The Future Is Now: Part I
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This and the next issue of Gatherings highlight some of the technology behind the 21st century library, especially at WMU. As you read the following paragraphs, I hope you'll gain a sense of our vision for technology in the University Libraries, on and off campus, and where we need to go to serve better everyone who logs on to www.wmich.edu/library/ or walks through our doors. At the same time, consider this issue a call to action, whether you consider yourself a digital pioneer, a digital immigrant, or a digital naif. Consider how you will participate on our journey into the future as a member of our extended community.

Living in “interesting times”

The apocryphal Chinese curse “may you live in interesting times” applies readily to our current status. Although we could certainly debate how much the pace of technological change has increased over the past several years, we all agree that the ways in which people are making use of new developments continue to be “simply dizzying”—even dazzling. No matter who we are, when we were born, or what we do, technology tremendously influences how each one of us learns, teaches, communicates, works, plays, and lives every day. What we get for our computing dollar continues to expand each successive year, and our expectations of what we can do with computers heighten accordingly. More and more organizations are making significant investments in digitally preserving and presenting all manner of data and information from numerous disciplines. Scholarly practice and communication patterns now include community-driven e-archives. The Web and other user-friendly interfaces have cemented the Internet commodity front and center. Through technology, millions of people around the world interact synchronously and asynchronously. Most current and future students, who, incidentally, are also tomorrow’s faculty, don’t remember what life was like before personal computers, cell phones, and the Web. Technology is increasingly the foundation of how we do everything we do. There’s literally a source for just about any information need or want.

Where’s the future library?

To begin, let’s frame that key question by saying that a library is first and foremost a service organization, which explains why an organization chart of WMU includes the University Libraries as an academic service. Our mission has two parts:

1. provide the University community with the information or resources that they need to learn and teach, and
2. support WMU’s mission to be a “dynamic, student-centered research university...focused on delivering high-quality undergraduate instruction, advancing its growing graduate division, and fostering significant research activities.”

Easily stated, but to meet these goals, a library must motivate its users to tell us what they need. We need to know what our faculty, staff, students, and community users specifically need. And, assuming we do discover their needs, how do we get them to tell us again, and again, and again, as those needs change? Fortunately, the University Libraries is in the forefront of user analysis in that we have just completed a second University-wide, nationally validated survey called LibQUAL. In addition, we implemented focus groups and Web usability studies with students, faculty, and staff that ask specific questions about their experience as library users. We are also looking at statistics and other data that we and our computers capture, and are beginning to analyze what “users are using.”

Given the responses that we’ve received, we’re now working across every

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unit in the Libraries to make what we already have, as well as what we continue to acquire, available in the easiest possible way. Every day, our Technical Services staff adds significant amounts of data to our Web site. Every day, organized information about our books, journals, databases, and other research and learning tools, which come from many vendors and other sources, become part of WestCat, WMU's online catalog, and other related systems. Every day, this information is manipulated, indexed, cataloged, and made retrievable in a dozen different ways. Every day, our Public Services staff is available to help you navigate through this vast array of information to find and get the information that best suits your need, whether you are physically here at WMU, or at a distant site anywhere around the world! And, every day, the University Libraries serves you because of the "behind the scenes" power of the Systems, Web, and Digitization units of the Libraries.

The technological foundation

As described in an earlier Gatherings ("The Systems Sustains," Winter 2003, No. 32, pp. 2-4), the personnel found in an office suite on the lower level of Waldo Library install, maintain, back up, and replace the various library servers on which Technical Services, AND all other library operations place their handcrafted data about every library function. The systems staff works with partners in WMU's Office of Information Technology and elsewhere to help provide multiple other client servers that comprise an infrastructure that allows our users to perform what seems to be an unlimited number of tasks, e.g., place and remove items from our collection (and other sources) on individual class reserve or borrow items from outside our collection from other libraries, to name only two of many.

Although it may not occur to most who use our systems, these key staff members also provide technical support to some 400 desktop and laptop computers at five different physical locations. In particular, this includes all of our public access computers on which students, staff, faculty, and community users increasingly rely. And, our diverse users not only seek information, but to synthesize what they find into their class assignments, their faculty research and instructional preparation, their ongoing work needs; and any other demand that the user brings to the WMU Libraries' terminals.

A special assignment relates to Systems' maintenance and troubleshoot-