“Academic libraries are changing faster than at any time in their history.” With this introduction, the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the Guardian newspaper began a wide-ranging review of developments in libraries, higher education, and the research enterprise in the United Kingdom. Focusing initially on the changes driven by rapid advances in information technology, the series quickly expanded its scope to include discussions of emergent patterns of scholarly publication, disruptions to the economics of information production and use, new models for teaching and learning in higher education, and radical changes in the expectations that faculty and students have for their libraries. While this series focused on the U.K., the trends it identified are global in nature. The way faculty and students search for information is changing, as is the way in which they use the information they find. The way faculty and students use their libraries – physical and digital – is changing, as are the demands they make on library collections and services. Libraries, like the institutions of which they are a part, face a “digital challenge,” or, more accurately, they face the challenge of a digital age: to demonstrate their ongoing contributions to teaching, learning, research, and service in an environment fundamentally re-shaped by information technology and by discussions about the future of higher education and scholarly inquiry.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, we believe that the academic library of the twenty-first century will be distinguished by the scope and quality of its service programs. Fundamental changes in the information and academic environments, however, demand new approaches to defining, designing, and delivering library services. An approach to library service designed for the twentieth century retains limited value if it cannot adapt to the demands of a new era in teaching, learning, and scholarship. To meet the challenge of designing a library for the next generation, we must embrace changes to our organization and to traditional ways of conducting our work. The opportunities for change are myriad, but the changes we choose to make must be consistent with our core values of service to teaching, service to scholarship, and service to our cultural heritage. The future of the University Library must be guided by these service imperatives.

The Illinois Tradition

The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is renowned for the depth of its library collections, and the quality of its services. For over a century, our approach to building those collections and delivering those services has been tied to a specific service model: the departmental library. The departmental library is defined by its collections, their alignment with
the teaching and research needs of specific departments or disciplines, and their management by librarians with expertise and experience in the fields of inquiry central to the concerns of the liaison departments. At their best, departmental libraries provide access to the universe of information most relevant to the academic pursuits of the faculty and students in liaison departments, and are led by librarians expert in providing services to faculty and students, as well as in acquiring and providing access to the materials needed for the collection. At one time, we referred to these librarians as bibliographers – masters of the world of books – today, we call them subject specialists. The departmental library service model facilitated regular communication and collaboration between faculty in a discipline and subject specialists dedicated to supporting that discipline, and it was the predominant model for large, research libraries throughout the twentieth century. If the departmental library was the paradigm for research library services, Illinois was its paragon: a campus that, by the late twentieth century, supported more than 40 departmental libraries, each presenting an artisan’s view into the riches of one of the world’s great library collections. At Illinois, there is a tradition of library excellence, but, as is the case in so many areas of academic life, that tradition is now challenged.

The Challenges We Face

No aspect of academic library work has been left untouched by ongoing developments in information technology, scholarly publication, and higher education. To appreciate the scope of these changes and the challenges they pose to the departmental library service model, one need only consider three major areas of concern: 1) the nature of collections; 2) the needs of users; and 3) the changing academic environment.

Traditional models for the collection of library materials have been re-shaped by advances in information technology and changes to scholarly publishing. Whether you consider the electronic journal, the online database, or the World Wide Web, you will find fundamental changes to the way we look at identifying materials of importance to our collections. Each advance, achieved only at considerable cost, has increased campus expectations for immediate access to digital content. For years, the Library has struggled to maintain its print collections while increasing demands for digital collections strained its budget. While the transition to digital content has not been uniform across disciplines, the Library has crossed the point of no return in committing to digital access to collections, both for materials provided to us in digital form, and for those we choose to convert to digital form. In addition to changes in technology, the Library has grappled with changes to the publishing environment, e.g., the annual cost of journal subscriptions has outpaced inflation for two decades, and discussions of open access and copyright law have re-shaped the means we use to gain access to content. Despite ongoing support from our campus, we have been unable to meet skyrocketing collections costs with available resources. Traditional collections have suffered; equally importantly, the Library has
been unable to fully meet the demand for new collections, whether new in format, means of access, or content. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, the landscape of scholarly publishing was radically different than it had been a generation before, and our departmental library service model – designed for a simpler age in an effort to collect and provide access to the literature of a given discipline – began to show the difficulties we would have traversing that terrain with the equipment left to us by our predecessors.

