Designing library services based on user needs: new opportunities to re-position the library

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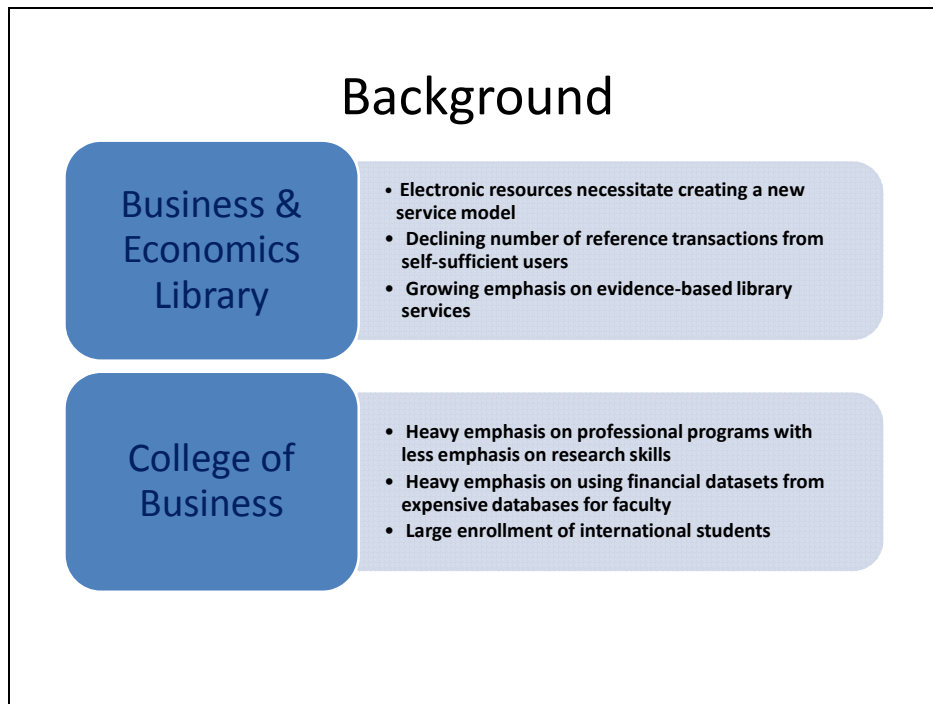| Meeting:	202. Reference and Information Services

Abstract

Providing proactive library services requires careful examinations of current capabilities, user needs, and the direction for the future. In an environment where users already feel satisfied and content with current services, libraries must start developing an innovative and sometimes a radical approach to reach out to users with new services. To do so, libraries should have a mechanism to monitor user needs which change continuously and ability to network with other campus units to meet their needs and expectations. The presenter has collaborated with several colleagues at the career service office to offer programs on obtaining jobs and understanding the job markets in various industries. Especially noteworthy in this approach was that the presenter's role was not limited to simply offering information resources to students. Rather, the author was regarded as a partner of the career service office and offered workshops and seminars that discussed how to tailor individuals' resumes and cover letters based on the information that they acquired. The presenter was concentrating on "how to apply information" to individual situations, rather than simply "how to find information."

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The theme for the 75th IFLA General Conference, "Libraries create futures: building on cultural heritage," is an excellent reflection of the current state of libraries in various settings. Libraries are now faced with unprecedented challenges to the extent that the survival of libraries often becomes an issue for discussion. In this respect, it is very critical to understand that libraries must create their own futures before other forces push libraries to select one from only few options. Sometimes it requires a radical departure from traditional library services, but creating bright futures while maintaining rich cultural and education heritage is indeed possible.

The presenter has proposed a model of libraries as proactive partners of their constituencies during the satellite meeting for the IFLA Management & Marketing Section in 2005. Since then, the presenter has refined the definitions of this model and applied it to developing new programs to proactively pursue opportunities and create the future for the Business & Economics Library at the University of Illinois. This presentation will discuss how the library has identified a new service opportunity and established its new service process.

Background

Business & Economics Library	• Electronic resources necessitate creating a new service model • Declining number of reference transactions from self-sufficient users • Growing emphasis on evidence-based library services
College of Business	• Heavy emphasis on professional programs with less emphasis on research skills • Heavy emphasis on using financial datasets from expensive databases for faculty • Large enrollment of international students

The Business & Economics Library at the University of Illinois serves over 3,000 students and faculty at the College of Business as well as other researchers in other disciplines on campus. In recent years, the library has aggressively sought to transform itself from a place of books and for study to a service point – both physical and virtual – for business-related fields with electronic resources.

