The Future [Technology] Is Now: Part 2
By Scott Garrison, Associate Dean, Public Services & Technology

Great changes have occurred since I first wrote about the University Libraries’ technological foundations in the Gatherings article published in May of this year. Dr. John Dunn became WMU’s president and among his early actions was the selection of Vice Provost for Academic Affairs Jim Gilchrist to be the Chief Information Officer (CIO). President Dunn’s priorities include working together as a community committed to education, and providing quality service to students. In accord with this plan, Vice Provost Gilchrist is using technology to eliminate information barriers and frustrations across the University’s many arenas—instruction, research, communication, student activities, facilities, and management of each individual’s official records. WMU is building on an ever-expanding computing systems network through which all functions are implemented and/or facilitated.

President Dunn and Vice Provost Gilchrist see the University Libraries as a mission-critical resource that the academic community, notably students and faculty, should actively use: each has expressed strong support for the Libraries. In response to that commitment, all units of the Libraries from Technical Services to Public Services to Systems and Administration work together, bolstered and facilitated by the strength of contemporary technology, to give our users what they need to be successful. In the end, almost everything can be reduced to one key goal: The University Libraries provides the best access to the best information in the most direct way possible. But, having said that, what does this concept mean from day to day, and into the future?

Here and now
Let me begin with a list of some soon to occur “happenings” that will definitely enhance searching and retrieval of information, i.e., make things better and faster as the Libraries’ faculty and staff collaborate to serve the academic community. We plan:

• To pilot a book pull/hold/delivery service in the Education Library in Sangren Hall that will make getting books more convenient. When a user finds a book in the catalog that s/he can check out from Education Library, s/he will be able, online, to request that the book be pulled from the shelf and held. Faculty who specify a date and time when they’ll be in their offices may have materials delivered, and students may pick items up at the library.

• To improve the performance of our online catalog, WestCat, for users, we will delete over 100,000 expired user records, and reindex our catalog more frequently than we do now. That will provide more accurate and “useful” data.

• To provide quick reference help, instant messaging (IM) access will be available during the Spring semester, continuing what was started this term by providing live online e-journal help via IM.

• To offer more instructional packages, we’ll build more asynchronous online instructional screencast and podcast content to place within WMU’s iTunes U service.

• To provide a wiki where English 1050 students may share, critique, and collaborate on writing for their assignments.

• To create Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds that advertise our new books, trial databases, and anticipated and unanticipated e-book and e-journal collection and database downtimes. Users will be able to subscribe easily to the feeds from our continually improving website, as well as from their personal iGoogle, GoWMU, or other favorite interface.

• To push the boundaries of what our new social software server can provide us and our users via blogs, wikis, online forums, and more.

• To improve the new e-reserves platform that debuted in the fall of 2007 so that students may securely log in using their Bronco NetID and password, whether directly or through the GoWMU portal.

• To make paying overdue and lost book fines and fees more convenient, we will connect the online catalog, WestCat, to WMU’s payment processing portion of the student information system so that students may pay online through the GoWMU portal, as they pay other University fees.

• To refine the Libraries’ presence in the GoWMU portal so that those content and services that most help our users are highlighted and emphasized.

• To establish a current set of user expectations for our public computers, and plan with the
The Future [Technology] Is Now: Part 2

Continued from page 1

Office of Information Technology and other campus partners to replace our aging iMacs with new systems that provide a user experience that is more consistent with other computing facilities on campus.

- To break down conceptual barriers between Waldo Library and the University Computing Center by building a learning commons between the two halves of our building complex. Students and staff will work together to assist users create documents, posters, and presentations (paying careful attention to copyright, of course!)

As is already obvious, so much of this list of new and/or improved services has to do with the power of the Web. Indeed, most of enhancements will help us, the managers of the Libraries’ resources, to do a better job of serving every user. In short, we plan to determine the what of our site so we can figure “how to run and maintain it better than we are today.” We’ll locate and evaluate tools such as content management systems to help us maintain our site, as well as develop our site to communicate better and realize our vision, mission, and program effectiveness.

Where are we headed?

“So what?” some of you might be thinking, “Nothing suggested is that unique.” Well, yes it is when contrasted to past initiatives AND there’s more to anticipate! For several years, the EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) has published a Study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology. The latest study, published in September 2007, is the fourth in a series looking at undergraduate students and information technology. The study is built on a literature review, a Web-based survey, student focus groups, qualitative analysis of student comments, and longitudinal analysis over several consecutive years. The 2007 study includes data from 27,846 students at 103 four-year and two-year higher education institutions.

