

MUSIC LIBRARY ASSOCIATION  
BRANCH LIBRARIES TASK FORCE  
FINAL REPORT  
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*Task Force Charge: To investigate the issues and strategies of centralizing versus decentralizing academic music collections, from small liberal arts colleges through large research institutions, including an exhaustive literature search, collecting anecdotal evidence of MLA members who have faced this issue, and collecting information and data on music collections that have been centralized or decentralized.*

## I. Introduction

MLA members represent a wide variety of libraries. Among academic institutions, our members work with collections located in centralized facilities, dedicated branches, and music departments. While the Branch Libraries Task Force does not endorse any particular organizational model, our attention is focused on libraries that move from a decentralized (branch or department) to a centralized arrangement. A change of this magnitude is inevitably unsettling for staff and users alike, even if undertaken in an ideal atmosphere of openness and collaboration. In reality, branch consolidations are often planned with minimal input from music library staff and the community of users served by these specialized facilities. This puts staff in the awkward position of coping with imposed changes, while at the same time presenting those changes to users in a positive light.

This report offers resources for music library staff facing a range of circumstances, whether researching the pros and cons of centralization, challenging a planned branch closure, or implementing a consolidation with minimal disruption. It concludes with recommendations for further action by the Association, with the goal of providing additional support for its members.

## II. Case Studies

*The following case studies are based on interviews conducted between November 2011 and January 2012 with music librarians from institutions that planned to close a music branch library and relocate its collections, services, and staff. The participants were promised anonymity for themselves and their institutions, and they were given the opportunity to edit the resulting text.*

### Case Study #1: Private baccalaureate institution

#### **SUMMARY OF EVENTS**

In response to the recent economic downturn, the institution undertook a thorough budget review in order to identify areas for significant cost-cutting. One of these measures was the closure of the music library and consolidation of its collections into the main library (no other branch libraries were targeted for closure). Further savings would be realized by eliminating all music library staff positions except the branch head, who would be absorbed into the main library.

Immediate and decisive action saved the music branch library. Chairs of the music, theatre, and dance departments all met with the provost and president to protest the closure. In addition, students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members participated in an extensive, grass roots letter writing campaign. The response was overwhelming and impossible for the president to ignore. Plans to close the music branch were cancelled, the only one of the major cost-cutting measures not to be implemented in full. Even so, service hours were reduced, the music library's student assistance budget was halved, two staff positions were eliminated, and two more staff had their annual contracts reduced to ten months.

#### **WERE MUSIC LIBRARY STAFF CONSULTED PRIOR TO THE DECISION TO CONSOLIDATE?**

No. The branch closure/consolidation was presented as a *fait accompli*.

#### **WERE ACTIONS TAKEN TO PREVENT THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

Yes. See above

## **HOW ARE USERS AND STAFF ADJUSTING TO THE MUSIC BRANCH'S REDUCTIONS IN FUNDING, STAFF, AND SERVICE HOURS?**

Since the averted closure, the music branch slowly regained some of the student assistance budget, although it is not at the same level. As a residential college, the libraries historically have had very generous hours, but the music library opens later (10:00 am) and closes earlier (10:00 pm on weeknights) than the other branch libraries. The students, of course, would prefer if the hours were comparable to the other branch libraries. There is no longer a night and weekend supervisor on site. Student assistants are told to call staff at home if there are major issues.

The major hit at the library is the loss of the music cataloging/night and weekend position. This work has had to be absorbed by two staff positions (this includes the music librarian) working in cooperation with the main library cataloging department. Needless to say, there is an ever increasing backlog. Since there are order records represented in the online catalog, music cataloging is often done on demand.

The library acquisitions funds were not affected, although it might now take longer to access new material. With the exception of open hours and onsite professional help, most library patrons are likely to see little difference in the quality of the service.

## **ADVICE FOR OTHERS FACING A BRANCH CLOSURE**

If you are having to deal with this situation and you don't already have an interested, supportive and driven constituency with strong opinions in your favor, it is too late to try to build a group of supporters. First and foremost, you must have a determined and supportive faculty who are willing to put in the time, effort and energy it will take. I think that reason we were saved is because we had the support of not just the music community, but also theatre and dance. There has been some sense in certain quarters that the battle was turned into the issue of the 'future of the performing arts,' not just the 'future of the music library'.

