Open to the Public:
Risks and Rewards of Serving the Local Community

by Steven Bell

Students from other local colleges or visiting scholars, seeking to use the campus library for serious study or research, is the image traditionally evoked when academic librarians think about serving the public. This idyllic scene, while noble, is somewhat detached from the reality of really opening up the academic library to the public.

Being truly open means accepting the citizens who need significant help to use a computer, the unemployed looking for a way to access the online world, the homeless person lounging in a chair in the learning commons, or any of the other cascading consequences of opening the academic library to the public. While academic library directors and their provosts can unilaterally decide to impose a restrictive access policy that severely limits or closes the library to the public, they should jointly explore new trends that reflect a growing public desire and demand for access to the academic library and its resources. Together they can evaluate the risks and rewards of inviting the broader community into the library.

Academic library administrators and staff are committed to supporting their parent institution's mission to achieve mutually beneficial town-gown relationships. Opening the doors of the academic library to the external community can contribute to that outcome. Academic libraries that serve as depositories for government documents are required to allow public access to those collections, but that is a fairly limited construct of what it means to serve the public. Though it may vary amongst local communities, a combination of factors is contributing to an increase in public interest in gaining access to the academic library. Why might an academic library director lobby the administration to pay more attention to the public as part of its mission and make the necessary accommodations to serve this population? This issue explores the potential benefits and challenges when academic librarians open the doors to the public. Though it is likely to bring new, additional burdens, the added value the library delivers can outweigh concerns about potential problems.

Seeking Access

Multiple factors are driving the public's interest in visiting academic libraries. While the desire to access unique research collections will continue to attract the specialized researcher, a set of new trends is raising the profile of the academic library as a public good. Included in that segment of the community that we refer to as "the public" are those individuals who have no official or formal affiliation with the institution, but seek to come onsite to make use of one or more resources. Depending on location, for example a densely populated urban campus versus a rural site, the public may consist of only those in nearby, surrounding neighborhoods or it could include those willing to travel across an entire metropolitan region.

While academic librarians can also serve the public virtually, those services are typically limited to phone, email or chat reference assistance. Those

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lacking a formal institutional affiliation are typically prohibited from remotely accessing the library's licensed resources. However, they may electronically access the library's online catalog, and any other readily available content the library chooses to offer, such as digitized rare books or doctoral dissertations. If they choose to pursue it and have it written into their licensing agreements, academic libraries may offer some electronic databases to the general public on a strictly onsite basis.

Here are some of the reasons why academic librarians can expect to see heightened public demand for access to their physical information resources, services and technology within the local community:

• **Economic Problems.** Cuts in state and local funding, shrinking tax revenues and other recession-related economic problems have public libraries offering fewer hours and resources to their communities. The situation is more pronounced in urban settings that also experience the challenges associated with neighborhoods experiencing high rates of poverty, unemployment, single parenting and the demise of K-12 school libraries.

• **Digital Divide.** Access to computer technology and broadband is improving, but the digital divide still persists in many communities. Public libraries are unable to serve all those who seek computers and Internet access or they may allow severely limited access, such as thirty minutes per day. The spillover demand is crossing over into the academic library.

• **Online Learning and MOOCs.** Online learners seeking college degrees are known to rely on local libraries for study space, academic journals and research assistance. As the number of institutions offering MOOCs expands and there are exponentially greater numbers of students without access to their own physical or virtual library, academic librarians can anticipate increased demand from community members engaged in online learning.

• **Third Space Alternative.** When there is no public library in the immediate vicinity, for local residents the academic library become an attractive

"third space" alternative. Those seeking quiet spaces, a place to read newspapers or magazines or access to technology will find that a local academic library meets their needs well. Unlike coffee shops or fast-food restaurants, the academic library requires no purchase for access. It can even serve as a meeting spot for local retirees.

• **DVD Usage.** Depending on local policies, some academic libraries allow the public to borrow DVDs or view them on site. Though the price of entertainment videos has dropped considerably, many still look to the library as a source of free movies. The digital divide means that many are still years away from streaming videos on the Internet. Along with limited book borrowing, allowing access to its collections boosts local interest in the library.

• **Cultural Programming.** Such programs bring both learning and entertainment to those who might otherwise be unable to travel to downtown metropolitan locations for public lectures. Academic libraries host the type of speakers, scholars and artists, who can draw crowds. Viewing it as a public service, some academic libraries are glad to welcome the public to the library for programming.

