INFO 204: Wits Library Recommendations

Introduction

As today’s world becomes increasingly digital, traditional academic libraries must rethink their services in order to keep up with users’ expectations and preferences, while working within the library’s budget. Libraries must pivot and re-brand in order to stand out in a crowded information marketplace, where information seekers have access to various library-alternatives that provide easy and instant delivery of information. Flat or declining library budgets exacerbate the challenges brought on by the heightened pace of information and communication technology (ICT) adoption. Since libraries are not for-profit enterprises, they often cannot provide the same level of service than a tech company such Google, Apple or Facebook can, and must therefore develop inventive solutions.

Libraries can address the 21st century challenges presented by staffing, technologies, diversity and space by innovating new recruitment and training models, adopting emerging technologies, reaching out to diverse constituents, and transforming physical library space to a multidimensional place where patrons can study, socialize, and experiment with technology.

Staffing

In order to execute the ambitious goals that any 21st century library may have, library staff must have high morale, opportunities for professional development, and a commitment to the mission of the library. Library staff often juggle multiple job roles that require
specialized skills and experience. Considering that library budgets are already squeezed, libraries may be unlikely to find and recruit many candidates with all of the skills required and is willing to accept the salary offered by the library. Wits libraries could therefore expand their recruiting outreach to include non-traditional applicants who have potential and a demonstrated interest in working in technology and education, but may not yet have a MLIS or all of the ideal skills. In order to train new and existing staff without overtaxing senior librarians, online or eLearning modules, modeled after subject guides, could be employed to train staff. Subject guides “offer a virtual space to collect organize, and present a set of resources, often repackaged for a specific audience,” (Grabowsky, 2013, p. 14). The creation of subject guides for incoming library staff as an asynchronous training option would allow new hires to train themselves on their own time, rather than requiring in-person instruction from current librarians. Benefits to using e-Learning tools include “motivating and supporting students to take responsibility of their own learning” while “making it easier to amend and update materials,” (Kattimani & Naik, 2012). These e-learning guides for new library hires can be created using basic information technology tools, and could be easily reviewed and updated.

The very act of creating these training subject guides could create a valuable learning experience for current staff and generate community cross-collaboration. Speaking about the benefits and challenges of subject guides, Grabowsky states, “the interactions [subject guides and embedded librarianship] engender seem to build relationships between librarians and students which in turn facilitates the development of a sense of community and assists in enabling the library’s mission of connecting needed library services and resources to users,” (2013, p. 16). Although the creation of internal training LibGuides could be initially time-consuming, they would be easy to update, could prevent costly onboarding procedures
in the future, and could provide paths for internal professional development. If there is not enough capable staff members with time to train others, Wits could also consider partnering with international MLIS programs such as San Jose State University (SJSU) in order to use their MLIS students to remotely create the eLearning guides for both library staff and patrons in exchange for course credit or internship experience. For example, SJSU offers Virtual Abroad and Virtual Internship programs to its MLIS students that allow them to gain professional library experience in the global workforce (Internships, Virtually Abroad).

Wits Strategic Plan identified problems of low morale and inefficiencies in the workplace and among Wits library staff. In order to mitigate these challenges, Wits must work to build intra-organizational ties within Library staff and provide incentives for advancement. A starting point could be the creation of internal focus groups amongst Library staff to elicit valuable information on staff perceptions and engage them in the library planning process. In a case study of Oregon State University Libraries (OSUL), focus groups were found to boost staff morale and engagement when properly executed (Mellinger & Chau, 2010). When focus groups were used at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign Libraries, “the results clarified training, communication, and procedural issues for the library system to address.” (Mellinger & Chau, 2009). These focus groups can be collaborative and documented so as to codify each person’s participation and keep a record of ideas presented. By holding a series of focus groups at each of Wits’ Libraries, staff will be given a chance to voice their opinions in a safe environment and library administration will learn on-the-ground information about any pain points within the library.

A pressing staffing challenge highlighted in Wits Strategic Plan is the existence of the “perception that favouritism and racism may be influencing selection processes for posts,
training, conferences, funding, etc. and that there is no ‘big family’ environment in the Library.” Library directors and senior staff must be leaders against racism in the workplace and immediately seek to address this perception, as it can be potentially corrosive to the short and long-term health of the Library. Alabi (2015b) reports:

Existing research on racial microaggressions shows that they can lead to a number of negative outcomes, including an unwelcoming organizational environment, decreased productivity of employees, and in some cases increases in turnover. With the increasing attention and resources being directed toward recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce of librarians, it is important for library leaders and managers to understand the role racial microaggressions may play in undercutting their organizations’ existing diversity efforts.