## Case Study #2: Private baccalaureate institution

### **SUMMARY OF EVENTS**

After the longtime college librarian retired, library and information technology units were merged under a new Dean. While the Dean favored incorporating music and science branches into a new main library, it was determined that the planned building's design could not accommodate the branch collections, and the consolidation project was abandoned. Although the music library facility had been built with room for expansion, and was now in dire need of space, there was no support for spending funds to improve a branch library.

The Dean hired consultants to assist with restructuring the newly-merged library/IT organization. Although their recommendations were not immediately adopted, their ideas about library organization and management would later bear fruit. Departures of several key staff members facilitated the reorganization process: the supervision of circulation and cataloging was centralized, the music and science branch heads were placed under a head of reference, and music reference/collection development duties were reassigned. Certain library positions were reassigned to IT, which had been chronically understaffed.

The music branch had begun to see a decline in usage, due to the widespread availability of new audio technologies, the relocation of nearby student housing, and other factors. Early retirements, offered in response to the recent recession, cost the combined library/IT organization about 25% of its staff. Around this time, there was also a change in library administration. The new Dean, an IT specialist who believes that the library's future lies in digital materials, was less concerned about finding space for physical collections. When upper administration again proposed moving music materials to the main library, the Dean agreed, and the music branch was closed.

### **WERE MUSIC LIBRARY STAFF CONSULTED PRIOR TO THE DECISION TO CONSOLIDATE?**

No. Although there had been rumors of a branch closure for years, staff input was limited to planning for a successful move after the decision had already been reached.

### **WERE ACTIONS TAKEN TO PREVENT THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

To have mounted a fight to save the facility probably would have cost me my job. The chair of the music department did not oppose the move. He was an advocate for technology, and not a major supporter of the music library.

## **HOW ARE YOUR USERS AND STAFF ADJUSTING TO THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

The circulation of CDs has dropped by 50% since we moved. I don't see much of the music faculty or music majors, but it is easier for students in other subject areas to find me. We no longer need to staff a separate music circulation point, and there is one less computer lab for IT people to service. My new office is more comfortable and I don't need to travel far for meetings or reference shifts.

Those of us in the music library helped our administration with this move – and tried to think positively about it. We had hoped that our situation would be positive for both us and the students. But I think it has been a mixed bag – as our lower CD circulation stats show. And I certainly have heard plenty of grumbling from music faculty (other than the chair) about how inconvenient our new location is.

## **ADVICE FOR OTHERS FACING A BRANCH CLOSURE**

I believe there are several keys to staving off a merger. The major one is support of tenured faculty. Students are around only about 4 years or so, and administrators know they can wait them out. But how heavily they use your facility -- daily body count, not just circulation stats -- is very important. The other is space in the main library. If you have a large collection, you may be saved from merger, simply because there isn't room in the main library to hold it, and it would possibly be too expensive to add more space to a new building project.

## Case Study #3: Private masters-level institution

### **SUMMARY OF EVENTS**

The branch library occupied two basement classrooms in the Fine Arts College that were filled to capacity with books (music, theatre, dance, art, and media arts), scores, a choral performance library, non-circulating audio and video recordings, playback equipment, and computers. Considering these overcrowded conditions, as well as the institution's need for additional classroom and rehearsal space, and insufficient funding for a completely new building, the only evident solution was to move the arts collections into the main library across the mall (approximately 300 feet).

The performing and fine arts collections were given a separate reference area on the main floor of the central library building and a complete quadrant on the library's second floor. This was a significant increase in the amount of space made available for collections. The dance, media arts, and theatre collections were fully integrated into the existing stacks. The music and art materials (excluding AV resources) were housed in the second-floor quadrant. AV materials were housed on movable shelving which was installed behind the circulation desk. CDs, VHS tapes, and DVDs were permitted to circulate outside the library after the move. Initially, a large room on the main floor was designated a listening/viewing facility. As technologies changed and AV circulation policies evolved, usage of this room declined. As a result, the onsite playback equipment was scaled back and placed in a smaller room adjacent to the second floor music stacks.

### **DID MUSIC LIBRARY STAFF HAVE ANY INPUT PRIOR TO THE DECISION TO CONSOLIDATE?**

No.

### **WERE ACTIONS TAKEN TO PREVENT THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

Faculty and students alike were upset and unhappy about the decision to consolidate. Some students organized a sit-in at the Provost's office.

