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Developing a Quality Service Strategy

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USC | Information Services Division | Resources & Services Quality Service Strategy

I. *What is our Strategic Goal for how we provide library services? What are we trying to achieve, and how is it aligned with the master plan?*

- Support the research, learning and instruction mission of the university by empowering our patrons with precision information control

II. *What are our guiding principles? What is our overall philosophy for providing service, and what constitutes "quality" service?*

- Service is our product
- Quality service beings at "home" (i.e. the quality of the service departments and individuals provide to one another within the organization effects the quality of the service we provide to patrons)
- All patrons receive a common level of individualized service
- All services are "outreach" services, and therefore, proactively solicited

III. *What are the tactics we will employ? What are the service techniques that will help us to provide quality service?*

- Active listening by paraphrasing main ideas, seeking clarification, and giving feedback (includes the use of positive body language)
- Awareness of service-quality variables:
 - Service provider's ability, empathy, responsiveness, confidence, and reliability
 - Library system workflow efficiency
 - Library environment and equipment
 - Patron's past experiences with library services, and emotional state at the time of the transaction
- Central reporting of service concerns
- Continuous complaint gathering and customer analysis
- Continuous investigation and training to enable "service genius" (a combination of informational knowledge, institutional knowledge, technical skills, and emotional intelligence)
- Maximization of available service styles from departments and individuals
- Participation in internal and external initiatives to enhance library services
- Recognition and reward of quality service provided
- Solicited acknowledgement from the patron that the service transaction has been completed

IV. *How will we know if we're on the right path? How will we gather input from patrons to assess our service quality, and how will we find out what new services our patrons need?*

- Recognize that the quality of all services can only be measured by demonstrable patron satisfaction
- The quality of service received and the need for new services is assessed by a combination of mechanisms that can include:
 - national and local surveys
 - focus groups
 - ad hoc interviews
 - formal feedback
 - research

V. *"What's my role and level of responsibility?" Who will monitor our progress, who will report problems, and who will propose solutions?*

- All personnel are responsible for supporting the strategic goal for quality service regardless of their position in the organization, and are evaluated annually on their ability to provide quality service
- Each department has an assigned quality-service monitor
- Service monitors report all known service concerns to the Director of Access Services along with a proposed solution
- Survey results, patron feedback gathered, and concerns from service monitors will be tabulated by the Director of Access Service and reported to the Leadership Team

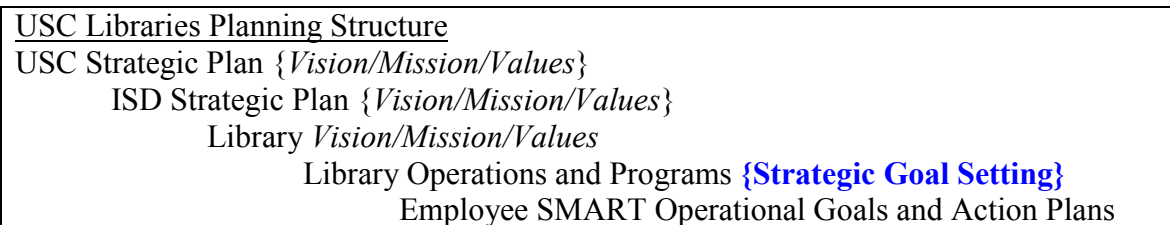
The service mission of the Information Services Division at the University of Southern California articulates our dedication to providing quality service. Until recently, however, we did not have a plan for accomplishing this provision. Our personnel were expected to provide “quality” service based on an assumption that everyone understood what was meant, and knew how to provide it. Without clarifying expectations in this regard, there was also no productive way of measuring the efficacy of the services we provided. In order to address this, a project was undertaken to develop a *Quality Service Strategy* that involved a multiple-day training workshop, strategic analysis regarding current service levels, and a series of group discussions. The strategy can be used as a resource of best practices for staff to enhance their skills, as a management tool for ensuring that quality service is maintained, and finally, as an assessment tool for measuring our service impact on the university. “Measurement”, in this sense, implies measurement against radical principles. Before a local baseline can be established there must be something tangible to reference, and this is precisely what makes measuring progress in the area of service difficult. Defining “quality” service for a specific environment, and developing a strategy to achieve it, are therefore necessary first steps toward developing reliable service assessment.

