Ten Indicators of Vitality in Smaller Academic Libraries

By

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December 4, 2009

Abstract

This paper provides a means of quickly ascertaining the relative health of smaller academic libraries by presenting a top ten list of vitality indicators. The list is based on an observational convenience sampling of thirty smaller academic libraries across the United States. The indicators making the list were those which appeared most often in the libraries studied, were the easiest to ascertain and are indicators that appear to have the greatest correlation with overall library vitality. The most prevalent indicators discovered are presented in a top ten list to illustrate the relative importance of and commonality of each of the indicators. Applying weighted and scalable numbers to the indicators for each of the libraries in the study helped to define the comparative value of indicators while providing a snapshot of the overall health of smaller academic libraries. The health and by extension direction libraries are taking in an age permeated by technology is a concern in the library profession. This study was only intended to provide a quick means of assessing comparative smaller academic library health and as a means of establishing comparative assessment for the purposes of accreditation. More empirically based research should be referenced or conducted to determine the actual state of health of smaller academic libraries.

Ten Indicators of Vitality in Smaller Academic Libraries

INTRODUCTION

The library is anachronistic to the future of education one senior university official declared in 2003. Under the impetus of the widespread dissemination of new information technologies, for decades pundits have predicted the demise of the library as a contributing entity in higher education. Hopefully the viewpoint expressed above is an aberration. Within the library profession there is an enduring thread of optimism about the future of the academic library. One recent library graduate student wrote, "In understanding and exploring technological changes, librarians not only participate in the information revolution but help direct its course."[1] Is the smaller academic library disappearing or is there truly cause for optimism about the future? What criteria can educators or librarians use in smaller academic institutions to suggest a library is comparatively healthy or not?

Professional standards and accreditation agencies have traditionally offered an external means of assessing the vitality of a library. Professional and accreditation standards are time consuming to prepare for, are often out of date and are erratically applied across the continuum of libraries. For instance the current ACRL standards, which rely on comparative and qualitative criteria rather than on quantifiable standards can ostensibly, make any library look good if the comparative group of libraries are under-funded and understaffed. Another senior university official rejected ACRL comparative standards analysis of peer institutions as an assessment tool on the grounds the school they represented is too unique to be compared to other universities. At the same school the visitation follow-up accreditation report listed a total of twenty-eight library concerns'. Only one of the twenty-eight concerns was addressed in the subsequent six years. Across smaller academic institutions the power of accreditation standards as a catalyst for positive change or even as a means of indicating effectiveness has dissipated. The academic institution has no obligation to adhere to or apply consistent standards.

If institutional assessment or accreditation criteria are suspect in determining value what is the alternative? Complex qualitative formulas may not be the answer either as librarians in smaller academic institutions often face severe constraints upon their time. This paper presents one observer's top ten list of vitality indicators that may provide the librarian with a quick means of ascertaining the health of a smaller academic library.

THE STUDY

The list of vitality indicators that follows was derived from a qualitative study based on direct in-person observations of thirty-one smaller academic libraries across eighteen states. The selection of the libraries in the study was not strictly random. Only those libraries which advertised a library director or equivalent position vacancy over the last four years were included in the study. In fact, the study originated as an anticipated short-term search for a new job, which early in the search process turned into an unexpected observational study of library vitality.

Only smaller academic libraries were included in the study. Inclusion was confined to those libraries where the only required educational credential of the library's chief administrative officer was the terminal MLS degree and the enrollment of the institution was between 1,000 and 5,000 FTE students. The study included twelve private institutions, eight public institutions and ten community colleges.

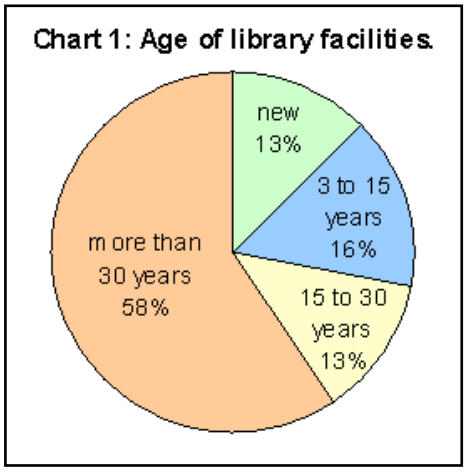
THE TOP TEN INDICATORS OF VITALITY

1. COMFORT

The tremendous potential libraries offer higher education in contributing to or perhaps even becoming centric to the success of students in the knowledge age is just beginning to be exploited in smaller academic institutions. This exploitative response is primarily manifesting itself in the form of required information literacy skills and the regeneration of a centralized learning experience found in the physical facilities and services of the library. Comfort as an indicator of vitality comes first on the list because

without adequate facilities to learn or practice the skills learned, required information literacy standards arguably will have less impact on the learning experience.

The economic pressure to adopt a true business model of management rather then a model of political expediency may be more responsible for shifting attention back to the student than any significant influence on the part of librarians. The business model advises that the educator needs to think of the student as a consumer. The student as a consumer demands the creation of an atmosphere of convenience, comfort and easily accessible services. For the purpose of this study the concepts comfort, convenience, and access are consolidated under the collective label of comfort. Comfort is the deliberate creation of a variably configured and attractive environment that becomes the first-choice option of students as the place to go for any academic directed activity outside of the physical or virtual classroom and even as an appealing alternative for personal activity such as social interaction or recreation. Many variables contribute to the achievement of comfort, a few of them are: lounge seating, artwork, attractive display shelving, places where students can be noisy, places where a student can have quiet, access to multi-media production technology, natural lighting, the availability of immediate assistance for any academic related question, access to a variety of information processing software, and immediate access to refreshments.