### **HOW ARE YOUR USERS AND STAFF ADJUSTING TO THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

The initial adjustment was difficult. It seemed that the fine arts college folks jumped at every opportunity to criticize the quality of service in the main library. Indeed, the staff members of the main library also were initially upset and somewhat resentful about the move. They had to learn new procedures and take on additional responsibilities. However, after a few years, as staff members felt more comfortable with their new assignments and as the students who remembered the branch library graduated, things calmed down considerably. Faculty, too, adjusted to the changes.

## **WHAT ARE SOME POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE RESULTS OF THE CONSOLIDATION?**

Positive: Eventually, the music and fine arts librarian felt much more like an integral part of the library staff. By distributing a number of administrative duties among members of the central library staff (i.e., ILL, serial check-in and claiming, binding preparation, and cataloging), the music and fine arts librarian had more time to focus on delivering ever-higher levels of quality and quantity of service focused on collection development, reference, and information literacy instruction. Communication improved between the music and fine arts programs and staff and other library programs and staff. Interaction with the library administration also improved. Resources for the music and fine arts collections improved considerably. Students from the college of fine arts became more aware of library resources in other, often related, areas. Likewise, students and faculty from the other colleges on campus became more familiar with the music and fine arts collections. Library staff members began to appreciate the amount of usage that the music and fine arts materials receive. Overall, the results were positive for the entire campus.

Negative: The new arrangement required less staff, so a departing arts librarian was not replaced. The branch's "sense of community" with the fine arts college was lost or at least diminished. It is difficult to replicate such a feeling in a larger, more universal space. However, the music and fine arts collections' (and staff's) "sense of community" with the University as a whole was strengthened.

## **ADVICE FOR OTHERS FACING A BRANCH CLOSURE**

The changes in staff workloads and responsibilities that result from the merger of a branch library into a main library understandably can be upsetting.

To ensure the smoothest transition possible, the administration should:

- be forthcoming about communicating the reasons that have precipitated the need for a branch closure,
- be sensitive to the impact such a closing may have on faculty, staff, and students,
- provide faculty, staff, and students with an opportunity to react to and have input regarding the change, and
- actively engage faculty in examining and prioritizing space and service needs relating to both the library and the classroom.

Taking these steps should help everyone affected prepare for the change and approach it with a more open mind and healthier attitude. An edict from "on high," coming without warning, is not the way to go. Having an awareness of who may be impacted by the change, communicating openly about the need for the change, and demonstrating sensitivity to the feelings of those whose work and study is being impacted by the change should go a long way to minimize disruptions.

## Case Study #4: Public Research University

### **SUMMARY OF EVENTS**

Several years ago the music branch's requests to fund equipment and other improvements began to be routinely denied. The economic downturn set off frantic budget cutting throughout the library, including the area of staffing, and the branch libraries were told to eliminate evening and weekend hours (the music branch did not, since the school of music administration pledged money to maintain evening and weekend hours). Several other branches were closed in the past 15 years, and most of the remaining branch libraries were now rumored to be possibly closing. Although the music branch was second only to the main library in circulation statistics, it, too, was being considered for closure. When the music collection was "temporarily" moved to accommodate a building renovation, it became clear that the relocation would actually be permanent. Rather than moving to a building across the street from its old facility, the music collection now occupies an entire floor of a large branch library with several other subject collections. The former music library space will become a well-funded project facility.

### **WERE MUSIC LIBRARY STAFF CONSULTED PRIOR TO THE DECISION TO CONSOLIDATE?**

No, but some staff "knew" that the branch would close prior to the official announcement.

### **WERE ACTIONS TAKEN TO PREVENT THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

Students and faculty organized a response through Facebook. The music librarian felt compelled to remain officially neutral, and always checked with administration before speaking on the subject (as a result, rumors and misinformation were rampant). Graduate students and faculty library users started a letter-writing campaign. Circulation statistics were closely monitored to disprove claims that music materials were underused. These efforts likely helped to secure better "temporary" quarters for the music collection.

### **DID THE BRANCH CLOSURE PRODUCE ANY UNFORESEEN BENEFITS?**

The music collection was unexpectedly given new equipment, shelving, and cases.