Whatever their current state of openness to the public may be, all academic libraries are or will be encountering growing public desire for access. Library directors at private institutions that are typically closed to local residents will need to consider carefully the options and possible service implications. It's easy enough to establish an open community service plan, but in doing so there are myriad considerations that will contribute to or detract from the program's success. Any plan must also take into account the impact on staff, as suddenly opening up the gates to the public can create a variety of stressful situations. It may require a serious conversation among the library staff and at the Provost's Council to determine how to best position the library to engage with the public, what policies are needed to properly support it, and what will and will not be offered to the public.

Discuss the "Why" First

Some academic librarians openly accommodate the public as a requirement, such as when fulfilling the rules for serving as a government documents library. Others are offering services to the general public because they believe it increases the value and relevance of the institution within the broader community. Whatever the motivation, academic administrators should understand why it is important to leverage the library to connect with the public. Though certainly less so than their public counterpart, the academic library can serve as a public good that is made available to the community for sharing. To varying degrees, many academic librarians are taking that position by making digital versions of copyright-free collections publicly accessible to the global scholarly community. Less attention, however, is paid to making the library building and its local resources available to the public.

The same spirit behind the sharing of local digital collections should serve as the "why" behind allowing the public to use the academic library. The added value to the institution in inviting the public to use the resources, be they collections or computers, is in elevating the local community by providing a form of access beyond the normal reach of its citizens. The goal is never to replace what public libraries offer, but to supplement it for those who need basic or additional support. Just as a college or university might help a local community with educational or infrastructure improvements, it can improve the quality of life in and around campus by offering library access. Computer and broadband resources in particular can make a significant difference by allowing otherwise disenfranchised individuals to engage with potential employers, obtain online job skill training and job-seeking support.

Given the political conflicts that sometimes occur between colleges and the local government, usually over the payment of taxes or fees for municipal services, the academic administration can point to the library's public support of the community as an additional way in which the institution offers added

value, often with positive economic consequences, to citizens. Once the library director and provost agree on the "why" and decide to pursue greater public access, the challenge is in establishing the appropriate balance between meeting the more highly prioritized needs of the students, faculty and staff, and those of the external community.

Practical Considerations

Being open to the public as a federal depository library is a virtually risk-free proposition. It's rare that any academic library promotes that status to the public with an invitation to descend upon the stacks to soak up the knowledge conveyed in congressional hearings and census reports. These items appeal to the few-and-far-between researchers with special interests. It's quite another thing to provide access to computers, the Internet and the circulating book collection. When academic libraries do that, even if they give it little promotion, the word will spread in the local community. The risk is that inviting the public into the academic library creates some of the same challenges that confront public library staff. With appropriate precautions and thoughtfully designed services, it is possible to serve the public without incident or degradation of services to the campus community. Here are some key considerations:

Staffing: Existing staff should be sufficient unless the plan is to offer the public access to computers and Internet technology. Decisions must be made about effectively offering the service so as to minimize disruptions for the staff or impingement on existing routines for students. If the service is popular and the number of public users grows, it may require the addition of technology student assistants. If the library lacks a door guard, it may consider adding security to both check identification and be available to respond to trouble if needed.

Policies: Almost all academic libraries that serve the public have found it necessary to develop special policies to regulate access. At first most

What 'Open to the Public' Means at IUPUI
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The University Library at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) is both an academic library and a community library. In addition to supporting the academic programs of IUPUI, the library also "opens its doors and collections to the citizens of the state of Indiana and beyond" (http://www.ulib.iupui.edu/development/community). The library is a significant economic and social resource for our community; as such, we believe it is important that we share our collections and services.

Although we tend to refer to all of our community users as if they are all of one type, there are actually three particular types: (1) computer users; (2) borrowers; and (3) high school students who come to the library access databases and use materials from the collection. With the exception of the high school students, there are very few patrons who visit the library who both use the computers and borrow materials.

Any adult state resident with a valid I.D. and proof of address is eligible for a University Library card. Every year we issue about 1,000 borrower cards to Indiana residents as well as thousands of guest computer passes. There is no charge to obtain a library card. A community member does not need to belong to any specific group (e.g., "Friends of the Library") to borrow materials. There are, however, limits on the number and types of items that may be borrowed.

We welcome community members at the IUPUI University Library during all regular hours of operation. We allow them access to more than half of the computer workstations in public areas; the exceptions are those computers located in the academic commons, the rich media cluster, and individual and group study rooms. We grant guest users all-day access to computer workstations for a one-dollar fee.

