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## Survey and Analysis of American University Library Action Plans and Their Implications: Post-print

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Action plans are specific task lists formulated under an organization's vision and strategy. The development of action plans has become a routine undertaking in American university libraries and represents an important instrument for advancing libraries toward the realization of their strategic objectives.

[Method/Process] Using action plans from 15 American university libraries as research samples, this study analyzes their timeline, format, structure, and content, employs word frequency analysis methodology, and interprets and dissects them in conjunction with ACRL's "Standards for Libraries in Higher Education" from five dimensions: macro-level integration, educational function, resource coordination, space development, and personnel and management.

[Results/Conclusion] Action plans facilitate the formation of standardized activity records for libraries. University libraries in China urgently need to clarify their self-positioning, maintain close connections with reality, emphasize sustainable development, and through scientific processes, formulate action plans that demonstrate high alignment with institutional objectives, are intuitively detailed, feature multi-dimensional interaction, and achieve ecological mutual benefit.

### Full Text

## An Analysis of Action Plans of University Libraries in the United States and Their Implications

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**Abstract:**

**[Purpose/Significance]** An action plan is a specific list of tasks formulated under an organization's vision and strategy. Developing action plans has become routine practice in university libraries across the United States and serves as a powerful mechanism for advancing strategic goals. **[Method/Process]** This study examines 15 U.S. university library action plans as research samples, analyzing their temporal characteristics, formats, structures, and content. Using word frequency analysis and drawing upon ACRL's *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education*, the paper interprets and dissects the plans across five dimensions: macro-level integration, educational function, resource coordination, space development, and personnel/management. **[Result/Conclusion]** The findings indicate that action plans help libraries establish standardized records of their activities. Chinese university libraries urgently need to clarify their positioning, maintain close connections with practical realities, emphasize sustainable development, and develop action plans that align closely with institutional goals through scientific processes—plans that are intuitively detailed, multi-dimensionally interactive, and ecologically synergistic.

**Keywords:** university library; action plan; strategic planning; United States

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An action plan represents a specific task list formulated under an organization's vision and strategy, serving as an effective means for achieving organizational objectives. As Chinese libraries deepen their strategic planning practices and research, numerous university libraries have developed strategic plans oriented toward new-era development and higher education missions. However, implementing these plans remains a formidable challenge—a new proposition for the scientific development of libraries. To ensure strategic implementation, developing action plans tailored to actual library conditions is imperative. In this process, investigating and learning from the experiences of U.S. university library action plans offers a valuable source of inspiration.

## 1 Research Overview of University Library Action Plans at Home and Abroad

### 1.1 International Research Overview

Since the 1960s, libraries in the United Kingdom, the United States, and other countries have engaged in strategic planning and action plan development and research. For many foreign libraries, action plans follow specific formats and are compiled periodically as routine practice. Overall, international research can be summarized in three areas: First, applied research on university library action plans that discusses how libraries develop plans under specific circumstances. Examples include F. Carolyn's study on how libraries formulate publicity-oriented action plans during staff reduction crises to effectively promote services and enhance influence. Second, case studies based on actual

library conditions, such as C. David et al.'s quantitative and qualitative examination of context-aware services at Saint Mary's University Information Resource Center, which argues that academic library action plans should reflect the effectiveness, rationale, and challenges of context-aware services. Third, research integrating specific library functions to explore action plan development, as seen in K. Rachel's investigation of a framework for libraries to provide services using multimedia collections in response to streaming media trends.

## 1.2 Domestic Research Overview

Domestic research specifically targeting library action plans remains scarce, with relevant studies typically embedded within strategic planning research. Through comprehensive analysis of CNKI, Wanfang, and VIP databases, this study summarizes Chinese scholars' research on foreign library action plans in three aspects: First, treating action plans as components of strategic planning texts, examining their proportion and placement. Ke Ping et al. analyzed 283 foreign library strategic planning texts, finding that 37.8% contained action plans typically positioned after prefaces, mission statements, visions, values, and strategic goals as anticipated activities for achieving objectives. Second, viewing action plans as a textual form of strategic planning that explores format and style. Qu Yun discovered in investigating foreign national library strategic plans that action plans provide a scalable format, where listing strategic goals, action plans, and key initiatives creates a concise yet comprehensive effect. Jiang Hong et al. categorized strategic plans containing action plans as strategic types, where strategic goals and action plans constitute essential components. Third, employing semantic analysis, textual analysis, and word frequency analysis to compare foreign library strategic plans and summarize future action plans. Teng Chao and Bi Xin surveyed 11 foreign university libraries including Harvard, concluding that these libraries propose action plans addressing emerging trends, including emphasizing resource discovery, physical space renovation, and librarian career development.

