ARL NEW MEASURES

The Measurement of Facilities Utilization in ARL Libraries
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I Definition of Topic

Advancements in the arena of electronic access to informational resources have resulted in the concept of the "virtual library." While there is no clear agreement concerning exactly what a "virtual library" entails, the notion that this will enable users to satisfy a significant portion of their information gathering processes electronically is generally understood. A key component and obvious benefit of electronic access to information is the elimination of the necessity to physically contact the resources. Put more bluntly, when the majority of users have reasonable electronic infrastructure in their homes, offices, dorm rooms etc. (many do already), and when the bulk of their informational needs can be met via available electronic resources, what can we say about the role of "physical library facilities?" Do they simply become the warehouses of past literature deemed "economically unsuitable" for digitization, or will they remain vital physical cogs in the information access endeavor?

This paper does not seek to answer this question. Instead, it attempts to chart a course for measuring how we currently utilize the physical spaces in ARL libraries. This can in turn, as we gather data and compare across libraries, suggest the impact of various space allocation decisions on library activity such as building use and circulation. For example, two libraries might pursue radically different approaches to shelving materials, with one using traditional shelving while the other utilizes compact shelving. This would result in the allocation of space for shelving in one library being much higher than in the other library, and enable one to assess if this has an impact use, such as the total number of circulations.

Similar examples might include the extent to which libraries subscribe to electronic journals, thereby limiting the space required for storage of physical journal titles, or the degree of outsourcing, which would decrease the amount of space required for staff operations.

No single measure, such as the examples suggested above, will allow libraries to respond to the overall question of the future role of physical library facilities. These measures should, however, provide insight regarding those factors that encourage, or possibly discourage, the utilization and subsequent effectiveness of library facilities.

It is probably worth noting that the authors take a decidedly dim view of the prospect of a university matriculate pursuing the entirety of their informational needs electronically while ensconced in a dorm room. Bluntly put, we believe that a physical place on campus where intellectual interests can be pursued at virtually any time of the day or night, in a serious academic environment and in the presence of other scholars and assistance (ie — a librarian), is both necessary and desirable, and that the provision of such a space is best achieved via a "library."

Given this context, this process is pursued with the desire to maximize the efficiency and effectiveness of this goal by arming librarians with a clearer understanding of the manner in which space utilization impacts these efforts.

II Assumptions

We assume the following:

A) As discussed above, the "library as a place" is necessary and desirable.

B) The amount of library space and the manner in which the space available is utilized has an impact on the amount of use made of the facility and the degree of success that is realized by the users.

C) Libraries will house, and students and scholars will require access to, retrospective print collections, as well as new print acquisitions, for the foreseeable future.

D) Personal assistance with access to information resources, in both print and electronic format, is best provided in a library setting.

III Why This Measure Is Important

This measure is critical if for no other reason than to be able to effectively respond to the notion that "when everything is available electronically there will be no need for libraries." Part of the answer to that assertion clearly lies outside of the realm of the physical facility itself, but it is equally obvious that the amount and proper utilization of the available space are critical factors in regard to whether or not users continue to come to the library or seek out alternative venues for information gathering AND alternative venues in which to pursue scholarly pursuits.

IV Data Elements

A. Building Characteristics

— age of facility

— number of floors

— total square footage

— assignable square footage

— cabling characteristics
— to library

— within library
— number of seats
   — carrel/individual
   — table/group
   — other

— number of computers for patrons
   — with internet access
   — Pentiums (ie — # of "state of the art" computers available)

— number of computers for staff
   — with internet access
   — Pentiums (ie — # of "state of the art" computers available)

— number of DHCP ports

— electronic classroom availability

— number of volumes housed

— availability of wireless access

— Number of hours building open

— Number of hours that key services are available

— Security system used

— Availability of self check-out

B. Space Utilization (amount of space used for)

   — staff offices

   — service points

   — materials storage

   — seating
      — carrel/individual
      — table
      — other

   — other (hallways, stairwells, restrooms, etc)

C. Use Measures

— headcounts

— circulation measures

— reference questions handled

V Data Collection

With the exception of the amount of space allocated to various functions (IV-B), most of these data elements are already collected by many ARL Libraries. It is not envisioned that all libraries would compile this data on an annual basis, but rather that data would be compiled for a volunteer sample group of libraries. This data would then form the basis of for "benchmark measures" against which other libraries could compare their data should they choose to compile the measurements.

VI Barriers

The key barrier to the generation of comparable data is differing local situations. Foremost among these would be the number and size of branch libraries. It is not clear whether measures for all branches could be reasonably melded into one "campus wide" total. For example, many campuses have "branch libraries" that are little more than open rooms where faculty place copies of recent journals, some of which are keyed for use by faculty only. Would this space count? Similarly, headcounts can be amazingly misleading. On some campuses the library houses other operations, or serves as a literal passageway, thereby producing entrance/exit counts that are wildly inaccurate. The ability to establish guidelines that would account for situations such as these by way of generating comparable data will be extremely difficult.

VII Experts

Paul Willis, University of Kentucky, where a new library facility has just opened, has agreed to work with this process, as has Don Kelsey, University of Minnesota. Don has also offered to take the proposals of this group to an informal group of facilities managers that meets at ALA for their review.