The idea of maximizing the learning experience of the student centered in the library is hardly a new one. Libraries have been designed as comfortable settings for serious research for centuries. Unfortunately this historical ideal appears to be fading if the age of and the attention given to the library facilities represented in the study is any indication. The reasonable life expectancy of a library building without significant capital improvement is not more than thirty years.[2] In the study four library facilities were three years old or newer at the time of the study, five libraries were three to fifteen years old, four libraries were fifteen to thirty years old and

nineteen libraries were thirty years old or older (see chart 1). Although there was no tangible evidence to support their claims, officials at four institutions with older libraries did allege that new construction or significant library expansion of the library would begin sometime in the next five years.

The age of a building alone should never be considered as symptomatic of comfort. Often guided by commercial hype and marketable fads institutional priorities have been inexorably drawn toward encroaching technologies, devolving bureaucracies and deceptive economics. Many technology based services provided by libraries have been disbursed elsewhere across campus. In the study disbursement of what have often been seen as library services included PC labs, media services, remedial services, departmental libraries, and 'commons' areas. From the perspective of the intuitional executive, disengaging traditional services from the library can be driven by desirable financial or political goals, which not unpredictably all too often takes precedence over student comfort. Another aspect of dispersal of services seen on the campuses under observation was the institutional penchant for the centralization of select services and/or the injection of additional procedural layers. Acquisitions, reference, systems, and administration functions where those most often caught up in institutionally imposed centralization efforts. The centralization of services is driven by the often specious goal of saving costs. In practice the centralization of services appears to rarely save cost or reduce workload, but it did appear to distance decision-making authority from the service contact point with the student.

Arguably comfort as an indicator of vitality is subjective. Yet, even a superficial inspection yielded an immediate sense of the qualitative level of comfort offered by each library visited. Comfort proved relatively easy to spot, another reason why comfort as a vitality indicator belongs high on the list. Comfort is the most obvious representation of institutional commitment to the learning experience for students and of the recognition of the library as a potent influence in the current and future success of students. For example, at one academic library in Illinois the presence of a public services librarian's

only office or work space occupying the middle of the open stacks area on the main floor of the library is not a trait of comfort.

The achievement of comfort can be incremental. For example, credit for comfort was given to a library in a forty year old building where 84 inch high book stacks were recently dismantled from in front of large outdoor facing windows and in their place was installed new lounge seating, new current periodicals display shelving, half-height media shelving and individual state-of-the-art CD/DVD viewing/listening stations. New construction or new anything like carpet does not by association imply the existence of comfort. In one instance, it was difficult to construe brand new thin carpet squares as a replacement for plush, sound-dampening, carpeting as a move toward comfort. In another instance at a college in Texas a brand new building had just been completed. The new building did not include any classrooms or individual study rooms. Instruction took place in the middle of the main floor around the only computers accessible for patron use. The new building was less than two years old at the time of the visit and yet the stacks were already at one hundred percent capacity. The staff areas were poorly designed around a centralized cramped and shared work space. Plus, the new building actually turned out to be less than half the size of the building it replaced. This situation in Texas may be more revealing of a disengaged institutional executive than it is of any kind of an attempt to achieve a sustainable or appealing learning experience for students.

The best comfort scenario was found at a library in Iowa in which a large new building had been constructed in the last five years. All the furnishings were new and variegated. The stacks were at less than 40% of capacity. There were two instructional classrooms and more than a dozen smaller group or individual study, meeting or multi-media use rooms in the building. There were three unused staff offices awaiting future growth. There were climate controlled archives. There were plenty of windows. There was a staff lounge. There was a staff meeting room. There was artwork throughout the building including a designated art gallery. There was a food court within thirty feet of the main entrance. There was plenty of storage space. There was even a small locker

room with shower facilities for staff use. Clearly it is possible that a high degree of comfort can be realized even at a school with less than 2,000 students.

2. INFORMATION LITERACY

As mentioned, the existence of required information literacy skills is considered to be on a par with comfort as a significant indicator of vitality. While there are exceptions, higher education in general has been slow to react to the encroachment of technology and the coming of age of the micro-chip generation of students. Change inertia appears to be particularly persistent in the smaller academic institution. The lingering commercially-hyped and dominant operational attitude found in smaller academic institutions was that the mere procurement of bleeding edge technology and the offering of computer literacy classes—all too often confused with information literacy—is analogous to success in higher education. As technology continues to evolve into affordable individually designed consumer technology the need for higher education to provide high-cost hardware and software infrastructure solutions diminishes, but the critical need to provide adequate education in information navigation remains and continues to expand.

Slowly permeating the ranks of the decision-makers is the idea that the mere presence of technology may not in fact be any sort of a guarantee for success in education or in life. A response to the advent of technology and the microchip generation that appears to be most promising and is gaining momentum even in smaller academic institutions is the inclusion of standardized and testable life-long learning skills in the curriculum like information literacy, critical thinking, literacy and oral communication. Librarians have always been strong advocates for the inclusion of required information literacy skills in the curriculum, but it is uncertain if this has significantly influenced institutional direction or curriculum change. A more likely influence on change is the sluggish realization that content turnover in many professions is too fast for content based instruction to keep pace with learning and the ease with which content can be accessed and manipulated on the job may obviate the need for content based education in some programs. There

are few institutions of higher education that do not include, at least in some form, for-credit experiential learning and assessable learning skills in the curriculum.

