

Designing Library Services to Meet Curriculum Needs

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Library alignment with broader institutional goals helps to ensure the library is meeting the needs of its primary users. Without alignment, a library may offer services that are irrelevant to the institution it serves. Seminaries and theological schools, moreover, have a unique mission in forming pastors, clergy, or religious academics. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to library services in these unique contexts. Alignment with the curriculum and educational goals of the wider institution is paramount. Considering those broader goals, libraries should develop strategic plans or mission statements that clearly and explicitly reference the context of their institution. Not all readers will work at member institutions of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Still, the standards ATS has defined for libraries can provide a helpful starting point for ensuring alignment (ATS Commission on Accrediting 2020, 10).

Standard 6.1 reads as follows: “The library has a clear statement that identifies its purpose and role in the school and the ways

it contributes to achieving the school's educational mission." The library should take care that it contributes specifically to the needs of its users and has a purpose shaped by consideration of institutional priorities. In light of this, a mission statement should serve as the foundation for all service development and subsequent evaluation.

Standard 6.2 further explains how the library ought to be understood as "a central academic resource that enhances the school's educational programs." Library staff should regularly review their services. These reviews should check alignment with the library's mission and with institutional needs, which change over time.

Standard 6.6 expounds on this idea in further detail: "The library offers services that enhance student learning and formation and partners with faculty in teaching, learning, and research." Libraries, responding to the unique needs of theological schools, may offer services that serve both academic and spiritual formation purposes (see Elliott 2006 and Welch 2006 for a classic understanding of libraries serving theological schools).

The ATS standards are clear about the importance of aligning the library with the institution. They can guide any librarian, whether subject to ATS standards or not, toward services that directly support the curriculum, faculty, or student research. When determining whether or how to offer a service or program at the library, librarians would do well to ask how the potential program enhances the educational mission of their institution. Being able to offer a clear connection between the program and the educational need should be a prerequisite for implementing the service. While many standard library services will easily meet these criteria, most may be tweaked to deepen their alignment with one's context and therefore optimize the library's effectiveness. The following sections offer more practical guidance on identifying users' needs.

Identify the Curriculum

So, how does one know their institution's curriculum or primary learning objectives? Not all libraries benefit from clear communication from institutional leadership or teaching faculty, so librarians may lack the necessary knowledge to plan effective services. However, this problem is easily solved: just ask! Typically, schools will have foundational documents, such as academic handbooks or

degree plan outlines, that outline the overall objectives of the curriculum and its general sequence. Similarly, most institutions publicly communicate their missions or have strategic plans available to staff upon request.

In some cases, one may need to simply ask appropriate staff personnel for these documents or for access to institutional databases or learning management systems that include them. Even if this information has not yet reached the library, institutional leadership usually appreciates such efforts. Librarians who seek out these course details show a commitment to understanding user needs. Libraries must “take the initiative in determining what the library has to offer that will help,” rather than assuming others will communicate with the library first (Archambault and Masunaga 2015, 504). Librarians are their libraries’ best advocates. They often need to initiate the work of identifying institutional goals and aligning services, because others may not do so.

Review the Programs

If this knowledge is shared in the form of documents, such as handbooks or strategic plans, librarians should carefully review these materials to ensure accuracy and relevance. In my context as our library’s user services librarian, it was part of my job to support our doctoral students with library programming. However, for several years, I did not fully understand that degree program, its educational delivery format, and the primary sequences of assignments, proposals, and theses. While I was offering a standard suite of library services to this group, I was only able to be more effective in serving these students after I took the time to read and annotate the doctoral program handbook fully and set up meetings with the doctoral program staff. I changed the format and timing of library orientations. I also arranged to receive syllabi, which helped me purchase relevant e-books for distance and hybrid students. Finally, I revised my research workshops to better align with thesis requirements. Now, the students and faculty in the doctoral program view the library as a critical partner throughout the program, from year one to the submission of their theses. I have also been a better steward of my time in offering effective programs and a better steward of our collection development funds to meet their stated needs.

Analyze Course Syllabi

One of the primary methods for understanding an institution's overall curriculum is to analyze individual course syllabi, which is sometimes considered part of a wider process called "curriculum mapping" (see Archambault and Masunaga, 2015; LeMire and Graves 2019, for illustrative studies). These documents provide librarians with essential knowledge about how their users are likely to engage with the library in completing their readings, assignments, and papers. Users' needs will be met most effectively when library services are designed around coursework (Smith et al. 2012). Therefore, it is crucial for the library to acquire and analyze course syllabi. Embedding librarians in faculty meetings or giving them access to the institution's learning management system would be an ideal solution. Librarians can collaborate with department heads or academic affairs directors (or their equivalents) to develop policies for submitting syllabi to the library at the beginning of each academic term. However, librarians can also acquire syllabi by simply asking teaching faculty for them directly. The whole institution benefits when librarians are aware of course content and assignments. Librarians are better equipped to serve students and can allocate resources more effectively for collection development. As a result, a synergy develops between the library, teaching faculty, and the academic office as everyone works toward the shared goal of supporting student learning.

