What Makes a Library Great

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Authors who write books on the subject of “great libraries” define greatness narrowly. As the appended bibliography indicates, these authors characterize libraries as great for one of two reasons: as iconic, palatial buildings or because of expansive, rich collections.

Defining “great libraries” as simply buildings or collections severely reduces its modern application. In today’s world, using these criteria, we would apply the word “great” to iconic constructions like the new main library buildings in Seattle, Chicago and Nashville, or we would admire the “great” collections in the main buildings of New York Public, Philadelphia Public and Boston Public libraries.

No doubt, once upon a time, “great libraries” could be defined singularly by their magnificent buildings or its rich collections. The complexities of our own times, however, require the use of different criteria. Today we recognize that a library system can possess a great building and still be mediocre. And, a library can hold rich collections that it stores and presents so pathetically that visitors want to move them to other places where they might get the conservation they deserve and some reliable form of access or display.

Our times call for “great libraries,” those that demonstrate conservation ideals and inspire new models of access rather than ceaselessly repeating old ways of thinking and doing. We need libraries that do great things to handle ageless problems. We need libraries that innovate in their use of new tools to achieve great results for their constituents.

All our claims for “great libraries,” however, will have little value unless we include as a definitional centerpiece evidence of how we will know that greatness is not a Pollyanna’s prayer or a publicist’s fantasy. To keep greatness realistic, each of its defining criteria should include measurements that help us measure an objective reality. To summarize, we ought to work to make every one of our institutions a “great library,” with the term’s foundation being observable criteria that our peers recognize as having both merit and measurability.

Within this context, what is a great library?
1. Great libraries provide measurably superior service. The greatest innovation is superior service. The most constant measure of quality is the delivery of superior service.

However professional librarians decide to meet their constituents’ wants and needs, those who organize the organization’s resources will know that their service is superior because they will constantly ask their users to assess that quality. Many tools exist to measure service worth. Cost benefit analysis, with its statement of dollars returned for dollars spent, is a formidable methodology. User focus groups, walk-out surveys, customer tracking, secret shoppers, telephone surveys, and virtual surveys of both users and
non-users are other measurement alternatives.

Our profession advocates “planning for results.” Equally important, we need to “measure for results” by making sure that users and community influentials assess the quality of our services and judge whether those services lead to improved family and community life.

2. Great libraries have great funding. Libraries that have great funding can be poor libraries in any number of ways, but without great funding, a library cannot achieve greatness. Several years ago, in a speech to some Kentucky library trustees, I asserted that library governance officials had a duty to make sure that their institutions had appropriate funding levels. An angry trustee jumped to his feet and yelled, “I don’t have to raise money! I run the library!” After the seminar, one of the man’s board colleagues said to me, “Yes, and he’s running it right into the ground.” That, I am certain, is always the result when those in authority decide that institutional finance is someone else’s business. Every person associated with a library – as staff member, board member, government official or friend – needs to be made a proactive advocate for library funding.

Achieving great funding takes specific attention and hard work in our profession. Institutional economics and finance are almost incidental in lots of library literature – and in the training of librarians. Economic coverage in library journalism is no better: Dramatic cuts get attention, but there is little systematic information or analysis of how library funding formulas differ in Ohio, Texas, California, North Carolina and Montana. Neither has our profession paid much attention to the cooperative funding-and-service mechanisms that librarians have worked out in the State of Minnesota or in regions like Kansas City and Houston.

Moreover, we need to identify new library funding mechanisms like those that support sports teams and their facilities and cultural institutions like zoos and museums. If libraries have the wide support that so many in our profession claim, then our broad calls for assistance and collaboration will be answered by civic leaders and financial experts who will help us find the funds we need with which to develop our critical future. Proclamations by politicians and civic leaders that they “love libraries” should be accepted with a smile and a thank you. Then we should do what law enforcement professionals do when they look for fraud: We should look for the money! To paraphrase an old Wendy’s hamburger commercial, even the vegetarians among us should ask, “Where’s the beef?”