Regardless of whether the discrimination is overt or subtle, racism can cause stress, fatigue, and anger (Knapp et al., 2012). While libraries cannot be responsible for the existence of prejudice in society, library employees need to be taught the proper ways to handle discrimination in the workplace and to feel safe to voice these situations to managers. To reach this end, Wits could adopt the free diversity program developed by the Southern Poverty Law Center, “Speak Up! Responding to Everyday Bigotry” which aims to teach individuals best practices in handling discriminatory situations in proactive and effective ways. This program uses media, participant stories, online survey, and group discussion to teach strategies and best practices for handling prejudice and elicit user participation in the program. Employed at Penn State Libraries, this program was very popular, with the organizers needing to turn away participants at first, and became a regular program offered twice yearly (Knapp, 2012). By encouraging and celebrating diversity among the library
staff, particularly by including a goal of diversity into its strategic plan, the Library itself could grow to be more inclusive and reduce rates of turnover. Discussing issues of racism, discrimination or classism during weekly focus groups could be an opportunity to host a healthy discussion on the library’s climate on diversity. In the long-run, the improvement of intra-library relations can result in improved services for library patrons.

**Space**

Among the many shifts the academic library is experiencing, the physical space of the library itself is also in flux. Many academic libraries now include spaces for social interactions such as cafes or coffee shops. Although food and drink in the library has been traditionally unwelcome, this trend has reversed in recent years as libraries look to reposition themselves as a Third Space that can support different learning and study behaviors occurring both on-site at the library and offline (Harris, 2007). While some information professionals may be skeptical of the inclusion of social spaces in libraries, other libraries are embracing these non-traditional spaces in order to respond to worrisome trends such as declining circulation of print materials, low gate counts, and decline in the use of reference (Gayton, 2008, p. 61).

Considerations on the proper design of library space are not limited to physical space but also include digital space. For example, the point when a student logs in to their university’s library site is an opportunity to provide users with a user experience that suggests they are entering a welcome digital space of research and study. By considering the user interface, user experience, and style of the library’s front-end, libraries can effectively digitize the sanctuary ambiance that physical libraries can provide. Grabowsky (2013) states, “Just as libraries attempt to make the physical library a desirable ‘third place,’ they must also
look to make the virtual library a welcoming destination for those at a distance,” (p. 16). Effective and appealing UI and UX design of the library’s digital resources that align with user preferences can help existing users locate information and attract new users to the library’s digital resources.

**Emerging Technologies**

Technological advances happen frequently and change the status quo very quickly. However, emerging technologies, or those tech advances that change in today’s world, can make a big difference to the way we communicate, especially among young people. Education has become inevitably intertwined with technology and virtually every educational institution utilizes it in their curriculum. Students, staff and faculty need to be tech savvy and information literate to apply emerging technologies to their scholarly pursuits.

According to a study conducted by Cassidy et. al. (2011), approximately 98% of college students own mobile phones of which 97% use it for phone calls and 95% use it for text messaging. When students were asked what library service they would use most from their mobile device, they responded with answers reflecting that they would like to be able to use course e-reserves and be able to search for materials from their device. It is clear that for library service to retain relevancy in the lives of young students, they must provide these resources and capabilities.

However, communicating and maintaining a presence through social media and emerging technologies can be a costly and inefficient service model for libraries to pursue (Cassidy et.al, 2011). Finding the most efficient way of communicating library services to patrons is a difficult and challenging endeavour. It may be prudent for libraries to cooperate with their institutions to utilize integrated software and their learning management system to
create online services. There are also many free source software that may be used to create connections between the students and the library. The literature suggests that students attending institutions of higher learning keep their social communication and school related communications separate because for most college students, building social relationships via instant communication is paramount to waiting to talk face to face or even using telephone or email. For this reason, libraries who utilize instant messaging for reference services may find that most of the questions they receive via text or instant messaging are from younger students.

In the realm of emerging technologies, student users are more apt to use print books rather than e-readers for academic reading. A low percentage of them even own an e-reader and were more likely to listen to a podcast of lectures as an academic tool on their mobile device. The high percentage of students who own mobile phones makes this very likely and is probably even more accurate today with the majority of them owning smart phones with the capability of connecting to the Internet.

Blogging and microblogging have become prevalent among students as more sites like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr provide photo messaging and short update posting. However, for this type of communication, text message is still the preferred method of college students.