When analyzing syllabi, it is prudent to focus on courses in which library use is most central or on those with the largest number of enrolled students. In both cases, the benefit to the analysis is likely the highest, as librarians can design library services to meet the needs that impact the most students (Locker and Whelan 2024). For example, most theological institutions require students in their early years of study to take larger lecture-style classes that introduce them to biblical studies, theology, or preaching. By analyzing the syllabi for these high-enrollment courses, librarians can design services that effectively reach a large number of students. These courses also generally occur early in the academic program, helping set the tone for later library use.

Some libraries may have existing and long-standing instructional programs or relationships with specific faculty members. Nonetheless, librarians should use the results of their syllabus analysis to revisit the effectiveness of existing sessions and adjust them,

wherever necessary, to be more effective in meeting the institution's broader educational goals. It is possible that existing programs may not be as effective as potential new programs identified through this analysis (Alcock and Rose 2016).

In reading syllabi, librarians can ask questions pertaining to books that will be heavily used across courses, assignments that align well with information literacy workshops and classes, special collections content that will enhance coursework, and research guides that can be developed or updated to support students in specific courses. Reading syllabi can help librarians identify instructional opportunities and, crucially, identify ineffective services or programs (Miller 2019). At my institution, for example, I have categorized classes that require research papers, allowing me to target those students with reference or research consultation services. Similarly, I partner with our rare book curator to reach out to faculty members who teach classes with content that overlaps with the strengths of our special collections. For introductory courses, I contact faculty to offer a brief instructional session on the fundamentals of scholarly research in the field. I often use one or two ACRL Information Literacy Frames to shape these sessions (Association of College and Research Libraries 2016). Indeed, one method of reading through syllabi is to identify the specific information literacy skills required for the successful completion of those courses (Beuoy and Boss 2019; Dubicki 2019). At some institutions, syllabi might contain specific learning outcomes for the course that librarians can leverage in their planning. In all cases, it is crucial to design services that closely align with the assignments and content in the courses; therefore, examining the syllabi is paramount.

Deliver Effective Service

As alluded to, several different service-delivery formats may be practical, depending on the librarian's analysis of the syllabi. One might suggest a library-led instructional session during class time or as an optional supplemental activity for students. Other cases may require an asynchronous service model, by which librarians create videos or guides for students to consult as needed. Alternatively, librarians might offer services that are not explicitly tied to any one specific course but simultaneously meet the needs of several courses, such

as workshops intended to help develop students' writing or research skills more broadly. These sessions could still be timed to coincide with when students are working on major assignments, but they do not need to be done in concert with the teaching faculty for a course. If time allows, mix service-delivery formats across the semester. For example, a library may host some events in person and others online. Similarly, one could ensure instructional content is accessible on the library's website, including recorded videos, as well as live face-to-face events. This increases the chance of meeting students' needs, wherever and however they seek help.

As a final note about effective delivery, for librarians starting this process, it can be tempting to try to offer all kinds of services at once. However, they should carefully plan how much effort or change in job responsibilities any of these proposals might require. It is advisable to change only a few services at a time, allowing users to adjust, while also preventing librarians from becoming overwhelmed by trying to do too much. Effectively planning, implementing, and evaluating the types of services most likely to meet users' needs is a multiyear process that should be consciously planned and sequenced to optimize staff availability. For example, in my own context, our rare book outreach service, in partnership with our rare books librarian, has been very successful. However, in the first couple of semesters, we found ourselves overwhelmed with the amount of work required to plan, curate, and teach each session for several classes. To meet those commitments, I had to neglect some responsibilities. It would have been more prudent to start slowly and build up the rare book class program over the course of several semesters rather than getting burned out at the very beginning.

Measure and Communicate Impact

Librarians who undertake this type of curriculum mapping project can also use the results of their analysis to demonstrate the value of their libraries in support of their institutions' educational goals (Miller 2019). They will be able to point specifically to how services and programs have been designed to meet their users' needs and will eventually have data on how they have evaluated the relative success of those programs. To the latter end, maintaining statistics on participation in these services or programs is one effective way

to quantify their impact. Advises Saunders (2015), “[s]ince academic libraries are essentially cost centers rather than revenue producers, it is especially important that they provide evidence of a return on investment to stakeholders” (290). Similarly, analyzing syllabi can also help librarians uncover how faculty view the library or how faculty expect students to use the library (or not). Understanding how faculty position the library within their syllabi can lead to further outreach opportunities for librarians who partner with faculty to accomplish the shared goal of student learning (Jeffery et al. 2017).

When done well, investing upfront time in analyzing institutional context and mapping out curricular needs benefits everyone. Students are better served, faculty have deeper trust in the library, and the learning institution values the library’s contribution to its educational mission. Librarians, too, will sense a greater sense of fulfillment in doing work that best meets users’ needs. While there is certainly no one-size-fits-all approach, the steps described above can inspire libraries to carefully consider the services they offer. Ultimately, it is the librarian’s unique opportunity and responsibility to implement these strategies in accordance with their institution’s needs.

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