

Highlights of the Library Review

Last October, Syracuse University hosted an external review committee of peers to evaluate the Library. To prepare for the review, the Library conducted a self-study that presented detailed data about Library collections, services, and operations. The review committee members included four directors of academic research libraries and a leader in the academic technologies and research library community.

The full report of the review committee is available online at <http://library.syr.edu/about/PDF/SUL-ExternalReviewReport-2012.pdf>, and the self-study is available in the Dean's office, Bird Library.

In summing up the role of the Library, the November 2012 report stated, "Libraries are aggressive intermediaries and aggregators of information, and, as publishers, are creating new innovative modes of scholarly communication. Libraries are partnering with faculty to expand their educational involvement beyond traditional bibliographic instruction, and to advance operational investigations as research-and-development organizations. Libraries are more entrepreneurial organizations, more concerned with innovation, business planning, competition and risk, leveraging assets through new partnerships to produce new financial resources. Libraries are also increasingly successful information policy advocates seeking through political relationships to influence national and global laws and legislation and to advance the public and scholarly interest."

The report contains 47 recommendations that touch on nearly every aspect of the Library's programs and support. The Library is moving forward with many of these recommendations using existing resources but others require additional funding. The lion's share of the recommendations address the Library's chronic underfunding and the poor state of library facilities.

The Library was especially commended for:

- Appointing a Copyright and Information Policy Adviser, who assists faculty across the campus with copyright issues. He issued a manual on using copyright in teaching.
- Nurturing a vibrant partnership with the SU Press, which is now a part of the Library.
- Completing the South Campus Library Facility, where special collections and less used books and print periodicals are housed.
- Establishing a digital repository called SURface to disseminate SU research and scholarship.
- Building strong communications and advancement programs.
- Increasing faculty and student use of rare books, manuscripts, and other artifacts in the seminar room on the 6th floor of Bird Library.
- Adding convenient services for the faculty, e.g. delivery to offices, and having a corps of knowledgeable librarians.
- Taking a leadership role in accessibility issues related to services.
- Receiving numerous grants, but especially one from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation that has allowed the Library to re-open the Belfer Audio Archive. The grant supports a new director

(jointly appointed as a Newhouse professor) and archivist with continuing funding from the University.

The Library was urged to move forward on:

- Formal assessment of its collections, both print and electronic.
- Establishing deeper relationships with other research libraries in the area, e.g., University of Rochester.
- Enlarging its digital library program.
- Creating multi-media production services.
- Developing a stronger partnership with Information Technology Services.
- Building a rigorous assessment program.
- Continuous training for its new web-scale discovery tool (Summon) that searches numerous resources simultaneously.
- Developing a stronger national profile.

Overall, the report recommended that the library undertake a refreshed visioning process with the campus community and that the academic leadership should begin to view the library as an integral part of the academic enterprise contributing to student success and faculty productivity.

The two most significant areas for improvement are the responsibility of university leadership: 1) correcting the long-term underfunding of the collections budget and 2) improving the physical facilities.

1. Collections budget

The report recommends that the Chancellor, Provost and senior administration “determine a planned and stepped strategy to correct the baseline collection budget deficiency”. It also recommends providing one-time funds for the backlog of electronic retrospective backfiles and journals that have been requested by faculty; increasing base funding for new faculty requests and programs, and allocating special one-time funding to strengthen disciplines in which the collection analysis indicates weakness. Finally, it recommends increasing base funding for special collections that “currently is seriously low compared to peer institutions”, considering a program for one-time funding requests to administration for opportunistic acquisitions; developing a strategy for sustaining the Belfer Archive, and raising funds for collection endowments.

“Academic research libraries are valued by the breadth and depth of the collections and information resources that are available to their users. As the Syracuse Library’s self-study correctly notes, ‘it is immediately clear that when reviewing the collection at Syracuse University that the size of the holdings and the budget are insufficient to meet the needs of a university of this size.’ Even in a bad economy, the Library’s collections collection budget has received good annual increases. These increases, however, cannot correct the inadequate baseline collections budget that has produced years of shallow collection building and library user frustration.”

“Department heads, faculty and graduate students express considerable concern over the ability of the collections to support the academic and research enterprises of the University. They also are very concerned about the senior University administration’s perceived failure to comprehend and address the deficiencies.”

“While many research libraries pay for collections-related services from this budget, they don’t use it for general operations. At Syracuse, this is a practice that must cease, and for this to happen the administration must also focus on the general operations budget inadequacies.”

2. Physical facilities

“The Bird Library, the main library on campus serving undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff has significant facilities problems. It lacks a variety of capabilities considered standard for libraries today and does not meet the norms of other ARL [Association of Research Libraries] social sciences and humanities libraries. It is an unattractive structure, both outside and inside, and the building does not receive adequate services from maintenance crews. Both wireless and wired network services are inadequate to meet user needs and there is a paucity of electrical outlets.”

“The main entrance leads into a Learning Commons, established in 2008. A new café inside the entrance is one of the few bright spots on that floor. Its inviting environment, comfortably configured new furniture, availability of power and wireless signal, make it a very popular spot with students. However, the rest of the furniture on the main floor looks very tired and was not built to accommodate the kinds of technologically intensive, collaborative work that students engage in today.”

“In a future renovation, it could include spaces where faculty or teaching assistants could bring small groups of students for work or consultation. Some specialized facilities, such as media production and presentation practice rooms, could reinforce the capabilities of the Library to support academic work, and subject librarians could be more closely connected with providing services linked to the technologies available in the Commons.”

“The lower level of Bird Library is also part of the Learning Commons. Renovation of this floor began three years ago but was halted due to environmental concerns. The university has been working with government agencies to resolve the issues but appears to be moving at a snail’s pace. The review team has questions as to whether the University administration has placed a high enough priority on resolving this situation so that work can resume.”

“The Carnegie Library renovation will create a traditional quiet reading room. It seems a missed opportunity to renovate a science and mathematics library and not develop some high technology information capabilities. However, the Library lost space in the building and there was an ongoing controversy with faculty as to the utilization of the space. It is evidence, though, of a disjointed building and renovation plan.”

The report ends with a description of national leadership opportunities for the Library that include the Belfer Audio Archive, special collections, the association of the Syracuse University Press and the Library, which together are producing two new online open access journals under a joint imprint. It also mentions developing further the copyright and information policy program and possible alignment with the Law School as well as deeper partnerships with the I-School and Library.

“The review team has identified important strengths in the Syracuse University Library, in particular the services being provided to student and faculty by the Library staff. But there are serious challenges, and the Syracuse Library will not be an effective organization, integral to student success and faculty achievement, unless they are addressed. This will require a revitalized collaboration and consultation among the Library, the faculty, and the senior administration.”