

Other Duties (and Places) as Assigned: How Analog Approaches Are Impeding Progress in Online Librarianship

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POSITIONALITY STATEMENT

This chapter discusses a variety of issues in academic librarianship that, the authors posit, stem from the inequities inherent in historically feminized professions. Thus, recognizing that our personal and professional identities frame our perceptions of this topic, it is important to note that all three authors identify as female and currently work in postsecondary academic institutions. Two authors are librarians, while the third is teaching faculty in the field of education—another historically feminized profession. Additionally, as geography also plays a role in both the notion of positionality (Holmes, 2020) and the arguments within this chapter, we feel it relevant to note that the two librarian authors are geographically bound to their institutions of employment and that all three authors teach online courses and/or have direct work experience in distance and online learning (DOL) environments.

INTRODUCTION

The “other duties as assigned” clause in position descriptions has achieved ubiquity among academic librarians, often soliciting an understanding smirk or eye roll at its mention. Librarians and library staff all assume other duties

on occasion for the sake of maintaining workflows and services during staffing shortages or when adjusting to new technologies and professional trends. In short, we grow the job as needed. But it is vital to take a step back and question at what point these “other duties” reach critical mass and necessitate the creation of a new position that requires specific expertise and experience. The COVID-19 pandemic spurred a rapid push toward online learning and librarianship (i.e., online collections, embedded librarianship, and online instruction) and initiated a surge of other *online* duties as assigned for librarians who otherwise would not have considered themselves part of the online-focused segment of the profession. Librarians who already specialized in online librarianship—those with accumulated knowledge and a highly defined skill set resulting from years of focused service to online populations—approached the pandemic-initiated shift in responsibilities by pivoting to act as supports. During the quarantine stages of the pandemic, distance and online learning librarians offered webinars, discussion forums, and workshops for colleagues who were new to online work and intended these training opportunities to fill the remote services gap the pandemic created. The initial intent was to share practical ideas and knowledge as a quick fix to stitch together services in the short term. We argue that this quick-fix approach cannot sustainably support the long-term need for what we now know is a permanent shift toward online learning, research, and general information-seeking practices. While specialized librarians shifted to meet the needs of institutions in the short term, academic institutions must acknowledge and support this work as a foundational necessity moving forward and create infrastructures to support distance and online learning services and positions.

Distance and online learning (DOL) is not a new concept. Community colleges and research universities alike have shifted to embrace and even emphasize online programs and course offerings over the past three decades. Strategically, DOL programs increase enrollment by attracting students that would otherwise not consider enrolling due to scheduling or geographic limitations. The pandemic merely expedited what we have come to call the analog-to-digital shift in education (in other words, the transition from physical to digital education practices and resources) and indiscriminately transformed all librarians into *online* librarians in some form or another. However, simply transferring analog practices and theories of librarianship to a digital setting does not constitute *online librarianship*, just as directly transferring physical teaching and learning paradigms to a digital setting does not constitute *online learning*. Instead, DOL librarianship exists as a formal, practice- and research-based professional subfield, developed with digital modes of information sharing and consumption as points of departure. Thus, as Hodges et al. (2020) note, quick, reactive, and ill-developed analog-to-digital transitions exacerbate existing misconceptions that online education constitutes a subpar or less effective mode of teaching and

learning. Hence, while librarians often embrace the jack-of-all-trades mentality as a product of necessity and an indication of adaptability, this does not mean we should accept or normalize “emergency remote teaching” (Hodges et al., 2020) or services that were hastily instituted under quarantine as standards for DOL librarianship. Just as librarians have intentionally developed and strengthened face-to-face services according to professional standards, so too should we intentionally create and support standards based DOL work. To accomplish this work, we propose that academic libraries require both dedicated, experienced DOL librarians *and* progressive organizational structures that embrace the post-traditional work environments needed to fully support modern (i.e., post-pandemic) students.

STANDARDS AND THE VALUE OF EQUITY AND EXPERTISE

The Association of College and Research Libraries’ (2016) Standards for Distance Learning Library Services (The Standards), provide personnel, facility, service, and resource benchmarks for academic libraries serving DOL students, staff, faculty, and administrators. The Standards assert, as a point of departure, that all members of a college or university community are entitled to equivalent resources and services as those available to their on-campus counterparts. Accordingly, libraries should also ensure that delivery of resources and services meets the “unique needs” of the online community. Recognizing the institution-specific nature of these “unique needs,” The Standards place the onus on libraries to enact distance community needs and outcome assessments, and to incorporate DOL support into their strategic plans and mission statements. Prioritizing DOL innovation and support compels libraries to thoughtfully design equitable services and environments for online library users.

