abstract: This article explores and examines the state of library services through interviewing a small group of directors, associate deans, and associate university librarians of public services and identifying common themes and insightful views on this area of librarianship. The participants respond to the same set of questions that cover topics including the value of the master of library science degree, the importance of partnering with nonlibrary units, and personal philosophies of library services.

Introduction

Public services encompass a rich variety of expertise and specialization that come together to connect and empower scholars and learners with information. Each university and college represents a distinct community, actually a collection of communities, that has informed the development of library services. No uniform portfolio of responsibilities defines public services. Just as libraries have selected and built their collections over time, libraries have developed and enhanced services to meet the specific needs of the community they serve. The rapid pace of technological change and the growing demand for accountability in higher education over the last two decades have moved libraries to respond in a multitude of ways. Through interviews (see the Appendix) with a group of four public service leaders (directors, associate deans, or associate university librarians), this article will explore the state of library services. The librarians interviewed were an assistant university librarian at a small private institution, an assistant dean for research and instruction at a small state university, an associate university librarian at a large private institution, and the chair of Research and Instructional Services at a large state university. The responses identify some common themes and yield insightful views on the work of public services librarians.

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The Responsibilities of Public Services

The scope of responsibilities included under the umbrella of public services varies by institution, as illustrated by the range of topics covered in this issue of *portal* as well as by the responses to the interview questions. The interviewees chose from a list of potential options the services that comprised their portfolio of responsibilities. The two areas that all four leaders held in common were reference services and teaching/instruction. Three of the four interviewees also included government documents in their portfolio. Table 1 shows the distribution of other functions that fell within the area of responsibilities of those interviewed.

Service concepts reported as “Other” included communications, building safety and security, development (fund-raising), library liaison programs, and special collections. Only two areas, reference services and teaching/instruction, were included by all the interviewees in their portfolio of public services responsibilities. When subjects were asked to share a brief statement of their philosophy of public services, each spoke to engagement with students and faculty, shared commitment and practice across all library units, and dedication to making every interaction with end users as meaningful and productive as possible. In addition, most statements included the idea that the user interactions of public services librarians inform their work and help them anticipate user needs.

Public Services Leadership

A 2015 study identified vision, integrity, management strength, collaboration skills, and communication ability as the five most important library leadership attributes. The study also explored how these attributes are acquired most effectively and found that practical leadership experience, participation in leadership programs, and working with mentors are the best ways to gain skills and perspective.¹

All of the leaders interviewed have a background in library instructional services or university-level teaching as well as experience as a discipline- or subject-specific liaison. When asked what they felt prepared them most for their current leadership role, they mentioned a background in research, experience partnering with nonlibrary units, and knowledge of practical applications of technology. Table 2 provides a brief summary of the responses by institution type.

Common themes include teaching experience, close connections with the research process through liaison work, experience leading, and direct support from the home institution for participation in leadership-focused professional development. Studying this small group of leaders, one can see that direct support for meeting users’ information needs, opportunities in leadership, and support from administration have fostered the growth of these leaders of public services.

Educating the Next Generation

Librarian position postings frequently contain such requirements as “ALA-accredited master’s degree in library or information science or comparable advanced degree and
Table 1.
Public services portfolio

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service type</th>
<th>Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference services</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching/Instruction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government documents</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circulation/Access services</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digital humanities/Digital scholarship center</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Branch/Subject libraries</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User experience</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interlibrary loan</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Commons</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly communication</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.
Preparation for public services leadership

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University size/type</th>
<th>“What most prepared you for your role as a leader of public services?”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small private institution</td>
<td>• Experience as a scholar/researcher in social sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small state institution</td>
<td>• Extensive experience with outreach and library instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large private institution</td>
<td>• Participation in the Association of Research Libraries Leadership Fellows Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Interim leadership or director roles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large state institution</td>
<td>• Participation in the Association of Research Libraries Leadership Fellows and Career Development Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Project management in previous positions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
appropriate experience in an academic setting may be considered.” The interviewees were asked, “As you hire for new positions in your library, do you find that holding an MLS continues to be a required qualification?” Only one of the four institutions has a firm stand on requiring the MLS (master of library science). Table 3 shows the responses regarding the MLS requirement for new hires.

For these leaders, an MLS seems to have become less important than other qualifications, such as advanced degrees or subject knowledge, for hiring new librarians. The variation of what comprises public services makes it unclear whether this issue is specifically relevant to public services or if it is simply the experience of the interviewees. Postings for subject specialists might understandably seek candidates with a specific disciplinary background or advanced degrees. These leaders hire for many types of positions, and the lack of an MLS requirement requires further exploration. A 2015 study of a collection of academic library job postings found that positions fell into four categories: (1) specific technical skills; (2) skills in working successfully with groups; (3) communication ability; and (4) personal attributes. These findings may be noteworthy because the postings do not include qualifications that are specific to libraries. A 2014 study of American Library Association accredited library science programs found that library and information science faculty have removed more traditional courses, such as reference, and replaced them with more technology-focused courses. If the MLS curriculum is evolving to remove traditional library coursework, it may indicate an attempt to keep up with the demands of new librarian roles. However, it is unclear if the coursework is addressing the needs and further study of the alignment of MLS curriculum and the expectations of new academic librarian positions.

