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**Libraries as gateways of learning and librarians as capable facilitators**

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## **ABSTRACT**

From the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, due to emerging technologies, renovations of infrastructure and information explosion, most libraries have been transformed from information storage places to learning gateways, and librarians have played the role as learning facilitators. During the transformative journey, along with the on-going building structural reconstruction, environmental improvement, and thoughtful adoption of technologies, libraries energized the librarians to take on new challenges and expanded the scope of library services in a state-of-the-art environment. As a result, in a modern era, what are the standard services in libraries as gateways? How has librarianship been re-defined and performed to live up to the expectation from the society? This article is my attempt to get these questions addressed. In the meantime, to facilitate my descriptions of services, I am taking my workplace, an urban college library, as a case in point.

## **CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF LIBRARY SERVICES**

For centuries when the printed format dictated the methods of communications, libraries held the reins as esteemed information depositors. The library was the most logical space for storing printed materials. In terms of collecting, processing and retrieval of information, no institution came close to the capacity offered by libraries.

Libraries of yesterday were practically all about collections, so librarians were keepers of walls of books, and journals; a roomful of card catalogs; mountains of documents; along with long lists of usage limitations, and rules of conduct. Today's libraries are, however, serving as gateways, where librarians are facilitators of knowledge utilization and navigation of modern technologies to benefit library patrons' learning needs.

Such transformative journey can be, for the most part, attributed to emerging technologies, renovations of infrastructures, and the librarians' professional ethics and dedication to providing the first-rated library services to all learners. This essay will describe the changes that have taken place in modern times. Along with my descriptions, examples from an urban college library, where the concept of an efficient and effective gateway has been supported by both the technological innovations and the administration of the college, will also be provided. While there are many of this kind of library, for my easy access and credibility for this project, I selected my workplace, Hunter College Cooperman Library, the City University of New York as a case in point.

## **THE EVOLUTION OF LIBRARIANSHIP**

Since the 1990s, a plethora of media and mobile platforms-- social networking products, smart phones, iPods, and tablets has inundated the earth in a speed faster than anybody could

have imagined. The universe has been engulfed by its flames, so nothing can escape its impacts. It's difficult to deny that the advancement in information technologies for the last decade outpaced those of previous nine decades in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As consumers of a modern society, we embrace wholeheartedly the rapid development of technologies and enjoy the resulting benefits. However, this sentiment also presents new challenges that forever changed the faces of library services. Could the traditional library field really keep pace with current progress without major transformation? "Are libraries obsolete?" or "Has librarianship stepped into its twilight?" The message from those queries signified the great challenges for both libraries and librarians' survival. (Candy 2005 & Lankes 2012).

In a modern society, libraries' roles have been re-defined by their abilities to supply information, as well as their professionals who can manage new technologies of information retrieval and an array of equipment to meet the community's needs. Under current circumstances, the magnitude of information has made it impossible for the library world to operate in isolation. Therefore, the new generations of libraries and librarians are expected to integrate innovative technologies with their services while collaborating with many internal and external stakeholders. It is with such a dynamic evolution that a new chapter of great significance has been opened up for librarianship. Take an example for reference services. This evolution has resulted in the formation of information commons, where consultations with reference librarians, access to information, discussions with research partners, and getting results from printers are all grouped at one location. Such movement is happening everywhere

among all types of libraries.<sup>1</sup> , so this trend of library services seems quite standard in modern times all around the world.

The Cooperman Library is simply one of those countless libraries, which are keeping pace with the current flow. On top of the on-going building structural reconstruction, environmental improvement, and thoughtful adoption of technologies, this originally old-fashioned library has energized the librarians to take on new challenges and expanded the scope of library services in a state-of-the-art environment. How has a commuter college, with financial shortage, in New York City journeyed through this metamorphosis? How would facilitations to students' learning correlate seamlessly with a remodeled library? Certainly, a responsible librarianship exhibited in the past is a given. With this main factor in place, the following is my attempt of getting these questions addressed.

### **THE CHANGES TOWOARD MODERNIZATION**

Hunter College Cooperman Library, then Waxler Library, was built at the present address in the early 1980's. With the passage of time and the advent of new technologies, its attraction had long worn thin. After hearing the expression by Hunter students "*I preferred to go to other CUNY libraries as they have better facility for study or do research*", Hunter College President Raab's response, at a library staff meeting, was "*I am determined to make a change*".

The Presidential Committee on Library Task Force, composed of faculty members and librarians, was formed in 2006. However, with the City's financial debacle at that period of time, the capital required for achieving the configuration of new technologies and the ideal layout of the facility could hardly be materialized. Under such circumstances, a library campaign for

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<sup>1</sup> Many good articles about information commons or learning commons: (Franks & Tosko 2007; Diggs 2009; Birdsall 2010; Holmgren 2010; Richard 2010; Spencer 2010; Heitsch 2011), have pointed to this undertaking

funding was launched by the President. This campaign became a huge success. As Leon and Toby Cooperman, a respondent of this campaign with a substantial donation, pointed out “A *library dedicated to student success, and one where students can gather to study, collaborate, and socialize, is critical, particularly at a commuter school like Hunter*”.