Assuming that library services’ desire to capture the communicative efforts of their students, the library should create a free app that would allow users to check their accounts, search the library catalogue, ask a reference question, and other similar tasks. It could be downloaded to their mobile and would provide quick access in a modern fashion. In a more comprehensive way, the library should have an information-rich library portal that can be accessed via the Internet with tutorials and self-learning opportunities for students to become
more information literate. This could possibly be presented through a learning management system that would provide learning modules that would guide students to practical applications available to them in the library.

**Online Learning**

Online learning is not just using technology, it is about becoming information literate: to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information using technological and cognitive skills (NMC Horizon Report, 2015). *The NMC Horizon Report* states that literacy has expanded to encompass digital tools and networked information. In this way, the library is compelled to take on the delivery of digital information through technological means. The point of online learning is to find and apply information to fulfil some need or requirement. Again, *The Horizon Report* iterates that supporting digital literacy requires programs to address both digital fluency training for librarians, and the teachers and students they serve. For this reason, the need for online learning as a professional development objective is paramount for information professionals.

Learning management systems are used for online courses to organize and deliver content in a virtual environment. The LMS retains all the attributes of a face-to-face classroom, using learning modules, discussion boards, quizzes, multimedia and links to further learning. As at San Jose State University’s MLK Library, there are learning modules used by the library that interface with the learning management system, Canvas to deliver information literacy knowledge and formative assessment. Librarians who design such an organized and comprehensive course would have to be fluently information literate and instructors in their own right. An information professional as instructors is not a new concept, but digital technology has changed what they teach and how they teach it. In fact, the idea of
embedding librarians into learning management systems is a concept whereby a librarian would be able to interact with student and assist them in their research. This would model research practices in real time and add to the information literacy by offering feedback and guidance. This would especially benefit first year students and would make the literacy skill part of the online course itself. (MS Embedded Librarianship, 2016)

Another concept studied at SJSU School of Information Science is the idea of MOOCs, or Massive Open Online Courses. The idea is that using MOOCs as professional development has the potential of offering information professionals the means to advance their learning without cost by visiting webinars and virtual conferences (Stephens and Jones, p. 345). This can result in continuous learning and exchange of ideas among information professionals. The documentation of the Hyperlinked Library at San Jose State University LIS program presented by Stephens and Jones offers a low-cost means to create professional development learning communities and would encourage and support any efforts to replicate it. They state that they would advocate for future partnerships with other institutions to use this model to offer free professional development opportunities and lifelong learning (Stephens and Jones, p. 354).

**Outreach to diverse communities & promoting library programming**

Advancing the library of a higher education institution is a daunting task, particularly if the library is shifting the students ‘and faculty’s perception of the library, but also if the library is simply investing time into developing the library beyond present capability. Two key factors that go into developing a 21st century’s library’s appeal and its capacity to assist are its outreach to diverse population groups and its promotion of the library’s programming.
Interestingly enough, these two topics relate so strongly, that research demonstrates they are interwoven when discussing planning to appeal toward audiences like students.

In understanding diverse populations, librarians must often engage with peoples that may appear unfamiliar, in terms of culture, behavior and the personal communication. Culture is subjective and varies depending on the region, further complicating the ease with which a librarian can relate. It is through bridging this supposed gap that librarians can find strong ways to pursue these audiences, adding them to their user base and targeting them through specific actions. Martín Blasco, an Outreach Librarian for Washington County Cooperative Library Services, suggests that “demographics are the best place to start our outreach work.” Familiarity with the audience that surrounds the library is essential to tailoring services and products to that audience, before any other kinds of effort are to be made. He continues his ideas on outreach by emphasizing the importance of developing trust from the audience, stating that patrons should feel a “developing sense of inclusion” that ensures them that the library does care about their needs (Blasco 2013). This “sense of inclusion” is crucial, as cultures have varying ways of expressing respect or initiating interaction, and librarians do not wish to accidentally exclude or offend any patron based on a misunderstanding. In addition, Blasco asserts that libraries should tailor their collections to their patrons, reflecting the interests of the patrons, particularly the minority groups that lay within. While Blasco’s interview and experience apply to a public library setting, his suggestions should be held with strong merit within an academic library as well.