3. Great libraries train and retrain their staffs. Libraries claim they are in the knowledge business. To keep their staff members up to date in their changing jobs, private-sector knowledge businesses, including banks, insurance, real estate and, brokerages, spend heavily on training. On average, they spend about 5% annually of their gross salary lines – not counting travel - on staff training. Libraries spend much less to update their employees, usually less than 1%.

Great libraries develop and implement major training programs, preferably watched over by teams of adult education professionals and experienced librarians. Dollars spent on training are easy to measure in any library budget. As library schools hand out MLS degrees to students on their way to become practitioners, the last line at the bottom of the diploma ought to read, “Your MLS is never enough! You need more training.”
The whole library field needs to advance its thinking about training to match the reality of 20th century library work. Governance officials ought to ask directors to make space in their budgets for a superior staff training program and then ask administrators to set up mechanisms to oversee how that training improves individual and group on-the-job performance.

4. Great libraries integrate the marketing of virtual, place and outreach services. At this point in library history, it is easy to sort out the libraries that integrate their marketing efforts. Quick evidence of superior effort: See if your library can demonstrate cross-over marketing among the efforts it makes with print handouts, mailings, attendants at in-library programs, outreach programs and website presentations to connect and promote its efforts in the other areas.

Library websites should advertise library special events and regular programs. Library mailings should demonstrate virtual accessibility and showcase activities happening at all the system’s neighborhoods. Library outreach programs should encourage library visits and use of the library’s virtual tools. And, in the 21st century, individual donors need to be given opportunities to make donations in every kind of advertising that the institution uses.

Moreover, in their marketing, libraries need to take special care about how to communicate with constituents who are not library users. Conveying “the idea of the library” to non users is as important as telling users about new resources that you have available. For most of us in the library profession, it would be correct to suggest that when we walk down a street or through a shopping center, one out of two people we see are NOT library users. The non-users have certain differences from users. They know less about your library than users, they are more likely to vote no for library revenue increases than users, AND they will be more likely to be illiterate and live in poverty, especially if they are young.

So, how does your library market to non-users? To users? Are the marketing tools you are using likely to be the ones that provide access to the groups you want to reach? How do you know you have contacts with non-users? Is that contact informative and positive? The questions go on and on. It takes only an act of will to obtain measurements that improve your marketing and outreach efforts.

5. Great libraries serve both the weakest and the strongest among their constituents. Every time I give a seminar somewhere, some professional librarian rises to say, “My library’s services will always be needed, because there will always be poor people. I’ll be happy if we just do that well.”

I find that comment downright scary. If we look at services for the poor – public housing, Medicaid medicine, and, alas, public schools in many inner cities and rural areas - we recognize how often such services are inadequate.

Poverty, however, defines only one set of library and information needs. Even wealthy stay-at-home moms delight in library preschooler “edutainment” programs. Working professional women and men participate in book clubs. And, every community taken over by retiree migration feels the demand for improved library services, including help with technology and information on investments, personal health, and consumer issues.

Publicly funded libraries need to provide critical programs that match the demographics of their
constituencies. The library and information services that the weakest and the strongest constituents need are not the same. One of my own board members, experienced in such matters, called our branches that served mostly poor citizens “equity libraries” and pushed for the service changes that went with the label. The measurement question in these branches was not about circulation but about attendance at practical help programs, public computer use and related offerings. The list of easy demographic and geographic measurables that associate our library efforts with service demographics is a long one. We need to pay critical attention to these associations.

6. Great libraries provide constituents with education and entertainment. Users who come to library staff, programs and websites want accurate and timely information. Over and over again, we are told in our literature that in general our answers to reference questions are “right” only about sixty percent of the time. Even if we recognize that questions very often have more than one right answer, training and good supervision raises that percentage. Our library educational programs should be built around learning outcomes for attendees and evaluated on the basis of what audience members learned. Library educational efforts almost always need to include literacy, either basic literacy or English as a second language for foreign-born immigrants.