For DOL programs to be truly successful, an intentional focus on equity is vital. While librarians can adapt in-person skills to DOL services, is it equitable to DOL students to simply state that all librarians are now “online” rather than developing the skills and services specific to this population? This approach is reminiscent of pre-COVID library environments that valued physical desk coverage above virtual chat coverage. In other words, serve the students physically in front of you, then attend to the ones waiting online. As one author is experiencing currently, management can often be more concerned with the *appearance* of services—meaning visible desk coverage—even when no reference interactions are logged, rather than putting that time and effort into less visible DOL services. If libraries continue to view DOL services as secondary or less optimal to traditional, on-campus services, they are relegating online library users to a secondary status. This is a particularly problematic approach when considered against trends in Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) circulation data.

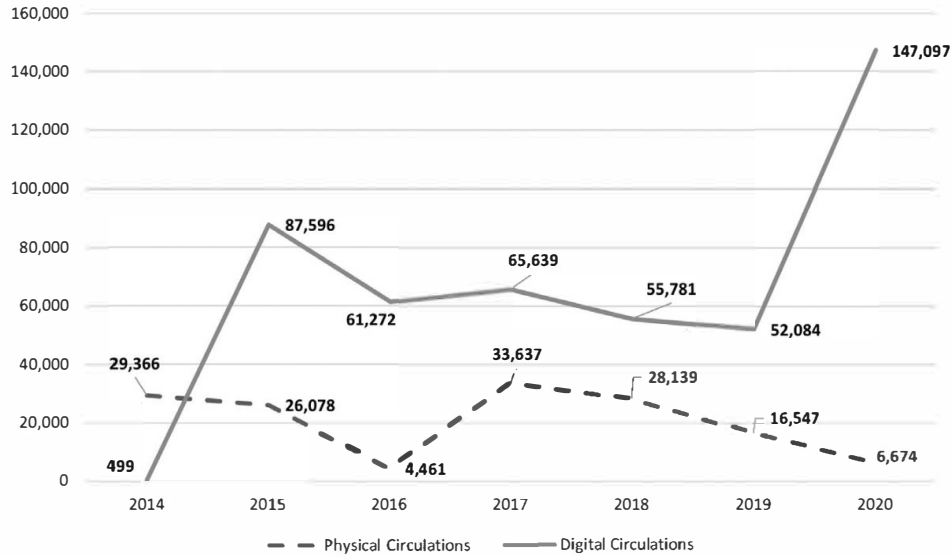


FIGURE 11.1. 2014–2020 IPEDS physical and digital circulation data for J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

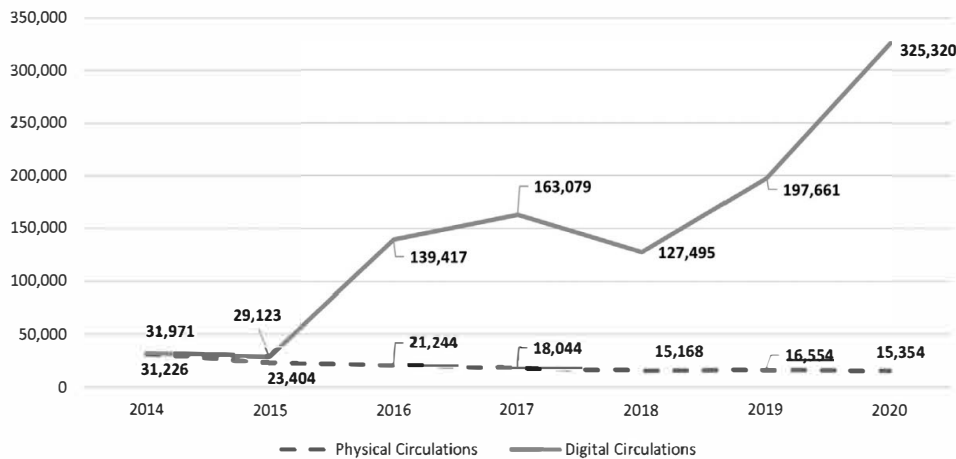


FIGURE 11.2. 2014–2020 IPEDS physical and digital circulation data for the University of Southern Indiana

As depicted in Figures 11.1 and 11.2, both the authors' institutional data reflect steady and significant decreases in physical resource circulation between 2014 and 2020. Meanwhile, digital circulation has substantially increased, reflecting a large-scale analog-to-digital shift in how users choose to interact with information (U.S. Department of Education, 2020a; 2020b). Thus, if online services truly are less optimal in practice, then these services and the positions that provide them need to be redesigned to proactively meet users' changing needs.

