In February 2006, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), facing its preliminary 2007 fiscal year budget, announced a series of library closures intended to save the agency money. The Bush administration's proposed FY 07 budget for EPA regional libraries was $500,000, an 80% reduction from the previous year's $2.5 million funding (this funding applied to just 10 of the 28 EPA libraries). The agency's reaction — to move for immediate closures and reductions in service — was considered by many within and outside the agency — to give it the most kindly characterization — as precipitous. After all, the budget had yet to go through the congressional approval process that could have provided oversight for how to implement such a significant reduction. Many believed the congressional process would also have offered an opportunity to make a case for restoring some of the funding.
hat ensued was more than 2 years of advocacy and intervention by agency employees and their unions, information industry associations, and congressional committees aimed at forestalling or reversing these closures in the interest of two critical constituencies: the public with its need for access to government information supporting public health and environmental issues and EPA's own employees needing to perform their jobs efficiently, effectively, and therefore at less cost. In October 2008, even presidential candidate Barack Obama entered the fray. In a letter to the president of the American Federation of Government Employees, Obama shared his views on "inadequate funding for the EPA" and stated, "I strongly oppose attempts ... to eliminate the agency's library system."1

Thanks to the tireless and sometimes very public efforts of the stakeholders, more than a little success has been achieved in restoring access to critical materials and services, but challenges remain. For example, a recent series of articles in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on the dangers of toxic chemicals in day-to-day products present to the public health and a similarly themed Government Accountability Office (GAO)
report focused on the EPA’s failure to gather even basic information. Both pieces attribute this failure to weaknesses in the agency’s chemicals management and risk assessment programs. The GAO report specifically notes “the EPA lacks adequate scientific information on the toxicity of chemicals that may be found in the environment — as well as on thousands of chemicals used commercially in the United States...” It might not be surprising to find out, then, that the EPA’s Office of Pollution Prevention and Toxics (OPPT) Chemical Library is “non-existent,” with “its staff, collection, and services placed in the main EPA Headquarters Library” or dispersed to other libraries in the agency during the process of closing and then re-opening the EPA Libraries in 2007. Fortunately, in a March 2008 report to Congress, the EPA stated that the Chemical Library — among others — would be reopened, which it was in late Fall 2008.

Those interested in a detailed chronology of the “EPA Library Affair” to date, as well as links to background documents, should go to the update compiled by the Special Libraries Association (SLA) Public Policy staff at http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/advocacy/EPA/epaupdate.cfm and the American Library Association’s compilation of related materials at http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/offices/wo/woissues/governmentinfo/fedlibs/epalibraries/epalibraries.cfm.

The Struggle to Quantify the Library Contribution

There is always pressure to reduce budgets. In the EPA’s case, as early as 2003, budget pressure took the form of requiring that the libraries present to management “a business case” for their existence. However, the resulting report only extrapolated the costs and benefits of maintaining libraries at each EPA regional facility.

Part of the challenges the EPA libraries faced in quantifying their value consisted of how they were, and continue to be, administered. Beginning in the early 1980s, as with services in many other federal agencies, the EPA libraries were privatized; the provision of services in the regional libraries was contracted out to nonfederal employees. Further, each region was allowed to develop its own contract specifications and budgets. So the size of staffs, services provided, purchase decisions, and costs were within the purview of each region; only rather recently were any agencywide minimum standards set. While decentralization and contracting out for services are not in themselves negative activities, the way the EPA administered them seems to have exacerbated the context in which the closures and reductions were even harder to counteract.

As one former EPA employee told us, the regional libraries did not have specific budgets; they were funded from a pool of money distributed to the regional assistant directors for use at their discretion and, therefore, what the libraries actually cost was extremely difficult to calculate. Further, no consistency existed across the regions in terms of purchasing, staffing, and even what services to support. For example, some regions supported the regional law library while others did not.

