
What Do We Do Now?

A Case for Abandoning Yesterday and Making the Future

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Positioning libraries to embrace transformative change and innovate for the future are perennial topics in current library literature. We are charged to push beyond incremental changes, abandon current outdated and dying practices and assume new critical roles in the academy.¹ As our institutions of higher education shift toward more business like practices and respond to societal and economic pressures, our libraries must re-envision themselves to fit within this new framework. The need to expand the library focus on the needs and mission of the institution and produce a library that “seeks to fulfill the campus’s goals, even in endeavors that currently don’t involve the library”² offers a significant opportunity to shift how we develop programming and measure success.

Peter Drucker has espoused the idea of organized abandonment for many years. In his book *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, Drucker suggests that for businesses and institutions of higher learning alike, the practice of systematically reviewing and abandoning dying or declining services and products is necessary to create change and innovate for the future.³ Systematically asking the question “If we did not do this already, would we, knowing what we now know, go into it?”⁴ is essential to knowing what to abandon and how to act. Drucker offers a framework for organizations to create a “policy of systematic innovation” that “produces a mindset for an organization to be a change leader.”⁵ He outlines specific steps for developing this type of culture, from examining every service and product on a regular basis, to piloting changes, to establishing a culture that maintains continuity for workers to thrive in this type of dynamic environment.

At Grand Valley State University, the forces of continual examination and change were thrust upon us when we were presented with a new building project. Having just surfaced from a staff re-organization and a number of changes resulting from working with new university and library leadership, the library was already starting to operate under a new cultural paradigm of continuous transformation and change. The responsibility of designing a building to meet the needs of the university weighed heavily and sent us into re-imagining the library of the future. This offered a rare opportunity to ask the question of what we would do if we could start anew. While the physical space is only one aspect of what a library offers, questioning what and how the physical space would work presented us the occasion to re-examine almost every aspect of our library programs and processes. Through this process, we have often come to the conclusion where feasible, implementing new ideas and programs “now” are best to strengthen

the library we have today and will help us prepare ourselves to be successful once we move into the new space.

ABOUT GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

Celebrating its fiftieth year in existence in 2010, GVSU is a large state comprehensive university (Carnegie Master's Large) that has grown to support approximately 24,000 students and more than 200 undergraduate areas of study and 28 graduate programs. Grand Valley offers a wide variety of programs and has an emphasis on faculty teaching over research. Graduate studies are generally focused on professional programs in areas such as health care, education, and business. The University is known for its entrepreneurial spirit and efficient budgeting practices.

University administration has been supportive of the University Libraries in securing funding for the construction of the new Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons and promoting the vision of what the library will bring to the campus community. There is great campus support for creating a library environment where programs extend and enhance the classroom experience, supporting student learning and success through a variety of services offered by library staff and other campus entities. As such, we have tried to be open minded and strategic as we plan a library for Grand Valley's next 50 years, abandoning what is no longer needed to put into place what we hope will be truly innovative and responsive programs for students and faculty. This has taken shape on a number of fronts, some examples of which are outlined below.

RE-DEFINING FRONT LINE SERVICES

As Sheehan described in her recent article, "conversations about reference services and experimentation with different methods of providing reference have been going on at GVSU since the early 2000s."⁶ Even before conversations about the new building intensified, we knew that the number of reference encounters was declining and that the nature of the questions was changing. Reference desk statistics and questions kept through LibStats had already informed us of what other academic libraries were already reporting,⁷ that the majority of our transactions could be answered by well trained staff and student assistants and we had already shifted to staffing the majority of desk hours with student staff. As we considered the new building, we knew we wanted to abandon the reference desk and transition our front line transaction services to one service point, managed by one department and staffed by full-time clerical employees and student assistants which would handle the majority (at least 80 percent) of our reference functions.

At the point that this decision was made, we decided to pilot this strategy. In January 2010, we closed the reference desk service and implemented a single-service point at our

main Zumberge library location staffed by support staff and student workers who report through our Technology and Information Services (TIS) Unit. Before this, reference was managed through our Research and Instructional Services Unit and circulation was managed by TIS. The service desk now manages the majority of those transactions that used to come to the reference desk as part of the front line services for students. Those students and faculty who require more in-depth research help are directed to librarians for one-on-one consultations. Frequently students and faculty contact the librarian directly, however when librarians are in their offices and available for consulting, they also sign into Wimba Pronto, an online chat interface, and show up as available to anyone working at the service desk. Service desk staff know they can always contact a librarian when needed.

Over a year into this transition, we've identified a few weaknesses with current practices and are working toward making adjustments to improve the service, including increased training and cross-departmental communication. The new library environment will also provide us with a different desk model, consisting of several smaller pods that will allow working more collaboratively with students. Currently a monolithic structure defines the service area and makes working with students during longer transactions fairly awkward.