Overall, domestic literature rarely treats action plans as a dedicated research object, though strategic planning research often encompasses this topic—reflecting the current reality of strategic planning development in China's library profession. With abundant research achievements in library strategic planning, continuing to merge action plans with strategic planning studies hinders in-depth exploration of this theme. This study's analysis of U.S. university library action plans emerges from precisely this consideration.

## 2 Sample Selection and Analysis Framework

The temporal distribution of the 15 selected action plans spans from 2014 to 2022, with most concentrated between 2016 and 2020 [Figure 2: see original paper]. In terms of format, the Massachusetts Board of Library Commissioners introduces action plans on its official website, encouraging libraries to develop them and providing downloadable, editable templates for reference [Figure 3:

see original paper]. Among the samples, only the University of Pennsylvania Libraries present their action plan in tabular form containing four key elements: goals, actions, timeline, and actors [Figure 4: see original paper]. Rutgers University Libraries follow a similar format, while the remaining 13 libraries use paragraph-style text [Figure 5: see original paper].

### 3.1 Structural Analysis

Analysis of the full action plan texts reveals that not all samples contain the four elements of goals, actions, timeline, and actors. The plans vary in structure: some integrate with strategic planning as detailed implementation guidelines, others appear as separate attachments, and only a few follow predetermined timeline tables. Most enumerate from major goals to sub-goals and then to actions, with only a small number including timelines, outcomes, and additional content. Therefore, major goals, sub-goals, and actions can be considered essential elements of U.S. university library action plan structures, while current strategies, timelines, outcomes and assessment, relevant institutional strategies, environmental analysis, and development processes serve as optional elements [Figure 6: see original paper].

**Essential Elements Analysis.** Major goals represent tasks decomposed from library strategic planning and constitute the core of action plans, listed by 93% of libraries as “Goals” (typically 2-16 goals). For instance, Pennsylvania State University Libraries establish 2 major goals, while the University of Denver Libraries list as many as 16, and 9 libraries including Rutgers set 4-6 major goals. Sub-goals are more detailed objectives under major goals, included by 73% of libraries as “Objectives” (typically 2-20 per major goal). Consequently, total sub-goals often exceed 20, with Syracuse University Libraries listing the most at 159. Such detailed sub-goal structures provide concrete guidance and reference significance for Chinese libraries. Actions refer to specific measures regarding personnel, methods, and approaches, typically expressed as “Action,” “Activities,” “Tactic,” or “Action Items.” Compared to goals, actions are concrete and executable, often phrased as “doing something at a certain place.” For example, the University of Alabama Libraries’ first action item reads: “Distribute liaison responsibilities among libraries and explore opportunities to incorporate librarians not currently engaged in liaison work.”

**Optional Elements Analysis.** Current strategy refers to the library’s strategic plan, expressed as “Strategies,” “Themes,” or “Directions,” with 26% of libraries listing strategic plans before action plans to provide macro-level guidance. Timeline appears as “Timeline,” “Status,” or “Recent Accomplishments,” with libraries displaying implementation progress and status on their homepages. Plans including timeframes and outcomes become more practical and measurable in subsequent evaluation processes. Outcomes refer to anticipated results of actions, expressed as “Deliverable,” with most libraries presenting them alongside actions, though Pennsylvania State University Libraries dedicate a separate column with 70 entries. Assessment is expressed as “Metrics”

or “Assessment,” corresponding to major goals. Relevant institutional strategy links goals or actions to university-level strategies, emphasizing alignment with the institutional environment, such as the University of Pennsylvania Libraries’ “Penn Strategic Domains.” Environmental analysis involves investigating internal and external information environments, policy changes, financial issues, and user needs before strategic planning, employing established management analysis methods like the University of Alabama Libraries’ SWOT analysis and Syracuse University Libraries’ SOAR analysis. The development process is documented by only two libraries: Stony Brook University lists working group leaders, members, and team composition, while Indiana University Libraries details their entire research process, particularly data selection, internal/external analysis, and communication.

### 3.2 Word Frequency Analysis

Word frequency analysis, a fundamental bibliometric method, identifies research hotspots and trends by analyzing keyword frequency in literature. Using the TextMechanic online tool, this study counted word frequencies across all 15 action plans. The sample contains 43,833 total words. Following English usage patterns, prepositions, function words, and morphological variations were removed, yielding 38 high-frequency words appearing over 100 times. Based on these results and overall sample understanding, the core content of U.S. university library action plans can be summarized in three points, with corresponding high-frequency word numbers from Table 3 indicated in circles.

