looking ahead

a report by the 2016–2017 MSU Libraries Visioning Task Force
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In the fall of 2016, the MSU Libraries Visioning Task Force was assembled with the charge to develop a vision for the MSU Libraries.

This vision focuses on the aspects of collections, services, and workplace environment within the libraries. While broad in meaning, these areas encompass the entirety of the MSU Libraries (MSUL) experience. In serving to advance the mission of the MSU Libraries and the University, the goal of this vision is to bring forth new changes and allow the Libraries to become a pioneer in the academic community.

The recommendations set forth in this report were formed by the committee and reflect the views of the MSU Libraries at large. Information for these recommendations was gathered over the course of nine months through surveys, meetings with library staff, and collaboration with colleagues in individual task groups. It is important to note that some of the recommendations offered can be accomplished more easily than others, but all are well-grounded in the goals that they serve.

While this vision effectively works to serve all users of the Libraries, its aim focuses on the largest user group on campus: undergraduates. Out of the initial charge and through several meetings held, common themes began to emerge: User Experience and Data-Information Decision Making; Space; Expertise and Outreach; Diversity and Advocacy; Discoverability; and Staff Experience. Each theme is equally as important as the next, and vital to creating the experience and impact that shapes the future of MSU undergraduates and their legacy in the world.

Key Recommendations

• Develop a holistic library space plan aligned with the university’s strategic goals; a plan that emphasizes high-touch services over book storage by making librarians more accessible to their users
• Create a universally accessible Beaumont (North) entrance to encourage users’ interaction with newly designed first-floor spaces
• Provide support, structure, and funds for Open Access and Open Educational Resources initiatives, and investigate ways MSU Libraries can successfully incorporate these initiatives
• Establish a diversity librarian residency program aligned with ACRL diversity alliance principles
In a sociopolitical climate in which universities are increasingly called to demonstrate the value they provide to students entering a professional workforce, the library’s ability to clearly demonstrate its contributions to student success is one of the surest ways to fulfill our mission and remain relevant. Indeed, since our users—most of them undergraduate students—comprise our very *raison d’être*, it is crucial to gauge the library’s relevance to them through assessment, by talking and listening to them to better understand their behaviors and expectations, and to leverage that understanding to optimize our spaces, services, and collections. Applying user experience principles can lessen confusion, promote an intuitive experience, and add impact and value for our students. To support a user-centric model of decision making it is crucial that we collect the data required to better understand what our users need from our spaces, services, and collections. A data-influenced library culture will:

1. Establish measurable performance objectives in library planning activates
2. Implement the plan, and capture performance benchmarks
3. Regularly assess and document the impact of decision making
4. Make changes based on available data

This iterative, four-step management method will improve decisions made by librarians by checking our assumptions against a data-informed reality. Only then can we pursue work with a measurable benefit on student and faculty success.
Recommendations

- Define expected outcomes for using library data to measure impact on student success; develop data collection guidelines to ensure the library is collecting data that will best demonstrate its value, and adjust data collection practices as necessary
- Use existing data from the MSU Libraries faculty survey to optimize services for undergraduates; explore other user data that the library may want to collect, including data about non-users, weighing usefulness against privacy considerations; for non-users, examine contributing factors such as library anxiety
- Develop a strategic assessment program to measure the impact of the library’s spaces, services, and collections on student success; assess in particular library instruction that utilizes Special Collections and other collections of distinction
- Demonstrate need for resource alignment around collections of distinction by capturing data on existing backlogs (e.g., those in Maps and Special Collections) and predicting future workloads
- Designate a librarian to work with student success and learning analytics initiatives on campus; identify the group(s) on campus already collecting data relevant to student success and retention
- Examine how and when students come in contact with librarians during their time at MSU
- Conduct an observational and interview-based space study of the building to generate a heatmap of both occupancy and resource use to compare with assumptions
- Build or purchase infrastructure to support aggregated data collections; leverage collection development policies and funds to support building data collections
As MSU’s principal interdisciplinary learning space, the Main Library should be—and certainly can be—a spatial delight for the campus community. The building is a mid-century gem with good bones and significant potential. Current renovations on the first floor hold great promise: the south lobby will soon become a more pleasant space to inhabit, and the relocation of Special Collections will better facilitate use of and exposure to some the library’s most remarkable collections. What’s more, ongoing efforts like the MSU Libraries Student Art Competition annually improve the aesthetics of the space while simultaneously engaging the student body in a rewarding way.