Embracing DOL-focused library positions that design and provide equitable resources and services requires the development of intentional, sustainable organizational infrastructures. These infrastructures should support DOL as a distinct and complex field similar to technical services, research services, and access services. As two authors have experienced firsthand, a single DOL librarian cannot achieve all that is required even when collaborating with neighboring departments and librarians, nor can a group of DOL librarians be efficient without a qualified, designated leader. To compare the missing DOL leadership position to one widely accepted at many institutions, the Head of Technical Services works across the library or library system to provide leadership in all aspects of cataloging, acquisitions, and resource management. Top-down leadership is necessary in technical services for the sake of consistency and standardization. Without uniformity of resource description and access parameters, library users would not be able to rely on stable access to essential resources and services. By extension, without a comprehensive and uniform approach in technical services, higher education institutions could not function in 21st-century scholarly information environments. Likewise, without a leadership position in DOL librarianship, the lack of centralized decision making yields a casual and unreliable approach to DOL with equally disruptive effects on library users.

THE ISSUE OF MOBILITY

Approaches to the successful administration of DOL services vary across institutions due to the diversity of populations and resources. Nevertheless, we assert that there are two systemic impediments to the widespread development of robust DOL support programs, namely the lack of both geographic and upward mobility within academic librarianship. In organizational structures, in job postings, and in the very history of the profession, these are the two significant obstacles to the comprehensive adoption of sustainable and scalable DOL service infrastructures across academic libraries. Moreover, both of these impediments are products of the gendered nature of the profession. It is, therefore, integral to the building of an equitable infrastructure for DOL services to examine the geographic demands and hierarchical setting of DOL positions.

The issue of geographic mobility in librarianship is particularly complex considering the mantra throughout library science programs is that graduates should expect to move to different cities or states to find librarian jobs. And we do this, over and over again, each time seeking to enhance our skills and/or job opportunities. This is not geographic mobility. This is geographic constraint—and it transfers the power of choosing where one calls home from the individual to the employer. Additionally, for librarians whose work is entirely online, geographic location is functionally arbitrary. A host of

employers, including Dropbox (Dropbox Team, 2020), Ford (Krisher & Rugaber, 2021), and even the State of Massachusetts (Decosta-Klipa, 2021), have adjusted job location norms to allow employees partial or full remote status on a permanent basis as a result of pandemic work experiences. Nevertheless, as higher education institutions begin return-to-campus activities, librarians with online responsibilities are being physically called back to campus along with their colleagues who primarily work on-site. Likewise, many new job postings for online learning, systems, and digital asset librarians still require an on-campus presence.

In short, what current and potential library employers are indicating is that a librarian's place is unequivocally in the library. In a historically feminized profession like librarianship—refer to Sloniowski (2016) for a critical feminist discussion of labor in librarianship—this sentiment sounds dangerously close to—and as functionally unfounded as—the patriarchal notion that a woman's place is in the home. We offer the following example from one author's experience of this sort of geographically restrictive position design. At a former institution, the DOL librarian was housed in the campus's online division, which included instructional designers and online course support positions. After the initial pandemic surge of emergency remote instruction, the institution made all positions within the online division fully remote—with the exception of the librarian position, which was relocated to the library as an on-campus position. The act of singly denying the librarian position geographic mobility could have been motivated by a variety of institutional factors and was, perhaps, not an intentionally patriarchal move on the part of decision makers. Nevertheless, the decision both reflects and perpetuates the exploitation and control over feminized labor upon which Dewey intentionally constructed modern librarianship (Biggs, 1982; Sloniowski, 2016). In short, systemic inequities still occur despite modern intentions.