Required life-long learning skills are often found in the general education core requirements of the institution. To support that goal, the existence of required information literacy skills was easy to ascertain, usually by a simply checking the course catalog. While the study often revealed the presence of required life-long learning skills, the notable absence of required information literacy skills was mystifying. Perhaps the exclusion of information literacy skills is a legacy of the hitherto prevailing institutional executive misperception that computer literacy and information literacy are one and the same thing or perhaps it is more an ingrained perception that the library is merely a keeper of increasingly outdated and unneeded information rather than a potentially critical instructional component in the success of students.

Only four institutions in the study required any form of information literacy standards in the curriculum. Oddly, among these four institutions three different methodologies were used in delivering and managing the standards. In two cases the requirements were ephemerally integrated with other required coursework in the curriculum, contained mostly within two core general education English classes. In another institution the information literacy requirements took the form of a basic skills test and were applied by a non-library managed unit as part of one state's mandate for public higher education. In the final institution extensive information literacy requirements were found in a separate credit bearing class, which the student could test out of, based on the attainment of a basic skill level using ACRL information literacy standards. None of the institutions in the study subjected information literacy to systematic learning outcomes assessment.

In scoring the vitality level of the libraries in the study some credit was given to those institutions which were making evidentiary progress toward the inclusion of required information literacy standards. For example at one school in Texas, while there were no information literacy requirements in the curriculum, there was a recently activated

information literacy committee with campus-wide participation. Lesser credit was given to those schools in which enterprising librarians were offering elective information literacy courses or were otherwise bypassing official sanction by working directly with faculty to include an information literacy component in individual classes.

3. STAFFING RATIO

Staffing ratio to enrollment proved to be an easily discernable and consistent indicator of vitality. Unlike the top two indicators, staffing ratio as an indicator is quantifiable. While headcount could arguably be a more accurate determinant, the staffing ratio number easiest to extract is the number of FTE students per every FTE library staff. Using more complex formulas, which include factors like the presence of graduate programs or the number of available patron seats, might arguably provide a more accurate picture of vitality, but the vitality indicators on this list are not intended to be standards. The top ten indicators on this list only intend to provide a quick way of comparatively determining the current health of the smaller academic library. Staffing ratio is ranked third because, unlike the indicators of comfort and information literacy, it is more difficult to ascertain the degree of impact of staffing ratio on student learning. The implicit assumption is that the more staff available per enrollment, the more significant will be the library's contribution to the education of the students.

For the purposes of this study library staff is defined as all exempt and non-exempt FTE positions in the library. The duties of professional staff compared to support staff often blur to such an extent in smaller academic libraries that no distinction could be made between full-time professional and support staff. The staffing ratio excludes student workers, volunteers, and adjuncts where identified. Surprisingly, findings reveal that the use of student workers was found to be a distinctive predictor of vitality on its own and therefore occupies a separate place on this list. The assumption is that reliance on an adequate number of employees who work enough hours for benefit eligibility is considered illustrative of institutional attention given to the library and its potential contribution to student learning.

Staffing ratio is a strong vitality indicator because too little staffing, apart from the influence of distinctive personalities, per student enrolled does have a demonstrably detrimental effect on the quality and the quantity of library services offered. A staff stretched too thin is generally more involved with minimal maintenance and motivational issues than with value added services or adjusting adequately to change. Also, a poor staffing ratio appears to have a correlation to executive indifference and a subsequent deterioration in library material support and utilization.

The staffing ratio in community colleges was usually several magnitudes lower than that found in four year institutions. For this reason community colleges could have been dropped from the study. However, exclusion of community colleges on this basis of poor staffing ratio assumes that students should automatically expect to receive an inferior education in a community college setting. In the event, contrary to expectations, at least school in Texas proved that community colleges can be the equal of any four year institution in terms of staffing ratio and in terms of overall vitality.

The average staffing ratio of all the schools in the study was 342 FTE students for every 1.0 FTE staff. The best staffing ratio found among the community colleges was 191 the worst was 790. The best staffing ratio found among the four year institutions was 172 the worst was 549. Observation revealed that generally, the lower the staffing ratio, the healthier the library was, but a good staffing ratio does not stand alone as a predictor of vitality. For example, a school in Nebraska with a staffing ratio of 203 was considered only marginally healthy overall. The school did not have and was not working toward information literacy requirements, only a few federal work-study students were employed in the library at minimum wage, there was negative collection growth, media services had been appropriated by another service unit at the school and there was a dramatic reduction of dedicated library space due to the encroachment of other non-library service units. A good staffing ratio in this case was not enough to make up for the lack of positive change or support in other areas.

On the other hand, none of the libraries in the study were considered more than marginally healthy overall when the staffing ratio exceeded 305. Poor staffing ratios negate any temptation to utilize marketing materials, mission statements, accreditation self-study reports, strategic plans or any other glowing, institutionally produced documentation as indicators of vitality. For instance, in an institution in Iowa, with a library staffing ratio of 422 the mission statement of the institution claims the school to be 'more than just a premier educational institution'. Clearly questionable advertising practices are not limited to just the business world.

#4 ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE

In the study a number of factors other than those anticipated were discovered that appear to be accurate indicators of library vitality or lethargy. In the traditional hierarchical organization structure the library administrator answers directly to the chief academic officer. Contrary to preconceived notions the traditional hierarchical structure was found to be a fairly accurate indicator of vitality, particularly when supplemental support mechanisms were in place such as a formal library advisory committee or a friends-of-the-library group. Ideally the advisory committee would include representative faculty from across the disciplines and student governing body representatives. Although rarer, an active 'friends of the library' advocacy group was found in two libraries visited.