The cost of wholesale renovation to such a large building, however, means improvements are made one discrete space at a time over a number of years. The inherent risk of this method, in terms of both function and aesthetics, is finding ourselves in a large space without an apparent unified vision. The library should develop a strategic, holistic plan for creating more open and inviting spaces, drawing our users into the building and promoting spaces that better stimulate research, collaboration, and study. Our spaces, including the Gast Business Library and Gull Lake Library, should accommodate the needs of all library users, in particular the undergraduate community that constitutes the library’s primary user group.
Recommendations

• Develop a holistic library space plan, including branch considerations, aligned with the university’s strategic goals; a plan that emphasizes high-touch services over book storage by making librarians more accessible to their users

• Organize collections remaining in the Main Library, including Rovi, to facilitate easy access and browsing; collection spaces should be attractive and conducive to anticipated use; Special Collections stacks should be moved into a dedicated, purpose-built space to ensure preservation

• Continue to improve and promote services the library uniquely provides to campus, such as Hollander MakeCentral, gaming rooms, passport services, and Collaborative Technology Labs

• Create additional group study spaces, in a variety of configurations, while maintaining the building’s quiet study areas

• Ensure the library is a safe space for all users; incorporate diversity considerations into all space projects, creating spaces that highlight and support diverse identities

• Build an accessible entrance at the front of the building and an accessible restroom on 1 East

• Continue making aesthetic improvements to the library by acquiring art, improving exhibit and display venues, refreshing furniture, and soliciting architecture and design expertise

• Develop workspaces better tailored to the specific tasks accomplished in those spaces, undertaken whenever possible with feedback from those intended to inhabit the space

• Designate an authority to incorporate data into decision making on future renovations and moves

• Improve the way users view and browse the library’s physical space online, as NSCU has done.
Expertise and Outreach

The library is teeming with expertise found nowhere else on campus, and with staff eager to leverage this expertise to create a powerful, meaningful experience for our campus stakeholders. For example, we have the capacity to function as the campus clearinghouse on matters ranging from copyright and open access to privacy and journal analytics. With a space widely perceived as one of the safest on campus, MSU Libraries can function as a social hub, too, where staff can help students create a human network—not just to foster academic success, but to support one’s general well-being. As a college education extends beyond what is learned in the classroom, so should our outreach efforts extend beyond academic life.

To realize the potential we can offer our students, we must consider how we utilize expertise and manage outreach within the library itself. Are we taking the time to seek opinions from our in-house experts and stakeholders before making critical decisions? Are we leveraging potential efficiencies that could free library staff to do more outreach and to nurture a human network for students? The library has done much to enrich life on campus for students and faculty alike, and no doubt the prospects of doing even more are bright. We need only support our informed, visionary pursuits with the communication and marketing expertise required to effectively convey their value.
Recommendations

• Tap communication and marketing expertise, externally if necessary, to develop a more effective approach to marketing our services and communicating our value

• Leverage approval plans and other data-influenced solutions to streamline collection duties, leaving subject and reference librarians more time to pursue outreach and develop content expertise

• Deploy staff with relevant expertise to help with projects that would benefit from their expertise, including the development of outreach and instruction skills among our own librarians; seek relevant expertise outside the library when it cannot be found within

• Provide support, structure, and funds for Open Access and Open Educational Resources initiatives, and investigate ways MSU Libraries can successfully incorporate these initiatives