The study found that 86.1% of students have simple cell phones without Web access. A further 12% have a smartphone (phone-PDA combination). More important, 99.9% send and receive e-mail daily. Some 82% prefer to use their institutional e-mail account to communicate with their instructor while 94.1% use their library’s website monthly (especially in the humanities and social sciences). Of significance is the fact that 84.1% of respondents use instant messaging daily (especially the 18-19 year old age group).

These data have already impacted our Libraries as, for example, in 2006, the Libraries began sending, by e-mail, overdue and fine notices. In place for some time are a popular Ask a Librarian service that functions through e-mail access and a vast e-mail/online document delivery network of full-text files of articles and other materials. But, each additional service has a tendency to create new questions. Will we soon see the value of sending overdue and fine notices by voice or text message? Will smartphones be capable of e-mail, IM, and richer Web browsing offered at a price as good or better than today’s simple phones? Will text messaging remain as popular as it seems to be today? Smartphones, such as Apple’s iPhone, are bringing together or converging functions more than ever before, offering not just phone, e-mail, calendar, addressbook, and digital photo functions, but also music, video, and Web. And, these functions permit browsing that previously occurred only on traditional laptop and desktop computers. What will any user expect to access from any electronic device? Answers to that question, based on ongoing user studies, will determine other innovations within a few months.

Regardless of the final answer to these and other questions, our Libraries’ Web site will be a place of experimentation as well as a source of the “right search” at the “right time.” We do not yet have federated, cross-searching of our different databases, e-book and e-journal packages, but this is certainly a trend across the nation. Is it safe to say “yes” for scientists, with their controlled vocabularies, but perhaps “no” for humanists who use both precise and variant phrasing for multiple concepts? How can we make it easier for our users to discover and retrieve not just the books, journals, and more that we acquire every day, but also what we transform through digitization from our rare materials?

Finally, it is obvious that our look to the future will definitely have more questions than answers since there is no end in sight (or sight) to the potential of our changing technologies. We do see that

- Publishers, vendors, knowledge managers, researchers, policymakers, and information specialists or librarians are moving to make journals, monographs, pre-print and post-print publications, and other media available through open access models.

- Science-intensive fields and almost all disciplines, governments, corporations, and the invisible Web are generating enormous datasets that have just begun to be archived and organized.

- WMU Libraries must effectively keep our faculty, who have quite different user needs and habits, as well as the students emphasized earlier, apprised of what we have and what we can do for them.

—We must see the future as an opportunity to apply the latest technology to provide content and services that today’s and tomorrow’s users effectively use and, more important, value.

—Or as I said several hundred words ago: The University Libraries provides the best access to the best information in the most direct way possible.

A Revolution in Maps: The New Technology

By Jason Glatz, Maps Coordinator

Over the last decade, there has been a revolution in the world of maps: a digital transformation. This revolution has been quiet—most don’t even realize it has happened—yet it has substantially changed the way that maps are created, viewed, and used. Increased computing power, advanced mapping software, and access to the Internet has changed map making and map accessibility from an endeavor that once relied on artistic ability as much as geographic knowledge to one that is largely the province of computer users at both the beginning of the process and the end user. This has opened the field up to individuals like this author who have limited artistic abilities, but have an affinity for maps and geography, as well as to individuals who, through the newer technologies, can find or develop map resources as focused as one’s own backyard or as extensive as the known universe itself.

Just as the Internet has changed the way people shop and gather news, by exposing us to many more retailers and news sources, the Net has also exponentially increased the quantity, quality, and accessibility of geographic information. The proliferation of websites, for example, MapQuest and Google maps, as well as stand-alone applications, notably Google Earth, have also facilitated every individual’s access to maps. Meanwhile, navigation systems in cars and handheld GPS (Global Positioning System) receivers are quickly making paper maps a thing of the past for most tech savvy individuals. Other technologically engaged individuals are using services like Flickr.com and Panaramio.com to share “geotagged” photographs based on their geographic location.

Most users, however, barely scratch the surface of this technological revolution in maps. Looking up your backyard on Google Earth is fine, but there is much more to the digital map revolution than a spotlight on a treeless house. Needless to say, the University Libraries has participated in this revolution in a number of...