Some proponents of required, on-campus work maintain that face-to-face interactions improve relationship building and communication among staff, or that shared responsibilities (e.g., every librarian works the reference desk) constitute some manner of fairness. Nevertheless, these ideas are grounded in a reliance on physical paradigms—i.e., place-based notions of information sharing (see Ettarh [2018] for a discussion of the professional impact of vocational awe and the notion of the library as a “sacred place”). In effect, librarians are trained from graduate school onward to embrace poverty, to accept jobs in new places to advance careers, to incur debt for relocation, to accept salary cuts and years lost toward tenure or promotion, to lose access to short-term disability, benefits, and personal support systems, all for the good of the cause. How can we champion equity and inclusion on campus when we readily sacrifice these ideals in vocational awe? Normalizing remote work options will not solve every issue of labor exploitation or inequity within the profession. However, it will eliminate arbitrary,

employer-imposed, geographic constraints and their associated financial burdens. Additionally, organizations that remove location requirements from DOL positions increase the pool of qualified, experienced job candidates by including candidates external to their institutional zip code (Clark & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2021).

A lack of geographic mobility, however, is not the only gender-based obstacle facing both librarians and the profession at large. Broadway and Shook (2018) offer an overview of gendered issues in librarianship, which includes a discussion of the ramifications of the post-hierarchical organizational structures common in libraries. On the surface, post-hierarchical structures aim to minimize superfluous levels of bureaucracy. However, eliminating formal leadership roles means eliminating the potential for upward mobility, or put simply, job growth with corresponding pay. Herein lies the difficulty of creating leadership positions in DOL library services. Organizational structures that refuse to devote hierarchical (as opposed to lateral) leadership positions to DOL support undermine the strategic potential for service development by devaluing expertise in the area. The lateral leadership roles many DOL librarians assumed during the pandemic allowed libraries to quickly adapt resource and service delivery during emergency remote semesters. However, emergency-implemented lateral leadership structures were not intentionally or thoughtfully designed with sustainability, growth, or wage equity in mind. They were an emergency means to an end. That said, as the profession adjusts to the “new normal,” libraries will not attract or retain specialized DOL librarians without offering pay raises for increased responsibilities. Consequently, without these centralized, qualified DOL leadership positions, libraries run the risk of delivering inconsistent and insufficient DOL services and resources to campus stakeholders.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The DOL labor and service inequities outlined in this chapter stem from the gendered nature and history of librarianship. Post-hierarchical organizational structures and vocational mindsets, respectively, enable and normalize exploitative compensation practices. From library school onward, librarians are indoctrinated and resigned to the expectation of wearing many hats for the sake of the public good. (Refer to Popowich [2018] for a Marxist analysis of libraries in neoliberal society.) Nevertheless, in devaluing our own labor—i.e., accepting other duties as assigned on an individual rather than organizational level, we are devaluing both the expectations and entitlements of our DOL user base. As a profession, we have an opportunity to address this narrative and the resulting practices and policies in the wake of post-pandemic social changes. However, this requires a confrontation of commonly accepted norms in the field and the internal inequities that arise in the analog versus digital approach to information resources and services.

There's no checklist for dismantling systemic inequity, but we can offer some ideas to initiate your thinking on this process. Though circumstances will vary according to institutional culture and history, the following suggestions may serve as a baseline for administrators to establish reformative pathways to successful DOL services:

1. Normalize digital communication and service delivery methods.
2. Conduct a thorough survey of library personnel, services, and resources that specifically support online learning.
3. Develop an action plan for improvement.

Normalize Digital Communication and Service Delivery Methods

Online interactions and information consumption are no longer supplementary or specific to distance users. Distance and local users alike rely on digital information resources for research. Live chat and video conferencing apps enable librarians to interact with users and successfully meet their digital information needs regardless of user or librarian location. Moreover, digital communication methods within the workplace increase opportunities for staff with speech or hearing disabilities to participate in formal or informal workplace conversations. For example, video conferencing software like Zoom and Microsoft Teams now offer live automatic captioning and give participants the ability to contribute input via text or audio. Integrating digital communication methods into standard workplace exchanges (e.g., meetings or quick chats) encourages familiarity and innovation with these resources and promotes inclusive communication practices.

