Charles Sturt University Library – "Anywhere, Anytime"

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Abstract:

Advancements in technology and changing patron needs have generated serious reassessment by libraries of the services that they provide. The use of library resources has seen a considerable change in trends, with a growing number of users opting to use the virtual collection in preference to the physical collection. Recent Charles Sturt University surveys revealed that students overwhelmingly chose online resources as their preferred approach to research and study. This data reinforces that demand for online material from CSU Library users must be met, resulting in a reduction in the print collection. Along with this, the majority of users have embraced the option for virtual support and a consequent decline in the number of patrons seeking assistance at the circulation desk has been noted. Driven by a large cohort of distance education students the demand for help through services such as online chat sessions has required extensive staff training and technological upgrades to ensure that these popular means of communication are maintained.

This paper looks at how Charles Sturt University Library has addressed the challenges of providing a "right here, right now" library service and increased patron demand for the Library's virtual services, by restructuring existing staff roles and creating new flexible Library Officer positions whose responsibilities include circulation, document delivery, virtual support, online resource maintenance and development. Initiatives such as the recent merger of the Access and Information Services sections, now under the umbrella of 'Information Services', has brought new opportunities for staff development; an evolution that is vital to ensure we uphold our reputation as an innovative, competitive and respected

institution. Although some would regard this progression as a "devil of a time in libraries", our purpose remains the same, which is to deliver streamlined and efficient access to information.

Introduction

This paper looks at how Charles Sturt University Library (CSU Library) addresses the challenge of providing a "right here, right now" library service, and an increased patron demand for the library's virtual services. Libraries have always reassessed their services, and advances in technology and changing patron needs means that it is essential that this be conducted regularly. An increasing number of library users are accessing virtual collections (electronic resources) rather than physical collections (printed resources). Recent Charles Sturt University (CSU) surveys revealed that students use online resources significantly more as their preferred approach to research and study (Insync Surveys, 2014). This data shows that CSU Library must meet the demand for online material, which will result in a reduction in print resources and a change in library services.

The majority of CSU Library users are embracing virtual support. Driven by a large cohort of distance education students, the demand for help through virtual services (such as online chat sessions) has required extensive staff training and technological upgrades to ensure maintenance of these popular means of communication. Multi-skilled Library Officer positions undertaking a combination of circulation and information work have been the norm in the University sector for many years. CSU Library is also fulfilling patron demands by restructuring existing staff roles and creating new flexible Library Officer positions whose responsibilities include: circulation, document delivery, virtual support, online resource maintenance and development. Initiatives such as the recent merger of the Access and Information Services sections, now under the umbrella of 'Information Services', has brought new opportunities for staff development; a change that is vital to ensure we uphold our reputation as an innovative, competitive and respected institution. Although some would regard this progression as a "devil of a time in libraries", our purpose remains the same - to deliver streamlined and efficient access to information.

The establishment of Charles Sturt University became official in 1989 through the merger of NSW regional institutions Mitchell College of Advanced Education in Bathurst and

the Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education in Wagga Wagga. Since its development, CSU has grown to become Australia's largest regional university with 2014 enrolments reaching 40,000 (CSU Office of Strategic Planning and Information 2015). It is also the country's leading provider of distance education (Charles Sturt University, 2014a) with over 60% of enrolled students now studying off campus (CSU Office of Planning and Audit 2015). With main campuses based in the NSW locations of Albury-Wodonga, Bathurst, Dubbo, Orange, Port Macquarie and Wagga Wagga, and partnerships with educational facilities across Australia and offshore, CSU prides itself in delivering quality higher degree education to a demographically diverse community. The University offers students wishing to study through distance the same level of support as their on campus peers:

- A top-level education from the largest distance education provider in Australia;
- Access to CSU's resources such as libraries, lecturers, student support and career advice, as well as on campus learning facilities;
- The opportunity to upgrade qualifications when they choose, allowing them to fit in study around work, family or financial commitments;
- The same academic and student support received by CSU's on campus students;
- CSU's online scholarly environment, Interact2, which provides access to learning and research resources and opportunities to collaborate online. (2014b)