Various factors, which are also applicable to other libraries, have forced the library to change its strategies on collection management and reference services. The rapid decline in book and journal circulation posed the question if the library's current physical space was effectively being used and if the current investment in print journals was justifiable. The pedagogical requirements for the business education changed very rapidly that most graduate-level courses required large datasets and commercial research reports for analysis and decision-making skills. While historical documents were still needed for doctoral students and some faculty members, the dominant information requirement for business was quick and convenient access to large financial datasets and expensive research reports from consulting firms and market research vendors.
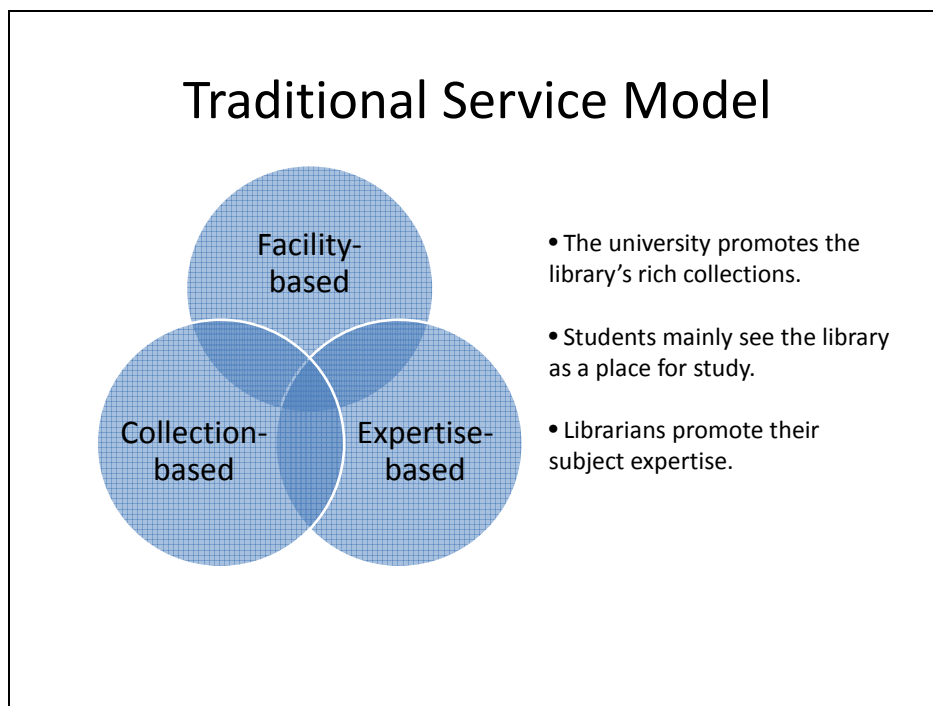
Furthermore, the decline in traditional reference services was evident. Since most resources became electronically available, users increasingly became self-sufficient in searching for information, although they did not necessarily recognize their lack of information searching competencies. The growing emphasis on evidence-based librarianship led the library to question how the library should re-design its services as most statistics on the use of the library was declining.

At the same time, the College of Business was also undergoing significant changes in its pedagogy. The College of Business placed a heavy emphasis on professional programs such as

the Master of Business Administration, Master of Finance, and Master of Accounting, which required little research skills. Students were trained to analyze data to solve business problems, and many of them worked with case studies selected by their instructors. Their programs did not involve additional research in general.

When faculty requested having access to some business databases, most of them were usually prohibitively expensive and complex to use. While general business databases for business articles and some basic datasets were available, faculty often requested specific databases that the library could not afford.

The unique demographics of the College of Business also played a role in prompting the library to re-design its services. The College of Business enrolled a high number of international students each year, and the percentage of international students actually had consistently been between 55% and 65%. This inhomogeneous group brought widely different library experiences from their home countries, and meeting their needs posed a great challenge.

Traditional Service Model

Facility-based

Collection-based

Expertise-based

- The university promotes the library's rich collections.

- Students mainly see the library as a place for study.

- Librarians promote their subject expertise.

