

## Guest Editorial

# “Distinctive Signifiers of Excellence”: Library Services and the Future of the Academic Library



In a recent essay outlining principles for rethinking the future of library collections, Dan Hazen, Associate Librarian of Harvard College for Collection Development, notes that “[research] libraries have traditionally built their reputations on the basis of their collection size and also the depth and breadth of rare book holdings and their special collections.” Even in light of digitization programs allowing broader access to content once considered scarce, he argues, local ownership of “unique artifacts, as well as uniquely comprehensive collections, remain primary measures of quality” among research libraries.<sup>1</sup> One finds a similar sentiment in *Celebrating Research: Rare and Special Collections from the Membership of the Association of Research Libraries*, which called each collection profiled a “distinctive signifier of excellence.”<sup>2</sup> There can be no question that a great library must provide access to great content, but do the seismic changes afoot in the ways in which access may be gained to content (including that found in unique artifacts) require us to ask new questions? For example, when access to content is no longer scarce, what are the *services* that will stand as the “primary measures of quality” and “distinctive signifiers of excellence” in the academic library? What effect might a broader understanding of distinctive services have on our appreciation for a range of libraries beyond those with the largest collections?

In his introduction to *Celebrating Research*, Nicolas Barker wrote that ARL members “want to be known for their

distinctive collections, not by some characteristic shared with every other library.”<sup>3</sup> This is true, but are collections the only characteristic of those libraries that is distinctive? Consider the Office of Digital Scholarly Publishing at Penn State (<http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/odsp.html>), the Library Assessment Program at the University of Washington (<http://www.lib.washington.edu/assessment/>), the Slavic Reference Service at Illinois (<http://www.library.illinois.edu/spx/srs.html>), or the KU Info program at the University of Kansas (<http://kuinfo.ku.edu/>)—each provides a service that I would argue offers a “distinctive signifier of excellence.” Many libraries provide institutional repository services, but do they have a professional development program like the University of Michigan’s Instructor College (<http://www.lib.umich.edu/instructor-college>), or a Copyright Advisory Office like Columbia’s (<http://copyright.columbia.edu/copyright/>)? The needs these services address are common to many libraries, but the services are not. They are distinctive. I maintain that understanding the process by which such distinctive services develop and contribute to the evolving mission of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century research library is as critical to its future as is understanding the environment for resource sharing, the need to rethink retention of print collections, or the challenges inherent in supporting e-scholarship. ARL has not yet chosen to “celebrate” the distinctive services of its member libraries in the way it did their special collections, but

it has taken important steps by including studies of services in its “New Roles for New Times” initiative, and by bringing a services focus to its series of institutional profiles.<sup>4</sup>

Over the past three years, we at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign have conducted an ongoing discussion of services as “signifiers of excellence” on par with our long-time focus on collections. Through the “New Services Models” (NSM) program (<http://www.library.illinois.edu/nsm/>), we have engaged librarians and users in discussions, planning efforts, and change initiatives aimed at exploring what “excellence” in libraries means in an environment fundamentally re-shaped by changes in information-seeking behaviors, scholarly communications, information technology, pedagogical practices, interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship, as well as by the global economic downturn. Pursuing the NSM program has allowed us to develop new approaches to our digital service environment, to rethink traditional services, and to design and implement new services in collaboration with our users, e.g., our Scholarly Commons (<http://www.library.illinois.edu/sc/>). We are still deeply engaged in this process, and we are still grappling with the question of how best to assess the quality and impact of these new (or renewed) services, but we are guided by the basic assumption underlying this editorial: in an era when everything we know about how content is created, acquired, accessed, evaluated, disseminated, employed, and preserved for the future is in flux, the research library must be distinguished by the scope and quality of its service programs in the same way it has long been by the breadth and depth of its locally-held collections.

This “service turn” in our thinking is important not just for what it tells us about the future of the research library, but also for the way in which it allows us to appreciate the “distinctive signifiers

of excellence” found across a broader range of institutions. Does every ARL library support a first-year-experience initiative like Bowling Green’s (<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/assistance/page41131.html>), an information literacy program like the one at Wartburg College (<http://library.wartburg.edu/infolit/>), or a literary magazine like Hostos Community College’s *¡Escriba! /Write!* (<http://www.hostos.cuny.edu/library/escriba/>)? The answer is “no,” because while the development of a distinctive library service does require vision, strategic planning, and professional expertise, it does not require access to a local collection numbering in the millions. Defining distinctive services with the clarity with which we have defined distinctive collections allows us to acknowledge that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be marked by different, but equally valid, definitions of excellence in academic libraries, and that the manner in which individual libraries demonstrate excellence will be distinctive to the service needs, and to the opportunities to address those needs, found on each campus.

Many services that I might identify as distinctive have been described in the literature; others have not. Our challenge in the coming years will be to more thoughtfully engage the question of what array of services our users should expect to find in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century academic library, and the question of how a focus on services as “distinctive signifiers of excellence” can help us to promote a community of practice inclusive of all library types. We should ask what makes a service “distinctive,” how such services are designed and delivered, and how they are staffed and sustained. We should consider who our partners will be in the collaborative development of these services, and pay more attention to how we will assess their impact and communicate their value. When we have done this, we will have taken an historic turn in our thinking about how we define

the leading libraries in our field and the benchmarks for excellence toward which we all strive in support of our commit-

ments to service to teaching and learning, to research and scholarship, and to our communities and cultural heritage.

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### Notes

1. Dan Hazen, "Rethinking Research Library Collections: A Policy Framework for Straitened Times, and Beyond," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 54, no. 2 (2010): 120.
  2. Nicolas Barker, "Introduction," in *Celebrating Research: Rare and Special Collections from the Membership of the Association of Research Libraries*, eds. Philip N. Cronenwett, Kevin Osborn, and Samuel A. Streit (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 2007), <http://www.celebratingresearch.org/intro/intro.shtml> (accessed July 26, 2010).
  3. Ibid.
  4. Association of Research Libraries, "New Roles for New Times: An ARL Report Series in Development," <http://www.arl.org/rtl/plan/nrnt/index.shtml> (accessed July 26, 2010); Association of Research Libraries, "Institution Profiles," <http://directors.arl.org/wiki/institution-profiles> (accessed July 26, 2010).
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## Errata

In the September 2010 article "Seeking Full Citizenship: A Defense of Tenure Faculty Status for Librarians" by Coker, vanDuinkerken, and Bale, note 67 appears as follows:

67. Gail R. Gilbert, "Keeping the Bar High: The Reinstatement of Tenure for Librarians at the University of Louisville," *Kentucky Libraries* 71, no. 2, 1961: 17-19.

Please note that Gilbert's article was published in the Spring 2007 issue of *Kentucky Libraries*, not the 1961 issue.