Branch Libraries:
Utilization & Administration
Catherine Dillon
University at Buffalo

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An issue that has been explored in previous decades, centralization versus decentralization, is still very much alive in today’s academic library. In this position paper, this topic is revisited with a focus on the current utilization of and administrative position surrounding branch libraries.

In past literature, organizational bodies have identified the issues surrounding branch libraries and decentralization as a strain on institutional budgets, caused by the perceived duplication of collections and services. The argument joined with the assertion of duplication is the claim of a large shift in academic curriculum that reflects a more inter-disciplinary focus campus-wide. Now nearly forty years later the inclusion of branch libraries in academic literature highlights them as being a necessity of institutions to provide sufficient facilities, equipment, and communication tools to students of distance learning programs.

Since the advent of the branch library in modern academic settings, they have been subjected to rigorous assessment and review. “Conducting a review of academic branch libraries may arise from institutional or departmental annual reviews, accreditation processes, or changes in academic programs and curricula. More often than not, however, serious reviews are undertaken for financial reasons, with an eye towards cost saving” (Madison, 343). Though cost saving and penny pinching is often listed as the catalyst for many reviews that lead to consolidation or closure, it has been shown through history that even during some of the hardest of economic times library systems created new branches; “Even during the Great Depression, when North Carolina experienced especially deep poverty, librarians (UNC) built a national class collection based on gifts, grants, and federal allocations,” (Michalak,421) and later went on to expand into
branch locations. Proof has been provided in other literature examples to disprove that financial strain on an institution should be a deciding factor in an administration’s argument for consolidation or closure. Whether an administration should or should not base their reasoning for consolidation or closure isn’t relevant, but what is important are the other areas of focus that the administration review in the process.

Reviews by nature are not meant to be punitive or disciplinary, but rather are to encourage the ongoing growth and development of services to the academic community. Recommended by the ACRL Guidelines and Standards, administrators should consult and adapt existing reviews to fit their institutional needs. Areas of main focus are briefly addressed in the following table that was taken from “A Model for Reviewing Academic Branch Libraries Based on ACRL Guidelines and Standards”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations for Review Criteria:</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Academic Mission and Strategic Plans</strong></td>
<td>“The academic programs that the branch facility supports are important to the parent institution, as evidenced by its mission statements and/or strategic plans.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic Location</strong></td>
<td>“Either the branch facility and its primary users are physically remote from the central library, or there exist special curriculum, research, and/or accreditation requirements for locating a branch facility in close proximity to the central library.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Budget</strong></td>
<td>“The administrative unit responsible for the branch library has an adequate budget and a stable source of income to support the collections, services, equipment, staffing and physical facilities.”</td>
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| Focus, Accessibility, and Utilization | “• The branch library’s collections and services are heavily used by primary users, and of limited interest to other university populations…
• The branch library’s collections support current and future needs of primary users…
• Physical access to the branch facility’s collections and services is adequate in comparison to the central library…
• Branch library’s services and equipment support current and future needs of primary users and staff…The level of duplication between the branch and central library services is acceptable and in balance with budgetary constraints of the total library system.” |
| Physical Environment | “In general, the branch facility’s physical environment is adequate in comparison to that of the central library. Specific issues to examine are:
• Public eating and shelving space
• Preservation/conservation of materials
• Lighting, heating, ventilation, and cooling systems
• Staff/public safety mechanisms and evacuation procedures
• Security of the facility and collections
• Access to electrical, telephone and telecommunication services” (Madison, 348). |

The gathering of this type of criteria seeks to inform administrative opinions of branch location in their library system. “Although discussions to reconfigure branch libraries are often viewed as the negative outcome of an unhappy set of circumstances, these new branch library iterations
should in fact serve as the impetus to explore the future more aggressively than our bonds of tradition and inertia might otherwise allow” (Crockett, 192).