If the landscape of scholarly publishing has changed over the past generation, it is fair to say that the landscape of user services has been transformed almost beyond recognition. Whether your starting point is technology, demographics, or area of academic pursuit, it is clear that traditional approaches to serving our faculty and students are also increasingly limited in their impact. National and international studies of library users confirm what we know from local surveys: with so much information available online, the library is no longer the starting point for academic research. At Illinois, the global movement away from physical libraries was exacerbated both by the nature of the departmental library model, which revolves around the idea of access to hand-picked collections, and by the facilities in which many of our departmental libraries were housed. Over the past decade, we have experimented with new approaches to providing library services, including enhancing our digital presence, engaging in outreach to faculty and students, and enhancing our facilities in order to make them better attuned to the full spectrum of our faculty and students’ information needs. The success of these efforts make it clear that the strengths of the traditional departmental library may be incorporated into other service models and methods, and that the contemporary information and academic environments are too complex to be effectively served by a single service model. A century ago, pedagogical methods, research methods, and the culture of the printed word were shared commonly enough that the needs of our campus community could be served by a single, well-defined departmental library service model; in the twenty-first century, this is no longer the case. To maintain our tradition of service, we must become more flexible in our established modes of service delivery. Our experience over the past decade has provided a foundation for successful change, but it is a foundation on which we must now build.

Our final set of challenges lies in the changing nature of the academic environment. The University Library must serve the needs of teaching, learning, and research at Illinois, and those needs are changing. Whether the measure is the number of degree programs offered, the changes internal to one or more disciplines, or the movement toward increasingly interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches to scholarly inquiry, it is clear that the departmental library service model is not sustainable in its current form. Each discipline cannot have its own physical library, and the hand-picked collections housed in physical libraries cannot keep pace with changes to individual disciplines. Moreover, the students and scholars
whose work routinely transcends the artificial boundaries that we have placed around the knowledge contained in specific books and journals are ill-served by a system that requires them to understand the structures of disciplines past in order to navigate the library landscape of their campus today. There are many disciplines where a traditional service model may still be valuable, especially if its service programs expand to meet the full range of contemporary needs, but it is clear that the contemporary academic environment is fluid, and our models for library service must be meaningful and sustainable within that broader environment of challenge and change.

The Changes We Need

The University Library remains committed to its core values of service to teaching, service to scholarship, and service to our cultural heritage. We remain committed to the tradition of excellence in collections and services handed down to us by those who built our Library. We remain committed to retaining the greatest strengths of the departmental library service model – rich collections attuned to the needs of our campus, subject expertise among our Library faculty, and a network of libraries designed to facilitate communication and collaboration between librarians, teaching and research faculty, staff, and students at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign – and to exploring how those strengths may be sustained, and built upon, in the higher education environment of the twenty-first century. The changes we need to make must address the challenges noted above, but they must be consistent with these commitments and core values, and they must be flexible and adaptable to what may come. None of the change processes noted above have come to an end, but we do not have the luxury of awaiting their final resolution before embarking on changes meant to ensure the continuing excellence of the University Library.

Over the past decade, we have set the stage for the changes that must now be made. We have committed to providing digital access to content, as well as to establishing an infrastructure for digitization of content held in our collections. We have established new mechanisms for outreach and engagement with our faculty, students, and public. We have entered into partnerships with colleagues in academic departments, information technology, and student services. We have renovated aging facilities, established professional positions focused on emergent fields of inquiry, and re-dedicated ourselves to the preservation of the materials we hold as stewards for the future. And, we have remained committed to supporting a network of subject focused collections and libraries – physical and digital – that will ensure that Illinois remains as much a leader in the provision of library services in the twenty-first century as it was throughout the twentieth.
With those commitments in mind, we present an overview of the changes proposed for implementation as part of the “New Service Models” discussions held across campus in 2007-08. Details of each of these proposals, and summaries of the discussions that led to each being identified as an opportunity for change worth pursuing, can be found at: http://www.library.uiuc.edu/committee/budgetplus/nsmfinal/

1. Establish a “Retrospective Reference Collection” in the Main Library
2. Establish and Implement Appropriate Strategies for Effective Digital Content Life Cycle Management
3. Integrate the Collections and Services of the City Planning & Landscape Architecture Library with those of the Funk Family College of ACES Library
4. Establish a “Scholarly Commons” Service Model and Service Point in 200 Library
5. Open and Improve User Services in the Main Library Book Stacks
6. Support E-Science and E-Scholarship as a Strategic Priority
7. Establish a Scholarly Communications Unit and Service Program
8. Establish New Approaches to Library Services to Multidisciplinary Fields and Research Centers
9. Establish a Library-Wide Program of Assessment of Library Collections and Services
10. Consolidate Responsibility for Acquisition and Cataloging of Library Materials within Central Technical Services Units
11. Centralize Responsibility for Main Library Access Services
12. Establish Central Curatorial Control of Rare Book and Special Collections Material
13. Integrate Government Documents Service Programs into Broader Service Programs
14. Create a “Media & Information Studies Library” to be located in 122 Gregory Hall
15. Relocate the Classics Library to 306 Library
16. Create a “Languages & Linguistics Library” to be located in 225 Library
17. Create an “Area and International Studies Library” to be located in 321/325 Library
18. Relocate the Illinois History and Lincoln Collections to 324 Library
19. Create an “Earth & Life Sciences Library” in 101 Burrill Hall
20. Include Library Staff Representatives on Appropriate Library Committees
21. Review and Realign the Divisional Structure
22. Review and Realign Decision-Making Structures