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July 2001

### Highlights from Syllabus Magazine

#### Ready or Not, They're Here: Library Portals

*Elizabeth Buchanan*

Ranganathan's Five Laws of Librarianship told us:

1. Books are for use
2. Books are for all, or every reader his book
3. Every book its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. A library is a growing organism.

These principles appear to be at least as relevant now as they were when first written, 60 years ago—maybe more so—despite the many twists and turns libraries have taken over the years. The theoretical principles remain fundamental to the world of libraries today as we struggle in the face of continually changing and emerging technologies, competing interests, and customer demands that far surpass "every reader his book." Ketchell has suggested that consumers now expect services and products, especially information, to be personalized and customized. Libraries, in response, are adapting to one of the Web's biggest movements: the customizable portal.



#### Changing Organizational Culture

Portals, also known as gateways, have made the move from the commercial world of the My Yahoos and Excites to a library near you. Generalized and niche online portals are rapidly increasing in number. Academic and special libraries in particular have found the portal approach appropriate as they struggle to compete with a host of other information providers and services, many of which promise to deliver "just the information we need when we need it." We've long heard of the demise of the library in light of these personalized Internet and dot-com information services. Fortunately, a doomsday scenario is far from reality, though libraries are realigning their services, delivery models, and philosophies in a truly patron-centered approach, more in line with the customization occurring in the commercial world of information provision.

Lakos and Gray suggest that the library portal will ultimately change organizational culture in libraries, challenging the way librarians do their work and affecting all types of librarians. They further indicate that the portal leads to a readjustment of priorities, creating a focus "on learning outcomes for students, superior support for research, and [that] all this will make the library more visible and its value more appreciated." Libraries, now dealing with information overload, remote access, distant users, and the full-scale model of the digital library itself, may benefit tremendously from the portal concept.

Portals are customer-focused, and as Lakos and Gray state, they empower "users to create personal information systems that are responsive to their individual needs." Users gain the benefits of personally relevant information, while experiencing a librarian's expertise through advisory services

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and direct service. Moreover, portals lead to better information management. Through the mechanics of a portal, lists of results shrink and become much more relevant and appropriate when filtered, in the best sense of the word, through the professional lens of a librarian.

Another particular benefit of the portal model impacts distance learning students, who are becoming a larger percentage of the student body. Distance learning (DL) students rely on an institutional Web site, and in particular, the library, to successfully complete their studies. A portal for the DL student may be a true lifeline to the campus, as it may provide access to all registration, enrollment, texts, advising, and library resources. Portals can be of particular aid to the DL student who is more often than not working full time and juggling family and other life commitments.

It must be stressed, however, that portals do not alleviate the professional responsibility of librarians; quite the contrary, we must be certain our users are familiar with the portal interface, can make the best uses of the resources provided through the portal, and know how to seek professional assistance. As users, distance or otherwise, choose to remain at home and access the library from personal computers, librarians must be committed to novel forms of assistance—virtual bibliographic instruction classes, online reference assistance, toll-free phone lines, and online forms and request services. The role of the librarian is not going away: It is simply growing and changing.

### **Up and Running**

Libraries across the United States and the world are discovering the benefits of the portal worthy of hefty investments. The Australian National University Library, for instance, approved the expenditure of \$1.7 million (Australian) over three years for its Portals Program. Universities closer to home, including the University of California at Los Angeles, University of Buffalo, University of Washington, and Virginia Commonwealth, among others, are investing money, resources, and time in the implementation of library and campus-wide portals.

### **North Carolina State**

<http://web.archive.org/web/20011217090712/http://my.lib.ncsu.edu/>

One of the most-discussed library portals belongs to North Carolina State. My Library@NCState began in theory in 1997 with a working model unveiled in 1998. MyLibrary@NCState comprises library resources, links to both library services and university Web pages, as well as personal profile areas. MyLibrary@NCState works by allowing users to select a subject discipline, thereby bringing a librarian's content expertise to one's own fingertips. Features including "Message from My Librarian" and "My Librarian" are predicated on the discipline selected by the user. As departments in universities have been accustomed to having a content expert to whom recommendations can be made and from whom advice can be solicited, this advisory service is now available to all through the portal. Users can be alerted when new materials are added to a particular collection, when new journal articles in line with an interest profile appear, when guest lectures and seminars occur on campus, and when materials for specific courses in which the user is enrolled are available. Gone, it seems, are the days of browsing the shelves, as we streamline the time of the reader. MyLibrary@NCState is a work in progress, with significant improvements occurring frequently. A visit to MyLibrary@NCState is a valuable experience for all librarians interested in improving their customer service models.

Resources concerning library portals abound in the literature and online, and resource sharing, including the source code required to implement the MyLibrary@NCState portal system—with the understanding that each institution works on its own administrative databases, security features, computer applications, and actual look and feel of the portal interface—is downloadable freely (<http://web.archive.org/web/20011217090712/http://hegel.lib.ncsu.edu/development/mylibrary/>). Playing in the "sandbox" of code is encouraged, and a worthwhile listserv exists to aid systems librarians and their peers as they install and customize their own "MyLibrary."

### **University of Buffalo**

<http://web.archive.org/web/20011217090712/http://myub.buffalo.edu/guest/student/>

Another noteworthy example is the University of Buffalo, which has expanded the portal concept nicely for students and users, including library areas in addition to many personalized student resources: class schedules, course enrollment, links to professor e-mails, and many other features. The University of Buffalo's portal gives students a different set of choices, depending on their status—prospective students, admitted students, then matriculated students.

## uPortal

<http://web.archive.org/web/20011217090712/http://www.ja-sig.org/>

Too, the uPortal project, a collaborative effort of more than 25 universities and Interactive Business Systems, has worked to build a common portal framework and set of standards through an open source code written in Java, XML, JSP, XSL, and J2EE. This collaborative effort promotes a set of requirements, including the provision of access to all information and services through a single graphical interface, a convenient set of Web-based communications services, the ability to present information and access to services on an individual basis in a personalized manner, and the ability to customize the appearance, layout, and information in the portal. Sound familiar? These are many of the same ideas typified in the Laws of Librarianship.

## Plan Ahead

Eisler, in the March 2000 Syllabus article "Selecting and Implementing Campus Portals," provides users with some simple questions for consideration as an institution debates the portal decision. Librarians and campus administrators alike are encouraged to refer to these before jumping on board without a clear plan. As with any other technology initiative, cost-benefit analysis, user needs analysis, and resource evaluation are requisite. I encourage readers to investigate the many examples that are browseable through the Java in Administration Special Interest Group (JA-SIG) Web site at [www.ja-sig.org](http://www.ja-sig.org). Librarians certainly don't want to shelve the portal alongside the Betamax and laser discs.

A growing organism, to be sure. Libraries: ready or not, portals are here—and when done correctly, they will most likely be here for good.

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