

Doing More with Less: the McMillan Experience

In 2002 McMillan Memorial Library was running out of space for public service growth while state-wide spending limits and a troubled local economy were beginning to erode funding for both facility improvements and staffing. To meet the needs of the community under these circumstances, the library was required to both expand public service space and reduce the size of the staff. Since 2002 the Library has renovated a 5,000-square-foot storage area to expand public service space and has reduced a 23 full-time-equivalent staff to 16 FTE. These seemingly contradictory goals were accomplished through a major rethinking of operations that resulted in an integrated reorganization of both the facility and the staff.

Analyzing the library's facilities and staffing and studying the best practices of other leading public libraries formed the basis for this successful reorganization. Internal analysis included a space needs analysis, an expansion feasibility study, and an extensive analysis of the work of library staff at all levels. Ideas from other libraries were gathered at library conferences, through research, and through site visits to leading libraries. Major components of the reorganized facility and staff include the following: consolidating public service desks, reducing departmental designations and providing cross training for flexibility, maximizing self-service while maintaining quality, and requiring library staff to perform "behind-the-scenes" tasks while on duty to serve library users.

Consolidating public service desks to unify service points. The amount of staffing a library requires depends directly upon the number of public service desks it supports. McMillan Library found that one and at times two of our major service desks were not needed to provide effective public service. At the start of the process, McMillan had four major service desks on two levels. The library now functions with three major service desks and can operate with only two desks staffed in periods of light use.

Reducing support staff departmental designations and providing cross-training for flexibility. With the exception of one paraprofessional position, the library has eliminated departmental designations and multiple position levels for all non-management clerical staff. These general-purpose staff members are cross-trained to work throughout the library as needed to enhance scheduling flexibility and efficiency. The library has maintained a sub-clerical position classification for shelvers, who also work throughout the library as needed. The library's six professional staff members and two management paraprofessionals have retained their departmental designations, but are expected to be able to oversee the entire library. Everyone, from shelper to director, is trained to help patrons acquire self-service skills, such as using the catalog, self-checkout, signing onto the Internet and the many other tasks that patrons usually perform for themselves.

Maximizing self-service while maintaining quality. The most obvious self-service components added were self-checkout and self-service holds. The redesigned and

relocated Circulation Services desk handles less than 10% of the total circulation. This allows a reduced clerical staff to focus their efforts on greeting library users and assisting them with library card registration and late fee problems. Internet signups are automated and most holds, renewals, and meeting room bookings happen online. Online magazine and genealogy databases provide access to important collections for patrons at home or work. Self-service is never forced or required. Staff is always at hand to assist with self-checkout problems as well as available to perform searches and place holds.

To further promote self-service, the library's remodeling efforts have sought to improve the arrangement of the library facility and its signage to encourage ease of use. The library user's ability to browse fiction, non-fiction, and audiovisual collections has been greatly enhanced through the substantial use of bookstore-style shelving for new materials. More than 15% of the adult print collection is shelved in 32 categories using this new shelving. The adult book displays promote the best and brightest part of the collection, while also functioning as gateways to the stacks. Sixteen of these new shelving units have been added in the Youth Services Department to complete the move to browsing gateway collections. The entire magazine collection has also been shelved by subject. Each of the self-service improvements made at the library has been popular with the public and extremely helpful in reducing the workload of the staff.

Requiring staff members to perform “behind the scenes” tasks while on duty to serve library users. In many libraries, especially those in non-urban areas, staffing efficiency is hurt by not using staff members who are on duty to serve the public to perform other “behind the scenes” tasks in between patron contacts. Staffing both a public service area and a back room is wasteful unless the volume of public service makes this necessary. In a smaller communities like Wisconsin Rapids, staffing efficiencies can be gained by having these important functions involve by one rather than two people in one rather than two locations.

Stationing “behind the scenes” duties in public areas is also improving public service. Our library has found it to be an especially useful way to provide a staff presence to assist with self-checkout problems. Professional librarians try to minimize time in back rooms to allow as much time as possible for serving library users. Our use of “roving reference” techniques is under development. All service desk telephones are cordless to allow staff to work and roam away from the desk. All staff wear name badges so that users can identify them when away from a service desk.

By the end of the reorganization process, McMillan Library appears to have, for the time being, weathered the budgetary storms. Despite a 7 FTE staff reduction, no one is overworked and the library's robust public service program has been preserved. The reorganization of the facility and the staff has been well accepted by our community. Our library is deeply indebted to libraries such as Richmond Public Library in British Columbia for the leading the way into a new era of public library service. The educational mission of the public library is more important than ever. We all need to do the best job we can in this time of diminished funding.

Update Like many libraries, McMillan is currently experiencing a growth in use. Despite a stable population, use has increased by 25% over the last two years. The Library has added adult and children's film series, augmented its adult concert series and expanded its teen programming. The structure described above has proven able to handle the sharp increase in use with only minor changes. Four additional shelvers (one FTE) have been hired to deal with the increased material flow and to staff the Library's coffee service.

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