Reid-Smith of Charles Sturt University has experience within academic libraries, and suggests similar initiatives that helped to improve the outreach to students of colleges and universities. To promote diversity and inclusion, he discusses the idea of an “International
Newsroom”, which features “TV news, newspapers and periodicals” relayed from outside countries (Reid-Smith, 2012). Showcasing more international issues rather than just those of the university’s location can express a broadened perspective from the library to its students, while encouraging them to be exposed to issues and topics outside of their home country or their point-of-view. While Reid-Smith’s example could be expensive endeavor, other, more affordable e means of exposing outside culture into the library can be used, including signs, displays and diverse collections. Incorporating these diverse means can be further supplemented with themed programs or signage including “book clubs and poetry slams”, “anti-stereotyping” campaigns, focus on “displaced populations”, and “online outreach” to outside the borders for more programming ideas (Reid-Smith 2012). This collection of strong ideas all rely on the foundation of audience familiarity. This notion of preparation through study of the user is useful to any type of library. So long as students of various ethnic backgrounds or demographics feel welcomed, the library’s visitation numbers and usage counts for its facilities will grow and maintain a high frequency.

Steven Shapiro reiterates this notion that outreach toward diverse communities that visit the library is not solely resting in the library’s physical or digital resources. Shapiro argues that the student’s impression of the library can all start with their feelings toward it. He notes North Carolina State University’s Hunt Library initiative to showcase projects. He states that academic libraries can become hubs for “creativity and originality”, centered on “innovation” and celebrating “student creativity” (Shapiro 2016). This design of welcoming other departments of the university within, by focusing on the students, can be further enhanced by the aesthetics of the space. He mentions that investments should be made in “facilities in order to become more of a cultural or community center that serves as a magnet for intellectual and creative activity embracing a variety of academic disciplines” (Shapiro
2016). His strongest point lies in his suggestion to have these student-centered ideas focused on the student’s interests or efforts that reside outside of the faculty guided coursework, in addition to anything administered via curriculum, to prove that the library cares for the student, not just their education. Providing space for student-centered activity or achievement furthers the idea of tailoring the library to them specifically. Adding in interests outside of the classroom can foster a haven of sorts for student expression.

Marketing toward patrons, or students in the case of academic libraries, is essential to express these notions and spread awareness of the library’s focus on these notions. Tina Thomas, Director of Marketing, Communications and Fund Development at Edmonton Public Library, admits that the specific term “marketing” is not frequently related to librarian responsibilities. However, it should be instilled in any and all programming design and subsequent promotional efforts made. In studying retail, Thomas argues that focusing on every interaction with each patron can instill the confidence that the library and its staff are equipped to handle various forms of assistance at the drop of a hat. Having an enthusiasm demonstrated by assistance, recommendations or advocating/advertising for upcoming programming gets the word out while simultaneously imprinting that the library cares (Thomas 2016). Maintaining displays and “marketing pieces” like brochures and other handouts are major improvements on promotion that are easily seen or can be taken for future reference. All in all, however, Thomas emphasizes the need for the librarian to advocate constantly, marketing their knowledge, skills and connecting patrons to new information through active and thorough assistance.

Eva and Shea, founders of Amplify Your Impact, share similar sentiments about how programming and promotion go hand in hand. Shea states that it is obvious how advancing
technologies, like social media, should be critical parts of any promotional campaign coupled with press releases or e-blasts (Eva & Shea 2014). She even mentions the idea of the librarian as the “marketer” being an underappreciated role of librarians everywhere just as Thomas referred to. In relation, Shea demonstrates that these tools and embracing the “marketer” label must coincide with true passion toward the programming, as that is when promotion becomes a “joy” (Eva & Shea 2014). Both argue that communication with outside librarians, public or academic, for ideas can amplify impact on initiatives, as there are never enough ideas or approaches that can be incorporated into a library’s efforts.

Altogether, research shows that, ultimately, students should be confident that their resident librarians have the intention to help, the desire to “work in a changing environment” while being “adept at customer service practices, including cultural competence”, which instills a trust in those students that the library is truly structured and prepare for their needs and interests (Blasco 2013). It’s not just the services, but the staff that need to relate. There can be every tool in the world for promotion at a librarian’s disposal to spread word of an absolutely amazing program, but the librarian must take charge and initiative, involving themselves with departments throughout the university including with faculty to show they enjoy constructing and hosting various student-oriented programs, services and activities (Eva & Shea 2015). Displaying passion by coordinating programs related to student interests, and giving students the freedom to create or have a say in library efforts will enhance the image and outreach of an academic library on campus and to its students in general (Shapiro 2016).

**Conclusion**
Academic libraries can surmount the challenges engendered by the fast pace of technological change and growing global diversity by listening and responding to the needs of its staff, their students, and faculty. Promoting a culture of inclusion, embracing smart technological opportunities, and expanding the library’s appeal to diverse constituents will ensure the academic library’s secure place for decades to come.
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