The flexibility of distance education allows for a 24/7 learning experience, which has created new challenges for CSU Library staff. As students adapt to study in a virtual classroom, they expect access to online resources and support. In fact, students in all modes of study have adopted this trend. In 2014 CSU Library ran the InSync client satisfaction survey, which revealed that 80% of students overall used online journal databases in their study and research, 70% used eBooks and 40% opted to use the CSU Library print collection (Insync Surveys, 2014). Data collected on actual resource usage also shows a significant decline in the use of the CSU Library's physical collection, i.e. a reduction of 54% in the past 2 years. The CSU Library Collection Services 2015 statistics shows that eBooks have experienced a 170% increase in use.
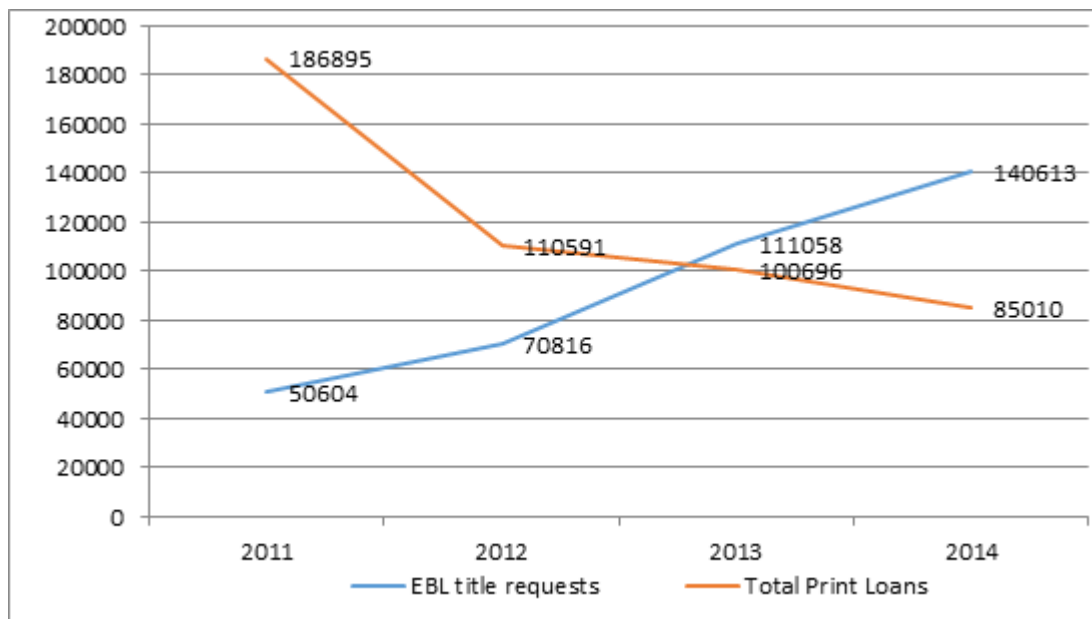
(CSU Library Collection Services 2015b).

The information revolution has prompted academic institutions to monitor practices and procedures constantly to ensure that they accommodate student needs. CSU's Collection Development Policy states that "The Library policy is to purchase networked electronic resources in preference to the print equivalent..." and "Existing print materials in high demand will be replaced by purchase of electronic resources wherever possible, in preference to the purchase of extra copies" (2011, p. 5). This policy is adhered to with over 90% of CSU Library's materials budget devoted to the purchase of electronic resources, (CSU Library Collection Services 2015a) and there are now approximately 50,000 eBooks available for access on the library catalogue. This evidence supports the hypothesis that demand for online material is on the incline, and with this demand comes the need for virtual assistance.

Historically, the structure of CSU Library has comprised of separate areas of service including Collections, Interlibrary Loans, Faculty Liaison, Access and Information. Staff employed in a specific area receives training to perform the duties required in that position. As the responsibility of delivering virtual reference services has traditionally been that of the CSU Library's Information team, the increase in demand over the past decade has proved to be a major issue for existing staff, with constant changes in technology adding its own challenges.

To address the shortfall in staffing numbers in Information Services, a restructure was implemented in 2007. Five new Information Library Officer positions were developed to provide frontline services; alleviating pressure on the Librarians and allowing them time to

dedicate to other growing areas of need such as embedding information literacy support, online tutorials, library guides and new study and research resources. Initially, the new Library Officers acted in a triage capacity, answering basic inquiries and referring more complex or lengthy queries to other appropriately trained library staff. They also assisted with the preparation of information literacy tools such as templates and online guides, as well as editing and maintaining designated website resources.