Beyond the bounds of how branch libraries are being assessed and reviewed, they are now serving other purposes. “In today’s climate, in which we must utilize the newest technologies or lose our relevance, perhaps we can look at the possibility of the centralized book collections (largely in off-campus storage) but centralized subject expertise and access to information, all rendered effective through newer means of storage and communication” (Crockett, 192). Where in the past the concern surrounding branch libraries was centralization versus decentralization, we can see in the literature that the changes in technology and information retrieval have shifted the focus on established and integrated services offered at branch locations. If there are established processes for the storage and retrieval of physical collections and the existence of excellent electronic resources, then the space offered by a branch library only need be welcoming and comfortable. With the development of new processes and uses in library space it has been asserted that, “perhaps the branch library doesn’t need books at all, and perhaps we should continue to discourage the notion that a library is a place defined by books and librarians” and focus on the growing use of libraries offering, “face to face sharing of ideas in a space designed to encourage collaboration that may be the most important element of the new branch library” (Crockett, 193). With an understanding what criteria administrative bodies are reviewing it is important to expound upon the changes in branch libraries and how that is reflected both in today’s branch libraries and the perceived use of branch libraries.
Academic Mission & Strategic Plans

The development of branch libraries appeared in the late nineteenth century, during this time period the libraries central purpose was the storage of collections. It wasn’t until, “the development of subject-specific collections that would support the curriculum of a particular department…was a natural occurrence as colleges and universities expanded, as more specialized academic departments were established, and as graduate programs grew in importance” (Crockett, 191). As branch libraries have grown and collaborative efforts between librarians and departments have become stronger, faculty acknowledges the value and benefit of having a branch library serve their department. “Historically, university libraries have favored the centralized model, but teaching faculty have preferred branch libraries with their strong ties and service to individual departments” (Crockett, 191). As Crockett expresses in her article, it has been the preference of the library to favor centralization, but it can also be surmised from many library mission statements that it is the libraries duty and intention to serve the academic community and meet their research needs.

As information changes, so do the information needs of the academic communities. In response to these changes, some academic librarians are revisiting departmental models that existed in past, the “CLIO (Collegiate Librarian and Information Officer) program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, in which each of the participating librarians has an office in the department, acts as the department’s liaison with the central library, provides information literacy instruction, and promotes the use of electronic resources” (Crockett, 194). This use of a library professional speaks to the changing needs of the academic community. As resources become more subject-specific and the content model shifts from ownership to access,
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Librarians have to find new ways to address the adapting environment. “The evolving national discussion on academic branch libraries is now firmly centered on how well they meet the needs of a primary clientele, how thoroughly they are integrated into the larger library system, and how capably they are managed” (Madison, 350).

**Geographic Location**

The demands of a department paired with geographical separation initiate the need for the establishment of a branch library. Customarily a branch library is developed after a department or organizational body has requested the presence and collaborative efforts of the library to serve a specific population of the academic community. Due to the geographic separation of the branch location the services that are offered to the user are noticeably different, “for the user accustomed to a circulating collection close at hand, a larger library staff, and a larger space, the slimmed down version of the branch library can be viewed as a significant loss” (Crockett, 195). The services offered at the branch may be displayed differently, but it is the libraries duty to make sure that they are comparable to those services that are offered to students at the central library. “In the age of instant access to a library’s holdings through an online catalog, a user’s need for physical closeness to the collection is greatly diminished...The new question for librarians is fast becoming not where information is located, but how quickly can the patron receive it” (Shkolnik, 349).

Geographical location and distance from the central library has also been discussed in academic studies focusing on the communication and collaboration of librarians at multi-campus institutions. It was found that, “distance from the next closest library appeared to be a major
factor in (librarians) feeling isolated from colleagues within one’s own library system only for participants at extremely remote library locations. Thirty-seven percent of respondents whose primary workplace is greater than 100 miles from the nearest library is the system reported feeling isolated Frequently or Very Frequently, as compared to other distances, such as 0-5 miles (21%), 6-10 miles (16%), 11-20 miles (23%), 26-50 miles (16%), or 50-100 miles (20%)” (Bottorff, 349). This study sought to investigate the improvements that could be made in the communication, networking, and collaboration of library systems with multiple branch locations, with the desired outcome to better serve their users. In the study it was also presented by a branch librarian that there was a possibility that librarians in branch libraries could feel overloaded in their research and professional development endeavors, because the sole responsibility of more duties left less time. “The librarian states, ‘Something I feel needs to be examined more thoroughly is the difference in opportunities in smaller branch libraries and increased duties, and yet, we are expected to produce similar levels of service and research for tenure” (Bottorff, 352). In many noted cases it has been found that branch libraries are more readily accepted and utilized by users if the following variables are addressed by the branch library, “the quality and quantity of local electronic resources, the quality and quantity of the newly configured space, the quality of document delivery and similar services, and significantly, the ways in which the transition is handled administratively and politically” (Crockett, 195).

