

Facility Infrastructure, Workforce Issues, & Reference Services in a Community College Library

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Observation Final

For the reference observation assignment, I visited a local community college's library, Library 'A'. Library 'A' serves a population of roughly seven thousand students as well as local community members. The college has a well-known nursing program, which caters heavily to those students. To get the full flavor of the reference services, I met with a different librarian each visit and spread the observations over three weeks. Of the ten hours I spent observing, one hour was spent observing the virtual chat service. While observing, I noticed the reoccurrence of several issues. Those being the layout and use of the library facility, reallocation of the budget and its effect on reference services, and the value of reference services to students.

In 2007, Library 'A' moved into its new building, a fifty-three thousand square foot 16.5 million dollar project. It features an open design concept that encourages team collaboration and group work (SHW Group, 2009). The first floor is the Information Commons, where there are PC and Mac workstations. In addition, on the first floor there is the reference desk, the circulation desk, the reference collection, and the nursing circulating collection. The second level hosts the rest of the circulation collection, the individual study carrels, and the college's Information Technology department. The building also hosts several classrooms, a testing center, and break-out/study rooms. The SHW Group (2009) created a design that "merges the library, information commons, student lounge, flexible classrooms, and multiple staff offices into a single structure."

Shortly after the opening of the new library, the economy took a downturn and immediately affected the libraries funding. During economic hardships, community colleges see a rise in enrollment, this is partially due to people losing their jobs and deciding to go back to school. Despite the increase in student numbers, funding has not changed (Arnold, 2010, p. 223). To further dampen the community college funding problem, "There is also a disparity in federal funding between two- and four-year schools. Universities receive more than three times as much per full-

time student in federal support as do community colleges" (Arnold, 2010, p. 223). Unfortunately, these scenarios encapsulate the problems of Library 'A'.

For instance, the library has seen downsizing in many areas. First, the professional staff dealt with the dysfunction and reorganization of employment. In August of 2012, a new library director was hired. Before the new director stepped in, there were two, co-directors. Each director saw ideas and treatment of the library differently, causing workplace tension. Second, the number of reference librarians on staff has shrunk to three employees, working part-time. Arnold (2010) states, "The majority of community college faculty is employed on a part-time basis." Unfortunately, the department hours went from ninety-six contact hours per week to thirty-six contact hours per week. A reference librarian is at the desk, Monday through Thursday, from ten in the morning to two in the afternoon and from five-thirty to eight-thirty in the evening. This leaves the reference desk unattended many hours during the week "which may lead to failures in continuity and consistency in staffing, policies, and procedures, as well as interaction with students and faculty" (Arnold, 2010, p. 299). This was found evident during one the observation visits at Library 'A'; and to make up for those missing contact hours, a virtual reference service has been put in place. There is the Ask-a-Librarian chat function connecting students to other librarians at other institutions, but there is also an email function that is answered by a Library 'A' librarian within twenty-four hours.

Before Library 'A' moved into its new structure, the space was much smaller and had less space for groups to work. When Library 'A' moved, it was to a building with more open, group study space, but there was less room for the materials. To accommodate for this, the librarians disposed of more than twenty thousand books along with the microfilm collection. Jackson and Hahn explain the library as a place in their article, *Serving Higher Education's Highest Goals: Assessment of the Academic Library as Place* by stating,

The concept of library as place has been much *en vogue* as the field faces a potential crisis related to technological progress and mass digitization. The academic library as a huge structure serving as a repository of a collection of hard-copy knowledge is facing a clear threat to its continued necessity and usefulness in the shape, form, and scale of the past (2011).

Library 'A' is an example of an academic library following this trend. This shows the focus and allocation of the budget has shifted from sustaining the print collection to developing the collection of online databases and academic journals.

In addition, Library 'A' is staying attune with the college's movement towards technology. The offering of more online classes has increased and more usage of technologies in the classroom. Library 'A' has designed classrooms with the newest technological learning resources. Sullivan (2010) emphasizes, in the article *Common Knowledge: Learning Spaces in Academic Libraries*, "[...] change in academic libraries has paralleled the reorientation of knowledge in higher education. Recently, in line with the emphasis on student-led inquiry and collaborative learning, the learning commons concept has resulted in a trend toward flexible designs and interactive spaces" (p. 130). To supplement this statement, Bennett (2007) explains in the article, *First Questions for Designing Higher Education Learning Spaces*, "[group study] spaces are not designed to support the delivery of library services; students are neither served nor taught in these spaces. Students use these spaces to take command of their own learning" (p. 14). However, how can Bennett say students will use the space in this way? Sullivan (2010) argues, "This is a view of the library as a learning enterprise more than as an information repository" (p. 132). I found this to be the case at Library 'A'. Students were at the computers with textbooks open, collaborating in the Break-Out rooms with fellow students, and some were socializing while eating lunch and drinking coffee.