The Library Officer positions have seen their own evolution and it has become evident that the roles need to be as adaptable as the communities they serve. Incumbents have discovered that social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs are useful tools for library promotion and information distribution, and their use has been additional avenues for outreach support. The introduction of CSU's Live Chat service in 2009, using a web-based application called Meebo, was another means of communicating with patrons. This followed with the implementation of a new platform, Refchatter, a product from Altarama, when Meebo ceased to operate in 2012. The Live Chat service continues to grow in popularity, with projections being made that live chat will replace the phone as a preferred medium for student / library interaction.
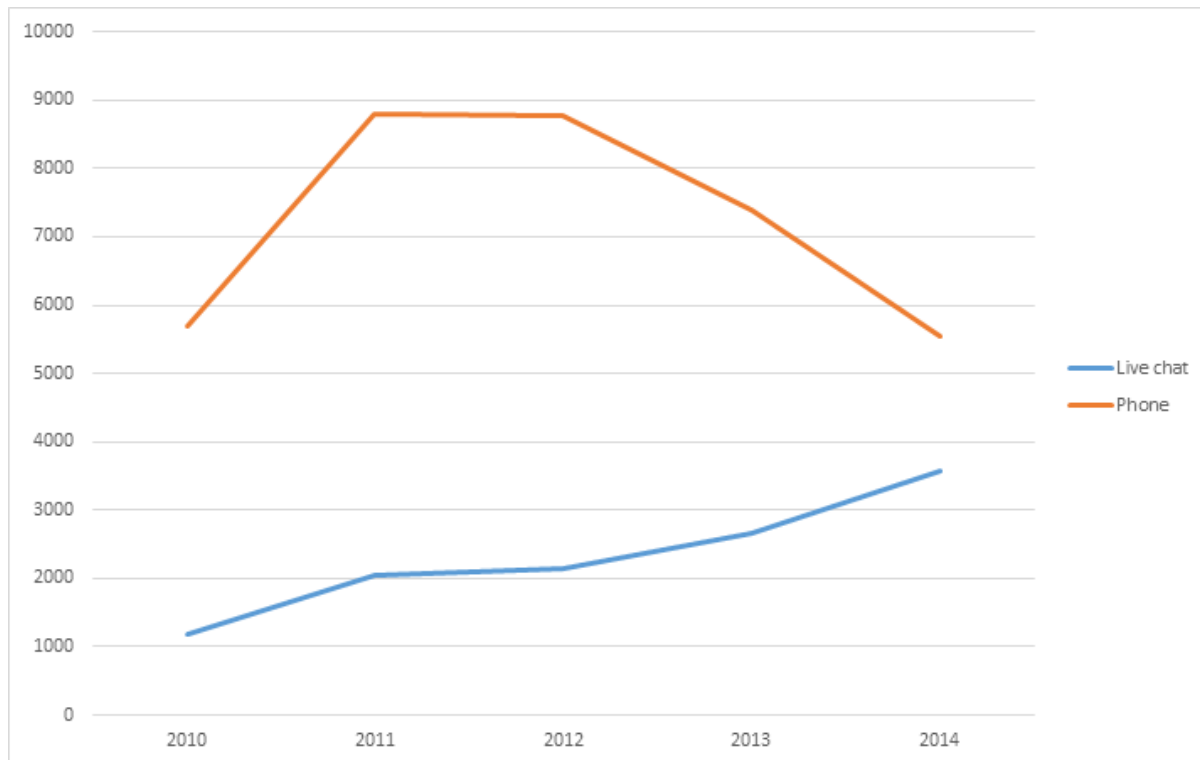
(Charles Sturt University. Library Services, 2015b)

Such changes require staff training in the use of new technology. Although proving invaluable, this technology has limitations and operators are often required to change their thought processes when dealing with inquiries. Electronic responses can sometimes appear impersonal so staff need to be mindful of the tone of their communication and use appropriate virtual etiquette. At times, it is also hard to relay direction clearly using technology such as online chat as conversations can become fragmented when there is a delay in reply.

