American Library Association Midwinter Meeting
Medium-sized Academic Libraries Discussion Group
January 25, 2009, Grand Hyatt Denver, 10:30 a.m. – noon

NOTES

The meeting was convened at 10:33 a.m. by co-conveners Mary Heinzman and Jan Kemp. Twenty-six participants attended. The topic selected for discussion was, “Future-Proof your library: How to assure that your library remains a vital campus resource.” A list of four questions was distributed to initiate the discussion.

- How are you positioning your library to be a vital part of the campus?
- How do you market your library to ensure that everyone knows what services you provide?
- Will you be offering any new services or discontinuing any services?
- Are you being flexible in scheduling staff, cross-training, or furniture arrangement within the library?

In response to the first question, one person reported that the dean of the library has become a leader of academic technology on campus. Challenges included obtaining furniture that would accommodate technology and enable students to work collaboratively. A new position, Head of Media Services, was developed to teach students how to perform tasks as diverse as making color copies and creating audio and video projects.

On another campus, the library has created ten group study rooms that are wired for computers with large display screens on the walls. The library collaborated with the campus technology office to have a satellite copy center in the library. One library is working on an initiative to partner with the campus writing center. At another library, a writing center will also be coming into the library, and two large reading rooms with high ceilings which had been turned into spaces for computers, will go back to being used again for contemplative study—but now they will be wired to enable the use of laptops. A Student Success Center was created in the library at another university, and the Center includes programs for non-English speakers and a writing center. It was noted that the Student Success Center is bringing students to the library who would not previously have come. Another successful initiative has been a program to award a $500 collection-building grant to any faculty member who applies. The faculty member must bring the application to the library director in person, providing the director with the opportunity to speak with the faculty member about new services and resources.

On another campus, a student marketing survey revealed that students consider the library the technology center of campus, and as a result, the IT help desk was moved to library. This same library also awards $600 grants for library book purchases to any professor who completes the brief grant form and comes to the library to meet the departmental liaison to receive an update on current library
services. It was noted that the materials requested by the professors are items the library would want to buy in any case.

It was generally agreed that students want to work together actively in groups at the library, and it is a challenge to revamp library spaces. The key is to provide flexibility. One library reported recently adding a coffee shop in the library, because there was no other place on campus to get coffee. Another library bought a rolling tripod to support an oversized flat-screen monitor that can be moved around the information commons and can be connected to any PC. Making note of the various locations where the rolling monitor is moved from day-to-day tells the library where these devices are needed. The library will be purchasing more of the portable monitors.

It was noted that it is important to have furniture that is movable. One library has reported much success with making 20 laptops available for borrowing so students can take them anywhere.

Another library reported that they benefitted from the University’s decision to create a new web site, because that meant that the library’s web site was also redesigned. It was agreed that faculty are hard to reach with information about new e-resources, however, one library reported that it can be effective to schedule an individual training session with faculty when they express interest in learning about new resources. This seems to work better than scheduling group training on new resources at set times and publicizing it.

Regarding challenges of adding power in spaces where more computers will be used, it was noted that you can install power strips along the wall and put tables next to the wall to provide individual seating with natural light. It was agreed that having enough power for computers is a key issue for most libraries.

One library that is creating a learning commons will have tutoring, disability services, international student services, and a writing center in the space. They wanted to create a group of services that would not appear to be remedial, but instead would represent “one-stop shopping” for students. Locating these services in the building is expected to bring more students into the library.

One library has installed movable tables with electrical outlets on the tops that can be moved by students (a few feet). A librarian noted that at her library, the third and fifth floors are quiet floors, and reference staff report that they sometimes receive IM messages from students who are studying on the quiet floors, reporting that someone is talking too loudly in the quiet area.

Buying booth-like seating with a table between two benches has created spaces for groups to work together in one library. The library has also purchased a number of white boards that can be taken to planetary scanners so students can scan the notes on the white board and send it to themselves via email.

A librarian asked whether any other libraries were combined administratively with Information Technology on their campus. Only two libraries in the group were currently combined with the IT department.
It was noted that having the support of the Provost is key in getting the library included in campus engagement with IT.

On one campus, the librarian initiated a campus-wide committee including representation from distance learning, libraries, academic computing and IT. The goal was to attempt to solve common problems by agreeing on a solution that the Committee would then sell to the campus. This was a successful approach, and in one year they were able to recommend a solution for campus-wide single sign-on that was accepted and implemented.

Another librarian noted that her campus has an experimental mind set, and it is understood that when new approaches are tried, sometimes the trial will fail and sometimes it will become the next big thing on campus. At that university, it’s okay if an idea goes nowhere— this is seen as the price of innovation. It was noted that the library has been a leader in the pedagogical uses of Flickr on campus, and that ideally the library should be thought of as the place where technology and academics come together.