Once the library decided to explore options for new service models, the first task was to assess the traditional and current service models. The library's services mainly consisted of three areas: facility-based, collection-based, and expertise-based. Although all service areas were dependent of one another, many service programs could be grouped into three separate categories.
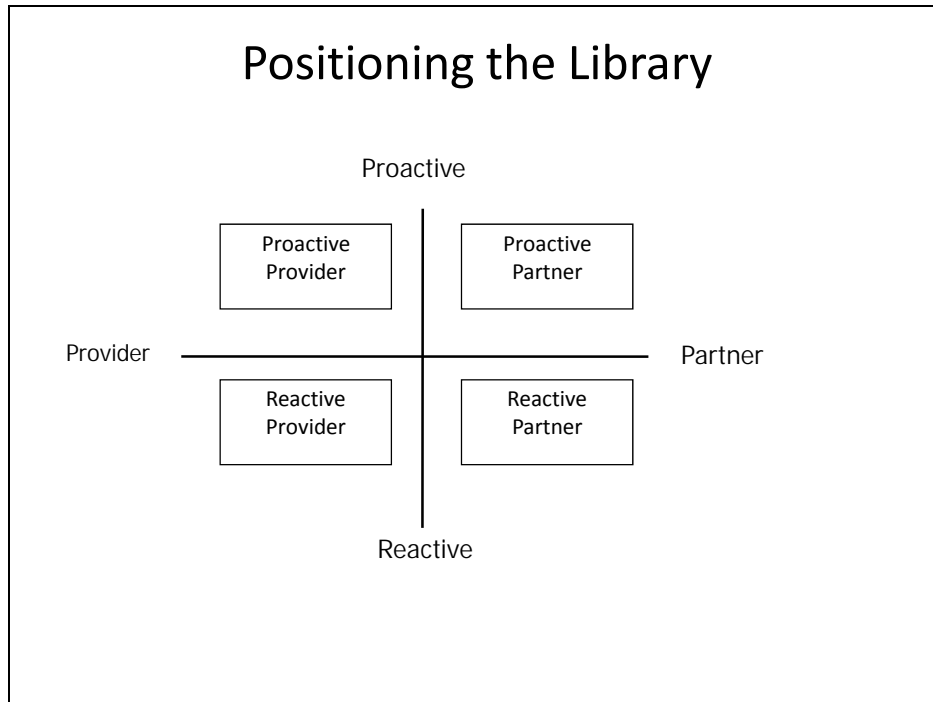
Providing space for study and group meetings represents the primary facility-based service, in addition to housing print materials on site. The presenter's previous research revealed that business students identified this facility-based service as the most critical service for them. It also showed that business students did not show strong adherence to their subject library; in

other words, they would choose to go to other libraries on campus with better physical facilities for their individual and group studies.
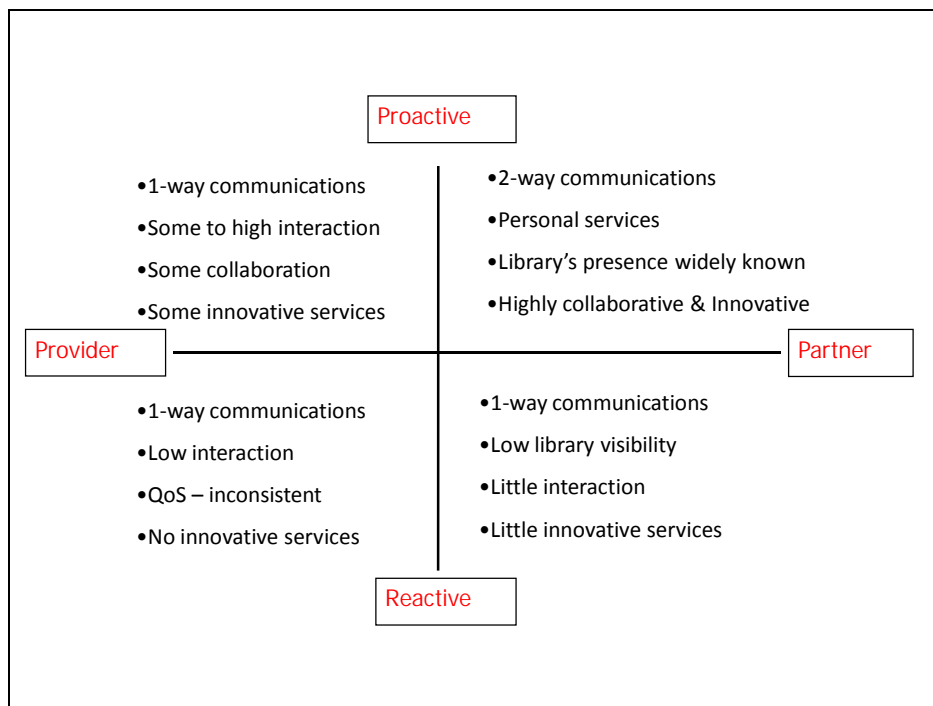
Collection-based services are perhaps best aligned with traditional library perceptions. Research libraries especially are often ranked based on the size of collections and collection budgets. Libraries without collections are unthinkable, and, as such, collection-based services can be considered as the core of any library services. Libraries with unique holdings and archives can easily prove their value to their constituencies, and thus, most, if not all, libraries place great emphases on their collections in their promotion and marketing efforts.