So far as entertainment, we should start with a basic premise that professional public librarians want to help people “enjoy” reading. Greater enjoyment comes with increased understanding, like interacting with authors in groups or online. It comes as well from opportunities to share and explore ideas with other readers. The popularity of reading clubs in today’s world is a wonderful example of self-entertainment in an often anonymous and lonely 21st century life.

My measurement mechanism here, as with those I suggest above, is again simple: We ask libraries to report the education and entertainment efforts they make, ranging from quality one-on-one reader’s advisory to regular music programs that the community’s teens organize for each other through outreach efforts outside library walls. And, at every entertainment program, we ask if folks had a good time, what they learned, and/or what they want to see changed.

7. Great libraries use virtual tools to offer a full range of timely information and services. Library websites need to move beyond the idiosyncratic state they are in today The website’s opening page needs to promote the library and navigate persons to the catalog, programs, children’s page and teen page, and name responsible library managers and how to contact them – to name only typical library website one-click destinations.

The site needs to promote the library’s uniqueness – its unique special collections, services and databases that professional staff have assembled for its community and lists of links that staff have assessed and judged especially helpful to local constituents. The website also should promote friends, foundation and donations of time (i.e. volunteer opportunities), needed in-kind materials and monetary gifts. Such a site becomes an accurate representation of the library, its operations and opportunities.

Finally, no single fact demonstrates a library administration’s cluelessness about the critical importance of its website than references so old they have whiskers. A good website rule is, “Don’t mount what you can’t keep current.” As with some of my earlier requirements of superior operation, this one is relatively easy to measure through simple observation.
I imagine that every reader of my list of criteria for what constitutes library greatness can provide me with a favorite criteria item that I left off. I have no problem with being more inclusive. I do insist that your additions include methods for measurements.

One final point. I have a practical reason for wanting us to think about and to develop great libraries. That reason, quite simply, is because we need them!

This thought is summarized in a wonderful saying decorating a wall in Nashville’s new central library. The adage reads, “A city with a great library is a great city.”

Libraries are significant markers on a civic skyline, overt signals that communities recognize the significant roles that literature, art, music, philosophy, history and science play as platforms for building a community where they want to live and work. As a profession, we need to spend our conscious work time building the great libraries that great cities need.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF “GREAT LIBRARIES” BOOKS

The earliest of these titles is Arundell James Kennedy Esdaile. The world’s great libraries. (Grafton and Co., 1934), which it has never been my pleasure to see. I, therefore, mention its existence but cannot characterize it. Anthony Hobson, Great libraries (New York: Putnam, [1970]), sets the theme. His volume examines “great” buildings and “great” collections.
The Nation’s Great Library: Herbert Putnam and the Library of Congress, 1899-1939. (Urbana-Champaign; University of Illinois Press, 1993), follows a similar theme in her examination of forty years of LC history. So, too, does Konstantinos Sp. Staikos, The great libraries: From antiquity to the Renaissance (3000 B.C. to A.D. 1600). (Translated by Timothy Cullen; New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press; London: The British Library, 2000), which concentrates on European library history until the end of the 16th century. A year after Staikos came publication of the exhibition catalog of the National Library of Australia, Treasures from the World’s Great Libraries. Sydney: National Library of Australia, 2001). This volume mostly described the exhibit, focusing on the treasures from the rare collection items from great research and national libraries that were on display. Two years after that, Guillaume de Laubier and Jacques Bosser teamed up with James H. Billington as photographer to publish The Most Beautiful Libraries in the World. (Trans. by Laura Hirsch; New York: Abrams, 2003). These authors used wonderful photographs to refocus attention on “great” library buildings and “great” library collections with emphasis on the structures. More recently, James Raven, ed., Lost libraries : The destruction of great book collections since antiquity. (New York; Palgrave McMillan, 2004), does exactly what his title says, narrating the tragic ends for collections that would have been major contributions to today’s knowledge base.