New Positions and Opportunities

Academic libraries have found it necessary to increase the breadth and depth of the skill sets in their workforce. Not long ago, an academic library would have a reasonably sized reference department staffed with a team of generalists who supported frontline reference. Others might have an undergraduate library or instruction coordinator who provided teaching support to faculty and students. However, the range of expertise required to meet current research needs requires more specific skills. Interview participants were asked about the most recent librarian hire or hires, as well as what new position or positions they would fill if given the funding. They were encouraged to dream big on the latter question, and their responses are shown in Table 4.

In the absence of position descriptions, the titles of the new and “dream” hires suggest that a pool of applicants with deep subject knowledge, research backgrounds, technological expertise, and practical experience would be desired or even required. The titles in the “dream” positions column illustrate a desire to inform decision-making, to communicate the impact of libraries in higher education, to provide advanced research support, and to improve ease of access to information. While these are not new concepts for academic libraries, completely dedicating positions to these areas may indicate increased specializations in public services. The “dream” column also raises the question of what public service leaders do to track trends and anticipate needs. The answers leaders gave in response to the request “Please share your approach to anticipating new emerging needs of researchers and learners” were as follows:
Table 3.
MLS requirement for new hires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University size/type</th>
<th>Do you find that holding a master’s of library science (MLS) continues to be a required qualification?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small private institution</td>
<td>No. I am not finding the MLS to be relevant to the areas under my direction. For selectors, the most important credential is the PhD. For others, relevant work in university libraries is critical, not the MLS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large private institution</td>
<td>We have hired for several positions recently where we did not require the MLS. We have begun using the following language in job descriptions “Advanced degree in the [humanities, sciences, social sciences—dependent upon the position] or an accredited MLS or equivalent combination of education and experience.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large state institution</td>
<td>No, we have moved away from only requiring the MLS and open the opportunities for other backgrounds in our faculty positions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I encourage subject specialists to actively participate in research seminars in the departments they serve. Emerging needs of researchers are on display in those seminars.

[Assistant university librarian, small private university]

We are embarking on “Community Conversations” as defined by the Harwood Institute [for Public Innovation, a nonprofit that helps libraries interact more effectively with their communities]. This process of “turning outward” we hope will inform developments in our library liaison program and our outreach initiatives. Conversations are designed to happen across disciplines and audiences (faculty, students, and staff are invited), and they are structured to draw out what communities aspire to and what they see as the major challenges to their work. The Community Conversations are facilitated by librarians, and I have undergone preliminary training to be a facilitator.

[Assistant university librarian, small state university]

Hiring of the three digital center coordinator positions is one way we try to focus on emerging needs. These three are tasked with talking to researchers and scholars both here and beyond our institution to stay on top of these new tools and methods. We also have an active assessment program which enables us to do user surveys, focus groups, observation studies, etc. to stay in contact with user needs.

[Associate university librarian, large private university]

I’d like to create a testing space for using new technology for learners and researchers. We attend innovative teaching workshops, but it is difficult to incorporate some of the teaching models into our library.

[Department chair, large state university]
Public Services Librarian Skills and Development

The collective approach to anticipating needs is twofold. There is an emphasis both on outreach and connecting with researchers and on support for experimental exploration by the librarians. Academic library and higher education conferences frequently visit the issue of supporting new forms of scholarship and research methodologies. The new ways that both scholars and students access and use information are driving changes in the reference services of academic libraries. The interviewees were asked about their approach to librarian and staff development for supporting digital scholarship, but no clear theme emerged from their answers. The responses represent a spectrum of approaches that might be influenced by organizational culture or more simply by operational opportunities:

In short, I hire specialists. My approach is to hire PhDs who have significant experience doing digital scholarship.

[assistant university librarian, small private university]

We are a primarily teaching institution, so our faculty are just beginning to take interest in scholarly communications. When I started my position, I noticed that support for these
activities was happening around the library in pockets but without any overarching purpose or communication. To ensure the grassroots nature of these initiatives remained intact, I began an interest group of library faculty related to scholarly communications, and we have met with campus research officers as well as made plans to establish an internal LibGuide for library colleagues who are interested in learning about tools, strategies, opportunities related to digital publishing, the digital repository, OA [open access], and research social networking.

