

Summary of Consultant's Report on University Libraries at USM – December 2012

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Mr. Jack Siggins, retired dean of libraries at George Washington University, visited the University of Southern Mississippi November 5-7, 2012, to conduct an assessment of USM library operations on the Hattiesburg campus. During the visit, he met with students, staff, academic faculty, library faculty and staff, and administrators. Mr. Siggins prepared a report for the Provost that is summarized below.

- Given the size of enrollment and the number of graduate programs at USM, the total library budget is not adequate.
- Funding for collections at the current level is not adequate to provide resources to meet demands of the academic programs. This is especially true for graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences.
- Book approval plans are most effective when collection funding is at a high enough level to allow for both departmental allocations and a book approval plan. When funding levels are too low (as has been the case at USM), individual department allocations tend to be more efficient than book approval plans in meeting the needs of faculty.
- Faculty at USM play a much diminished role as the result of changes in the collection purchasing policies implemented in recent years. Moving from a book approval plan to a faculty driven purchase on demand (POD) approach would better serve USM.
- The level of library staffing needs to be increased if USM wishes to meet expanded expectations for library services. Added staff could expand instruction of students on library use to improve their ability to find and use resources for classes and research.
- Another area for improvement could be in reference services, especially in evenings (after 5:30 pm) and on weekends. These are times when graduate students, especially those who hold daytime jobs, tend to come to the library to do their work and often need the help a good reference librarian can provide.
- In order to meet demands for staffing in certain areas (e.g., special collections) some of the staff were reassigned. Some librarians and staff were assigned functions for which they had little or no preparation or experience. As a consequence, their ability to perform these new functions was low, especially initially. That, in turn, has led to some confusion, a degree of inefficiency and an alarming drop in staff morale.
- Over all, librarians and staff are working cooperatively and collaboratively with each other, even when faced with new challenges and assignments. The exceptions to this situation involve relationships between library managers and administrators recently hired.
- While the need for change may have been justified, the way the changes were carried out (i.e., without first getting sufficient prior “buy-in” by the library faculty and staff) has resulted in resistance to the changes themselves and profound resentment among almost everyone.
- Sometimes librarians voluntarily work extra hours when circumstances of the workflow require it. Among some, however, there is an attitude of “I’ll just do my minimum job and no more.” This attitude of “I am only willing and required to work 9-5” among some library faculty undermines morale.
- Productivity of reference and technical services could improve with additional staff. Some library staff were shifted to other library functions, however, to accommodate identified

priorities. For instance, the role and importance of ILL in supplementing the USM collection and meeting faculty and student needs for resources seems to have been diminished.

- Coverage of reference services in the evening and on weekends (when commuting students tend to use a library) is inadequate. Part of the cause for this situation, however, is resistance by library faculty to work any schedule but 9-5, Monday-Friday, a situation that has existed for some time at USM.
- Staff librarians having a leadership and supervisory role over faculty has been a source of major objection by library faculty. Their concerns derive from the faculty status of librarians and the perceived attempt to circumvent giving faculty status to new administrators. New administrators were hired and placed in positions outside the faculty status system in order to provide more flexibility in administration. The library faculty see this move as a threat to their own job security.
- Practices and procedures for processing catalog records have changed due to budget restrictions. Should full, more complete information in the items record be provided, or brief, less fulsome information? Because of the difference in processing time and staff costs, the former technique is more time-consuming and costly than the latter. Unless special funding is available at the start (e.g., from a donor or other source) to pay for full and complete processing, most archives and special collections departments do the processing in stages, i.e., staff do brief records first and then, as staff time becomes available, they go back to the brief records and expand them. One complaint from USM Library archives staff was that they were restricted to doing only brief records, which they felt was inadequate for researchers, especially in the de Grummond children's collection. Usually, this decision is mostly a matter of resources (staff and dollars) that are available.
- The USM switch to Millennium was undertaken with inadequate prior analysis and discussion with USM librarians and staff. A primary consideration should have been: Is the potential benefit of the new system so great that it out-weighs both the qualities of the old system and the disruption to services and procedures that the change inevitably would generate? A complete comparison analysis might have shown that the benefit of a new system did not outweigh the overall costs in dollars, staff resistance and workflow disruption; and therefore a switch of systems was ill advised.
- The deans are especially anxious about the quality of library collections and the change in how purchases are made for the collections that support faculty teaching and research. They also are worried about the changes in the roles of the librarians relative to the academic departments, especially the deterioration in the quality of interaction between the faculty and the librarians. The deans see this decline as detrimental to an effective, cooperative relationship that is necessary for the academic enterprise to be successful.
- Is it a good practice to hire non-tenure track administrators in the Library? In the current environment, it is not a good idea.
- At present, the USM library does not meet minimum requirements for ASERL membership. This group could be very useful to USM and eventual membership should be a goal.
- What barriers does USM have to providing the type of library services needed by USM library users? Clearly, the primary barrier is budgetary. The consultant concluded that a second (and perhaps more daunting) barrier is the attitude prevalent among many library faculty toward their jobs. Their view of themselves is that they are performing to the highest professional standards, when in fact they are meeting only those much lower standards expected of them in the past, standards that are below those at USM's sister institutions.