Organization-wide familiarity with current and emerging digital communication and service methods also decreases the likelihood of workflow disruptions during emergency shutdowns. In their discussion of remote work management, Rysavy and Michalak (2020) note that communication through online tools had already been adopted in their pre-pandemic work environment. This allowed team members to transition to work from home quickly during the pandemic as they were already accustomed to digital collaboration. Methods of digital communication enacted during emergency remote work included asynchronous daily check-ins with Flip-Grid, chat with Slack over the course of the day, and virtual face-to-face Zoom meetings a couple of times per week. Rysavy and Michalak also acknowledge the importance of synchronous, face-to-face interactions in building and maintaining healthy communication practices among staff and offered, "Sometimes projects/big ideas/questions just simply need to be talked out" (2020, p. 538). In these scenarios, team meetings were held via Zoom, and the authors suggest that these virtual meetings offered the opportunity to improve interpersonal relationships. Rysavy and Michalak's (2020) experiences support the notion that in-person interactions simply

for the sake of being in-person are not necessary for effective workflows, and in this scenario, normalizing digital communication had a positive effect on the team. Apart from digital communication platforms, the teams also leveraged cloud-based file storage systems, which afforded workers the ability to easily access and collaborate on documents regardless of physical location. Likewise, centralized decision making regarding digital communication and file management expectations kept the team organized and effective.

Conduct a Thorough Survey of Library Personnel, Services, and Resources That Specifically Support Online Learning

Normalizing the use of digital communication methods is a terrific first step toward creating inclusive environments for library staff and users. Nevertheless, the creation of *equitable* environments and services for DOL users requires more from the library than simply embracing live chat and video conferencing apps. Services like instruction, research assistance, and technology troubleshooting must be designed and delivered with the DOL population in mind rather than simply replicating existing on-site services in an online environment. The same applies to the information resources offered by the library. The ACRL Standards for Distance Learning Library Services (ACRL, 2016) offer guidance for libraries and academic institutions in this regard.

When considering services and resources:

- Do on-site and DOL users all have direct access to library staff?
- Do services and resources meet ADA, Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG), Section 504, and Section 508 accessibility standards?
- Are on-site and online library services standardized, assessed, and equitably distributed?
- Are DOL services operating efficiently and effectively?
- Are DOL users adequately represented in assessment and strategic planning endeavors?

When considering personnel:

- Does the library currently have DOL expertise on staff?
- Is there a librarian or group of librarians on staff responsible for researching emerging DOL strategies and advocating for DOL user needs?
- Are DOL services centrally coordinated, or are they inconsistent across library units?
- Do DOL experts have hierarchical authority, or do they occupy lateral leadership roles?

As learning and research across the P-20 spectrum increasingly depend on online resources and services (in both pandemic and non-pandemic times), libraries must adapt technical services, research services, and access services to equitably and effectively meet the information needs of DOL users. Consequently, the many resource and service considerations for consistent, successful DOL programs, as evidenced by the diverse requirements listed in *The Standards* (ACRL, 2016), unequivocally require both intra- and inter-departmental coordination of staff and operations. Likewise, per *The Standards*, DOL librarians in this sort of coordinating capacity should receive equivalent status and pay that is comparable to other coordination or leadership positions in the library. If budgets or organizational hierarchies do not currently support equitable pay or status for DOL librarians, then those structures should be analyzed and reconfigured for equity.

Develop an Action Plan for Improvement

After surveying and analyzing DOL resources, services, and staff, consider methods for improvement based on measurable goals. *The Standards for Distance Learning Library Services Worksheet* (Haber, n.d.) provides a template for assessment and progress planning that takes into account both library and institutional considerations that factor into meeting *The Standards*. It is important to note that, oftentimes, we must ask difficult questions to maximize improvement potential as an organization. For instance:

- What work is the library engaged in that could be reduced or altered based on current needs?
- Where are we spending the most time and money? Why?
- What work are we focusing on that is no longer a priority to the institution or students?

These questions have the potential to yield some answers with uncomfortable implications for library staff at all levels of the organization. No one wants to hear that their efforts are obsolete or no longer necessary, especially if they have been engaging in and enjoying specific tasks for years. Conversely, questioning and reimagining processes, spaces, and resources can create opportunities that allow institutions to dismantle the historically restrictive and exploitative environments within libraries and establish a more equitable workplace and institutional culture. All said, if analysis of operations, goals, and resources indicate the need for change, the library ultimately owes it to its user community to adapt workflows and redirect efforts.

Large-scale project changes and institutional reorganization can seem daunting, but there is a wealth of theory and documented experience upon which we can build our action plans for improvement and successfully

manage change. Soehner (2014) outlines a successful change management program, implemented as part of the University of Utah's Marriott Library's "evolution[ary]" processes, which involved the combination of library IT departments and services to eliminate resource and service duplication and to streamline processes and communication. Library leadership utilized Kotter's (2007) influential eight steps to organizational transformation to guide the analysis of the current situation and ultimately develop a successful action plan for repositioning personnel and services. The Marriott Library's change processes, though successful, were not without issue and Soehner (2014) provides helpful details regarding unforeseen points of contention regarding staff perceptions and overall communication.

