# Perpetual Motion: Running a 24/7 Library in a 9 to 5 World

**Rob Withers**
**Head of Access Services**
**Miami University**

## Abstract

The 24/7 availability of information has led to the demand for 24/7 library services. Miami University increased operations of its central facility, King Library, incrementally, until it began 24/7 operations in 2000. Demand for 24/7 access among students remained so strong that the University reinstated 24/7 hours after an attempt to scale back hours during the recent recession. Issues have included identifying essential services, staffing / scheduling, maintaining two-way communication between overnight and weekday staff, obtaining IT Support, responding to security and safety issues, and relations with other entities at the University. Despite these challenges, the availability of overnight hours continues to be valued and used by our student body.

## Introduction

Once upon a time, when many cities were limited to a small number of broadcast television stations, it was customary for many stations to sign off the air during the overnight hours. However, As Jarice Hanson notes in her book *24/7: How Cellphones and the Internet Change the Way We Live, Work and Play*, changes in technology have led to changes in ways that people, especially younger people, manage their time (Hanson, x-xi). Indeed, the availability of information on the internet on a 24/7 basis has changed perceptions, particularly in populations served by colleges and universities, about the hours during which services and information resources should be available to them. As one academic noted in an opinion piece, universities and colleges are rapidly evolving into a 24/7 working environment, with a wide array of services expected around the clock (24/7 Demand Leaves Staff Besieged).

Libraries in particular have been impacted by the interest in around the clock service. One article noted that "If your library has yet to be lobbied by students for a 24-h [sic] space …, chances are good that someday soon it will be." (Albanese, 44). A study of ARL institutions in 2008 found that nearly half of libraries were offering consistent 24 hour access (Driscoll & Mott). This trend appears to have been un-diminished by the 2008 recession, as an informal survey of ARL directors in 2011 indicated that over 70% of libraries were doing so (Laaker, 18). Because libraries are sources of access to information and to assistance in locating information, many institutions have experienced pressure for extended hours, up to and including 24/7 access to services.

### History of Extended Hours at Miami University

Prior to 2000, Miami University had offered slightly extended hours in the period leading up to final exams. In 2000, the University made its first effort and expanding hours during the full academic semester, with its central facility, King Library, remaining open until 4:00 a.m. Sunday

– Thursday and re-opening at 7:00 a.m. the following morning. Full 24/7 operations of the library began in 2007. During the recession, the University encountered financial setbacks that ultimately resulted in layoffs. At this time, King Library hours were reduced to 24/5, with the Library closing at 10:00 p.m. on Friday nights and 9:00 p.m. on Saturdays. There was an intense backlash from students to this change in hours, and the Associated Student Government called on the University to restore 24 hour operations on weekends as well as weekdays. As a result, 24/7 operations resumed in Spring 2010 (Finchesser; Grant). With the opening of a new student center in 2013, speculation that 24/7 operations of King Library would be curtailed reached the Associated Student Government, and the Libraries re-affirmed their commitment to 24/7 operations as long as demand is sufficient (Clyburn).

### Choices for Service Models

There are a variety of models for late night operations of libraries. Options include:

- Whether to allow access to an entire building, or to restrict access to one wing.
- Whether to provide full circulation service, or to rely on self-service machines to check out books or laptops.
- Which non-circulation services to provide (Reference? Lab support? Circulation? Security?)

Each institution that contemplates extended operations will need to consider these options and identify the ones which work best for their situation.

#### *Choosing a Physical Footprint*

King Library lacks the ability to restrict access to other floors on the elevator. In addition, the entire building (except for Special Collections) shares a single security system, meaning that security could not be activated only in a "closed" portion of the building. In addition, ensuring that library users have left a portion of the building scheduled to close during a portion of the overnight hours could be a time- and staff-intensive process. Because of the cost of changing the building security system and elevator and the difficulty of being able to secure closed space, the entire building (excluding staff areas and Special Collections) remains open during the overnight hours.

In 2013, the Libraries examined the option of transferring 24/7 operations to the Business, Engineering, Science, and Technology (BEST) Library. In addition to having a smaller physical footprint, this facility also has the ability to close off access to one of its three floors. However, the administration determined that many services available at King were not currently available at BEST. Among these were:

- Textbooks on Reserve, which makes the textbooks from the 50 most heavily enrolled courses available to students. Textbooks for all disciplines were available at King Library due to the 24/7 schedule, and circulated heavily.
- An ATM machine, which students relied on to place money on their one cards for printing and copying.

