The Buley Library Web Portal: Reflecting the Library’s Mission

Robert F. Musco

Southern Connecticut State University
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My most recent experience as a library user has been my contact with Southern Connecticut State University's Hilton C. Buley Library on the New Haven Campus. Though I have used the Library's resources frequently in the past two semesters, my time spent there has largely been limited to picking up books that I had previously preselected through the library's OPAC, and occasionally browsing other print material in whatever subject area I might have been researching. I have also consulted a few reference works held in the library. Overall, however, I have accessed most of my materials through remote web access. As a result, it is not an exaggeration to say that Buley Library's web portal is the library to me (2009).

Increasingly, today's university students perceive their library's web site as the outward face of the institution itself. Indeed, as Arthur Downing notes in his essay *Impact of the Internet on the Administration of Libraries*, library web sites are more than a complement to basic library service; they are used to further strategic goals by conveying information to library stakeholders, including patrons, potential funding sources, evaluators, and employees (2001). Library web portals can be viewed as an external representation of the library's own internal hierarchies and structures, and the web portal's organization may come to reflect priorities in the library’s service functions. These service functions, in turn, may change to adapt to new user needs met through the web page (ibid).

Of course viewing Buley Library's web portal can only provide a glimpse into the internal functioning of the library, but the overt characteristics of the web page, such as its design and content, including patron services and information, can give an indication of the priorities of the Library's administration insofar as the service it aspires to provide to students and faculty as its core mission. Given library administrators’ awareness of the growing student preference to access information online, a brief overview of the library web portal may be instructive in understanding Buley's service priorities.

Upon entering the Buley Library web portal through the University home page, the most prominent feature one notices is the search box for the trial version of the WorldCat interface, customized for Southern, which provides information on the full range of library holdings, including the electronic books
held by Southern, and housed remotely by WorldCat. The WorldCat customized search function also makes it possible to view materials held in other libraries around the world. The WorldCat interface offers some attractive options not found in the previous version of the OPAC, known as CONSULS, including an automatic citation engine that creates references in several formats. CONSULS, on the other hand, has a few advantages over WorldCat; for example, it allows one to browse LOC subject headings linked to resources.

Directly under the basic WorldCat and Consuls searchboxes is *Find a Book*, which gives several ways to search for material, including by type (multimedia, such as audio, video, prints, models, etc.), audience (*Children's Books*), *eBooks*, *Reserves*, and *New Resources*. There is also a section explaining the use and location of call numbers in the library, and links to other library catalogues, such as Yale University's Orbis. In the interests of clarity, it would perhaps be clearer for users if all non-book offerings could be moved from the *Find a Book* section to a different area called something like *Find Non-book Media*. Upon inspection, the *eBook* section, which lists a number of eBook subscription packages and individual resources, reveals one organizational anomaly when it warns that some, but not all eBooks are searchable under CONSULS. This may be precisely the kind of flaw that an eventual switch to the customized WorldCat interface is attempting to correct.

The *Find Articles* section provides a search page for electronic articles. Searches can first be restricted by subject-specific or subject-related databases in *Search Databases*, or journals can be searched singly through the *Journal Locator*. Figuring prominently in the *Search Databases* page is a notice of the various resources that have either been discontinued or substituted with what one assumes are lower-cost alternatives, a result of the current financial problems created by state budget restrictions. Though the article search engine is similar in operation to other library search engines, I find that the information given about article searching is not always completely clear. For example, reading through the instructions it was difficult to understand if *all* print or microfilm journals are always fully indexed electronically, or if some physical materials would need to be searched through print indices. Additionally, after finding an article title, the user is sometimes lead through a number of screens in a
pattern that seems to have too many diverging branches, instead of a single, clear direct link leading to either the article itself or information about its physical location.

The next major section in the web portal is one that I have found particularly useful -- Research Guides. In this section librarians have compiled a list of subject-specific resources, beginning with specialized subject encyclopedias and dictionaries, which are enormously useful. A number of related databases are also listed, as well various non-subscription web pages. Additional subject-specific databases available can be found through the List of Databases.

A directory of librarians, together with the subject areas they handle and the most recent acquisitions in those areas, can be found under a section labeled Librarians. Oddly, the Librarians section also contains Buley Library's Collection Development Policy, including statements on challenged materials and weeding. The Collection Development Policy is also linked, perhaps more appropriately, through the departmental hyperlinks, which are found under the Phone and email section. Since this section contains much more than simple contact information, it might be useful to rename it (Department Information, Policies, and Contacts?). This section is actually the clearest window onto the Library's internal operations, since it houses actual policy and workflow documents, most of which would only be of interest for internal use. Each department has hyperlinks to documents covering a number of internal protocols in areas ranging from Receiving to Cataloging.

From the point of view of the user, the Library Services section will be the most often used, after the search sections. It provides guidelines on such topics as borrowing, research interviews, interlibrary loan, and the RefWorks® reference and citation manager. Online appointments can be made to meet with librarians or schedule classes, new materials can be suggested, and interlibrary requests may be made. Clearly, the web portal facilitates a number of important library services, allowing the user to save a great deal of time in finding and obtaining resources.

The section entitled Offcampus Access & Library PIN gives some insight into what I have found to be perhaps one of the greatest frustrations for a new student to Southern, which is a surprising lack of integration in the University’s information management systems. For example, there is a separate log-in
process for email and online class access, and separate registrations is required for remote library access. Even after registering names and passwords for all these services, students may only then accidentally discover that they need to register yet another time in order to log on to workstations from within the physical library. This in-house access, incidentally, expires with no warning after a certain period of time (no one in the "password" office knows exactly how long the period is), and a new log-in must be assigned, again from within the physical library. Some recent changes to university information systems have streamlined the overall access process somewhat through the My SCSU interface, and these flaws cannot be blamed on the library, but rather are likely due to the fact that different legacy systems were acquired at different times, a common problem in large organizations.

Buley Library offers a complete range of extremely valuable services through its web portal, and though the institution is still undergoing construction, both in terms of its physical plant as well as its information systems, the overall impression is of a full-service library that has recognized user accessibility as part of its core mission.
References


http://library.scsu.ctstateu.edu/