The ability to provide customer-acknowledged “quality” service can be a measure of an organization’s health. As such, this ability provides organizations with a competitive edge. It is clearly a benefit when working with scarce resources, and it is a further benefit for academic libraries, which often struggle with a both a real and a presumed scarcity. Presumed scarcity by patrons can occur for a variety reasons, but two causes seem especially rampant. One is the well known phenomenon that, regardless of the number of resources offered, there are always individual research needs that cannot be immediately met. Even if you can please 80% of you patrons, the 20% of unsatisfied need can be an extremely burdensome situation. In these cases offering informed and personalized alternatives becomes a critical part of our daily operations. The complexity involved in navigating both physical and virtual library spaces is another common cause. If patrons ask for help we have a good chance of meeting their needs, but what happens when they do not? From the patron’s perspective, experiences of presumes scarcity, as well as experiences of real scarcity, are perceived as limitations on their personal control within an information environment. Thus, the role of information service providers is to relinquish some of our own information control to empower our students and faculty.

Such a task is not easy, for information is the currency of our non-profit world. To emancipate information is to compromise our influence, or so it would seem. The service strategy we have developed is based on the principle that in actuality information is not what patrons are primarily seeking from us. Service, in fact, is our most valuable product, and the source of our true influence. It is illusory to believe that we can control information anyway—either the content, or the access to it. Information either exists, or does not; when extant it is made public, or not; we are aware of its existence and have purchased it, or not. Providing quality service is thus the most significant contribution that an academic library can make toward supporting the mission of its university. Why then is our approach to service so lackadaisical? We provide the occasional training for

our personnel, yet often do not hold them accountable except for the most severe transgressions. Instead we spend most of our energy clumsily falling all over our selves, apologetically responding to the latest complaint. In the end, even the best damage control will not result in patron satisfaction.

Clearly, what makes formalizing service standards problematic is that they are difficult to articulate in a measurable way. One way to resolve this for academic libraries is by creating a strategic goal that captures what the organization is trying to achieve through the services provided. The strategic goal does not need to be multi-layered or complex, but it cannot be anything less than a foundation for the strategic goals of the university it serves. In the process of developing our service strategy at USC, the articulation of our service goal was among five strategic questions asked to a task force charged with developing the full strategy. The four remaining questions relating to guiding principles, tactics, assessment, and responsibility were designed to ensure that the goal was met. Although some of the answers to these five questions might easily be transferable, it is reasonable to assume that each institution's library would develop a unique strategy. Furthermore, the strategy may or may not fit neatly within every institution's planning structure. At USC, our planning flows down from university administration to the libraries as depicted below.



The university administration develops our overarching strategic plan, along with a vision, mission, and a set of values. The Information Services Division, of which the libraries are a part, also has its own strategic plan, vision, mission, and values. And finally, the Library (ISD Resources & Services) has created its own vision and mission, and has created an addendum to ISD's core values. As part of our annual performance appraisal process ISD managers create a set of operational goals and action plans for each individual staff. Some of the staff and teams are also assigned strategic goals, which are not meant to be accomplished within any set timeframe. Strategic goals are open-ended goals. They work to fill the gaps between strategic planning and operational goals by providing coherence between the multiple layers of the organization's master plan. All of the components within a forceful planning structure are inter-connected, and may flow in multiple directions. And importantly, strategic analysis must inform and influence all planning components.