First, U.S. university library action plans prioritize the library itself and its parent institution—the library and university. As service organizations, libraries serve students and faculty as primary user groups. Strategies and actions aim to better support research, learning, and education. Regarding library-university integration, Pennsylvania State University Libraries repeatedly propose collaboration with campus services. Northeastern University Libraries lists concrete plans such as integrating information literacy courses with university curricula and promoting cooperation among teaching centers, academic departments, and subject expertise centers.

Second, to achieve these goals, libraries must integrate diverse collections and resources across different campuses, emphasizing accessibility while creating diverse, instructional spaces. To achieve desired outcomes, libraries should launch academic programs or projects, collaborating with partners both on and off campus, including faculty, students, colleges, and communities. All libraries establish connections between spaces and practical functions while addressing management issues. For example, Washington State University Libraries discusses renovating learning and interactive spaces, planning to investigate how library spaces influence user behavior, and proposes faculty engagement in integrating library services with university research.

Third, during implementation, libraries must emphasize two aspects: assess-

ment ① of all activities, such as Georgetown University Libraries' evaluation of staffing, space planning, and responsiveness; and close attention to technological and era changes. Amidst transformation and change ②, libraries should focus on digitalization ③, data and metadata ④ applications and practices, actively participating ⑤ in institutional affairs to promote library development and expand influence ⑥. The University of Alabama Libraries devotes most of its action plan to technology development, including planning space development and services according to educational and technological advances, and hiring personnel for new technology practice and maintenance.

### 3.3 Content Analysis

The Association of College and Research Libraries' 2018 *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* organizes all library operations into nine areas: institutional effectiveness, professional values, educational function, resource discovery, collection development, space development, management and leadership, human resources, and external relations. This recent standard closely aligns with educational, degree, research, and collaborative functions. To deeply analyze the samples, this study uses these categories, combined with the structural elements above, to form five analytical dimensions: macro-level integration, educational function, resource coordination, space development, and personnel/management.

**Macro-Level Integration Analysis** encompasses values, efficiency, and impact related to library positioning. All 15 libraries fundamentally serve their universities, maintaining alignment with institutional, departmental, and student needs, explicitly stating this mission at the outset. Northwestern University Libraries proposes that the library forms the foundation for supporting university teaching and enhancing institutional reputation. Stony Brook University Libraries positions itself as a center for collaboration, digital innovation, and academic support. The University of Denver Libraries defines itself as a center for academic communication and knowledge creation, with each action corresponding to the transformative directions outlined in the university's *Impact 2025* initiative. U.S. university libraries strive to articulate their contributions to learning, teaching, research, and employment, collaborating with multiple stakeholders to expand influence. Indiana University Libraries employs a strategy of publicizing successful service cases within its primary goal of "aligning goals with university strategy," highlighting library effectiveness in serving the institution. Old Dominion University Libraries proposes expanding the impact of targeted research activities by co-hosting events with the university research office and establishing specialized repositories to create a national research brand akin to academic scholarships for the university.

**Educational Function Analysis** manifests in many areas, with embedding in classroom instruction, information literacy education, faculty support, and research encouragement as key components. For classroom integration, U.S. university libraries emphasize not only electronic resource instruction but also

embedding diverse collections and services into effective learning experiences inside and outside the classroom, requiring proactive and conscious action. The University of Alabama Libraries' first sub-goal under "Innovative Instruction" involves restructuring liaison programs for active online and offline communication across campus. As learning media diversify and information environments converge, learning occurs everywhere. Libraries should utilize different platforms and teaching methods for various learning contexts to provide appropriate and timely guidance. Pennsylvania State University Libraries' first sub-goal under "Teaching and Learning" aims to transcend the role of online education partner to become key insiders supporting learners.

Information literacy education has been implemented for years, with surveyed libraries constructing comprehensive, multi-dimensional systems. Action plans aim to consolidate achievements, enhance learning experiences, enrich teaching and assessment methods, and promote deep learning. Northeastern University Libraries' first sub-goal under "Learning and Teaching" transforms traditional "person-to-person" information literacy courses into actions supporting teaching plans, using visualization and data aggregation technologies to create new extracurricular learning experiences, establishing workshops to guide regular reading, and utilizing platforms like Omeka for online exhibitions. U.S. university libraries strive to provide professional development opportunities for faculty, becoming capable assistants in data analysis, planning, and publishing. Actions include strengthening internal and external partnerships to help individuals and academic units enhance research impact and visibility. Miami University Libraries' third action under "Promoting Peer-to-Peer Support" creates research scholar and Adobe scholar programs, developing international research and creative projects beyond traditional curricula to increase faculty awareness of international career development opportunities. Several action plans also mention open education and digital literacy education as emerging trends. Old Dominion University Libraries takes actions to raise awareness of author rights and open access, using digital sharing to enhance research visibility and impact, and providing support for digital content creation, digital teaching platforms, and digital analytics.