[assistant dean, small state university]

We have invested heavily in staff development in support of digital scholarship. We have three discipline-based digital centers staffed by discipline experts in the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. We have made strategic hires in this area, hiring nonlibrarian subject experts well versed in the emerging digital tools and methods. We have also had several training programs for our staff to “skill up.” Notably, we had a three-year effort in humanities called the Developing Librarian Project. This project involved 12 humanities librarians working together to build a digital resource [a digital history of the Morningside Heights neighborhood of New York City] as a team. In so doing, the group learned the tools and methods of digital scholarship that faculty and students have expressed interest in using. We also support external training for librarians, including conferences, workshops, and institutes.

[associate university librarian, large private university]

We are fortunate to have [a digital scholarship center] so we have lots of opportunities to take advantage of the various programs. I encourage librarians and staff to participate and learn about the various types of software tools, programs, and projects. We just recently hired a [digital scholarship] project leader as a liaison librarian, so I’m looking forward to exploring different ways that we can move into creating digital scholarship opportunities for students.

[associate university librarian, large state university]

Supporting Research, Teaching, and Learning

How will libraries ever meet all of the diverse needs of the public they serve? Librarians are taking new roles in supporting the academic missions of their institutions. However, it is not sustainable for academic libraries to take on every need and challenge of their home institutions. The need to collaborate and partner with nonlibrary support units has grown and become the norm for academic libraries. All four public services leaders reported that their roles required partnering with campus units to provide services. The nonlibrary units with which libraries partnered included digital research centers, digital humanities centers, student academic success centers, teaching and learning centers, writing centers, graduate schools, and offices overseeing research administration. In a recent analysis of the strategic plans of academic libraries, just 80 percent of the plans described these kinds of partnerships and collaborations. While at least one of the interviewees indicated that managing these relationships is challenging, clearly this is the direction that leaders and frontline librarians are headed. Revisiting the breadth of library service offerings, it seems likely that networking and connecting with broader campus initiatives will become standard features of position descriptions for all librarians and in particular those in public services.
The Evolving Role of Teaching

As previously mentioned, all the public services leaders interviewed have teaching or library instruction as part of their portfolio of responsibilities. While a teaching role for librarians is nothing new, there were many different approaches to supporting librarians in this role. The emphasis placed on the development of librarian teachers indicates there are challenges and that this continues to be a strategic role for libraries. When asked “Please describe your view of how librarians’ roles as teachers and educators have evolved?” every response described a programmatic approach to ensuring that librarians had tools and training to hone their teaching practices. The programs described included regular training; adopting the Association of College and Research Libraries Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education; partnering with campus teaching or writing centers; experimenting with flipped classroom instruction, where students study new content at home and use class time for projects and discussions; and developing assessment and adjusting teaching practices. In addition, two respondents have broadened instructional services to include instructional consultation as a service model, citing scalability as an issue. In the consulting model, librarians work with faculty to help them modify or create assignments, exercises, or entire courses in such a way that students engage with information in a meaningful way that promotes information literacy.

Anticipating Users’ Needs

All four institutions reported that they used data of some kind in planning space, services, staffing, or other decision-making. The type of data referenced included surveys, gate counts, reference tracking, and ethnographic studies. Close attention to the local population’s activities is one way that public services divisions design and plan for their users’ needs. Librarians also must stay atop trends in teaching and scholarship. Public services leaders closely watch the following trends:

Digital publishing that changes the presentation of research findings. When this comes to fruition in the next five years or so, libraries will need to be prepared to adequately host this new type of content. Similarly, libraries will need to be able to support their researchers with new ways of storing, sharing, and visualizing data.

[assistant university librarian, small private university]

I pay close attention to assessment. Libraries must collect user data and to have the tools in order to analyze it for trends and connections to campus outcomes, not only to inform our own decisions and directions but to show the value of our work to the communities we strive to serve.

[assistant university librarian, small state university]

Among many trends, I think the one that is most significant at [my] institution is the increased focus on teaching and learning in R1 institutions [universities that engage in extensive research activity, according to the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education]. This summer our provost created a Teaching & Learning Center, and it is located in the library. This center is focused on innovation in teaching and learning, and I am currently exploring how the Libraries can partner with this group to better
support our faculty and students. It seems to me that as research becomes more global and faculty affinity groups are often not on their own campus, but at other institutions or with scholarly societies, that teaching and learning can be the strength of local collaborations. [department chair, large state university]

High impact practices—creating student success initiatives. Higher education is looking for ways that students can be more involved and engaged in their learning. The implication may be for librarians to be more involved with creating learning spaces, information literacy skills, and incorporating user experiences into the curriculum. [associate university librarian, large private university]