• Provide instruction on privacy, copyright, digital publishing, open access, data curation, and other areas in which the library possesses particular expertise

• Leverage the Rovi Collection in outreach, instruction, and research as a bridge to information in time-based media formats

• Take a more holistic approach to education and focus on overall well-being of students, including physical and mental health; help students increase their social capital on campus

• Encourage more collaboration across the library’s various service points; build organic connections between departments, units, and services

• Showcase our value and expertise through digital collections and integrate that content seamlessly into our other search tools and collections

• Encourage innovation and risk taking; take a more proactive approach to change
MSU’s Main Library was recently identified as one of the most welcoming places on campus, an honor shared broadly in The Chronicle of Higher Education. This distinction reflects the library’s enduring commitment to fostering an inclusive, welcoming, empowering, and supportive environment regardless of a person’s race, socioeconomic status, religion, gender, sexuality, or disability. Our active diversity committee, our hosting of ARL’s Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce (IRDW) program, our commitment to hiring staff from underrepresented groups, our outreach efforts like the Muslim Journeys Book Club and participation in Project 60/50, the multiplicity of voices in our collections, and our library tours for diverse student groups all underscore our commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Even with all we have accomplished, there remains a wealth of opportunities through which proactive, intentional advocacy from the library could benefit groups and individuals on campus. The library has a powerful voice which can be amplified for the benefit of members of marginalized groups through public statements, unified demonstrations of support, or even simply by posting welcoming messages in the building. Meanwhile, looking inward, the library is well poised to critically examine its own culture, space, functions, collections, structures, policies, and services as they impact issues of advocacy, justice, and equity. We should consider deeper questions related to advocacy alongside data-influenced models for decision-making processes at all levels, resulting in a richer, more equitable, and more humane environment for our patrons and staff.
Recommendations

- Continue to collaborate with partners across campus and beyond to develop and host diversity programs for the campus and larger community
- Develop a peer-to-peer service to help students approach library resources and complete required assignments
- Improve the pipeline of diverse individuals seeking library jobs, perhaps by establishing an endowment to support the employment of students from diverse backgrounds in the library, and/or by developing a mentoring program for those interested in careers in librarianship
- Establish a diversity librarian residency program aligned with ACRL Diversity Alliance principles
- Encourage library staff to build diversity into their work, perhaps by showcasing diverse collections, attending diversity-themed conferences, building diversity into collection development, or supporting diverse public programming; incentivize the pursuit of such activities, perhaps by including a specific diversity focus among evaluation criteria
- Increase hiring and retention efforts for staff from all underrepresented groups
- Partner with pre-college and admitted student programs serving diverse groups of students so those students might more easily see themselves as library users
- Raise awareness of harassment and clarify procedures around reporting incidents of harassment for employees and library patrons
- Revise the charge of the current Diversity Advisory Committee in the library to act as advisory to the Director and the Executive Council on diversity-related topics relevant to the library
- Continue to pursue opportunities to advance diversity initiatives in the field of librarianship by supporting programs such as the ARL Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce (IRDW)
MSU students and faculty should be able to rely on and trust our discovery systems to connect them to the library-managed resources they need. At the same time, we want students and faculty to be able to discover the library’s resources in the same open web tools they use in their daily lives. Our discovery systems should help contextualize information and provide pathways to serendipitous discovery, being supported and continually improved by skilled and well-resourced library personnel.