### **ADVICE FOR OTHERS FACING A BRANCH CLOSURE**

Activism carries the day. Don't forget to target non-majors, who may not use the music collection, but might value the branch as a study space. It is also crucial to maintain and study statistics, which can be bolstered by purchasing materials that circulate frequently (e.g., pop music CDs that rank high on Billboard charts). Mount an advertising campaign with bookmarks and external banners promoting the CD collection. While none of these efforts prevented the music branch from being relocated, they may have helped us secure a better new space, protected the music budget and staff, and earned us new equipment and shelving.

## Case Study #5: Public Research University

### **SUMMARY OF EVENTS**

The branch library, located in the music building, was running out of space and had no security gates. Over the years, the growing music library had been forced to move various functions to non-contiguous rooms and to the main library, negatively impacting staff and users. Vague plans to expand the existing branch never materialized. Finally, staff broached the subject of consolidation within the main library, to the surprise of the library dean.

Although music library staff favored closing the branch, they had assumed the music library collection would remain unified. To their surprise, a decision was made to shelve music books two floors away from scores and CDs, causing hardship for users and staff. Eventually, the music librarian's repeated efforts to reunite the collection bore fruit: the dean used some unanticipated funding to purchase new shelving and equipment. Music books and scores are now housed in the same location, and the music collection has new exhibit cases, Finale keyboards, and their own special collections area. No staff was lost during the move; indeed, now that service hours have increased, the music staff has also grown.

### **WERE MUSIC LIBRARY STAFF CONSULTED PRIOR TO THE DECISION TO CONSOLIDATE?**

After music library staff initially suggested the consolidation, the library dean made all the decisions without their input. Since some non-music librarians resented music getting its own area in the main library, the dean may have avoided consulting the music librarian in order to avoid the appearance of preferential treatment.

### **WERE ACTIONS TAKEN TO PREVENT THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

No, since the consolidation was proposed by music library staff in the first place, as a solution to chronic space limitations. However, after the collection was moved and split up, the music librarian repeatedly sought opportunities to educate administrators about how library users actually employ music materials.

## **HOW ARE YOUR USERS AND STAFF ADJUSTING TO THE CLOSURE/CONSOLIDATION?**

Now that music books and scores have been reunited, the new setup exceeds everyone's dreams.

### III. Questions to consider when a branch closing is proposed

At the core of an academic music library's mission, regardless of its physical location, are two fundamental concerns: treating music materials appropriately and supporting the institution's musical activities. What factors should music library staff, library directors, and other interested parties consider when discussing a music library facility? We suggest asking how the institution can best provide the following features and services, relative to the size of the collection, the number of music students (majors and non-majors), music courses taught, and support for faculty research and performance:

- appropriate shelving for music materials in their various formats
- minimal physical separation of materials in different formats, so they can easily be used in combination
- security tagging or other theft-deterrent measures
- policies appropriate to the use of music materials
- a service point for recordings
- proper management and circulation of scores and parts
- subject expertise at point of service
- adequate space for study and/or listening
- audio and video playback equipment for every format represented in the collection
- reasonable physical proximity to practice rooms and faculty studios

#### IV. Bibliography of Resources (1980-2012)

*Topics represented in this bibliography include branch libraries in a variety of subject areas, centralized and decentralized library services, technology and the branch library, and successful library consolidation projects.*

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## V. Recommendations

Under the heading “Advocacy,” the 2011 Strategic Plan suggests “writ[ing] boilerplate statements on specific issues that MLA members can access and use as needed for individual advocacy, including statements (for example) about the value of hiring music specialists in libraries \*and+ how the unique needs of music users translate into music library services...” The Branch Libraries Task Force urges the Association to prioritize the creation of such statements, since changes to staffing and physical spaces are often proposed by administrators with a limited understanding of how music libraries function. Indeed, during the course of its work the Branch Libraries Task Force was approached by several MLA members eagerly seeking such a resource for use at their home institutions. A list of talking points, backed by the authority of the Music Library Association and the collective insight of its members, could greatly strengthen local efforts to communicate music users’ interests to library administrators.

Many MLA members are employed in special branch or departmental music libraries, which are increasingly under scrutiny, as evidenced by the contents of this report. Thus, the Task Force encourages the Association to become a more visible and active participant in the national discourse on the future of libraries taking place in organizations such as ALA, ACRL, and EDUCAUSE.