

External Assessment Report – Northwestern State University Libraries

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Introduction

This report is based on the *Northwestern State University Libraries Self-Study 2001-2007* (2009 revision) and a site visit conducted February 7-11, 2010. Although not arranged in the same order as the self-study, this report follows the basic organization of that document; i.e., it will address strengths and weaknesses of the various organizational units of the main library and the two branch libraries, and will examine the areas of staff, administration, budget, services, instruction, resources, access, communication and cooperation, and facilities. In addition, equipment/technology is discussed under its own heading because it was addressed in that manner in the conclusions section of the self-study. This report will conclude with some observations about the NSU library system that either stood out or that do not fit neatly into any of the categories, followed by recommendations for improvement.

Faculty & Staff

Strengths:

- Dedicated, knowledgeable, creative and hardworking librarians and support staff
- The library faculty was listed as one of the greatest strengths of the library in a survey conducted for the self-study
- Out of necessity, librarians and staff know how to do many jobs in order to cover for each other and to accomplish the tasks and responsibilities of positions that are vacant or have been lost
- Perhaps surprisingly, morale does not appear to be an issue, at least right now

Weaknesses:

- Too few librarians and library support staff – not nearly enough people to go around. According to the self-study report, NSU currently ranks eleventh out of eleven in the number of library staff per 1,000 FTE students. The NSU libraries will simply not be able to continue to provide quality services with what amounts to a skeleton staff.
- People are doing many jobs (or parts of many jobs) that used to be performed by others; as a result, many tasks and projects are being left undone out of sheer necessity
- Because the library is so short-staffed, tenure track faculty librarians run the risk of focusing exclusively on their academic assignment, and thus may find it exceedingly difficult to meet tenure criteria for scholarly and service activities
- Staffing needs are many and varied. In no particular order, the library needs a full-time cataloger, an electronic resources librarian, an acquisitions/collection development librarian, an assistant archivist, another reference/instruction librarian, a distance education librarian, a government publications specialists, and additional support staff at Leesville and Shreveport. All of the librarian positions would also contribute to the liaison program.

- No money for travel in order to attend conferences, resulting in isolation from professional peers, difficulty in keeping current in field, and inability to present at conferences to further tenure and promotion objectives
- Burn-out of the existing staff is a real concern; as is a decrease in morale as people continue to be asked to do more with less

Administration

The organization of the library is typical of most academic libraries; i.e., a director, librarians holding the MLS degree, and support staff. The director reports to the VPAA, which is critical to providing a strong voice in support of library services. Librarians hold faculty rank and status, and therefore must meet criteria for tenure and promotion. By virtue of holding faculty status, librarians are eligible to participate in university governance, e.g., serving on the Faculty Senate or as a member of a university committee.

The library's policies and procedures manual is typical of academic libraries and appears to meet the needs of the university. A library advisory council is in place to provide advice and input regarding library operations and policies.

Budget

I concur with the findings put forth in the self-study report. The self-study cites the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) recommendation that academic libraries be provided at least 6% of the institution's Educational and General (E & G) budget. In this day and age that figure is probably pie-in-the-sky thinking; however, the closest year Watson Library and the two branches approached that amount was fiscal year 2005-2006, and that year the library's percentage of the E & G budget was only 3.9%. The 2007-2008 budget was only 2.76%. As a result, the library's budget as compared to the university budget has been in steady decline. The self-study report (p. 34-36) points out that this discrepancy is also reflected in the comparisons with peer institutions: Northwestern State University ranks the lowest, eleventh out of eleven, in the following budget-driven areas:

- Ratio of volumes to FTE students
- Ratio of material expenditures to FTE students
- Print material as a percent of total expenditures
- Ratio of library staff to 1000 FTE students

The lack of an adequate budget for information resources has also been criticized as unacceptable by a number of accrediting agencies and external reviewers: the National League for Nursing Accreditation Commission, the National Association of Schools of Music, Dr. Jimmy McCoy assessing the physics program, and Dr. David Coleman assessing the history program.

The library's budget does not currently have a mechanism to account for increases in the cost of information resources. Print journals and full-text journal databases typically increase in cost approximately 10% per year. LOUIS is a tremendous asset due to the cost savings realized

through consortial buying; however, LOUIS cannot offset the significant budget erosion over the past few years and the effect that erosion is having on the library's collection.

Budget issues also affect the travel budget for librarians and library staff. Keeping informed of advancements in information technology is perhaps the greatest challenge facing librarians today, and NSU librarians and support staff are either unable to attend state, regional, and national conferences, or they must pay their own way.