**Budget**

An extensive amount of literature addresses the budgetary restraints that administrations face in the establishment and management of a branch location. Before an administration will
consider using funding from their budget, they need to deem that the academic community would be well served by the addition of a branch location. In this process the administration must assess the complex needs of their academic communities, “branch libraries vary enormously, as do the academic communities in which they reside, and thus no one solution will fit all institutions. The overall size of a campus and the comparative power of various academic departments play key roles in the decision for campuses. In fact, total centralization is probably not possible at a large institution, so very limited number of branches, each serving several related disciplines, can present a workable and effective compromise” (Crockett, 192).

After a library is able to make the determination of the addition of a location is necessary they begin to assess the cost of the facility, staffing, collections, and technology. It was noted in “Branch Libraries in ARL Institutions”, that “maintaining a large number (of branch libraries) can spread library resources thinly, yet many institutions continue to establish new units” (ARL, 1). Strangely enough though an extensive amount of literature reports the exorbitant cost of branch libraries there are a limited number of empirical studies to support claims. “One of the few is a study by Snunith Shoham of the Library School Library at the University of California at Berkeley. He studied the cost of maintaining a departmental library in relation to the costs to the user and the university. In his analysis of the cost of the Library School Library, he estimated that 44 percent of the total labor costs for the library would exist even if it were not a branch. In examining material costs, Shoham concluded that only about 7 percent of the materials cost is for duplication of resources. He also examined users’ costs… and concluded that ‘one would have to impute extremely low values to the hourly value of users’ time for their preferences for a convenient, decentralized provision not to be economically justified, once all costs are taken into account’”(Suozzi, 516).
As information seeking habits change almost daily, the need to use branch locations for the storage and retrieval of physical collections is somewhat a thing of the past. Substantial investments are being made in physical space for face-to-face collaboration; while administrations are weighing the trade-offs of service options, user access, and political campus and administrative concerns. In focusing on these trade-offs administration seeks to reduce costs allowing them to do more with less, “Potential savings generated by more efficient operations could effectively evolve into new revenues. Many of these cost savings would not involve significant new investment and often show immediate results. If you find a way to do something for 50 cents that formerly cost you a dollar you get an extra 50 cents to put to other uses” (Coffman, 4). The article, published in 2006, acknowledges that much of the theory and literature published on branch libraries was from many years in the past, but they still recommend branch libraries as the first place to cut costs. “Libraries could save a chunk of money by operating few, larger branches. Historically, libraries built a lot of small to medium-sized neighborhood branches, because early studies showed that library visits dropped off significantly the farther the library was from the patron’s house. But that added convenience comes at a high price—additional facility costs for rent, utilities, and maintenance. You also have the cost of duplicating a significant portion of the collection already in the main library. More important, you face the cost of duplicating staff at the branches and, since staff accounts for, on average, 65 percent of operating costs of libraries, those costs can add up” (Coffman, 4). The article notes that historically patron usage significantly drops the farther the library is from the patron’s home, but then sites that a major administrative concern should be the cost of duplicating staff at the branch locations. From the noticeable drop off in usage of the main
facility by patrons from a distance, it should be realized that the staff at the main library would likely not have any interaction with these patrons. It should be acknowledged that the creation and staffing of branch locations encourages the usage of the library system of a population that would have otherwise not considered using the services due to distance. This factor should help to ease the focus on duplication of services, as the main campus would have likely never served the patrons at these distances. In the business world they would sight this as the cost of customer acquisition; especially during the inception of a business or the offering of a new product or service customer acquisition costs are expected to be higher.