More than 20 years ago, in an attempt to quantify benefits, the EPA libraries conducted an analysis to calculate the “value of studies read” by their users as one possible metric to tangibly express the value of the libraries. The resulting dollar amount, they felt, could be pointed to in business terms as a contribution by the libraries to the agency’s mission.

The two value studies only represented a variety of attempts during the past 3 decades to establish benchmarks for the EPA libraries to use in understanding costs as well as the value being contributed. With each attempt, however, the variables studied were not comprehensive in terms of the five functions that the libraries themselves had put forth as key components of the service provided:

- Perform research and interpret results
- Distribute information and bibliographic resources
- Select and acquire information products (electronic and paper resources)
- Provide access to other information
- Manage and administer

While a cost-benefit approach is certainly relevant, the approach used here limited its focus to the “as is” state of the libraries, failing to address the critical questions of possible improvement through centralization of services or a closer alignment with the mission and goals of the agency. Perhaps a better approach would have taken the number of reference questions, searches, and resources supplied and estimated the number of hours of staff time saved in each of the libraries, correlating this with a cost per hour of the customer’s time. The multiple could have led to “savings” in number of dollars with dollars aggregated as net benefit and divided by the cost, yielding a ratio. For example, for every dollar spent operating library services, $2 in benefit might be realized. This analysis could be done across all the libraries regardless of location, thereby creating a benchmark to serve as a standard for all to meet.

Finally, in demonstrating any kind of contribution, one must include client valuations. How do the customers view
the services? How have client needs changed? It is absolutely vital to answer these questions in order to build a more cost-effective, value-added service — the goal of any business case! While we know that the clients of the libraries were ultimately very vocal about the value of the services, the vociferousness of the input came after the reductions and closures. One wonders if such input had been collected regularly, whether the eventual course of events would have been different.

A more significant issue in EPA's approaches to library valuation was the failure to determine what services contributed to the organization's ability to meet its mission. Limitations in the cost to benefit analyses were rooted in assessment of an "as is" nonstrategic setting. In our view, any business case evaluation must provide answers to the following questions:

- What is the current alignment of the information/library services to the present mission of the organization being served?
- How does this need to be changed, if at all, and what are the opportunity costs and benefits to adopting a more strategic focus and direction?

If you agree that your library could benefit from a better business case, please see some recent studies by Jacobson and Matarazzo and Jacobson and Sparks for a full description of how to conduct such a study. If you need a better sense of strategic focus and its benefits, please take note of a benchmark study of 25 information centers in the pharmaceutical and medical device industries. There, the author notes:

As libraries transition from books to bytes, successful benchmark partners create a strong niche in their corporations through a process of identifying "unique and critical" aspects of the business, determining where the information center can play a significant role, creating a mission around that role, and aligning library resources with the mission.10

Some have suggested that the closures and resulting employ-ee, public, and information industry outcry may have caused an indirect benefit to the EPA libraries. Having struggled with what, in retrospect, seems a very dysfunctional organizational and budgetary structure, the agency's regional libraries — or at least those that closed and then reopened — are perhaps presented with an opportunity to become more creative and rethink how services are provided in an agencywide context.

No one would argue that the pain and disruption caused by the events at the EPA was good. Being able to see the opportunity offered by any reduction or even closure, though, may well mean the difference in long-term survival for any library or for any librarians.

In a Library Journal article, we recently called on library managers to provide leadership and "show the companies we work for that our services are essential."11 On the other hand, a recently completed review of the literature relating to the management of corporate libraries notes an absence of research, either theoretical or pragmatic, on this subject in the U.S.12 It is hard to know where to look for guidance in these uncertain times. Nonetheless, your survival is at stake and you must act now. Be a leader, prove value, or become a footnote in the history of libraries.

**Afterword**

In February 2009, another example of a major library closure in the news industry occurred with the announcement that The Wall Street Journal's news library would close in the spring.13 So

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**EPA Libraries in 2009**

The EPA National Library Network consists of three repository libraries, 10 regional libraries, five specialty libraries, and nine research laboratory libraries. Three of these regional libraries, Region 5 (Chicago), Region 6 (Dallas), and Region 7 (Kansas City), had closed due to the budget cutbacks and some, if not all their collections, were disbursed. The headquarters library in Washington and the Chemical Library had also closed.