Kotter's (2007) oft-cited eight steps for transformational change—with 9,362 citations per Google Scholar as of March 2022—provide a valuable, loose blueprint for organizations looking to communicate, enact, and embed vision-based change at an institutional level. That said, broad steps such as "institutionalizing new approaches" (p. 99) imply that institutional leadership has, in fact, decided on an appropriate and effective approach to change. Nevertheless, many of us (institutionally speaking) may very well agree that a change is needed, but the path to enacting that change may be fraught with seemingly insurmountable social, technological, or systemic obstacles. Likewise, the awareness of the need for change may be so recent that the available paths to achieving change may be totally unknown or untested. In these scenarios, an exploratory, iterative approach may be in order. The plan-do-check-act (PDCA), also known as the plan-do-study-act (PDSA), approach offers a structured, iterative, and institution-specific approach to issues of quality control. One particularly functional and appealing aspect of the PDSA approach is the variety of action steps available in a given scenario. Langley et al. (2009), for example, note that iterations of a PDSA cycle may result in adoption, abandonment, adaptation, or expansion of a given approach. This structure complements Kotter's (2007) eight steps by reinforcing the idea of continual change as progress, applying the scientific method to decision-making processes, and embedding flexibility into institutional actions.

One author's institution recently began the large-scale process of shifting library resources and workflows to emphasize digital resources, systems, services, and users. The library began by analyzing structured user feedback and trends in resource usage to ascertain if a change was needed. The pandemic certainly increased digital demand, but that demand had been growing for years, so change was deemed essential. The library's strategy follows Kotter's (2007) eight steps, has been relatively successful at the first four (i.e., identifying issues, establishing a leadership group, and creating and communicating the overall vision with stakeholders), and is now at the point of engaging stakeholder action and planning specific, short-term improvements, which is where PDSA cycles have proven useful. Some of the initiatives within the larger process include transitioning to exclusively

hosted systems and platforms (including migration to a new ILS) to minimize access downtime for users, formalizing a digital-first acquisitions policy, and exploring controlled digital lending (CDL) mechanisms. One of the more disruptive changes was the migration from a legacy ILS to a modern system. The migration resulted in the automation of workflows that had previously required considerable staff time. Between the reduction of ILS-related tasks and the trending decline in physical circulation, front desk staff experienced considerable decreases in daily workload. As a result, library administration has begun redistributing personnel (both current and future hires) from front-facing positions to resource management and metadata-focused positions to support digital infrastructures and is currently in the “study” phase of a PDSA cycle. Likewise, a “plan” stage has begun for exploring ways to integrate front desk staff into CDL workflows, which are still in the “plan” phase as well. In this scenario, the PDSA approach has given the library the flexibility to investigate, test, and redesign processes and approaches if needed, while Kotter’s eight steps provide a high-level framework and direction for successful change navigation.

CONCLUSION

Though higher education was already making permanent transitions toward online learning, the COVID-19 pandemic expedited that process at many institutions with the onset of emergency remote work and instruction. The global pandemic has passed the two-year mark, and new variants of the virus carry continual threats of lockdowns and cancellations worldwide. At this juncture, it is vital to recognize that a proactive library is more effective for its users than a reactive library, and we must work toward building sustainable infrastructures for supporting all learners and researchers at a distance—in both emergency and non-emergency environments. To this end, academic libraries must pivot library operations and organizational structures in a manner that values and liberates both library staff and users. Libraries must acknowledge and support the expertise of DOL-focused librarians and integrate DOL considerations into operations across all library units. These DOL considerations should extend not only to library users but also to librarians and staff whose work can be completed successfully regardless of geographic location. In short, creating a sustainably effective modern library requires an intentional shift in organizational mindset that elevates and embraces DOL services, resources, and strategies from the inside out. Steps toward sustainability include:

- Iterative analysis of institutional data to proactively support changes in users’ information habits
- Institutionalizing digital services and tools as means of equity
- Prioritizing and formalizing DOL in strategic planning efforts

- Critically questioning and reconfiguring organizational hierarchies to value DOL expertise and initiatives
- Eliminating workplace restrictions that are outdated, arbitrary, or oppressive

Physical resources and on-site services will always have a place in libraries. Nevertheless, if we are to meet our users' increasingly digital information needs, physical paradigms should no longer dictate our processes and approaches.

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