Expertise-based services may imply diversely different library services. Reference services probably best represent an expertise-based service especially for research libraries. Research librarians at universities are generally considered as subject specialists with advanced degrees in their fields in addition to library science degrees. They demonstrate their expertise through assisting faculty and students with complex research projects. Their subject expertise becomes even more important than ever as users no longer contact reference librarians with questions that can easily be answered on their own using the Internet, and many business databases require advanced knowledge in finance, accounting, and statistics. The presenter discovered that the time spent per each reference question increased dramatically, which might reflect the fact that the nature of reference questions was quickly changing.

As the library assessed its current core value based on these three services, it recognized a discrepancy in terms of significance for different stakeholders. The University of Illinois had aggressively promoted its library system for its collections – it had maintained its top status among public universities with its holdings. Students, however, mainly saw the library as a place for study and demand even more facilities for individual and group study. Librarians, while proud of the heritage as the top research library based on the collection number, greatly sought to assert their value as subject experts and, therefore, expertise-based service was highly important for their professional achievements. This apparent conflict of interests further complicated the library's effort to identify its future value and direction that it should.

Positioning the Library

Proactive

| Proactive Provider | Proactive Partner |

Provider ——————————————— Partner

| Reactive Provider | Reactive Partner |

Reactive

Given the complexity of such mixed messages of the library's value, the library then needed to clearly define how it should be positioned for its future. The presenter introduced a model of library positioning during the satellite meeting for the IFLA Management & Marketing Section in 2005. This model consisted of four quadrants, each representing a unique library positioning. The four positioning strategies are: proactive partner, proactive provider, reactive partner, and reactive provider. The vertical line measures the degree of being proactive in terms of marketing and building relationships with users or constituencies, while the horizontal line differentiates the library as a partner of its constituency with active collaboration or as a provider for its constituency's demand with little collaboration.

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                          ┌─────────┐
                          │Proactive│
                          └─────────┘

•1-way communications              •2-way communications
•Some to high interaction          •Personal services
•Some collaboration                •Library's presence widely known
•Some innovative services          •Highly collaborative & Innovative

┌────────┐                                          ┌───────┐
│Provider│                                          │Partner│
└────────┘                                          └───────┘

•1-way communications              •1-way communications
•Low interaction                   •Low library visibility
•QoS – inconsistent                •Little interaction
•No innovative services            •Little innovative services

                          ┌────────┐
                          │Reactive│
                          └────────┘
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Based on this model, the library sought to assess its current position and determine whether it needs a different positioning or should maintain the current positioning to create its future.

Proactive Partner: The library in this quadrant enjoys high visibility to its constituency. The constituency actively seeks the library for collaboration, and the library also maintains close communication channels with the constituency. The library is widely seen as a critical component by the constituency for its success.

Proactive Provider: The library actively and consistently communicates its value to the constituency. Although not as high as the library positioned as the proactive partner, the level of interaction with the constituency is relatively moderate or high. The constituency seeks the library for assistance; however, the library is not recognized as the core component for its success.

Reactive Partner: While the constituency seeks the library for collaboration and assistance, the library does not actively market its value and services. Reasons for being reactive in serving the constituency can vary. Mostly, it may have insufficient resources, both personnel and budgetary, which can prevent the library from committing its resources to be a core collaborator.

Reactive Provider: Neither the constituency nor the library communicates with each other on a regular basis. The constituency does not regard the library as a critical factor in achieving its goal, and the library also does not have enough resources to support the constituency. The library only responds to infrequent and irregular requests for materials from the constituency.

Creating a Value Proposition (1):
Where does the library want to go?
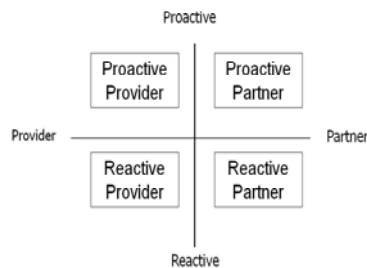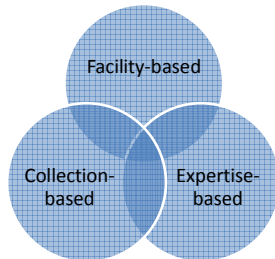
The library's strategic direction:
1. Expertise-based service
2. Proactive partner

After reviewing the results from various surveys including LibQual and other short questionnaires, the library determined that it was currently positioned in the proactive provider quadrant. It was evident that the interactions with faculty and students at the College of Business increased over the years, which led to the increased visibility of the library. However, the library could not confidently state that the College of Business regarded the library as a critical partner for the College's success yet.