It was not so much that the traditional hierarchical structure represents the best library management model in smaller academic libraries, but rather it was found that the presence of an altered organizational structure was more apt to be a strong indicator of a lack of library vitality. The traditional hierarchical structure had been tampered with in fifteen of the thirty-one libraries in the study. While management literature dictates the desirability of creating flatter organizational structures, where decision making authority is shared and is closer to the immediate needs of the client or student, disregarding misapplied labels, no decision-making teams or flat organization structures were found to exist in any of the 31 libraries in the study. In every case where the organizational structure was altered the overall health of the library was clearly suffering.

The most common organization structure alteration found was the insertion of an additional layer of management between the library and institutional authority. The most common method of adding a layer of management was to shift library director reporting from the chief academic officer to an associate academic position. A less common method of structure alteration was to turn over the entire management of the library to the computer technology department, most often referred to as IT or Information Technology. While it appears that enrollment trends have influence on the creation of additional layers of management, oddly the added layers appear to be injected more as a response to the encroachment of technology. Ostensibly the reasons for adding management layers was twofold, the decision makers at the top are too busy to be directly concerned with library activity and/or the advent of technology requires a different reporting structure. Yet in at least two instances of an added management layer, one in Kansas and one in Oregon, technology had reached a maintenance plateau and enrollment was declining which contradicts the need for an additional level of management over the library.

The conclusion was that an additional layer of management has a strong tendency to distance the library from authority which slows the responsiveness of the library to patron needs. Reinforcing this contention is the inference that by nature, change in the smaller organization tends to have a larger and more far reaching effect on outcomes than what may be found in larger organizations. Also, the type of structure an organization has appears to have a correlation with other indicators of vitality. For instance, in those cases where the reporting of the library was deliberately readjusted to a lower point in the organization chart, inputs such as expenditures per student and staffing ratios were invariably worse than in those institutions where the organizational structure had not been tampered with, hence the value of the traditional hierarchical structure as an indicator of vitality.

The organization structure as a vitality indicator is ranked here at number four because the study may have been too small and observation too brief to ascertain with accuracy

the full impact organizational structure has on library vitality. For instance, the role of structure in determining vitality was uncertain when the factor of personality was considered. Occasionally a personality emerged in the study that clearly had a greater degree of influence on organization outcomes than the job description for that position would indicate.

#5 CHANGE

At a time when change appears to be an almost daily occurrence in libraries, evidence of positive change is an obvious indicator of vitality. Change is not at the top of this list because change was found to be extremely variable and taken alone was not an indicator of vitality, whereas the indicators of comfort and required information literacy could stand alone. Change can also be incremental and therefore difficult to measure. Change can be big, it can be small, it can be positive, it can be negative, it can include or overlap one or more of the other indicators on this list, it can represent creativity or it can merely reflect something that has already been successfully implemented elsewhere, this last being a more common type of change found in smaller academic institutions. Because significant positive change is all about overcoming inertia and taking chances, change is also a potential indicator of institutional awareness of the value the library offers higher education. For example, disregarding enrollment trends, but taking into account trends in technology, an expected change was newly created staffing positions as an exploitive means of taking advantage of the library's obvious potential in delivering information literacy requirements and remaining a centric education point on campus. While this may be one of those changes that is taking place in larger libraries, disappointingly this type of change was not found to exist in any of the libraries in the study. While some of the indicators of vitality on this list might represent some facet of the library that has been in place for many years if not for decade's, evidence of change as a vitality indicator is more about current visible change.

A student run coffee shop installed in an older library at a college in Iowa, while not a new idea, was construed as a positive change since it responds to the business model

of education, which pays attention to the student as consumer. Brand new 'comfortable' lounge seating with personal CD/DVD stations at a small university in Kansas was considered a positive, yet more creative, change for the same reason. An institutionally directed increase in the number of summer open hours in the library at a school in Utah, without adding staff, was not considered a positive change; rather it was merely another example of executive intransigence. An example of a negative change was found in a beautiful brand new library building at a small university in Pennsylvania designed without an instructional classroom in which, immediately after completion, the campus computer department installed a glass walled PC lab under it's management in the floor space intended for reference right next to the circulation desk thereby irreparably restricting traffic flow, line of sight, reference space and stack space.

#6 STUDENT WORKERS

Student workers as an adjunct to staffing is found in normally found in every size of academic library. In the smaller academic library the dependency on student workers appears to play a critical role in operations. For that reason the presence of student workers who are adequately paid out of institutional funds, not federal work-study funds, was found to be an unanticipated indicator of vitality.

The criticality of the presence of student workers extended beyond just circulation duties stacks maintenance, material processing and extended open hours. The presence of student workers allows library's with limited full-time staffing to stretch staffing needs further in covering all of the necessary functions of the library. Student workers in the study were engaged in a number of significant functions such as inter-library loan, reserves, statistics gathering and analysis, media services, claiming, binding, inventory, serials processing, format conversion, acquisitions, mail room processing, and lab assistance. Student workers were also found to be engaged in functions traditionally thought to be reserved for professionals or full-time support staff such as reference, copy cataloging, collection development, and systems maintenance. It may be argued that the use of student workers in some of these areas is contrary to professional practice and of questionable use in attempting to deliver quality services. Considering

size there are often no other options for the smaller academic library but to turn to this expediency. Arguably the quantity and the depth to which student workers are utilized in the more complex functions might be interpreted as another indicator of institutional intransigence toward the library's place in higher education. Nevertheless, the student worker is a permanent fixture in the operations of the smaller academic library.

