

# Redefining our Library

Sharon Holderman

Tennessee Technological University

**Abstract:** Although libraries have claimed redefinition, it mostly applies to how patrons access information. There should be more focus on the other ways that libraries are changing. The definition of a library has not changed, and many people still separate traditional library services from non-traditional library services. It is all the library, and we should focus on serving our patrons' needs and let libraries define themselves.

**Keywords:** *academic libraries, tradition, definition*



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

I googled *redefining libraries*, and the first 10 results focused on how the digital revolution has changed the way libraries acquire, share, teach, produce, and disseminate information. There is no arguing technology has drastically changed the way we do things, especially in the last 20 years. Besides our collection, my library offers computers, group study rooms, equipment checkout, and non-traditional instruction topics including financial literacy, effective presentations, and research poster design. These could be considered updated ways to disseminate and access information for our patrons. Other libraries have branched into data curation, makerspaces, and publishing, which are also part of organizing and creating information. All of these endeavors have certainly transformed the services, look, feel, and structure of libraries.

My library has also entered the world of learning assistance; we manage the university tutoring program, supplemental instruction program, learning support program for underprepared students, and a testing center opening this year. Although these are not traditional library services, they are fulfilling the needs of our campus community. These have become functions of our library and are actually some of our most popular services. Our dean's title is Dean of Library and Learning Assistance, which facilitated these services being developed or relocated under the library umbrella. To be clear, these programs organizationally belong to our library; I am not referring to non-library functions simply located in our building.

Managing these learning assistance changes within our library culture has been more difficult than I anticipated. I thought our learning assistance programs automatically redefined our library as we expanded beyond the traditional library services. It caused me to view the definition of a library quite differently than I did 20 years ago, but I seem to be in the minority. Within our own library, there is still much separation between the traditional library functions and the learning assistance services.

There are faculty in the learning support program, but they are not involved in the library faculty promotion and tenure process despite being under the same dean. Library employees have questioned the use of student wages for tutoring but do not question using money for student workers serving traditional library functions. Librarians want instruction sessions to take room-scheduling priority over supplemental instruction sessions despite both being library services. Our most recent strategic planning committee did not have representation from the learning support program until someone suggested it. Librarians resisted using a vacant reference librarian position to hire tutoring and testing employees even though we have experienced a severe decline in reference and there is a strong need for a university testing center. These behaviors suggest many see a dichotomy between libraries and learning assistance, which can alienate various people and services within the library. The reality is everything we do is part of our library.

I have learned we have not actually redefined our library because some employees feel we should no longer be called a library because we do non-library things. We need to get away from semantics and not let the definition of a library dictate what we do or how we do it. I believe what we do dictates how our library is defined. If we decide something is valuable enough to offer, then it shall become part of the library no matter how unusual it is. If we created and taught a class for students on probation to improve their study skills and increase retention, it would be a library function. If we started a technology transfer office for intellectual property, those employees would be part of the library staff. Trying to determine which library functions are more important or more library-appropriate benefits no one and only serves to hinder unity.

I challenge you to resist using the library definition to determine how you serve your patrons and community. Serve them based on their needs and your capacity to meet them. Not sure what

their needs are? Ask them! Not only is this more accurate than guessing what they might want, but it will help you think outside the traditional library definition. When it comes to redefining libraries, we have two options:

1. Establish a library's individual identity regardless of definitions or semantics, or
2. Actually redefine the word "library" and its culture to include more than just a focus on collections, resources, and traditional services.

If we choose the first option, libraries will find their identities individually and create their own definitions based on what they offer. They could even choose to supplement or change their name to be more descriptive. For example, my library might be called Library and Learning Resources.

Alternatively, my library has created a tagline: More than you expect. This helps indicate we offer more than traditional services, and we make sure to promote all we do regardless of how it fits into the traditional library definition. Our patrons then define our library based on how they experience it, regardless of tradition.

Choosing the second option is an uphill battle because it requires a large-scale change in the perception of what libraries have and do. Nevertheless, it is not an impossible culture shift, and libraries are nothing if not flexible given our history. After deciding on a broader, more inclusive definition of the word, there would be a major marketing campaign to spread the word (pun intended). Of course, libraries would also need to have a conversation with dictionary publishers about their definition.

However, we redefine our individual libraries or the larger culture and definition, we shall always strive to best serve our patrons' needs without limiting us to a dictionary definition. Honestly, I think my library's foray into nontraditional services has been very easy for our patrons because they

are not caught up in semantics or an organizational chart. They get a library tour, learn where to go for tutoring and testing, and all is right in their world. Adding learning assistance has been more difficult for our library employees because they often identify a library based on history, tradition, and the definition of the word. Introducing nontraditional changes within a library's organizational chart would be easier if employees' perceptions and definitions of libraries were broadened, allowing everyone to feel part of one library team.