**Resource Coordination Analysis** requires that collection development align with institutional strengths, research fields, and curricular priorities while rapidly responding to campus changes. Northwestern University Libraries has begun establishing a systematic faculty liaison program, aiming to align librarian actions with academic departments by 2021. Collection development action plans emphasize integrating diverse resources and providing multiple access pathways. Indiana University Libraries' sub-goal "Ensure collections containing human knowledge, thought, and creativity" includes cataloging, digitization, and opening new access portals. Northeastern University Libraries boldly explores and supports new technologies, directly adopting "Apply streaming media" as a sub-goal under "Procurement and Resources," developing virtual interactions for media resources where students are most likely to learn.

Special collections have become important differentiators for libraries, gaining new vitality through collaboration, exhibition, promotion, and utilization. Northwestern University Libraries plans to collect project outcomes based in its African Studies branch and collaborate with museums for exhibitions under the major goal of “Enhancing global academic reputation and impact.” Northeastern University Libraries’ special collections plan starts from daily operations, taking actions to excavate and promote resources closely connected to university teaching and research missions.

Beyond traditional collections, U.S. university libraries progressively advance long-term preservation and access of academic and cultural records as new collections to support sustainable scholarly communication. Indiana University Libraries’ sub-goal mentions providing subsequent services for preserving physical artifacts and process data for university research units and individual researchers. “Becoming a campus leader in graduate productivity” serves as Houston University Libraries’ primary goal, with actions including collaborating with institutional, regional, and national bodies to provide data management services throughout the research lifecycle.

In digital and electronic resource development, major actions involve optimizing service platforms and websites to simplify access to collections and information sources, further digitizing special collections, revealing multimedia resources, and providing intuitive access to the most reliable content. Miami University Libraries uses the uSearch retrieval system to achieve seamless access to university cultural property, collections, and institutional repositories. Washington State University Libraries plans regular website usability testing under the major goal “Develop infrastructure supporting 21st-century information environments” to ensure anytime, anywhere access for faculty and students. Optimizing library websites with system architectures and interfaces that match user retrieval preferences is essential. Some libraries plan to invest in discovery tools to simplify user experiences and differentiate between specialized and general resource needs. The University of Alabama Libraries creates web pages allowing users to interact with library data innovatively as a sub-goal under “Develop and maintain dynamic and flexible physical and virtual spaces,” planning iterative website development and creating liaison indexes that further match keyword terminology with faculty and student language.

**Space Development Analysis** focuses on constructing knowledge commons and innovative teaching spaces around research and teaching objectives. Houston University Libraries transforms how faculty and students use spaces to discover and create knowledge by developing creative spaces equipped with personnel and devices to provide practical experience in research, design, visualization, and creation.

Given limited physical space, maximizing utilization and expanding flexible, multi-purpose spaces represents a practical solution. Miami University Libraries cleverly designs the third floor of Richter Library as a faculty commons area, connecting this event space to digital scholarship service areas and subject librar-

ian offices on the same floor. Houston University Libraries plans comprehensive network and technology coverage throughout buildings to extend virtual space. Libraries should also provide intuitive navigation supporting autonomous use of physical and virtual spaces, such as offering tool recommendations on laboratory computers, expanding appropriate digital signage coverage, and regularly replacing outdated signs.

In space development and renovation, U.S. university libraries solicit and follow user input to evaluate and improve building environmental experiences. Houston University Libraries proposes designing adaptive, accessible spaces that accommodate users' diverse values, backgrounds, interests, and learning preferences, allowing them to create their own learning environments throughout library facilities. Libraries actively develop immersive learning environments that integrate higher education and technological advancement trends, maintaining dynamic and flexible physical and virtual spaces. The University of Denver Libraries plans to provide multiple academic support services in the Anderson Academic Commons under the sub-goal "Improve and expand learning environments," creating an inspiring community space centered on academics and supported by services.

**Personnel and Management Analysis** reveals that achieving these goals requires strong financial and human resources. Regarding human resources, the first priority is ensuring adequate staffing to increase the librarian-to-student ratio. To effectively compensate for human resource shortages, extensive collaboration with student librarians has become a positive tradition in most surveyed libraries. The University of Alabama Libraries provides opportunities for information systems management and computer science students to better meet website maintenance and small-scale programming needs.