The library concluded that it should find ways to move from being a proactive provider to a proactive partner of the College of Business. In order to re-position itself, the library needed to create a value proposition that would present a clear and compelling message to the College of Business. Furthermore, the library determined that the decreasing use of its collection and physical space could not be the basis of the new service model. Therefore, the library's new service model will be expertise-based.
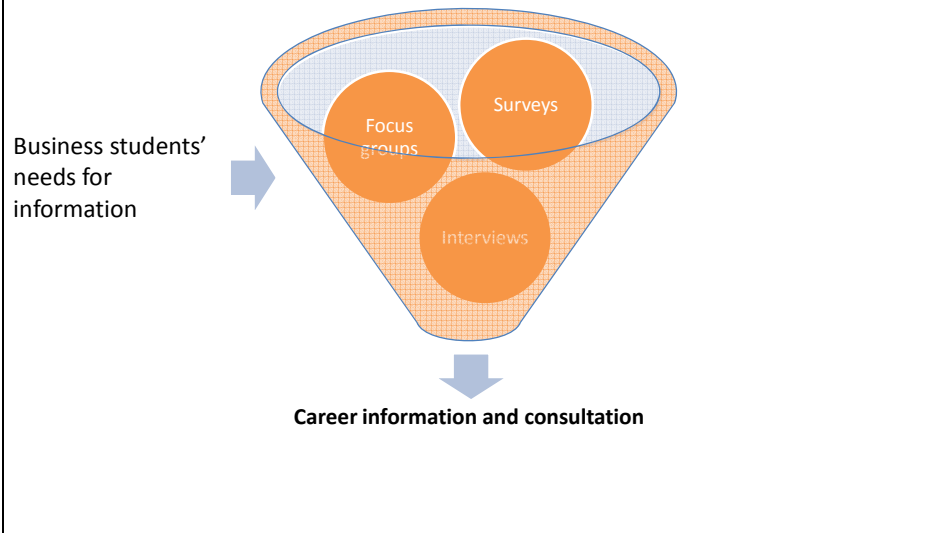
The next step was to understand the value proposition of the constituency to its own clients. Without knowing what value the constituency seeks to deliver to its clients, the library's value proposition can simply be irrelevant. To understand the value proposition of the College of Business, the library had used various methods: surveys, focus groups, interviews, and observations. After extensive analysis of the data collected, the library concluded that securing a job was the primary goal of business students. The College of Business was especially investing its resources in career assistance, since the job placement rate was one of the most critical factors in determining the rankings of business schools. An area where the library could contribute to the success of the College of Business was providing relevant and up-to-date information related to career.

Creating a Value Proposition (3):
Where does value hide?

- The success factor for the professional programs (e.g. MBA) depends on job placement.
- Students demand focused and filtered information in job search process.
- Students can find information but do not know how to interpret and apply information.
- The career services office does not have adequate knowledge in applying vast amount of information to each student's unique situation.

However, simply providing career-related information was not a compelling value proposition, since the library had already been covering career as one of its service areas. It needed some further examinations to identify how to create a value. Results from surveys and interviews revealed that students often rely on the Internet to find information about the companies to which they apply, and they demanded focused and filtered information pertinent to their own personal situations. In other words, they needed to know how to apply information, rather than how to find information. Moreover, the career service office lacked knowledge in using various information resources. The office concentrated its effort in recruiting companies to come to the campus and advising students on how to write resumes and cover letters. The office lacked time and personnel to advise all students on applying information effectively to their personal needs in order to improve their resume writing and preparing for interviews.

Creating a Value Proposition (4):
Can the library deliver the value?

- The library assessed its capabilities if it can create an opportunity for a new service:

  – Personnel: librarian with extensive corporate experience and hiring experience.

  – Resources: electronic databases pertinent to career development.

  – Connection: partnership potential with key stakeholders.

The library identified the need for guidance in applying information to individual needs as an area where a value can be created. Determining that the library can deliver the value, however, was necessary, since the library could face losing its credibility if the promise of delivering the value was not kept. In terms of personnel, the library had a librarian who had extensive corporate experience and student hiring experiences. This librarian then examined electronic resources that would be necessary to initiate individualized career advice and determined that the library had adequate resources. Lastly, the library explored a partnership potential at the College of Business to start this new service, since this partnership would create credibility to students. The library identified and connected with key personnel at the career service office; they welcomed the idea and became the advocate of this new service.