Transformation or Adaptation?
The interviews revealed that these libraries have been forced to eliminate only a few services. Two institutions reported either a reduction or termination of reserve services. Others described fewer reference service points. When asked about new services, the answers were similarly brief. This may indicate that libraries are adding more services or possibly reinterpreting traditional library services by focusing on the core institutional values of teaching and research. Themes consistent throughout all four interviews show a commitment to deeply connecting library resources and services to faculty and students. This seems consistent with outreach concepts discussed in the library literature as long ago as 1993.7

Reflections and Philosophy
The following statements describe each leader’s philosophy of public service. The responses seem rooted in tradition and timeless in their approach, which provide a good foundation to continue to build services. The responses express a commitment to training and to positive user experiences, and a calling to anticipate the needs of the local communities that these institutions serve:

Public service means engaging actively with researchers and students in relevant subject matter areas. By learning about ongoing research projects, librarians are able to understand current research needs, to observe trends, and, thus, to anticipate future needs. Understanding the SERVICE element of the job is critical. Public service librarians need to make their own interests and time secondary to the needs of researchers and students. [assistant university librarian, small private university]

I firmly believe that any library’s provision of resources must be matched with a flexible, thoughtful, and responsive approach to public service that is rooted in a cohesive community of practice that comprises all library faculty and staff. Through a collective understanding and shared purpose of support and partnership, the library has the potential to impact and influence diverse communities of learners and researchers. The best way that we can do this is by recognizing local contexts and aligning with institutional priorities; thereby ensuring our relevance and responsiveness to our users. [assistant university librarian, small state university]

I believe all service in the libraries is public service. Every interaction with our users, whether it is checking out a book, troubleshooting on e-resources, consultations, or partnering on a project, is an opportunity to engage deeply in the research and learning
process on campus. Library services are working well on a campus if faculty, staff, and students see the libraries as a place that is necessary for teaching and learning to take place. I hope to evolve our services and spaces (both virtual and physical) to increase engagement with our users and help solve the biggest issues the campus is facing.

[associate university librarian, large private university]

We have not had a “public services” department for a long time. My department and Access Services are constantly working together to review policy and procedures to follow the “Think Yes” philosophy and making sure that everyone (students, staff, and librarians) are adequately trained at the service point at the appropriate knowledge expectation and includes a referral system to close the communication loop to make sure the user gets what they need. We want the user to come back and have a great experience in the building and online.

[department chair, large state university]

Conclusion

This exploration of interview responses offers some insight into the various approaches to public services at a range of academic libraries. The responses and conversations that these interviews elicited revealed a timeless mission for library services, which is to support faculty and students in their academic goals. The interviewees describe responsive and thoughtful approaches to supporting and even partnering in research and teaching. They report different ways that they help their staff and librarians have the requisite The central themes refer to traditional values while taking on new approaches to supporting the work of local scholars and learners.

Diane Dallis is a member of the Editorial Board of portal: Libraries and the Academy and the associate dean of academic library services at Indiana University Libraries in Bloomington; she may be reached by e-mail at: ddallis@indiana.edu.

Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Please share the areas that comprise your public services portfolio (check all that apply):
   - Reference
   - Teaching/Instruction
   - Circulation/Access services
   - Interlibrary loan
   - Off-site storage
   - Government documents
   - Learning Commons
   - Digital humanities/Digital scholarship center
   - Scholarly communication
   - Branch/Subject libraries
   - Website
2. Please share a brief history of your professional career (listing position titles.)
3. Please describe the experiences you feel prepared you most for your current position.
4. What is the month and year of the most recent organizational restructuring that included public services at your institution?
5. How many large organizational restructuring initiatives has your institution undergone in the last 20 years? (general estimate)
6. Please share your approach to librarian and staff development for supporting digital scholarship.
7. Please describe your view of how librarians’ roles as teachers and educators have evolved? If applicable, please include your approach to librarian and staff teaching development.
8. If your institution has undergone any renovation or building projects in the last 10 years, please describe your impression of the impact of space and/or renovation on library services.
9. Have you been able to use assessment data, use data, or study findings for planning services, space, staffing or any other level of decision making? Please briefly discuss your answer.
10. Please share a brief description of the one to three newest public services positions that have been created, posted, or filled in your library.
11. Imagine a scenario where your campus wants to fund three new public services positions that are needed in your organization. What positions would you hire?
12. What is the trend that you are most closely tracking in higher education, and what implications do you feel it may have for library public services?
13. Does your role require you to partner with local campus units? If yes, please share an example.
14. If you partner with nonlibrary units on your campus, please share some of the rewards and challenges of partnering.
15. Please share your approach to anticipating new emerging needs of researchers and learners.
16. Are there services that you have stopped or reduced in the past five years? If yes, please share a few examples.
17. Have you piloted or launched a new service or taken on a service from another campus unit? If yes, please describe.
18. As you hire for new positions in your library, do you find that holding an MLS continues to be a required qualification? Please briefly discuss your experiences or reasons behind your answer.
19. Please share a brief statement of your philosophy of public service.
Notes