The challenges often experienced by Library Officers (and indeed all library staff) are not limited to communication upgrades. The growing number of eBook and eJournal users has added to diversity in the type of inquiries received by staff on a daily basis and troubleshooting has become a major skill required to ensure a positive response. Although these flexible staff handle inquiries promptly and professionally, a willingness to resolve problems at the first port of call has been challenging. The access of electronic material is not always as straight forward as pulling a book off the shelf and the 'right here, right now' expectation is sometimes not achievable, leaving many students frustrated and seeking help. There is a spectrum of possible reasons for access issues including user equipment, Internet connection, browser choice, licensing agreements and the patron's administrative record. The demographics of CSU enrolments have also created a need for frontline assistance as a growing number of mature aged students (CSU Office of Planning and Audit 2015) try to adapt to changes in technology. As a result, Library Officers have needed to be proficient in all areas of inquiry including being more involved in assisting patrons with information searching - a task once handled by Librarians (Gremmels, 2013). The ability to resolve inquiries that are more complex has meant that the 'triage' system of old has become obsolete. Difficult queries still require referral; however, the increased competency of Library Officers has had a distinct impact on how frequently referrals occur.

Realignment of responsibilities has been a work in progress, and its impact has been far reaching. Flying on the wings of change, management looked at how a merger of library services could be beneficial to the organisation. The development of new Access Library Officer positions commenced in 2014, designed to work collaboratively with Information Services and Access Services Teams. The expectation of this new wave of Library Officer is to provide assistance in both areas, and the training involved in getting these staff up to speed is extensive. Assigned with the task of providing day-to-day support for the delivery of both Access and Information services, incumbents' duties include: circulation, maintenance of the

CSU Library physical collection, providing virtual and telephone information assistance and developing online information resources. This has meant that there are now more staff available to respond to incoming calls and online inquiries. As CSU Library's virtual service is not branch specific, staff absences do not impede the delivery of the service, and there is even distribution of workload across campuses.

Staff have acknowledged that the development of this new role has been beneficial for career progression and given them opportunities to upgrade their skills and knowledge. It has also resulted in a better understanding of what each team does and their relationships with students and this has encouraged greater co-operation and connectivity with other staff. It is evident that these changes have been a positive development for the organisation. However, they have also raised some concerns.

The introduction of new Access Library Officers has not increased the number of staff currently working within the Division of Library Services. They have been devised as replacements for vacated positions, predominately Library Assistants, to redress the imbalance resulting from a significant decrease in print collection usage and to provide increased staff support for the growth in online collection and service usage. Research on trends in library employment practices (Gremmels, 2013) highlights that administrative responsibilities, equipment upkeep, the processing of document delivery for distance education students, collection maintenance and assisting patrons at the circulation desk are but a few of the essential tasks performed on a daily basis by Library Assistants. With their numbers decreasing, there is still conjecture about who will be responsible for some of these duties. This situation is increasingly evident in academic libraries and there often appears to be a blurring of the roles of library staff at all levels in other institutions. (Gremmels, 2013; Hill, 2013)

As with all organisations, one of the greatest limiter to staffing is budget constraints, so recruiting trained staff to assist in more than one section is imperative from a corporate perspective. In recent years, there has been a strong focus on training staff to assist in virtual services; however, staff are still required to maintain the efficient running of the physical collection. The collection of print copies, organising of the CSU Library area, maintenance of the physical collection and the operation of the circulation desk are manual tasks that require staff attention and are quite labour intensive. Although Library Officers are still required to assist in these areas, the need for support in virtual services is increasing and it can be challenging to manage these competing priorities. Unlike virtual services, the need for staff in

Access Services is very location specific and the lack of staff may significantly affect the quality of support provided. To maintain a physical presence within the CSU Library in busy semester periods, management has introduced the use of "rovers", involving staff of all levels from Access and Information teams. Rovers work within the stacks to assist patrons with resource inquiries. Regardless, many students still expect an attendant at the circulation desk, with client surveys and desk statistics demonstrating this.

To address this expectation, CSU Library has recruited students to work on a casual basis within the Access area and take on an increasing number of tasks beyond the traditional student shelver role. This has been successful in ensuring there is a response to basic in-house patron inquiries, and routine resource maintenance such as shelving, stock consolidation and shelf tidying is continued. However, as experienced in other libraries (Kathman & Kathman, 2000), casual student employees have study commitments that can affect their availability. It is also a condition of their employment that they are a currently enrolled student at CSU, meaning that they can only remain contracted for the limited duration of their studies. Therefore, despite achieving successful outcomes, the turnover for this essential staffing solution is high due to its transient nature. It should be noted, however, that similar issues can be experienced with all employees, and student casual staff are proving invaluable both for their role in maintaining campus based library services and allowing permanent staff to take on other complex duties.