**Focus, Accessibility, & Utilization**

As stated earlier, the act of information seeking and retrieval is rapidly changing. For an institution to remain relevant to the academic community they must be ready to restructure offered services at a moments notice. The evolution of libraries from collection owners to information providers and how they should manage the transition was addressed in Suozzi’s article, “they must look for ways to promote connections between databases, communication networks, scholarly communication, and clients in order to meet what Dilys Morris has called the “greater need for access, interpretation, and brokering” (Suozzi, 513). New developments in branch libraries are demonstrating a user-centric focus that empowers the user to obtain resources and services at a distance from the main campus. UNC successfully implemented what they consider an outward facing library system which they say, “anticipates altered environments, new user needs and fluctuations in funding levels, and it makes effective changes and adjustments as a natural way of operating” (Michalak, 422). UNC Library was able to take a
traditional construct and mold their library into a system that fit their users’ needs. The debate of centralization versus decentralization was not a focus, but rather the system that supported the user to interact with the collection. “UNC successfully moved more than one million printed volumes from the main library to offsite storage with only a few complaints. People can order these titles online for next-day delivery, again moving traditional functions into the user’s realm and adding to the library’s outward-facing profile” (Michalak, 414). The ability for the UNC Library to move more than a million print volumes demonstrates that users are no longer tethered to the idea of physical collections being in close proximity. The ever-evolving library users’ information seeking behaviors inform the library of what services and resources that are relevant to their needs.

In a study of the information literacy programs offered at a branch library of Indiana University, Pennsylvania at Northpointe, library students sought to compare the access and the specialized patron focus offered at the branch. What the students found was that the same general requirements were applied to the branch library that were created and applied at the main library. The students found this to be a great disadvantage as many of the branches in the system were varied greatly in curriculum and had very specialized programs that would be better served by having site-specific requirements. The students identified specifically that at many of the branches courses were offered in the evening and for students to have access to instruction librarians would have to schedule themselves to be available in the evening or on weekends. To better serve the branch library users, the students helped to garner an instruction session schedule that would coincide with upcoming projects and assignments of high enrollment classes. This study intended to show and was successful at showing that though the population of users at a branch library may be smaller at than the main campus it does not make them and less important;
and with the time and opportunity branch librarians can offer elevated services to the departments and users they serve (Hooks, 2007).

**Physical Environment**

Library literature that explores the “new” branch library focus on de-structuring the classic components of the physical space of a library and are rebranding them as intellectual meeting places. Professionals of the library industry are not unaware of the challenges or repercussions that exist with reorganization, identified in the following excerpt are physical elements that should be considered for a branch library, “it should be as comfortable as possible, with lounge chairs and with the ready availability of food and drink…the presence of computers, presumably with all available library resources and productivity software…the space should include a number of network connections for increasing the number of laptops that users are bringing to libraries” (Crockett, 193). In Crockett another physical element that is addressed is the addition of group study rooms; where libraries of the past sought to house large collections, libraries of the future seek to accommodate more users to better identify and serve their needs.

Just as no two universities are alike, as is the same between libraries, the branch library that may work for one academic community may not serve the purposes of another. In addition to the structure of the library the way a library is regulated in relation to sound and food can greatly alter an environment. The stringent food and sound policies of the past are being handed over for a more relaxed and open environment, allowing students to use the space how they feel comfortable.
Conclusion

The example in the last section outlining the transformation of library policies to fit the needs of users draws a parallel to the initial topic of centralization versus decentralization. The main fear of decentralization by proponents of centralization is the lack of control of decentralized units. As policies become more user-centric and less rigid, branch libraries of the future are proving that focusing on the user is increasing user satisfaction and use of the facilities. “The measure of the library’s success will be gauged by the quality of the books selected; the degree of accessibility offered to the undergraduate, graduate and professor; and the amount of judgment and personality employed in the offering” (Shkolnik, 350). Though administrative opinions and judgments at times of budget cuts are critical, it is the opinion of the library user that are most important in directing and developing services. Branch libraries will exist and adapt, as long as the academic community can demonstrate their importance to the academic mission.
References