An example of the student worker as a poor indicator of vitality was found at an Illinois college where dozens of federally funded work-study students were employed at minimum wage at not more than twelve hours of work per week per student. It is evident that low pay with minimal work hours per week neither motivates nor provides enough time, even for the best student workers, to become competent in library processes that required constant and close attention. In one case in Michigan the observer was told that the library, because of the quality of work the library was perceived to produce, was the only place on campus that could employee student workers and therefore was required to employ significant numbers of federal work study students year round as a stratagem for making the institution look good. Unfortunately it is difficult to keep dozens of untrained, and because of time constraints, un-trainable student workers busy. Examples like this one in turn appeared to result in a sort of catch-22 situation in which institutional authorities felt justified in withholding essential support from library operations.

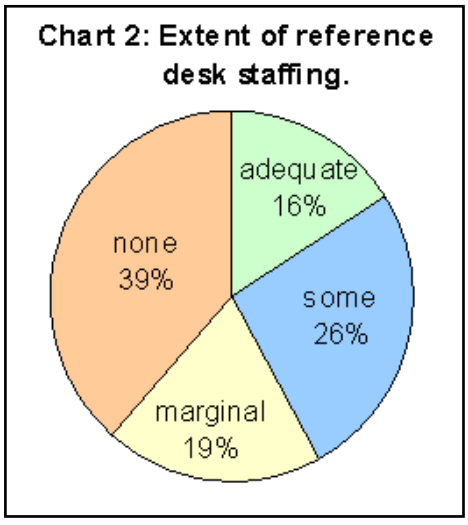
An example of the employment of student workers as a positive indicator of vitality was found at a university in Kansas where library staff had the autonomy and authority to set and regulate reasonable raises for student workers. In this case Federal work study funds were supplemented significantly by institutional funds. The minimum, not the maximum, number of hours students were permitted to work per week was twelve. In this situation it was not unusual to find students working up to twenty hours per week year round for as many as four years. More hours and better pay normally results in a better trained and more reliable student worker. In this case the student worker becomes a valued complement to staffing and a strong indicator of vitality for library's that, at least within the limits of this study, were universally understaffed. As far as

could be determined, only six libraries in the study supplemented federal work study with institutional funds. This low number was considered a bit odd insofar as it is a lot cheaper for an institution to provide institutional funds for student workers than it is to expand staffing numbers.

#7 REFERENCE DESK

Perhaps taken for granted in the profession and in larger academic libraries, the professionally staffed reference desk is a traditionally accepted core function of libraries. The smaller academic library presents us with the exception to this rule. The professional assumption is that despite the advent of 24/7 online reference assistance, the availability of the professional face-to-face reference function in libraries should be increasing in importance in the higher education environment, where concepts like self-directed learning and skills based learning are beginning to spread. Contrary to this argument the evidence found in the study suggests that the professionally staffed reference desk, after media services, archives and systematic collection development, is one of the functions disappearing from the smaller academic library. In those cases in the study where a professionally staffed reference desk does appear it was often at the cost of other services and functions.

In the study it was determined that five libraries had an adequate professionally staffed reference desk operating during a significant portion of open library hours along the lines of the traditional definition of a reference desk (see chart 2). Eight libraries operated a reference desk with limited hours, usually this meant no weekend hours, few evening hours and limited afternoon hours. Six libraries had professionally staffed reference desks, but were deemed marginal in this vitality category because the reference function interfered noticeably with other primary services and functions of the library. Twelve libraries either had no designated reference desk at all or the



desk was staffed primarily by student workers or circulation support staff.

For example, at a library in Iowa the reference desk was staffed about eighty hours per week by just four professionals including the Library Director. Twenty hours per week at the reference desk may not be that unusual, notwithstanding overlap coverage, at a larger research university where the library often has the luxury of employing subject specialists, but in a smaller academic library it is insupportable where these same reference librarians are responsible for all of the other required functions of the library like administration, collection development, cataloging, archives, instruction, serials control, committee work, budget, and tenure obligations. Such a situation may be more indicative of the notorious penchant of librarians to "make do" or continue to "do more with less" than with being adequately supported by the decision-making bureaucracy of the institution. This is a situation where staffing is being stretched beyond reasonable levels to cover one function at the cost of other functions or services. It was also found that libraries located in more populous areas may have an unequal advantage in staffing a reference desk adequately. For example, at a college in Texas near Houston reference desk personnel were supplemented by easily available and relatively inexpensive adjunct librarians.

A lot of the marketing surrounding smaller institutional success is predicated on providing the student with a level of education equal to or better than larger institutions. It may be true that the smaller institution provides more chances for the student to participate in extracurricular activities and the smaller institution often provides smaller classes, which as theory has it, results in more individualized attention for students from instructors. Yet, how can an institution claim educational parity if the library does not adequately provide reference service? The mere presence of an adequately and professionally staffed reference desk without interfering with the quality delivery of other services is a strong indicator of vitality, yet it was also found to be notably infrequent in the study which is why as a vitality factor it appears lower on the list.