Although serving the community is a vital part of our mission, such service presents a number of challenges. For example, some of our regular guests are homeless. A few appear to have behavioral issues, and some have hygiene issues. Complaints are relatively rare. It is worth noting that the great majority of community users do not cause any problems. However, most of the library's security issues do originate with public patrons, not with students.

We believe that providing computer access to those who would not otherwise have it and sharing our rich academic collection with those who would not otherwise have access to these resources are both laudable reasons for being open to the public. Moreover, the willingness of University Library to be open to the public sends a strong message about the University's commitment to the local community.

William H. Weare, Jr. & Matthew Stevenson (2012): Circulation Policies for External Users: A Comparative Study of Public Urban Research Institutions, *Journal of Access Services*, 9:3, 111-133.

simply allow all to enter with no guidelines governing who comes in, when they do and what they may do once in the library. As public use grows this may be a recipe for disaster. For example, allowing neighborhood teens to freely roam the library may lead to after school noise and disruption as young adults look for ways to entertain themselves. Many academic libraries quickly find it necessary to limit access by minors only when accompanied by a responsible adult supervisor. Academic libraries are often open late hours but may choose to allow public access during limited hours (e.g., no public entrance after 8:00 pm). When needed, academic administrators can find good examples of academic and public Library Code of Conduct

policies that govern acceptable behaviors.

Training: With the doors open to the public there is little control over who may enter. The possibility for experiencing the challenges of working with the homeless, mentally ill, or con artists is always present. While these populations offer special challenges, knowing how to deal with those people who monopolize computers or study areas, or turn the library into their personal office, or spend too much time socializing with the staff, is a new form of a workplace skill. Administrators should work with campus security or human resources to arrange for additional staff training to help staff prepare for any eventuality, which can always be useful as the campus library can experience difficult situations that involve its own community members.

Technology: One certainty is that the public will seek out computers and Internet access. Even in economically prosperous communities there are individuals who lack access to technology. Whether the public library is unable to handle all those who seek it or the academic library is simply a more convenient option, anticipate demand for technology. Be advised to avoid a free for all, allowing the local community members to use any and all computers. That's a great way to anger students who find themselves without computers. Consider creating a separate space for public computer users; it may require investing in a few machines and data lines, but it can enable necessary control over access. Rather than require staff to collect user information at each log-on, acquire a computer control system that allows the public to log on whenever they choose without staff supervision.

Shifting to Openness

If your academic library guards its entrance closely to prevent most of the general public from gaining entrance, perhaps now is the time to consider becoming more open. If the library director and academic administration are open to the idea, these steps may contribute to a more smooth transition process.

Communication: Work closely with frontline staff in sharing information about any new access policy. Involve them in the process of developing guidelines and listen to their concerns. Frontline library staff deal directly with members of the local community, and their support is needed to ensure the public feels welcomed in the library. If there are local community or neighborhood groups, consider including their leaders in your communications plan. It is always advantageous to gain support from external stakeholders.

Security Concerns: Opening the doors to the public is generally safe but not without risks. Paying more attention to building security is the best approach to limiting crime opportunities. When and where appropriate, consider adding video cameras, card swipes or authorize a guard to require those without official university identification to display photo identification and sign a visitors' log book.

Test the Waters: While it's never desirable to provide new privileges only to retract them at a later date, it may be reasonable to begin with a pilot project that allows public access for a six-month period during which the impact on the library may be assessed. Make it clear to the local community that public access is being allowed on a trial basis with a final determination in the future.

Talk to a Public Librarian: Academic librarians with little experience in serving the local community will benefit from a meeting with public librarians. In addition to the opportunity for informing the public librarians about access policies for the local community, it can establish a good relationship for sharing best practices. Public library colleagues have many lessons to share when it comes to serving the local community.

"Openness" Is More Than Just Being Open

The theme for the early 21st-century academic library should be openness. That means being open to reforming broken scholarly and textbook publishing systems, open to new pedagogical thinking, open to new organizational structures, open to inviting the global community to access classroom education and cultural riches and open to all types of new possibilities that will advance higher education. Be open to finding better ways to make academic libraries a resource for the local community. Being a more open college or university that invites the public to take advantage of the academic library's resources is a transformation worth considering. There are some risks for sure, but the rewards reaped are potentially well worth the investment of resources needed to embrace the new culture of openness.*--sbell@temple.edu*