TRANSFORMING REFERENCE TO CAPITALIZE ON COLLABORATIONS

As described above, reference as a traditional separately staffed professional service no longer exists in the main Zumberge library, however as we considered what we would do differently if we could start over again, a new service idea for helping students with their research emerged and is now incorporated into the new building plan in an area we have coined "The Knowledge Market." Similar to the NOEL Studio at Eastern Kentucky University (<http://studio.eku.edu/consultations.php>), The Knowledge Market is being designed to bring together a variety of services students need all in one convenient area. Peer writing, speech and presentation help, will be available along with peer research coaches.

Developing this program requires building partnerships with others across campus to provide expertise, service, and support for the service. Partners are engaged and enthusiastic about working with the library to design new programs that enrich student-learning experiences. Currently, the library is negotiating a shared understanding with partners, including discussions about hours services will be staffed, service level, and other expectations. Planning for how the services will interact and support each other, as well as training are all aspects that need to be agreed upon before services go live in the new building.

Great opportunities exist for the library to learn from the writing center and other partners as these collaborations strengthen. The writing center already has a well established scheduling infrastructure and assessments in

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place that allow the program to connect the service to specific classes and assignments, tie consultations back to the faculty, and improve peer-coach training, the service, and student performance. At this point the library does not have peer-coaches and hopes to work with the writing center to develop an infrastructure for building a strong training and assessment program. We will be looking for ways to pilot the peer-coaching and The Knowledge Market services before we are in the new building.

RE-THINKING COLLECTIONS

Signals pointed to the demise of the print reference collection for some time. Since 2008, the policy has been to only purchase electronic reference sources, with the exception of style manuals and a few other sources that are unavailable or have incomplete electronic surrogates. Understanding how little the print collection was being used, even by our professional librarians,⁸ and knowing that we would never choose to build a large print collection in a modern library, we developed a plan to reduce the collection's footprint. The project resulted in reducing the print reference collection to one quarter of its original size. The current print reference collection is presently under 1000 titles and will be reduced in size by another half to three quarters before we move into the new building. The space saved by dismantling this collection in the current building has allowed us to offer students new types of collaborative work and study spaces.

We understand that collecting print will continue to diminish as a major function of the academic library of the future. As such, many other collections strategies are being employed to minimize this role and systematically design for an electronic future. For the past three years, we have grown our electronic patron-driven acquisition offerings and budget, to the point where over 25 percent of our budget is devoted to such purchases. Whenever feasible, we drop print journal subscriptions and rely solely on electronic coverage. We have continued to keep two working budgets as we consider collections, one to deal and manage recurring costs and a second to take advantage of new opportunities, such as acquiring new discovery systems. When times are tight, we have worked to preserve the new opportunities budget at the cost of reducing journal subscriptions, licensed databases, and book budgets. Finally, understanding the expense of housing unused print legacy collections, we are testing out a rules based weeding system in hopes of identifying a simple strategy for efficient, systematic removal of items from the collection.

While the new library will actually offer us the opportunity to bring books currently in storage back into the building, we will be doing so with a much smaller footprint. Between a small open stacks collection (of approximately 15,000 square feet) for humanities and newer social science and science books and an automated storage and retrieval system (ASRS), the capacity to store and grow the print collection while it is still viable is preserved using as few resources as possible. Faculty are

reassured knowing that their books are readily available and this configuration provides the library great flexibility. When the point comes where we examine the browsing collection and determine we need to abandon this practice for housing books, it can be easily dismantled and repurposed. For now, we've determined a fixed browsing collection size and have a plan for how to move items into the ASRS systematically.

MAKING THE FUTURE

The examples listed above are only a few of the many changes that we have implemented over the past few years at Grand Valley State University Libraries. Driving toward a new future has required constant vigilance and a willingness to re-consider what seemed to have only just been decided. By continually focusing toward a completely new future, from designing new spaces, to re-considering the many products and services we deliver, we are able to position ourselves to make a future we can believe will be integral to our institution's community.

Peter Drucker warns, one certain is that tomorrow will not be like yesterday and while "making the future is highly risky,"⁹ there is more risk in keeping the status quo and not innovating. As Stoffle, Leeder, and Sykes-Casavant encourage, "If we can give up our traditional understandings of library work and collaborate with others to take action, we will see transformation that makes our work more efficient and increases our value to the higher educational institutions we serve."¹⁰ We have to make leaps where we can, sign on to developing a culture that thrives on innovating and abandon what is no longer needed in our academic libraries.

References

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