New Service Model: *Career Consultant*

- In the past, the library did support career-related research services.
- The new model proposes the librarian to become a consultant (proactive partner) rather than a resource pointer (reactive provider) in career research.
- This new proposed role suggests moving from collection-based service to expertise-based service.

The library finally constructed a new service model with a value proposition. This model proposed that a business librarian would serve the students at the College of Business as a career consultant who would provide individual counseling on identifying relevant information and applying such information to personal situations. In the past, the library provided resources for students to use (i.e. reactive provider), but it now sought to engage with students in their career research process. This model also suggested that the new service model was expertise-based rather than collection-based.

In this new service, the librarian establishes an ongoing relationship with each student throughout his or her program. The librarian initially spends a significant amount of time understanding the student's background and career goal. The librarian then works with the student not only finding information but applying it when writing resumes and cover letters and also preparing for interviews. After having done company and industry research together, the librarian and the student modify the contents of resumes and cover letters. Once the student receives an offer for an interview, the librarian works with the student in preparation for interview questions based on personal background and information gathered from research. The librarian' role in the past was a career resource finder, but this new service model proposes the librarian to become a career consultant, a step further than being a resource guide.

Radical Departure or Logical Evolution?

- **The librarian establishes a personal relationship with each student throughout his/her program.**
- **The librarian knows personal background and career aspiration for each student.**
- **The librarian helps apply information to each student's unique situation.**

Resource guide → Resource counselor → Career consultant
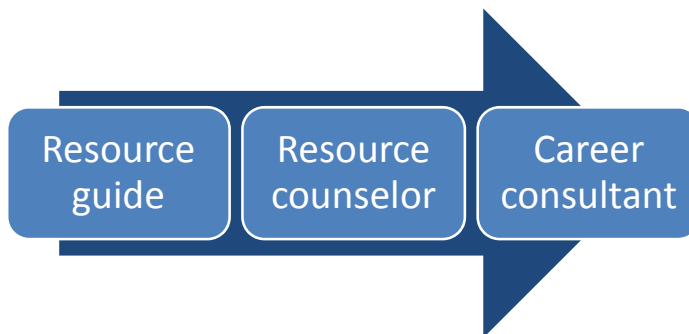
An argument can be raised for this new role: Is this what a librarian at a research library should be doing? In this particular case, there actually were some discussions even among librarians as to a proper role description in this new service. Although the career service itself had never objected to this model where the librarian assumed much more responsibilities for students than providing information upon request, some librarians felt uncomfortable with the fact that the library might cross the boundary between the career service office and the library. The library answered these two key questions:
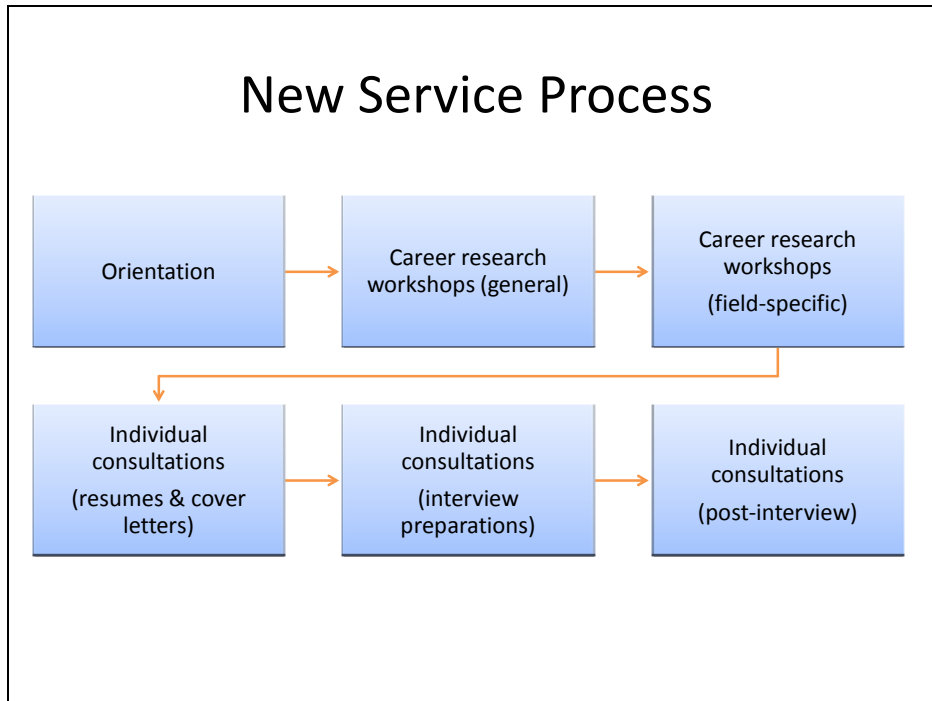
1. Is the library entering the domain of the career service office?