As of January 2009, the three regional libraries reopened and are well into reestablishing their collections and services. The Headquarters Library and the Chemical Library have been combined and also reopened, though some concern remains about the Chemical Library collection.

The agency has promulgated new operational standards for the National Library Network where none had existed before; reporting lines have been more firmly established. For example, at a minimum, the regional and Headquarters libraries must be open at least 4 days per week on a walk-in basis or by appointment during core business hours.

Questions remain about how quickly the agency will proceed with digitizing resources given budget and copyright issues. Nonetheless, during 2009, a much more robust strategic planning effort is underway by EPA's chief information officer that includes all stakeholders. The EPA libraries website [http://www.epa.gov/natlibra] is encouraging the public to provide input on current library services as well as on the future of the Library Network.

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the ongoing saga of the EPA libraries in many ways represents a bright spot in what seems otherwise to be a litany of service reductions and closures both in the public and private sector and across all types of libraries, public, academic, and special.

More to the point for our purposes, though, is what we can learn from the EPA experience and how we each can apply these lessons to our own environment. We see the key takeaways from the EPA experience as follows:

Verify the realities of savings touted by those recommending reductions and/or closure. If possible, count them with hard figures of your own about savings generated by maintaining services. State these savings unequivocally in terms directly relevant to your organization’s bottom line (e.g., hours saved and monetary equivalents, business opportunities identified, clients won, etc.).

Generate ongoing, focused advocacy (even protests) by users across all target groups crucial to describing your “relevancy” and your contribution. We stress here the value of “ongoing advocacy.” Don’t wait until after the door is locked to ask your users how valuable you were to their work product.

Follow the model used by information industry associations such as ALA and SLA in advising Congress. Supply a list of questions for your management to use in evaluating any closure/reduction recommendations. Put these questions in meaningful, relevant business — not library — terms. This can help get management to at least stop for a minute and think about consequences in a very directed way.

Always have one or more potential strategies in place (regularly refreshed based on changing circumstances) so you have a clear vision and plan describing your role in the organization’s success. Think in terms of “minimum,” “adequate,” and “ideal” and their related ramifications to accommodate any obvious compromises. Know in advance the arguments you might likely face and be prepared to respond.

Keep usage statistics, such as the elusive term “value,” in context. Create one relevant to your organization and understandable to nonlibrary users. Use benchmarks from your competitors to differentiate the contribution you make.

Watch out for clear dangers. For example, EPA was criticized for lack of communication, having no strategy in place either pre- or post-reorganization, and for lack of centralized leadership and oversight in carrying out plans.

Review successful past efforts to enhance efficiencies, respond to business changes, and continue alignment with business needs and goals. Be ready to cite specifics of where the library has contributed.

Finally, face the political realities. Even if you are not in a public organization, politics remains a reality you must address and may well explain what is happening to you. Certainly politics and self-interest typically play roles in the positions advocated by various stakeholders. In the case of the EPA libraries, it is likely that many of the decisions made were a direct result of the politics of President George W. Bush and his appointees. The unions had their own bargaining positions which impacted how quickly plans to reopen the libraries could be pursued. Even the information professional associations had a stake in taking full advantage of this opportunity to visibly act as advocates for their memberships.

One of the most important lessons to learn from the EPA experience is to make sure you understand who all the players are in your organization, who your champions are, and how to use informal as well as formal channels to make sure the benefits of your services are made known on an ongoing basis.14

Endnotes
4 Email, Frederick W. Stoss to The Newslib Mailing List newslib@listserv.unc.edu, Subject: “GAO: EPA Lacks Information to Evaluate Chemical Risks; Jackson Promises Reform” (fwd), Jan. 27, 2009, 9:41 a.m.
6 Personal Conversation, Toby Pearlstein, March 2, 2009.