As mentioned, the increase in demand for online resources and support has been a significant motivator in the reassessment of staffing at the CSU Library. Clearly, the need for trained staff to assist in this ever-growing area of service is a high priority. However, the statistics have also shown that although the use of print material is declining, it appears to be on campus students leading this movement. The number of distance education students borrowing these resources has remained static in the past 5 years, averaging 40,000 items issued per annum and accounting for half of all physical loans in 2014 (CSU Library Services 2015a). This is an interesting trend, and there are a few possible reasons for this.

Firstly, although the University will purchase electronic copies in preference to print copies wherever possible, the existing print collection contains invaluable research material that may not be available in electronic format. The process for the selection and discarding of these resources involves much consideration and as a result, the collection is highly regarded by academics and students alike.

Secondly, part of CSU's commitment to supporting the remote and growing mode of distance study includes the supply of hard copy books to distance education students with free return postage. This ensures that these students are not disadvantaged in accessing quality resources due to geography and cost. Requesting print material for document delivery is also very convenient for distance education students. Resources are searchable on a comprehensive online database, and although access to print items is not instant, the process of placing a request for its delivery is electronic and as easy as the click of a button.

Thirdly, a possible explanation for the continued use of print material is the demographics of enrolled students. Of all on campus students, 87% are under the age of 30 whereas over 67% of distance education students are over the age of 30, with half of that number studying as undergraduates (CSU Office of Planning and Audit 2015). It may be that the use of electronic resources is an obstacle for mature aged students, particularly if they are new to academic study, so they are inclined to travel the traditional path of sourcing print copies for referral. It is obvious that this significant group of students need both virtual and manual staff assistance to ensure that they have resources appropriate to their needs. This highlights that although it is reasonable to believe that the use of electronic media will continue to increase, the importance of servicing the CSU Library's physical environment must not be understated and should remain a consideration when assigning duties to Access Library Officers.

The growing popularity of virtual services and lower door counts (CSU Library Services 2015c) has challenged libraries to find innovative ways to capitalise on their physical library space. At CSU, devising a master plan is high on the agenda. In consideration are ideas for optimizing prime space within the CSU Library, which will result in significant changes in its physical presentation and promote positive and productive study areas for students that visit the University. Implementation of this may require the consolidation of the main collection and the storage of low use items off site. Although this might appear to result in a reduction in the print collection, the process used to determine the outcome for these resources is complex and includes consultation with academics, researchers and Faculty Liaison and Collection Services librarians. Along with this feedback is careful assessment of reports and statistics to ensure there remains a concise collection of print resources that is relevant to the subject areas currently offered at the University. This strategy aims to utilise part of the physical area as a student hub, ultimately creating increased space conducive to a

flexible learning environment. This allows CSU Library to accommodate its students in a way that goes beyond the supply of research material.

Conclusion

CSU Library continues to evolve and frequently assesses the delivery of its services with referral to collated data and feedback. It is evident that there are potential obstacles in the use of online resources and this has increased the demand for virtual support. It is also evident that there has been a decline in the use of print material and the number of students visiting CSU Library has fallen. However, data also shows that the facility's physical element is still valued. Changing trends in resource usage is well scrutinised and continues to motivate staff and facility development. CSU has revised staff roles and created new highly trained positions that will sustain services and ensure the delivery of quality virtual support to CSU's diverse student community. The distribution of duties continues to challenge the Division as it acknowledges the importance of all areas of service, be they virtual or physical. The reality is that the universal library domain is changing. Although hard copy material is highly regarded, its use in many cases does not justify the extensive prime real estate required to accommodate it. Consolidating the print collection to transform practical library floor space into student study areas will provide a positive physical environment and encourage academic outcomes. This seems to be a reasonable compromise.

The suggestion that we have entered a "devil of a time in libraries" is a matter of perspective. CSU, like all academic institutions, continues to look at ways to promote its existing services and develop new initiatives to support its students. Positive response from staff and students has been encouraging and it is evident that the organisation is equipped with the resources needed to deliver reasonable "right here, right now" demands for library services. Challenging as this may be, continued progress has resulted in a dynamic work environment manned by professional and customer focused staff, adaptable and prepared for future development.

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