Yet, avoiding resistance is inevitable. A librarian became annoyed at the noise level resulting from group work and students talking in this learning space. This librarian feels a library should be a quiet space for study, and the students should go to the cafeteria if they want to talk. Another group that has met this design with skepticism is the older student body that is going back to school. Those who are going back to school may be uncomfortable and unfamiliar of the current library services. Nevertheless, cooperation and adaption is necessary for this library space to be successful.

Furthermore, of the students who approached the reference desk some had never used the school's databases or spoke with a reference librarian. Some approached the circulation desk asking for help on a research project or paper and the circulation aide directed them to the reference desk. "It is not uncommon for students to arrive at two-year colleges with little to no library experience, and thus a certain natural amount of library anxiety" (Arnold, 2010, p. 229). On one observation day, a student approached the librarian asking for help in finding a book about communication and leadership. The librarian then asked him if he had used his high school library or had instruction in searching and using the online catalog. Surprisingly, the student had never used his high school's library. This happened on several other occasions with different students. The librarians were very willing to show the students how to use the online catalog and find a book on the shelves as well as instruct them on basic search techniques when using the databases. One librarian went so far as to explain and show a nursing student how to differentiate between a research paper and an original, peer-reviewed study. "Community college library reference services, then, tend to be a blend between the typical academic perspective (teach the student to find the information) and the traditional public library (provide the patron with the information)" (Arnold, 2010, p. 230). The reference librarians at Library 'A' display this combination of services.

Compared to the level of in-person reference services, there was a small disappointment in the virtual reference services. Typically, the same librarian participated in the chat program every week. The observation lasted an hour and the librarian received three questions from different students at different schools. One was from another community college, one was an undergraduate student at a large university, and the final question was from a graduate student. During the chat sessions, the librarian came across as abrupt and short. Her responses were brief and seemed like she was in a hurry. There were many misspellings and abbreviated words; some I presume, were on purpose. This showed a level of unprofessionalism that I was disappointed to see. Ironically, this librarian mentioned she enjoyed this virtual service and compared it to AOL instant messenger, which is something she has done since the 1990s.

Despite the innovative facility designs that may limit librarian contact, the reduction in reference staff availability, and budget cuts, the reference services are still valued. At Library 'A', reference services are located between the two library entrances and between the circulation and IT desks. Whereas the circulation desk sits high and at eye level for the patron, the reference desk sits low. This creates an approachable atmosphere for the user. In addition to sitting low, the reference desk has computer monitors moves and rotates so the student can see the screen. In the article, *The Knowledge Commons*, Allen (2011) asserts that reference services hold an existence value. "Students may derive utility in having a staffed service point nearby, even if they don't use it. Economists call this existence value. Existence value stems from the notion that simply knowing a resource exists can create a comfort level in the mind of a consumer, whether or not the resource is ever used" (p. 469). Along with the librarian's strong passion for helping students, the presence and approachability are all contributors to the value of reference services.

In summary, observing at Library ‘A’ has been a valued learning experience. Recently, the library has made significant restructuring changes and the majority of the staff has adapted well to these transformations. This is a changing field and Library ‘A’ is no exception. “The college library is an institution of growing complexity while access for students is becoming simpler due to better net- working, discovery tools, and specialized information sources” (Becker, 2012, p. 492). In addition, each of the librarians is a retired school librarian and it was great to see how their background influenced his or her interaction with each student who approached the reference desk for help. Additionally, at each observation the librarian posed a challenge and gave me a chance to participate in the library’s reference services. One day, the librarian explained the collection policy and gave me the exercise of picking a book to add to the circulating collection. I looked through several sources of book reviews, picked a book, and explained why I chose it. Little did I know, the director of Library ‘A’ contacted me saying she is adding the book I picked to the library’s collection. During this assignment, I received encouraging feedback and support from these librarians.

Works Cited

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