating staff use a variety of means to identify themselves to users, most commonly with appropriate signage (13 responses or 48%). Some other methods include wearing a special identification badge, having flyers or brochures on hand, or simply being present at an assigned desk or office.

Library services in non-library spaces are offered on weekdays during the day by all but two of the responding libraries. Weekday hours are most common for services provided in offices or work spaces in academic departments (28 responses or 76%). Services provided in computer labs and

hospitals have similar daytime patterns. Services located in the more student-focused spaces—such as residence halls, study halls, career centers, student unions, and writing centers—also have service hours on weekday evenings and Saturdays. A hospital is the only non-library space where some services are also provided on Sundays.

Staff provide library services in a variety of workspaces in non-library locations. The only spaces where librarians work from separate (42%) or shared (22%) offices in any significant number are in academic department spaces. Librarians in academic space also work from an assigned desk in an open area (17%), in unassigned space as available (14%), or “roam” the space and approach users one-by-one (19%). A few respondents have assigned space in other locations, but most roam the space to provide assistance.

Library staff use a variety of equipment to provide services, including desktop computers, laptop computers, printers, phones, and personal digital assistants. Six respondents also report occasionally using projection equipment. Office, clinical, and lab spaces are most likely to have a full complement of equipment. Staff in student-oriented spaces rely more heavily on laptops. Printers and phones are virtually nonexistent outside of office-type spaces.

Funding

The survey asked how services in non-library locations are funded. All respondents report that services are funded primarily from the library budget. Three of the respondents indicated they received new funding to provide the services. About half receive some funding from a scattering of other sources. It is clear, though, that respondents consider departments’ contribution of space and equipment shared funding for the service. Funding by non-library sources is used for equipment, librarian and other library staff time, and promoting the services.

Service Promotion

The most common means of promoting library services in non-library spaces has been e-mail announcements (91%), flyers or posters (71%),

library orientations and instruction sessions (68%), and library Web pages (68%). Other publicity venues include departmental Web pages, library newsletters, newspapers, phone calls, and word of mouth. No matter what type of space, libraries have used a variety of methods to publicize the service. Where user communities are more defined, such as academic departments, hospitals, computer labs, and writing centers, e-mail has played a larger role in promoting the service. In spaces that serve broader, more interdisciplinary groups of users, posted signs, brochures, and Web pages have played greater roles in the marketing mix.

Service Evaluation and Assessment

The majority of responding libraries have not formally evaluated these services and 20% have not done any evaluation. Most rely on informal feedback about the services and observation for evaluation. Among those that have done some type of structured evaluation, surveys are the method most frequently employed (34%).

Opportunities and Challenges

Respondents were asked to list up to three benefits and three challenges of offering library services in non-library spaces. Several themes emerged from the comments. One benefit is increased visibility for the participating librarians and the library by providing services on users' turf. Another benefit is the user convenience of providing needed services on users' own terms. A third benefit is the opportunity to establish relationships and connect with faculty and students in a way that can't be done in a traditional library setting.

Challenges mentioned include the process of negotiating and procuring access to scarce departmental space. Staffing and keeping the service a priority for the libraries is also a challenge. These services can be relatively labor intensive and require committed library staff and administrations to make them successful. If key participants leave for other jobs or are asked to take on additional responsibilities elsewhere in the library, non-library service programs can fall by the wayside. A related challenge is the question of scalability. How can a

library provide this service for every department? Or, should it try to provide the service for every department? Lastly, respondents said that marketing and publicizing the programs are an ongoing challenge.

Conclusion

At least one-third of ARL member libraries are providing, or have provided, some form of scheduled library services outside of the library. As information technology evolves and "any time, any place" access to resources becomes more ubiquitous, few users need to come to the library to find the information they need to do their work. Research libraries and librarians will continue to seek new strategies for providing services to library users, including working with them on their own turf.

There are several conclusions about the nature of library services in non-library spaces one may draw from the survey. To flourish, these services appear to require a delicate balance of entrepreneurial and dedicated staff able to absorb the additional duties without additional funding, the ability to take advantage of local opportunities, access to appropriate non-library workspace and technology, and interested users. Individual librarian initiative was reported as the major factor in instigating new services; the reassignment or resignation of key staff members was also noted as a major factor in decisions to discontinue services.

With a few exceptions, library services in non-library spaces are not fully integrated into public service programs. Forty-two percent of the libraries surveyed report that services had been started and then discontinued, largely because the conditions listed above didn't exist. The wide variety of names given for the services and the librarians who provide them also indicates the fluid nature of the services. Lastly, relatively few libraries report that they have formally assessed these services. Given the highly entrepreneurial nature of the enterprise and scaling issues, sustainability is a legitimate concern.

This begs the question, "How does a library determine if the service is a success?" Should success be measured solely in quantitative terms by

the number of questions answered, staff members and departments involved, and cost effectiveness of the service? Or is a more useful indicator for libraries the indirect benefits accrued along the way, such as increased goodwill, heightened visibility for the library, and the chance to build stronger relationships between librarians and library users? Both approaches are valid and the answer is most likely some combination and the precise balance between the two can and should shift over time, based on local conditions. This is clearly an area where many libraries have been willing to take risks and experiment with a different service model. At the same time, institutions have been willing to step back and discontinue the service if experience shows

it to not be worth the investment of staff time and resources.

While the quantitative data gathered by the survey is informative, the many comments written by the respondents are especially important in establishing the context for understanding both the nature of the services and the challenges that libraries providing these services face. Although numerous challenges were noted, they seem to be outweighed by the opportunities and benefits—both direct and indirect—that come from reaching out to students, faculty, staff, and other library users in their own spaces and building personal connections between libraries and library users.