Second, libraries must ensure staff knowledge, skills, and experience match job requirements. U.S. university libraries encourage professional development and skill enhancement through action plans. Miami University Libraries conducts comprehensive analyses of tool skill gaps among librarians under the major goal "Drive continuous workforce development." Stony Brook University Libraries repeatedly emphasizes building a learning organization culture under "Foster a culture of learning and assessment," including organizational risk-taking, encouraging continuing education, critical thinking, and innovative ideas; allowing experimentation and valuing staff contributions; and disseminating new knowledge throughout the organization.

Human and financial resource efficiency and effectiveness are closely related to management approaches. U.S. university libraries emphasize team communication and progress. Washington State University Libraries propose that teams should be transparent, not only in internal communication but also in soliciting and acting on feedback from numerous stakeholders. "Cultivate talented staff" serves as a sub-goal for Georgetown University Libraries, with specific actions focusing on simplifying management processes, reducing goal obstacles, and conducting workshops. The University of Denver Libraries proposes "Create

a rewarding workplace for staff performance success and career development,” referencing institutional employee engagement surveys to recognize and reward all staff and celebrating department or team achievements in major events.

University management relies on assessment based on real data. Rutgers University Libraries refines assessment items in action plans to better count, reference, and guide activities, including information literacy workshop numbers, exhibition and audience statistics, online course creation and participation, consultation frequency and time investment, reading scale, survey feedback, and contact collection. Additionally, through team coordination and LibQUAL+ surveys, they implement new Alma functions including data collection and report generation.

## 4 Implications and Reflections

[Figure 7: see original paper] illustrates the composition of U.S. university library action plans. Through clear two-tier goals and specific action steps implemented over multiple cycles, these plans objectively and naturally form standardized activity records where documentation equals action and reflection. The comprehensive processes, clear structures, and concise expressions offer valuable lessons for Chinese libraries. Meanwhile, the approaches of aligning with institutional missions, clarifying self-positioning, and highlighting educational functions profoundly reveal the fundamental mission of university libraries to serve higher education, providing far-reaching practical guidance for Chinese libraries’ planning and development.

### 4.1 Clarify Positioning and Develop Action Plans Closely Aligned with Institutional Goals

U.S. university library action plans start from institutional and library realities, with every action grounded in and contributing to the university, its departments, and its students. For these libraries, the university library is not only a hub for knowledge and scholarship but also symbolizes institutional prestige and reputation—a critical reference for social status and funding acquisition. Consequently, U.S. action plans explicitly state their positioning at the outset. Chinese university libraries must recognize that action plans serve not merely as work guides but fundamentally aim to promote institutional development. When developing action plans, libraries should first study their institution’s strategic planning documents to establish a mission of acting to fulfill the university’s goals. On this basis, they should contact relevant institutional planning departments, actively solicit input, establish dedicated drafting committees or teams, and invite key personnel from important departments to serve as advisors or committee members.

## 4.2 Connect Closely with Reality and Emphasize Sustainable Development

Action plans must be based on thorough investigation and research, using scientific methods to analyze the environment and ensure feasibility. Chinese university libraries should conduct environmental analyses before planning, employing mature management methods such as SWOT or SOAR analysis to systematically and scientifically develop more realistic plans. Additionally, libraries should establish assessment mechanisms to track progress and effectiveness, ensuring continuous improvement. The practice of publicly displaying timelines and progress on library websites enhances transparency and accountability. Chinese libraries should adopt similar practices, making action plans living documents that are regularly updated and communicated to stakeholders.

## 4.3 Develop Intuitively Detailed, Multi-dimensionally Interactive, and Ecologically Synergistic Plans

The structural analysis reveals that effective action plans require clear hierarchies—from major goals to sub-goals to specific actions—while maintaining flexibility in format. Chinese libraries should develop plans with explicit, measurable actions rather than vague aspirations. The plans should facilitate multi-dimensional interaction among library departments, between libraries and academic units, and between libraries and external partners. Creating ecologically synergistic relationships where library actions support and enhance the work of other campus units while leveraging external partnerships will maximize impact. The emphasis on student success, faculty support, and community engagement in U.S. plans demonstrates how libraries can position themselves as essential partners in the academic ecosystem.

In conclusion, the systematic approach to action planning evident in U.S. university libraries—characterized by clear structures, evidence-based content, alignment with institutional missions, and commitment to assessment—offers a robust model for Chinese libraries seeking to enhance their strategic impact and demonstrate their value within the higher education landscape.

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**Author Contributions:**

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