- Multiple value transfer stations, which allow students to add money to their one cards. These machines break down frequently, but the availability of redundant machines in King Library usually means that at least one machine is working at all times.

This confronted the administration with the options of (a) ceasing to offer these services, (b) moving these services to the BEST Library, or (c) offering duplicate versions of these services at the BEST Library.

### *Choosing a Method of Access*

Many libraries use identification card swiping equipment to limit access to facilities during late night hours (Bowman, 221). This setup has been problematic at Miami. In theory, faculty, staff, and students can gain access to the building between 11:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. by swiping their University identification cards. However, access is possible only with an identification card issued by the University a few years ago. There is a widespread misunderstanding on the main campus that the University will charge for upgrading from the older card to the newer one. As a result, a significant part of the University population still relies on an older identification which will not allow them access to the building. Circulation staff must verify that those unable to enter the building are affiliated with the University and allow them access to the building (and also keep students from propping open the doors or admitting unaffiliated persons).

### *Choosing Available Services*

Studies indicate that the primary demand during overnight hours is for study space (Engel et al., 96; Scarletto et al., 372), and the most consistently offered service during extended hours are circulation services (Driscoll & Mott; Steele & Walters, 10). In King Library, circulation provides services which support study, most notably the checkout for digital equipment, study room keys, and textbooks for the 50 most heavily enrolled courses (which accounts for over two thirds of circulation transactions). In addition, circulation supervisors are responsible for building operations, and are the designated contacts for Physical Facilities and University Police. Some institutions rely on a combination of swipe-card access and security personnel as an alternative model of staffing (Rea, 48; Lawrence & Weber, 530).

### Current Operating Model / Current Usage

King Library ends most non-circulation services between 10:00 p.m. and 2:00 a.m., with the Center for Information Management Lab being the last service point to close. The Circulation Desk remains fully staffed during all hours. The primary factor in providing full circulation service was the expectation of service that the student body holds. Students have come to expect troubleshooting with digital equipment, networking, printing, and copying, and the overnight hours have not diminished this expectation. In addition, circulation staff can page videos from our IMC's closed stack collection during overnight hours.

Access Services has three overnight positions (two 9-month, one 12 month). On any given night, two of the overnight positions are on duty, providing redundancy in the event of sudden illness, vacation, or one of the positions becoming vacant. Redundant scheduling helps to avoid scheduling problems experienced by some institutions which rely on a single position in the

evening (Bowman, 225; Sewell, 23). At most hours, a student employee is scheduled as well. Occasionally, we have adjusted staff schedules due to vacation or illness. The only significant disruption to overnight operations occurred when one staff line was vacant, and the person occupying the other position was unable to report to work due to a level three snow emergency in his county. In that instance, the library closed until personnel could report in the morning. We have been fortunate to have a currently enrolled MLS student in one of these positions, which helps out when students have questions about research during the overnight hours.

For Fall Semester of 2013, the average number of circulation and informational transactions ranged from a low of 11.24 per hour (5:00 a.m. – 6:00 a.m.) to a high of 47.48 per hour (midnight to 1:00 a.m.) While significantly less than daytime numbers, which can average 300 transactions per hour during the early afternoon, they constitute a steady stream of traffic. Since studies report that students value the availability of the library for study space during overnight hours, perhaps a better measure of overnight activity is the number of logins per hour, which ranges from a low of 86.88 per hour (5:00 a.m. – 6:00 a.m.) to a high of 314.56 per hour (midnight to 1:00 a.m.).

## Challenges

Regardless of what model libraries choose for extended/overnight hours, there are several challenges likely to arise. Many of these come about because the most campus services focus on first and possibly second shifts on weekdays, when classes are in session.  When one service provider called the former Dean of the Libraries on a Friday afternoon and assured her that they would respond to a difficulty on Monday morning, she noted that if you think of an eight hour block as one shift, then the period from Friday evening through Sunday morning is the equivalent of one week of shifts. In her words, "Monday is a long way away when you are open 24/7."

### *Challenge: Building Maintenance*

 One of the most significant challenges the Miami University Libraries experienced was building maintenance. As a result of re-structuring by our Physical Facilities Department, housekeepers were moved to an early morning shift which ended at 1:30 p.m.  Unfortunately, the building is at its busiest during the afternoon and evenings. Following the change in staffing schedules by Physical Facilities, trash cans would routinely be overflowing by the time evening custodians could come in to empty them, and would overflow again before the morning shift. Weekends were a particular problem. The Libraries ultimately made pictures of these difficulties and printed them on a poster, which was presented to Physical Facilities. The result was improved staffing, particularly on weekends.