Services

Strengths:

- Librarians and staff strive to provide high quality services; in a student opinion survey the library's score increased for five consecutive years, and the NSU libraries scored slightly higher than the national average the past two years
- Interlibrary loan
- Library instruction program
- Assistance for researchers using the Cammie G. Henry Research Center
- Online catalog
- Library web site
- Student/faculty reading room events and activities

Weaknesses:

- Reference assistance – the reference desk often cannot be staffed because the library staff is so thin
- Lack of Saturday hours at Watson Library
- The Leesville Library is often closed if staff members are out sick or fulfilling other obligations such as providing library instruction or attending meetings
- Library service quality in general is at risk of gradually eroding due to the lack of staff

Instruction

Instruction was not observed during the site visit. According to the self-study report, the reference staff has incorporated computer searching of library resources into library instruction sessions. In the fiscal year 2006-07, a total of 4,908 students participated in this training, which compared to the size of the student body appears to be a good ratio.

The topics of library services, resources, citing sources, and plagiarism are covered in one-shot instruction sessions in the freshman orientation program, academic study skills courses, English 1010 and 1020, and a scattering of courses in other programs. This is typical of most information literacy instruction programs today.

The self-study also indicated that online instructors are incorporating library resources in their courses. Through the efforts of the instruction librarian, the library now has an online tutorial specifically for distance education students.

The library is to be commended for recognizing and attempting to comply with ACRL information literacy competency standards. Full compliance is hampered by a lack of knowledge regarding which standards have been successfully utilized. Evaluation of the instruction program is a challenge, as it is at most institutions, due to difficulty in developing and administering meaningful assessment instruments and in analyzing and interpreting the results.

Resources

Strengths:

- Cammie G. Henry Research Center collection
- Digital images collection and ongoing digital imaging projects
- Government Publications collection
- Online databases available to NSU at greatly-reduced consortial prices via LOUIS
- The book collection, even though becoming dated, appears to be well-used (a single point of comparison: NSU libraries reported ca. 50,000 check-outs last year, compared to 30,000 at my institution, Austin Peay State University, a similar institution in mission, enrollment, student body composition, and academic programs)
- In the process of moving from print journals to e-journals

Weaknesses:

- The book collection is not being updated and thus continues to age
- The NSU collection ranks last among peer institutions in number of books and serial back files per student
- Limited funds to acquire access to online databases not available from LOUIS
- Lack of article-linking software
- Moving away from print journals toward e-journal is necessarily a slow and arduous process, exacerbated by lack of a method to compile a comprehensive list of journal titles except by hand
- Not enough staff to process the resources of the Cammie G. Henry Research Center collection

Access

Intellectual access to information resources is varied and adequate. The library could improve access from indexing/abstracting databases to full-text journal resources by implementing article-linking software. The print collections are arranged in accordance with accepted library practices. Interlibrary loan/document delivery service offers access to materials not in the NSU library's collection. The lack of a courier service to Leesville hampers convenient access to materials held by the Watson Library from the Leesville campus. The self-study report notes that Watson Library and the Shreveport Nursing Library meet ADA requirements for physical access, but the Leesville Library does not.

Communication and Cooperation

Methods of communication with constituencies and stakeholders appear to be varied and effective. Each academic department has a librarian liaison assigned to it. The liaison program

is handicapped by the large number of programs that each librarian has responsibility for. No problems were reported or observed with regard to communication and cooperation between the library system and the Information Systems Department.

Internal communication appears to be effective and is fostered by general staff meetings, planning sessions, informal discussions, and the library director's open door policy.

Equipment & Technology

Strengths:

- Computer lab space in Watson Library is adequate, and is supported by a number of other computer labs on campus
- Unified work stations are located adjacent to reference collection and appear to be adequate in number
- Library users have access to appropriate software

Weaknesses:

- PCs are outdated, but I was told they are scheduled to be replaced soon
- Microform machines are often out of service or performing inadequately
- The library does not have article linking software, which would also provide an automated method of creating and maintaining an up-to-date list of serials, including both print journals and e-journals

Facilities

Strengths:

Watson Library

- despite the age of the building, it still has a useful and appealing layout and interior appearance
- good individual study and group work areas
- adequate spaces for teaching, presentations and special activities

Shreveport Nursing Library

- new, well-designed and attractive
- adequate space for the collection and for group and individual study
- excellent location

Leesville Library

- good location adjacent to classrooms

Weaknesses:

Watson Library

- inadequate HVAC system and ventilation, leading to mold growth in some areas
- windows leak, causing interior drywall to erode

- according to the self-study report, the ceiling poses a serious, potential health risk because it contains asbestos
- poor lighting
- running out of space to house the Cammie G. Henry Research Center collection
- location of the building at the far edge of campus

Shreveport Nursing Library

- instruction sessions must be conducted in an open area in the middle of the library

Leesville Library

- overcrowded and poorly laid out, no room for growth of the collection or to place additional computer workstations
- inadequate HVAC system
- roof leaks
- poor lighting

Branch Libraries

Shreveport Nursing Library

Strengths

- nice, new facility
- excellent location
- adequate space for individual and group study
- adjacent to computer lab and not far from classrooms and faculty offices
- adequate collection of resources
- serving a homogenous population helps to simplify programs and services
- well-used by students