For the subsequent years, a series of improvements were made to strengthen the library infrastructure as well as incorporating innovative technologies and librarian-driven services. From an infrastructure of the 1970s to high tech-equipped learning facilities, this development represented a team effort from the College, alumni, and friends of the Hunter community.

### **LIBRARIANS AS LEARNING FACILITATORS**

The objectives of the academic library services have always been geared toward assisting students in achieving their educational goals. Hunter College’s Latin motto—*Mihi Cura Futuri* (In English: The care for the future is mine)—graces the Library entrance in bright color and represents both the College and the library are committed to the same mission. We are working closely together to accomplish the vital role in making it possible of students’ success at Hunter.

What are the new paradigms of our work quality as facilitators in this renovated learning center? Generally speaking, effectively redesigned facilities have enabled the librarians to provide essential services with significantly reduced physical and equipment limitations. As a result, many satisfactory services could be delivered to library patrons without encountering difficulties. In a nutshell, the pathways being taken toward our goals are hence delineated.

## **A. Navigating information and managing knowledge**

As being described in the Dictionary, *“navigating, in digital world, is the act of going to different places on the Internet or on a particular Web site in order to find what you want”* (Webster Dictionary, 2014) Therefore, the careful selection of retrieved reference to the faculty and students is considered as one of our specialties and it is this function that makes librarians outstanding and most reliable among all the information providers.

It goes without saying that a due credit should go to modern technologies, because expeditious development in this compartment laid solid foundation for making marvelous library services possible. Moving forward together with technologies, libraries can enjoy the benefits to the fullest. Nonetheless, extraordinary efforts from the library part for facilitating great resources within easy reach to patrons deserve a big applause as well. In fact, quite a few channels of communication mentioned below just came into the horizon in the computer world but it did not take long for librarians to make the technological renovations adaptable for library uses.

I. Popular social media (for example: Library website, FaceBook, Twitter, eNewsletter, digital signage, blog posts, instagram) have been effectively utilized to promote library activities (e.g. lectures, exhibits) or make announcements of our new services (e.g. extended library hours, or snacks offerings during finals). In so doing, library users would not miss what is being available even if they may not time to visit the Library. Most importantly, librarians can make connections with our patrons virtually and extend our welcome beyond the physical confine.



II. The newly launched CUNY searching engine—*primo* has the capability of searching library catalog plus a comprehensive index that includes documents, conference proceedings, purchased databases with articles from peer-reviewed journals, streaming audios or videos, and other types of information including valuable free websites. When using Primo, the searching could be targeted for a particular CUNY college, or set to search the collections across 19 colleges under the umbrella of the City University of New York.

This wonderful tool has incredible power of knowledge discovery, which is on par with the appeal of internet engines. However, since it is under the management of CUNY library consortium, the features and coverage better suit our students' needs. As a matter of fact, it has been a general consensus that librarians' breath of knowledge and competence in searching skills are irreversible assets of library services, and they are also the soul of information navigation.

III. Library research guides of a variety of subjects, prepared by the librarians, are accessible from our library home page for interactive learning when patrons are at a loss for researching techniques and methods. This virtual service is actually equivalent to research consultations that provide face to face instructions to patrons. However, the scale for libGuides, which are empowered by modern technology and librarians' expertise, can reach larger population with relatively same effects.

IV. Laptops or iPads, which have library proxy capability and plenty of applications, can be loaned off the campus and seamless printing in the Library from mobile devices is an easy task. With this great convenience and thoughtful policy, students have options to complete their studies or library research at their own pace and anywhere of their choices.

In the meantime, this availability helps to reduce a heavy traffic for desktop computers in the library facility.

V. Have you ever thought about getting online chats, with a librarian around the clock, and 7 days a week? This is not an impossible dream, because a global service titled Ask-a librarian around the clock, makes 24/7 virtual reference services possible in library communities. With more than 10,000 libraries around the world participating this Reference Cooperative (Question, 2015), it is not exaggerated to say that the sun never sets on our library services.

VI. Our library patrons can request materials that are not owned by Hunter libraries from any libraries in the nation, anytime, by using a channel from our home page and have the materials being delivered for use in a timely fashion. This speedy service, which is made possible by generous cooperation in the library world and advancement of technologies, is particularly useful during library off hours, because self-help can cut down the possibility of the delayed delivery of urgently needed materials.

## **B. Advocating the meeting of the minds and the words in the Library**

Helen Keller once said *“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much”*. Although the Cooperman Library has promoted students’ brain storming with classmates, due to library layout limitation, group research activities unfortunately yielded many obstacles in the past. The new design of the main floor of the Cooperman Library is now conducive to collaboration among classmates, or with librarians or faculty members.