The library will share the service responsibility with the career service office. In fact, the career service office has felt the need to offer similar services but has not been able to do so due to many reasons. Also, the career service office can concentrate on recruiting companies to visit the campus and provide general career guidance for students. Instructing students individually with research poses a heavy workload for them, and they also lack the expertise in using information. The library will be their collaborator and partner.

*2. Is the library qualified to offer such services?*

The library would not have initiated offering this service, if it did not have appropriate expertise internally. The library hires business subject specialists who have corporate and hiring experiences, and the current business librarian brings such experiences from global corporations. This is an opportunity where the strategic hiring of the library can create a compelling value.

In order for the library to create its future, however, the library must be bold and open to a radical departure from traditional service models as long as it does not completely erase its heritage or core mission. The library was confident that the new service was both an evolution of its past services and also a radical approach to meet the demands of user needs.   As many libraries explore new opportunities to create their futures, this same question will inevitably be raised repeatedly. Creating a clear and compelling value proposition would be the starting point of examining the validity and viability of radically different services from the past.

New Service Process

Orientation	Career research workshops (general)	Career research workshops (field-specific)
Individual consultations (resumes & cover letters)	Individual consultations (interview preparations)	Individual consultations (post-interview)

The new service model for career research consisted of six stages. First, all new students enrolled at professional programs were required to attend a business research workshop led by the business librarian. This workshop was aimed at introducing students to business electronic resources available on campus. After this workshop, the business librarian hosted a career research workshop for students in various disciplines, and it covered electronic resources that might be helpful for career research. It was followed by another workshop later which would focus on specific job categories such as careers in accounting, investment banks, corporate finance, and consulting. Once those workshops were completed, students were encouraged to meet with the business librarian individually to discuss strategies for further career research preparation. The business librarian met with students through appointments and held a series of individual sessions to understand each student's background and career aspiration. These individual sessions helped establish close relationships with students and greatly helped the business librarian identify information needs for students as they began to write resumes and cover letters. The business librarian helped them effectively use information from multiple resources and personalize such information, so that their resumes and cover letters would become focused and highly relevant to the companies and industries to which students were applying. Those who succeeded in receiving interview offers then contacted the business

librarian again to prepare for interviews. The business librarian coached the students on how to answer questions related to their preparedness to work on the desired industry and how they could contribute to the companies based on research results and personal background. Finally, those who failed to receive job offers contacted the business librarian and work on improving their application materials. Throughout this process, the business librarian would establish very close relationships with students, and many of them later expressed great appreciation and even become advocates for the library. The appendix to this article will provide a short illustration of an actual case where a struggling student successfully obtained a job and became an advocate of the library as a result.
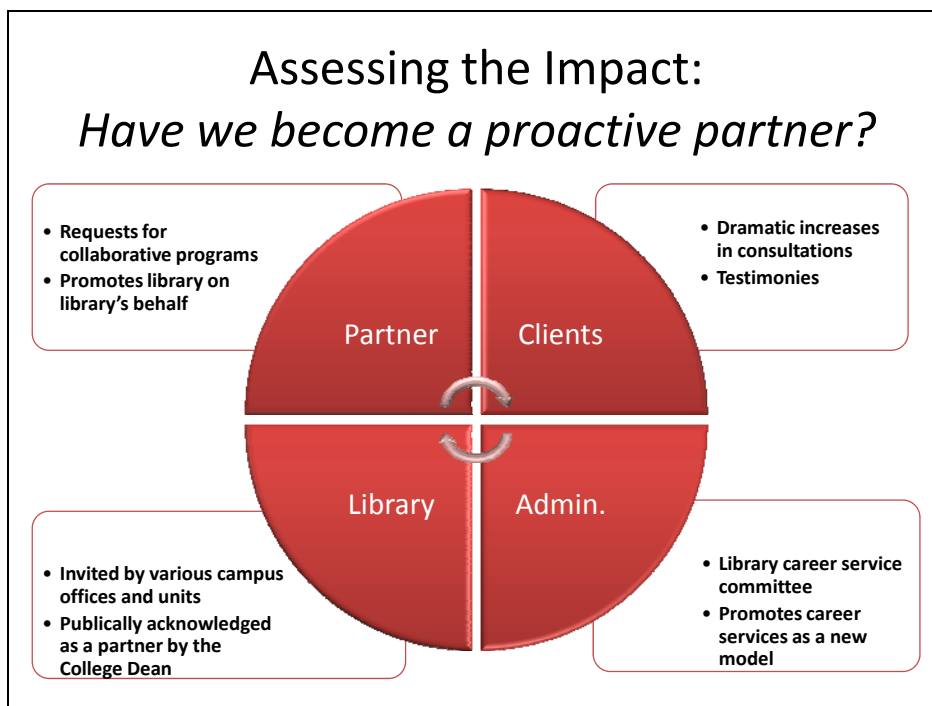
Assessing the impact of this new service was indeed an important component in the effort to re-position the library as a proactive partner. Developing a quantifiable contribution was not an easy matter, since there were undoubtedly many factors that helped students obtain job offers. Thus, the library used the following methods to assess the impact of the new service:

Partner: The career service office was the partner to implement this new service. The library interviewed the Associate Director and received a very positive feedback. In fact, the Associate Director became proactive in expanding the service scope and promoting this service to students. The Associate Director advocated this service to other campus units, and, as a result, the business librarian was invited to multiple campus events to speak about applying business information to personal job search strategies.

Clients: Students who received assistance from the library expressed their feedbacks in various ways. Most often, they recommended other students contact the business librarian and receive personal assistance. Since the initial introduction of this service, the number of requests for individual consultations increased dramatically year over year.

They also testified great satisfaction through testimonies via newsletters and letters. Interestingly, those who had received individual consultations also became frequent library users for other purposes. They realized benefits of library services which they would not easily have easily recognized otherwise.

Library: The business librarian became well recognized on campus as a specialist in the field of career research. Many campus units and student services offices invited him to train their staff and also to offer campus-wide workshops. The highlight was the invitation from the College of Business to sit as an expert panelist along with corporate executives to advise all business students in finding jobs during the economic downturn. This event was broadcast via various media including public televisions and newspapers.

Administration: The library administrators were also considered as important stakeholders in this effort. The administrators recognized the impact of the new service and launched a committee to explore expanding this service to other subject libraries or library system-wide. The administrators also publically recognized this service as an innovative new service model.

Become a Proactive Partner: *Key Factors*

- Continuous examination of user needs via various methods
- Aligning the value proposition to meet the goals of the client organization and the library.
- Careful and realistic examination of the library's capabilities.
- Winning the support from your partners.
- Delivering what you promise with consistency.
- Willing to change and being aggressive.

In re-positioning the library as a proactive partner, key factors have contributed to the successful implementation of this new service.

- The library continuously monitored changing user behavior and needs over an extensive period of time. This helped recognize the gap between current library services and actual user needs.

- The library sought to align the value proposition with that of its main constituency. In doing so, the library's new service could help the constituency meet its goal as well.

- Recognizing an area of opportunity was not enough. The library had to examine its capabilities in personnel, resources, and connection carefully to make sure that it can deliver what it promises.

- Establishing a firm partnership was a crucial factor, because the partner, the career service office in this case, had a wide recognition among students, and the survey revealed that students had the most frequent contact with this office. Winning their support played a key role.

- Although the library initially had to struggle with questions on the definition of librarians' roles in research libraries, it quickly decided to move aggressively and explore what opportunities it could seize. As a result, the library could enter a new frontier and gain reputation for excellence.

The library now confidently concludes that the effort to re-position the library as a proactive partner of the College of Business has proved to be a success. Waiting for others to define the future for the library may lead to the loss of the library brand and push the library to have a marginal and limited role.

Appendix: Case Study

Below is an illustration of a case how an international business student worked with the business librarian to re-formulate his job search strategy and successfully landed a position at a global consulting firm.

1. Being lost in the State of Confusion
- Kim from South Korea was enrolled at the Master of Accounting program.
- He sought to work for a leading accounting company in the U.S.
- He had no previous experience with accounting but some management experience.
- His resume and cover letter were seen too general and unfocused.
- He was advised to contact the library for help after a series of unsuccessful applications.

2. Personalizing Information
- The librarian had extensive interviews to understand his background and career goals.
- The librarian identified several resources to understand the company and the industry environment.
- The librarian worked with him to re-write his resume and cover letter to reflect the needs of the company and his qualifications.
- The librarian then offered a mock interview to determine if he truly understood what contributions he could bring to the company based on his research on the company and industry environment.

3. Becoming a Library Advocate
- Kim was offered an auditor position at one of the world's largest accounting firms.
- He commented that the help from the library was the most critical and relevant in securing his job. He felt "well-prepared" throughout the application process thanks to the careful preparation with the assistance from the business librarian.
- He is now partly involved with recruiting students from the campus and advises students to seek assistance from the library early in their programs.