Weaknesses

- barely adequate staff size (one librarian and two support staff)
- faculty members interviewed during site visit indicated that too much space was given to books that are unneeded and unused

Leesville

Strengths

- useful location

Weaknesses

- inadequate staffing (one librarian and one support staff)
- inadequate hours of operation (42 hours/week; closed on weekends)
- lack of staffing often results in a further reduction of the hours of operation
- cramped, overcrowded, unattractive building
- maintenance issues – building leaks, subpar HVAC system
- small, inadequate collection, with no space for additional materials
- no regular courier service to transport materials to and from main library

- obvious tension between Leesville library staff and the Leesville campus administrator
- library appears to be greatly underutilized

Assorted Observations

- The library faculty, staff, and administration are to be commended for creating a comprehensive and well-organized self-study report. I found it to be informative and extremely useful, both in preparing for my site visit and for reviewing the library organization and operation in preparation for writing this report.
- NSU librarians and staff continue to do more with less; however, they will eventually reach a point of diminishing returns where that is no longer possible.
- Despite its age and the lack of systematic maintenance, Watson Library is a very good facility that only needs a bit of a facelift. I wish I had a similar building on my campus.
- In academic libraries in general, book usage has declined in favor of electronic resources. Books, however, still hold an important place in the research process and in teaching and learning, as evidenced by the concerns expressed by the library council regarding the lack of a budget to purchase new library books. At least some money must be found each year to improve the book collection.
- The self-study reported on the age of the book collection by indicating the average age of books in specific subject areas of the collection. Instead of an average age, a more useful indicator would be the number and percentage of books reported by decade in each subject area.
- Some university regulations or practices are not congruent with good library practices, e.g., charging fines for overdue materials may actually be counterproductive as the use of print resources continues to decline in academic libraries in general; the reluctance of campus police to patrol the Watson Library, particularly at closing time, presents a safety issue for library staff.
- Graduate students were more concerned about hours of operation than were other groups I met with. The president of the SGA mentioned the lack of Saturday hours but did not dwell on it; faculty did not mention it at all. In contrast, the graduate class I met with mentioned Saturday and evening hours; however, I am aware that my findings (with a very small sample size) are at odds with the results of the building use study conducted last year.
- Watson Library appears to be underutilized by some programs, i.e., history, business (there may be others as well, but these are the two that came to light during the site visit). This bears further investigation; e.g., it would be useful to look at book check-out patterns arranged by LC range to determine the comparative frequency of book check-outs, and to determine which programs do or do not take advantage of the library instruction program, and why.

Recommendations

1. The recommendations made in July 2000 by the previous external evaluator remain relevant today:
 - a. It is essential that the Northwestern State University find the funding required to address the needs that have been identified.
 - b. It is equally essential that the institution begin addressing the problems immediately.
 - c. The five-year plan outlined in the self-study presents a viable strategy for resolving the problems within a reasonable time frame.
 - d. If the university truly intends to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of its academic degree programs, it must improve the library by finding the means of resolving the deficiencies and providing adequate, sustained funding.
2. The university's upper administration should work with the library director and librarians to identify and implement those elements of the five year plan that are feasible and achievable. There is no sense in coming up with such plans if they are to be ignored.
3. Given the current subsistence-level staffing, consider eliminating walk-up reference desk service at Watson Library and move to a model requiring students to schedule appointments. Since students are generally resistant to planning ahead, this will require a cultural shift that will not take root immediately. In the interim, it is imperative that the burden for providing reference services not be shifted to other available staff, e.g., the circulation department, who have their own service desk to operate and who do not have the training or background to provide in-depth reference services. One way this issue might be addressed is to schedule reference librarians to be on call; that is, to be available somewhere in the building, but not actually sitting at the reference desk, so they could be contacted by circulation staff if reference services were necessary.
4. Close the serials-media service desk in Watson Library and deploy staff currently assigned there to areas with greater personnel needs.
5. Campus police should have a greater presence in Watson Library, especially during evening hours and at closing time.
6. Increase the number of student employees assigned to the library.
7. Acquire and implement article-linking/serials management software such as CARL Gold Rush; saving the time of researchers and library staff will more than offset the purchase cost.
8. Work to establish a higher profile for the Watson Library within the campus community, and to make the facility a more student-friendly, welcoming place.
 - a. Schedule more activities in the library (e.g., build on the presentations and events already being conducted in the reading room).
 - b. Continue working to establish a coffee shop in the library.
 - c. Remove the racist and pornographic graffiti in the restrooms.
9. Make another attempt to create a friends of the library group. This can only be accomplished, however, with the full support of the university administration. If possible, it would be highly beneficial if the president were to contact individuals to serve on an implementation steering committee made up of representatives from the faculty, administration, advancement office, student body, alumni, emeriti, and "movers and shakers" within the community. Although time-consuming initially, a friends group can contribute to the library's public relations and outreach efforts and assist with town-gown relations, as well as assisting with fundraising.