



Access Service Unbound: A Customer-Focused Service Model for the 21st Century

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Access Service Unbound:

A Customer-Focused Service Model for the 21st Century

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ABSTRACT

Following a supply chain model, appropriated from the business world, a public four-year institution dismantled its Access Services Department by limiting physical item processing tasks, delinquent account management, and the Circulation Desk, redoubling its efforts to focus on customer service by offering a “roving” model of customer service. This newly reformed Public Services Department offers self-checkout options in addition to these aforementioned changes. Users depend on access to course materials, technological equipment, and ILL/Reserves items. This paper describes how this library leveraged project management to smooth the transition of changes in responsibilities and offer excellent access despite the new format.

KEYWORDS

Access Services, Organizational Change, User Experience, Supply Chain

1 Introduction

While users continue to depend on being able to receive their course materials, requested books, technological gadgets, Reserves, and ILL materials on time, the contemporary academic library must be nimble enough to anticipate future needs, develop more streamlined services, and help transition its librarians and staff into their shifting roles and responsibilities. The academic library must adapt its public services and user engagement strategies to meet the changing needs of the 21st century academic community.

2 The Project

The Georgia Institute of Technology (Georgia Tech) Library serves just under 30,000 students in a STEM-based, four-year, public, residential campus environment situated in midtown Atlanta. It is part of the University System of Georgia. The Library, which boasts about 90 employees (including faculty librarians who are non-tenure-track, and staff), has been undertaking a major reconsideration of its programs, services and outreach as part of the “Library Next” initiative.

Library Next encompasses a more proactive, retail-based approach to service and tries to offer an enticing answer to 21st century users who divide their time and study space choices between the campus library, Starbucks, the student center, and even the new learning commons building situated adjacent to the library. While users - including faculty, graduate students, undergraduate students, alumni, and visitors - continue to enter the recently renovated library spaces, their activities within the spaces have drastically changed when considered in comparison to decades past. Circulation of print volumes are decreasing, whereas digital downloads are increasing.

In direct response to lower print circulation, Georgia Tech partnered with Emory University, a private university located in Decatur, Georgia, to create the Library Services Center (LSC) which is a shared facility, located in Atlanta geographically situated between the two institutions. The LSC opened in March 2016 and offers state-of-the-art, high-density storage that houses 95% of Georgia Tech’s print collection and a smaller fraction of Emory’s lower-circulating items.

The advent of the LSC and the sharing agreement with Emory necessitated a reconsideration of how services are offered. Whereas “Access Services” was once a stand-alone department with dedicated librarians, the new model requires a more matrix-style organization with continuous communication between many different departments to ensure excellent customer service. The LSC as well as the Library Records Center (LRC) and finally, the “Library Store” which is the ultimate place of fulfillment within the Georgia Tech Library need to constantly communicate in order to ensure that users are receiving their items within the promised twenty-four-hour turn-around time. In order for this supply chain to operate effectively, librarians and library staff need to function together with the main goal being to meet – or exceed – the users’ needs.

In addition to creating a welcoming environment, the all-new Public Services Department “Library Store” model includes library staff members “roving” to meet users where they are needed, just as much as it anticipates user needs by offering user-friendly, self-service options. It also ushers in a new public service model that is open-ended enough to adapt to user needs as

they evolve over time. Such proactive flexibility is a vital component of the library's outreach to students and faculty and one of the hallmarks of Library Next.

By foregrounding roving staff near the main entrance of the library, rather than sequestering them behind the Circulation Desk, it helps to build deeper relationships with users and this, in turn, facilitates more meaningful chances for Library involvement in the research process at an early stage. This type of proactive customer service means that users who may not have in the past approached the service desk because it meant uprooting themselves from where they were working now have the opportunity to interact with library staff who are in their spaces ready to give them the help they need.

While the immediate needs of the users are getting met via a new public service model, more of the traditional Access Services "processes" are distributed to other units within the library. As such, many of these activities now happen at the LSC and LRC. Distributing those responsibilities required a systematic communication tool and a comprehensive knowledge of the duties performed in the previous Access Services Department. Implementing a ticketing system and finding synergies in the types of tasks necessary to run an Access Services operation and utilizing current department functionalities and skills was important for the transition to the new Supply Chain service model.

Before the Library Store came into existence, members of the Public Services Department were responsible for processing tasks which included banding ILL books, scanning sections of requested books for electronic delivery, and the circulation of DVDs. The dean of the Georgia Tech library desired a separation between the "processing" side and the "fulfilment" side of library operations.

As would be expected, members of the Public Services Department had many adjustments to make to their changing roles. Many members of the team had been long-term employees who suddenly experienced a major shift in their day-to-day duties. This caused stress and an identity shift as the Reserves unit, previously under the Public Services Department moved to the LRC and ILL moved to the LSC. Team members missed seeing and interacting with their colleagues and communication became more critical as they worked to not miss a request or leave a user's need unfulfilled.

This Supply Chain splits the once Access Services Department into a triangular relationship between Technical Services, an off-site storage facility, and logistics i.e. stacks maintenance, while maintaining a close relationship with Public Services, operating as the storefront to the supply chain services provided. Maintaining this delicate relationship requires work from all units involved.

The Georgia Tech Library's model for reimagined access services took careful planning, many hours of dedicated logistical study, and a willingness on the part of librarians and staff – library-wide – to work together to create a supply chain model that more closely resembled the workings of a business than a traditional academic library. The need for understanding and change management applied directly to this project and lessons learned include understanding the intricate and, in many ways, inextricable relationship between processing and fulfillment.

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3 Conclusion