Our strategic goal for all library services is quite simple: to support the research, learning and instruction mission of the university by empowering our patrons with precision information control. Again, the idea is to enable patrons as much access as possible without intervention. There is no need to insert a service that will slow access if it is not requested by our patrons. Our guiding principles are the signposts that keep us

on the right path. First and foremost of these is the notion that service is our primary product, and it is the quality of this product that makes the greatest impact on our patrons. Providing a common level of service means that we do not shrug off an undergraduate unnecessarily when a faculty member enters the scene. In practice, this is much more difficult than it appears in print, nevertheless, it is an important rule of thumb. The individualization of each service transaction ensures that we do not under service patrons, and it ensures that we do not over service them as well. Each transaction should be a proper fit, so that patrons are neither unsatisfied nor overwhelmed.

The quality of the service we provide to one another within the organization affects the quality of the service we provide to patrons. This should be self evident, yet it is easily forgotten, downplayed, or even denied. There is no way to deny with any integrity that poor service is a symptom of poor management, and it can be argued that patrons know this intuitively. The final principle, that all services are proactively solicited, collapses a common distinction between service types. We often think of desk services like circulation and reference as being a sit-back-and-wait sort of service. Outreach services such as collection development and in-class instruction, in contrast, are more proactive. In order for our services to be effective, all services must be considered a form of outreach. Even the briefest experiment will show that reference statistics triple when using this approach.

Although the tactics we have chosen to employ are meaningful for us, they are the least prescriptive of all elements in the strategy. They are included mainly as a resource for personnel when attempting to hone their service skills. Indeed, the list of tactics could easily be longer, and there are a plethora of insightful tips to be found throughout the literature. One of the most paramount of all available tactics is the notion that there are a number of variables that factor into every service transaction and ultimately determine the patron's perception of the service received. We often think of good service as being friendly service, but this is a gross oversimplification. Without question the service providers demeanor, tone of voice, personal approach, and so on are essential, but it is also essential that the patron perceive competency in the service provider, and that the provider is being responsive and empathetic to the patron's needs. Equally, there is no cheery disposition that can reconcile a flawed system that has inconvenienced a patron. Inefficient workflows are often the source of disputes because they predispose patrons toward resentment before the service transaction even begins.

Put plainly, from the patron's position there are no rules to what perceptions can enter into a service transaction. Mislabeled directional signs, warm water fountains, slow networking speeds, lack of available parking, overpriced coffee—all of these experiences trigger an emotional response that can potentially resurface during the transaction. In order to prepare library personnel for this challenge we need to provide them with more than informational knowledge. There is so much informational knowledge to be had that we understandably spend the majority of our training time and resources pursuing it. Equally—if not more—important than this is knowledge about the institution itself. A master of information is effective up to a point, but what happens when the information is not available? The service provider needs to be equipped to refer the patron to a human

resource, or to provide some other option that the patron might not be aware of. Another critical piece is the service provider's technical skills. There is no benefit to the patron if a service provider is aware of the latest electronic resource, for example, but then is not able to demonstrate how to access and use it.

Finally, beyond a service provider's knowledge and skills should lay a foundation of emotional intelligence. This term is sometimes overused, or misused. It is used here as a convenient way of describing that there is something beyond the intelligence quotient that makes quality service possible. Being emotionally intelligent is another way of saying that the service provider is aware that emotions exist; the patron has emotional potential, and the provider has emotional potential. The better a service provider can objectively recognize and label emotion, the less likely s/he will take matters personally and become defensive. We have deemed the ideal service provider who strives toward all of these traits (informational knowledge, institutional knowledge, technical skills, and emotional intelligence) as a "service genius".

Critical to the success of our service goal is assessment and analysis. Although the new measurement concept of placing the patron at the center is rhetorically accepted by most library personnel, it still needs to be continually reinforced. If we cannot demonstrate that patron's are satisfied with the quality of our product, we can not consider our current services to be adequate. To accomplish this it must be clear that everyone in the organization is required to take personal responsibility for the quality of our product. Assigning personnel to function as service monitors and tying the guiding principles to annual performance appraisals for everyone are suggested as management tools. These tools will provide structure to the otherwise fuzzy nature of providing quality service. Ultimately, this is the aim of our service strategy as well. Through the process of developing and articulating this strategy we have clearly stated the organization's service expectations, and we have prepared our managers for measuring both service ability, and service behavior.