#8 ARCHIVES

Professionally, archives are also considered one of the traditional core functions of the libraries. Just like the reference desk an active archive is normal in research libraries, but such is not the case in the smaller academic library. In the study a viable or active archive in the smaller institution was defined as an area operating under the aegis of the library which is dedicated to archival collection growth, storage, access and preservation. A critical element in an active archive is the presence of permanent staff, which could be as little as one half-time professional who is engaged in soliciting additional materials, cataloging, preserving and assisting researchers in the use of the materials. By this definition the mere presence of an active archive in a smaller academic library would be an indicator of vitality. Unfortunately if this study is predictive of the future, then the active archive may well be on the way to becoming the first core function to disappear entirely from the smaller academic institution. The dissolution of archives can happen incrementally, almost unnoticed over many years, as full-time professional staff are replaced by support staff, by student workers, by volunteers, or by attaching the work to an already full-time existing job description elsewhere or eventually by simply discontinuing the work entirely.

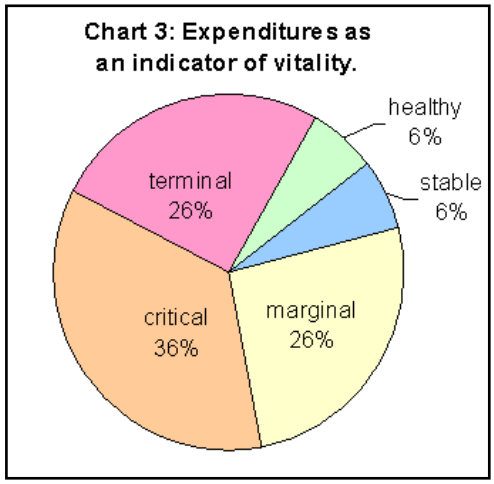
The bureaucratic perception may be that students by and large do not avail themselves of archival or original research materials at smaller institutions in a manner consistent with that found at larger research institutions. The inference is that archival materials in smaller institutions are of less intrinsic or historic value than materials found in research institution archives. True, archives in smaller academic institutions by nature tend to be more localized or focused on a limited number of topics, but that does not make them any less important. An active archive can also play the important role of historically defining and bolstering the identity of an institution, something many smaller institutions are struggling with in the de-identifying era of instruction delivery via technology. Just as technology encourages smaller institutions to engage in redundantly identical pedagogy so too does the loss of or the disappearance of an active archive shift institutional identity toward the mundane.

The existence of an active archive as an indicator of vitality is listed lower on the list and after the reference desk is because logic suggests that the presence of a reference desk may be of more importance to the teaching mission of the smaller academic institution than is an archive. In a few years, archives as an indicator of vitality will probably be dropped from the list regardless of the importance the library profession may attach to the archival function, simply because so few smaller academic libraries retain this function. In the study group, none of the community colleges engaged in any noticeable activity that could be described as an active archive, only two of the private four-year institutions did so and four of the public four-year institutions did so. At an institution in Minnesota where comfort has been neglected, where information literacy requirements do not exist, where positive change is neither dramatic nor obvious, a half-time near-retirement person is currently the archivist. When this spot comes open in the near future how will the priorities of the university or of the library affect refilling the position?

#9 EXPENDITURES PER STUDENT

Expenditures per FTE student would be higher on the list except for the inconsistencies that exist in calculation. Institutional financial reporting was often found to be neither reliable nor representative of the true state of affairs. For instance, expenditures from a restricted or gift account were folded into reporting numbers to make one institution look more supportive of library services than it actually is. Inconsistencies were found in other areas as well, such as using the enrollment figures from the current year with the expenditures of the preceding fiscal year. There were other distorting factors reveled as well when expenditures are looked at as a vitality indicator. Some of these factors are the geographic positioning of the campus in a rural setting as opposed to an urban setting, the observed escalating tendency of allowing students to exclusively use the Internet for research, and the decline in research requirements in assignments. Also, two institutions in the study flatly refused to provide current expenditure figures. An inadequate alternative was the utilization of the dated numbers posted to the National Center for Educational Statistics.[3]

It is possible that the inconsistencies in reporting may be a case of poor management rather than intentional. It may also be indicative, once again, of the apparently not uncommon practice of institutional authority manipulating reported data in a manner that better represents or misrepresents, depending on one's point of view, the institution in an attractive light. A smaller academic institution in Minnesota reports low expenditures per student, but fails to take into account the fact that most of the online resources provided through the library are purchased by its subsidiary campus in another city. In this case the expenditures per student are better than reported. And when other indicators are applied this library places better on the vitality scale than the reported expenditures per student would indicate taken alone. On the other hand a small institution in Illinois reported that it expends $589 per student enrolled. However the zero growth collection, the aging facilities, the poor staffing ratios and poor marks in nearly all of the other vitality indicators would suggest that either expenditures are deliberately inaccurately reported, which is not surprising as the institution had just been through an accreditation visit, or a great deal of money is being siphoned into an area of activity not at all visible to the trained observer. In this case internal library accounting figures indicate that the expenditures per student may actually be below $200 per student.



Regardless of enrollment or other filtering factors, the disparity in expenditures per student for library services in the study was remarkable. At the time of the study one library in Iowa was spending more than $440 per student per year whereas less than $150 was being expended per student at a college in Texas. Looking at all of the indicators, there appeared to be five distinct levels of vitality as defined by expenditures and for that matter by all of the indicators (see chart 3). Generally the healthy smaller academic library is one that is allowed to spend more than $430 per student per year, there were two such libraries found in the study. The library considered to have attained a stable level of vitality is

one that spends between $330 and $430 per student; there were two of these found in the study. The library at the marginally healthy level is one which spends between $230 and $330 per student; there were eight of these found in the study. The library at the critical level spends between $150 and $230 per student; there were eleven of these found in the study. And, the terminally ill library spent less than $150 per student; there were eight of these found in the study.