Though studying in groups has become quite normal on this floor, some areas of the Library are still designated as “quiet” study to accommodate individual preferences and patrons’ different needs. While this is a welcoming change for some patrons, the librarians at the Cooperman Library also came to better understand why the rule of no talking remains in place in most libraries. This flexibility of allowing group discussions has brought on great difficulties in satisfying patrons with different modes of studying. Nevertheless, as facilitators of students’ learning, we have to be sensitive to their needs, not only in terms of what they want to learn, but also considering how they learn.

### **C. Working with faculty from other departments in the Library**

While it is our goal to be well rounded in all academic disciplines in order to provide services to patrons’ diverse needs, and while all of our librarians are required to have subject specialties, the reality is that no staff member can be expected to possess thorough knowledge with the “intra-disciplinary” focus. To compensate for this insufficiency, we actively seek partnership with faculty from departments such as: physics, chemistry, mathematics, computer science, and writing center, to provide tutoring hours in the Library. It has proved to be a great initiative and a much more holistic approach.

The policy that the librarians also serve as liaisons to different departments has been in practice for years. In the past, the librarians have tried many venues, outside the library, to be well informed for the needs of students and faculty members while rendering our services. Our newly upgraded facilities and gracious offers from classroom faculty, e.g. writing or computer specialists make it easy for the partnership among students, faculty, and librarians taking place

right in the Library while students have questions or encounter technical difficulties during the process of doing researches.

#### **D. Making Library education available in undergraduate curricula**

It has been well known that library education is usually obtained at a Master's level in the United States. A few years ago, the marketing team of the Cooperman Library submitted a course proposal to Hunter College Curriculum Committee making a 1-credit course—taught collaboratively by librarians—available to the undergraduate students for Hunter College. Approved by the College and endorsed with high enrollments by students, this course has been a smooth sailing since its establishment. Although its objective is to teach students how to properly conduct researches with resources available in the information land, it also highlights the important role that librarians play in higher education.

Contemporary libraries are so much different from traditional libraries, so is librarianship in modern era. In an environment with emerging technologies and improved facilities, students can get better perspectives for what librarians can do for them.

#### **E. Serving as mentors to future librarians**

With the great enthusiasm about our profession and the confidence in our excellent learning facilities, the librarians at the Cooperman Library gladly accepted the challenges of mentoring interns who are about to graduate from library schools whenever necessities arise. On the other hand, the mentorship experience has also motivated us to refine our knowledge and skills while learning about what is currently taught in the library schools.

Passing down the professional torch to the good hands of future librarians is one of librarians' great responsibilities. In the meantime, we take this opportunity to demonstrate to the next generation that librarianship is far from stepping to the twilight zone.

#### **F. Repositioning library space to suit purposes**

As an urban college located in the heart of Manhattan, Hunter does not have the luxury of a huge campus for students to enjoy their leisure moments while they are not in the classrooms, so the librarians have felt compelled to offer students a congenial and cozy space to take a break. We have witnessed that the extra work involved in the renovation, especially the maneuver of shrinking staff work spaces, pays off when we see groups of students sitting on comfortable sofa of the study center or in the dining booths discussing projects, catching breaths after nerve-racking classes, chatting with each other, or just sitting by the window to appreciate the spectacular view of the heart of Manhattan.

Having witnessed a wide array of student activities in the Library, we are ascertained that a library in a modern society can also be a target location for social gathering in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Librarians are instrumental to facilitate this happening.

#### **G. Linking with Hunter community and showing appreciations**

Nowadays, substantial endowments do not come as often as we wish for a public institution, neither can we ignite the impulse of famous billionaire philanthropists. Nevertheless, the entire funding of Hunter library renovation, except a tiny portion from the city council, came from private donations. In addition to the Cooperman family, countless alumni, friends, and supporters have contributed generously to the library campaign for renovations. This library has become the platform that connects the community together to do

something innovative and helpful to the next generation, and the librarians' great services to users could serve as the catalyst of this connection.

The Cooperman Library has expressed our gratitude to major donors' kindness and contributions by naming many library services after them. Besides as a token of appreciation, this gesture offers an assurance that their good deeds would always be associated with those activities of Hunter students and the provision of library services.

### **CONCLUSION**

The responsibilities of modern librarianship embrace, saying the least: academic consultations; purchases and organization of materials for effective usage; collaboration with different professionals; problem solving; information retrieval and evaluation; and involvement in community activities. The evolution of librarianship has infused librarians a renewed sense of purpose and pride, so we understand that librarians' job domain is not restricted in their workplaces. Rather, it has evolved, physically and virtually, to be links in the community we proudly serve.

Technological advances will undoubtedly continue to present both solutions for as well as new challenges to our profession, and a commitment to great services will continue to guide us through any challenge along the process. It is the collective diligence and effort of librarians, working closely with the institutions that support or house the libraries, and other stakeholders, that will ultimately determine the future of libraries.

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