To further these ends, MSU Libraries should invest in discovery systems that effectively and efficiently match users—ranging from first-year students to expert researchers—to resources in a wide array of formats supplied by a wide array of providers. This is, and will always be, a complex and shifting challenge. It is, therefore, necessary that we better understand users’ interactions with our discovery tools, especially those of our undergraduate students, in order to identify areas of dissatisfaction and impediments to successful discovery. This improved understanding will allow us to address weaknesses in our systems’ design, integration, and operation. User experience research and testing will be vital, as will the experience of librarians who daily interact with our students and faculty.
Recommendations

• Devise and conduct a discovery process audit for a selection of current resources and tools; leverage audit insights to make improvements, including the incorporation of proactive usability testing and student-focused assessment

• Ethically assemble data on discovery system usage that will inform iterative improvements

• Assess efforts to push library discovery onto the web, including embedded structured data, publishing linked data, and leveraging Wikipedia and social media; consider ways to scale these efforts and incorporate them into library instruction

• Hold metadata to high standards and integrate bridges to digital resources in physical collections (especially exhibits)

• Identify and progress in areas where MSU Libraries and the profession can be more inclusive and accessible with regard to their metadata and discovery systems; ensure that collections supporting diversity and inclusion are appropriately discoverable and accessible

• Broadly support interconnected, serendipitous discovery across all physical and digital collections

• Maintain commitment to hiring, training, and supporting staff with skills that support discovery

• Build ways to routinely collaborate across divisions on discovery efforts (e.g., supporting and recognizing experimentation)
To provide our students with an exceptional library, cultivating an exceptional staff is critical. After all, the services, collections, and systems we support are only as good as the care and attention of the people standing behind them. And one key way to improve the care and attention of staff is to more deeply invest in staff members’ happiness and satisfaction in the workplace. Happy workers, briefly put, are more productive workers. The MSU Libraries must remain committed to fostering the kind of positive working environment that attracts the best candidates—and better still, the kind of environment that retains them upon their arrival.

In pursuit of this environment, efforts to improve communication, collaboration, and how we value staff could go a long way. These are daunting challenges to be sure, and these are challenges commonly cited in organizations of all sizes. We must not be discouraged by a need for improvement, nor should we be discouraged to see these same needs surface in any future assessments. But to do nothing is to miss the point. The important thing is to try continually—a course far more likely to result in progress than is simply brushing them aside as unsolvable. So while these challenges may seem intractable, addressing them head-on will help to make MSU Libraries the best library work experience in the Big Ten Academic Alliance.
Recommendations

• Hire an independent third party to conduct an analysis of the staff experience
• Foster a top-down commitment to sharing knowledge at all levels; enlist an outside organizational expert to review internal communication methods, and/or form an internal communications committee to share information across the organization
• Promote professional development opportunities for all staff at a high level
• Develop a minimally mediated peer-to-peer staff recognition program that facilitates frequent, fast, and easy recognition; student workers should also be part of an incentivized recognition program
• Create a more in-depth or extended onboarding experience for new hires, librarians and staff alike
• Reevaluate the organizational structure of the library to better integrate new positions, service points, and initiatives
During our meetings, the MSUL Visioning Task Force often expressed the need for an ongoing, iterative process for visioning, not just for the Libraries as a whole, but for each unit within MSUL. Visioning should be done continuously and at each level to ensure that the Libraries are engaging in proactive leadership, and to assert ourselves on the forefront of academic libraries at major research institutions.

One final recommendation from the task force is to create a standing Visioning Committee to review, assess, and revise this report every two to three years. The committee should revisit the report to see which recommendations have been addressed, which need to be updated or revised, and if new recommendations should be added. The committee also needs to encourage visioning at all levels by providing a structure in the annual Goals and Objectives for each unit. In order for the MSUL to fulfill the world grant mission of our university, to advance scholarship on our own campus community, and to continue to provide the best support and services to our students, ongoing visioning is a vital component and one that can have a positive impact on our university.

The task force would like to thank the many librarians and staff who helped with this process by providing feedback to questions to inform our themes, serving on sub task groups to create recommendations, and for moral support when the task force needed reassurance moving forward. This report was written and compiled by the members of the task force, but could not have been completed without the assistance of our hardworking colleagues, and we hope we have rewarded those efforts in this document. The MSU Libraries are a strong institution thanks to our staff, librarians, and leadership within and outside the Libraries, and we hope this vision report reflects that strength and provides a scaffold as we venture into the future.
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