#10 APPROPRIATION OF SPACE & SERVICES

The appropriation of library space and services is entirely a negative indicator of vitality which is why it appears so far down on the list. While comfort is the most obvious representation of a bureaucracy's commitment to the learning experience for students and of the recognition of the library as a potent influence in the current and future success of students, appropriated space and services is quite the opposite. The appropriation of space and services occurs when institutional authority, often it was found without discussion with library staff or any sort of a situational analysis, unilaterally either physically moves some unrelated and non-library managed service unit into a space originally designed for or projected exclusively for library use or extracts a core library function and hands it over to some other service unit on campus.

The presence of instructional classrooms and computer department PC labs were the most common visible examples found of space appropriation. Examples of other services moved into library designated space were enrollment services, executive offices, remedial services, the bookstore, human resources, a testing center and an art gallery. In one case at a university in South Dakota a radio station, faculty offices, computer services, food services and PC labs among other service units have all been established in a facility once designed exclusively as a library. Another variation of the appropriation of space found in the study was the construction of a new library facility that is clearly smaller and inappropriate to the needs of the students and the future of the institution.

Media Services, long considered a core function of libraries was the most common service transferred elsewhere, usually to either computing services or instructional technology services. Other dispersed or appropriated traditional library functions or services discovered in the study were a curriculum lab, departmental libraries, document retention, archives, management of resource purchasing consortia, management of the web site, acquisition of online resources, the management of online resources and library administration. In two cases library management was or is in the process of being placed under the computer services department administration.

While enrollment has generally been increasing over the last decade in most of the schools in the study, the trend is that space allotted library services is decreasing. What is the net effect of space reduction on learning outcomes and on library services? Further research in space reduction is needed to determine its impact.

NEAR MISS INDICATORS

There were a number of other indicators that might be construed as vitality indicators which were revealed in the study that did not make the top ten for one reason or another. The presence of technology is the most glaring example. The presence of technology may have been a significant indicator of vitality a decade ago, but this appears to be no longer true for the simple reason that technology, and particularly information dissemination technologies have permeated every facet of higher education. At a school in North Dakota it was found that even some student workers, working less than ten hours a week, had their own dedicated state-of-the-art workstations. It was not uncommon to find some staff, particularly in technical service areas, who have access to two or more dedicated workstations. Everyone has technology. Higher education is literally flooded with it which makes technology much less the indicator of vitality than it once may have been. Some evidence seems to suggest that so much attention is being paid to the acquisition of technology that the primary purpose – that of teaching students – may be suffering because of it. Also, the distribution and the use to which technology is put may be more indicative of mismanagement than it is of vitality. At an institution in Ohio the library only had one old PC at the circulation desk while all other

staff had to share workstations. Yet, the president of the college, waving a Blackberry around went into some detail about the importance of and his insistence on the use of 'state-of-the-art' technology by all of his executive staff.

An apparent strong indicator of vitality but occurring too rarely to be included in the top ten was the existence of a library general restricted account. A general restricted account is a fund exclusive of the operational budget that has accumulated over the years usually as the result of monetary gifts to the library. General restricted accounts carry over year after year and are susceptible to judicious library use without institutionally imposed restrictions or interference. A general restricted account is not to be confused with a restricted account where the gift is disignated to a specific purpose such as the purchase of books. It was found that only two institutions in the study had significant general restricted accounts which were not enough to put restricted accounts into the top ten of vitality indicators.

An unexpected near miss was discovered in the accessibility and design of library web pages. The lack of an easily identifiable link to the library on the institutional home page and a required fixed institutional template on every web page regardless of content were more often than not indicators of a lack of library vitality and possibly representative of a lack of understanding of the role of the library. The lack of a link to the library on the home page was inconsistent enough in practice however to preclude it from inclusion on the top ten list.

Another near miss was library traffic or gate count. Gate count has been utilized as a routine passive outcome or output assessment measure for a long time, but in the study it was found that gate count was too inaccurately reported to be included on the list. The problem, as was found with expenditures per student, is that gate count reporting does not conform to consistent standards. For example, some libraries report non-library users, such as faculty who may have an office in the library, and staff in gate numbers thereby skewing meaningful comparative results. Gate count used in conjunction with remote online full-text circulation and access might be a good indicator

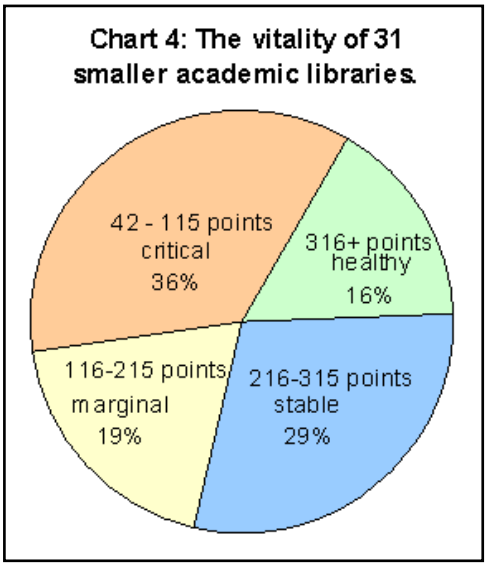
of vitality, yet only one library in the study appeared to be tracking both of these numbers with any accuracy.