One librarian stated that faculty are the library’s natural allies when it comes to technology, because faculty don’t think IT is very responsive to their concerns. It was noted it is rewarding to work with faculty and learn about the ways in which they are using technology.

On one campus, the library placed the academic technology plan on a wiki, so people throughout campus could see that the library had campus support for this role.

At another library, a presentation lab has been created to help students who need to prepare for class presentations. Professors from the Communication department donate their time to help students learn how to speak in front of a group and how to prepare presentations, etc.

One library director changed the campus culture by volunteering librarians to serve on campus committees and offering space in the library for meetings or collaborative services. Now the library is always included in campus planning groups.

A librarian noted that her library has organized a celebration for Abraham Lincoln Day. They brought in students from the English Department to give the Gettysburg address, and students from the History Department carried out other aspects of the program. It was recommended that libraries tie learning objectives to everything they do, including events.

As part of their regional reaccreditation process, one university is creating a first-year experience initiative. Many librarians are participating on campus committees, and it is expected that this will help others on campus see the library as a partner in working for successful student outcomes.

It was noted that librarians are doing more research consultations and fewer assigned reference desk hours. Librarians have scheduled office hours to mirror what teaching faculty do. One librarian has office hours in the department for which she serves as a liaison. This can be a difficult transition for some librarians. On one campus, many of the librarians regularly attend meetings of the academic departments. It was noted that offering individual research consultations is the only way to have the
type of customized, face-to-face interaction that students need. One library reported that the wording on the sign over the Reference Desk had changed three times. Currently, the sign says, “Research Help”.

One librarian commented that when he thinks of a reference librarian working with a student learner, it reminds him of a pilot and copilot: the pilot’s goal is for the copilot to be able to take over the controls at some point. Similarly, the reference librarian wants the student to take over the research effort from the librarian at a certain point in the process.

A librarian noted that at her library, they are lobbying to have IT staff to be stationed in the library building. At another library, the information commons desk is shared with IT. On one side of the desk there is an IT person, and on other side of the desk a reference librarian is available. In addition, this library uses student peers to assist at the desk. Referring to the pilot/copilot concept, one librarian reported that laptops are available for student use at the reference desk, and when a librarian works with a student on an in-depth research question, the librarian can show the student how to access the resources online on the laptop and then check the laptop out to the student.

Another library reported that their reference librarians have photos posted along with a list of their subject specialties on signs outside their offices to help students connect with the right person.

In response to the question of whether Reference departments are using landscape furniture or enclosed offices for reference librarians, one library reported that they had created offices using landscape furniture for Reference and it had been successful. The arrangement encourages collaboration among librarians. Each person has an enclave with a door and walls and a phone and computer. Another librarian said her library went to modular furniture and the arrangement was not successful because of the noise level. A librarian asked if any library had more than one reference desk. Only one librarian reported that her library had two reference desks. At that library, there was one desk for humanities and social sciences, and another for science and technology.

A librarian reported that her reference department receives more questions via Meebo than at the reference desk. Although the IM service was initially designed for distance students, it turned out that many on-campus students prefer to interact virtually with the library.

It was stated that text messaging might be the next big thing—students can send text messages and the messages come to the reference staff via Meebo. The software is open source and there are no communication charges, so providing service in this way is free to the library, except for staff time.

Ideas for marketing the library include becoming good friends with the campus newspaper editor and with members of student government. Another library connects with first-year students via video on the web page. At another library, the reference librarians met with the entire football team. The purpose was simply to connect with the football players, not to try to teach them too much at the session. One college has created librarian trading cards and hands them out. There is a contest to collect cards for all the librarians, with a drawing for a prize. It was mentioned that at one university, there is a librarian assigned to each student for the first two years.
One library is using the ALA READ posters to highlight student/faculty collaborative research work. READ posters are created with photos of the students and faculty members featuring slogans such as “Biologists use the Library.” Another library reported inserting links to library services on Blackboard course pages. On another campus, there is a new librarian job that assists in training in the use of Sakai. Other libraries are starting to use LibGuides to create research guides with links to new types of information and are putting more information into online tutorials. It was noted that it is important to insert your library where students are, for example into YouTube.

One librarian noted that it is really students at the junior level who particularly need library services. Often libraries do a thorough job of covering the freshman students, but it’s actually the juniors who indicated the most need for library research assistance and expressed an openness to getting help. It was reported that one junior commented, “In my junior year, I can’t afford bad information.” One library sends an email to every student who is taking a capstone course and let them know about research appointments. Another library takes advantage of the student workers in the library and asks them to tell their instructors and fellow students about library services.

It was noted that libraries need to repackage their library instruction publicity. Rather than making general statements about library instruction, librarians may want to send more individualized messages, for example, “Do your students need to do SWOT analyses and research financial information for companies?” It was noted that LibGuides has been very successful in generating interest for library instruction for various disciplines.

The meeting was adjourned at 12 noon.

Respectfully submitted,

Jan Kemp