### *Challenge: Building Safety*

 The author's predecessor as Head of Access Services noted concerns when King Library first extended its hours:

> In retrospect, we who work at the main library's circulation desk blush (just a little) at our initial reaction [to extended hours]. Our first response was indeed reactionary: great

> apprehension for the safety of employees, visions of skulkers in the stacks preying upon unwary patrons, pizza and beer parties raging among the Government Documents microfiche cabinets. Our sense, overall, was one of impending doom (DiMarco & Van Dam (1998, 7-8).

These concerns were, as DiMarco and Van Dam note, exaggerated. A review of incident reports filed for maintenance issues and emergencies for the 2013/2014 academic year indicates that there were a total of 21 incidents of some kind. Seven incidents were reported between the hours of midnight and 7:00 a.m. Three involved intoxicated individuals who received medical evaluations from EMT's, one involved use of drugs (a pipe and the lingering odor of marijuana were found after the fact), one involved a non-drug/alcohol-related medical emergency, one involved a report of panhandling, and one involved a serious leak. During the same period, there were four reported incidents from 5:00 p.m. until midnight (1 serious plumbing issue, 1 theft of laptop, 1 instance of multiple alarms from a fire exit, and 1 report of conduct prohibited by the Miami University Policy and Information Manual) and nine incidents from 7:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. (1 electrical malfunction, 2 medical emergencies resulting in emergency transport, 4 serious leaks, 1 serious plumbing issue, 1 fire reported in a trash can on the front porch of the library, and 1 report of conduct prohibited by the Miami University Policy and Information Manual).

The presence of University Police aids in creating an environment in which students feel safe. When University Police headquarters moved into a new headquarters located on the opposite side of campus from the library, they sought to create a presence on the side of the campus which houses King Library (and is adjacent to Oxford's uptown). The Libraries stepped in to provide them with a substation in the library. In addition to enabling police to respond to incidents taking place in or near the library, it also ensures ongoing police presence in the library.

Since the Library sits along the main path to Oxford's busy uptown, and close to street parking, the area around the library tends to be well traveled even during overnight hours. A ride sharing service is also available.

Security cameras operate at multiple locations around the building, and can be used to identify individuals suspected of misbehavior.

### *Challenge: IT Support*

Miami's IT Services contracts to provide overnight support via their help line. With the exception of one incident where wireless service was inconsistently available over one weekend, support has been generally effective.

IT Services also handles the campus-wide contract for printers and copiers. When they selected a new vendor, the Libraries learned that the previous vendor, who frequently serviced machines at night and on weekends, was not obligated to do so by contract. IT Services had been unaware that the Libraries had been receiving night and weekend when they negotiated the new contract, and therefore did not include this service. When the new provider learned of some of the challenges that arose during overnight and weekend hours, they offered to provide service during peak usage times, such as midterms and finals.

### *Challenge: Communication with Employees*

Another challenge is communication with staff and students who are spread out over a 24/7 schedule during the academic year. No two people in the Access Services department have the same schedules. Of the ten staff members in the Department, only 5 work Monday – Friday schedules, and only one works an 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. schedule.

Mandatory meetings to review policies and provide updates to student employees are scheduled immediately after the library closes for Labor Day Weekend. Communication with staff is more challenging. Since two positions are nine-month contracts, the only time available to train all staff is during the winter break and January term, which the library is open for reduced hours. After receiving a day or two of introductory training, new staff are moved to their permanent schedule, and are trained by either of the Access Services department's two unclassified positions (the department head and the circulation manager). Performance reviews are sometimes conducted in the same way, with one of the unclassified positions arriving at the end of the overnight hours (between 5:00 and 8:00 a.m.) to conduct performance reviews.

### Conclusion

Operating the library during extended hours entails contending with challenges logistical and budgeting challenges. However, the availability of the library and some of its core services is genuinely appreciated by the students. As noted above, Miami's Associated Student Government has expressed its support for these operations, and Miami's administration has responded.

In response to a survey about Miami's newly-established January term in 2014, students were asked to rank which services were most important to them, and ranked the libraries as the second most important feature. In follow-up surveys after the first January term, one of the most requested changes was library hours. Given the number of people who were present in the building at closing time, these hours have been extended, although not to full 24/7. Nevertheless, the interest in having a library facility open, and available well into the evening, continues to be strongly supported by Miami's student body. The Libraries are pleased to be able to meet this need.

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