Within the course of the study it was thought that perhaps a strong positive ratio between select input measures like collection size and select output measures like circulation might be a good indicator of vitality. If high inputs tend to produce high outputs, than the comparative ratio gap between inputs and outputs could potentially be a strong predictor of vitality in smaller libraries with necessarily lower inputs. Once again however, due to disparities in reporting and the quantity of time required for calculating the gap ratio this line of discovery was abandoned as a potential vitality indicator.

A final potential vitality indicator was library pay scale and benefits compared to cross campus or locally competitive job descriptions, pay scale and the cost of living. The thinking is that where pay and benefits are competitive the library was likely to be more vital. Pay may be another promising indicator, but it was one that was impossible to measure within the time constraints of the study.

DISCUSSION / RESULTS

Curiously during the course of the study there were a number of unexpected vitality indicators such as student workers and the appropriation of space that were revealed while other expected indicators did not make the list such as the concept of an information commons, learning outcomes or online database access. Clearly some of the indicators on this list, like the student worker indicator, do not translate well to larger research universities or to public libraries. The smaller academic library may be a more unique and operationally disadvantaged



type of educational support unit than envisioned by smaller academic institution executives who rhetorically promote value added education at their institutions.

In an attempt to attach quantifiable numbers to the vitality indicators the libraries in the study were each scored on a zero to ten scale, with each vitality indicator given a comparative subjective weight. For instance the indicator of comfort was assigned a weight of 10 for a maximum possible point total of 100 as opposed to the archives indicator which was assigned a weight of 4 for a maximum possible point total of 40. The maximum score on this arbitrary scale is 570.

Given the arbitrary nature of assigning weights and points to indicators, the line of demarcation between the levels of health appeared surprisingly easy to ascertain. The terminal category found in the expenditures indicator was dispensed with in the points scale because despite the sad state of affairs discovered in some libraries, all thirty-one libraries of course still exist and are operating in some fashion.

Using this scale the top scoring library received a total of 470 points. Only six libraries, one public, two private and three community colleges, scored in the upper fiftieth-percentile on the scale (see chart 4). Twenty-two libraries scored less than half the points (235) of the top scoring library. The disparity in point spread may be partially attributable to the fact that some indicators, such as organization structure, tended to be an either/or proposition so the scores for those indicators were often either a 10 or a zero. Five libraries received 316 to 470 points and were rated as healthy. Nine libraries received 216 to 315 points and were rated as stable. Six libraries received 116 to 215 points and were rated marginal. Eleven libraries received 42 to 115 points and were rated to be in critical condition.

On the rating scale the healthy library is a library that is actively growing in importance. A healthy library is one that has sufficient resources and influence available to initiate change, commit to significant professional and staff development, expand services beyond the traditional environment, contribute significantly to the mission of the

institution, and augment learning outcomes. The stable library operates in a reactionary mode. The focus for the stable library is on adjusting adequately to externally imposed change, flat lined budgets, stretching fixed resources to cover curriculum and program changes. Planning and goals in the stable library are usually short term. The stable library pours its energies and reduced resources into maintaining or preserving historically successful services and library functions. The marginal library is in maintenance mode. The marginal library focuses on scrambling to adjust to increasing budget deficiencies and shifting fixed resources to the core functions, for the sake of appearances all existing services are retained to some degree while de-evolution incrementally takes its toll. Year after year the operational maxim is – do more with less. The critical library is in appearance mode. A library in critical condition can appear to be adequately maintaining a select number of core functions, but in reality is slowly unraveling. Select core functions are no longer supported or are being siphoned off into other institutional units. The critical library may even be viewed as a subsidiary of computing services or as a non-academic unit. In applying non-accrediting professional standards whether quantifiable, qualitative or comparative, glaring deficiencies are revealed at every turn. Generally only a divine act can incite demonstrable change – in one such case an aging building historically over capacity, over utilized, and exceptionally shabby was found to be literally sinking into the ground and the building was condemned. Unfortunately, the design for the new building called for a severe reduction in usable square footage despite increasing enrollments, why?

More important than arbitrary scores, the study firmed up the picture of what a vital or healthy smaller academic library looks like. The healthy smaller academic library is one that includes comfortable furnishings; adequate staff work space; ascetic extras such as plenty of natural lighting or an artwork gallery; food; guaranteed purpose built space with room for expansion; required or at least evidence of movement toward required information literacy; direct reporting to the chief academic officer; recent positive change such as a new staff position; a library managed learning commons; the presence of institutionally paid, above minimum wage, 20 hour a week student workers; an adequately staffed reference desk during all open hours; an active archive,

expenditures of more than $330 per FTE student per year; and, a ratio of not less than one FTE staff person per every 300 FTE students.

CONCLUSION

Ferreting out and prioritizing vitality indicators in smaller academic libraries through observational study proved to be relatively easy notwithstanding travel costs. However, use of the indicators to establish the relative health of a library may be problematic without more rigorous empirical based research. Yet the ubiquitous presence of the indicators across the spectrum of libraries in the study does suggest that the relative health of smaller academic libraries can be quickly established by means other than having to carry out detailed, time consuming and often complex critical analyses and outcomes assessment initiatives. As regional accreditation agencies change their rules, such as discontinuing on-site visits and allowing self-assessment, it may not even be necessary to participate in detailed assessment activity. On a more alarming note, the the study seems to suggest that the smaller academic library exerts little influence on the future of higher education and the utilization of technology. Arguably, if the study is predictive of the health of smaller academic libraries than the future of the smaller academic library is ambiguous at best. The critical factor in the health or vitality of the smaller academic library more than anything else appears to devolve upon institution executive dogma rather than on library influence or activity.

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