Planning for Change in Academic Libraries

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Earlier this month, a controversy swept through the ranks of librarians online. The issue that raised the ire of the library media and bloggers was comments made by the director of McMaster University in a talk he gave at Penn State University (Annoyed Librarian, 2011; J. Rogers, 2011; StevenB, 2011; Wilkinson, 2011). In this talk, Jeff Trzeciak (2011), the director, suggests that in the future McMaster University would no longer hire MLS-holding librarians, but expected to hire PhD holders and Information Technology (IT) specialists as subject experts. The concern rose from his apparent marginalization of those holding MLS degrees for people perceived as lacking the appropriate librarian training. The purpose of this explanation is not to take a particular view on this matter, but rather to bring attention to a scenario where a library director is exploring alternative options to improve the services and capabilities of his library.

The consulting and research service Ithaka S+R recently published their Library Survey for 2010, where they studied "the strategic direction library administrators are planning for their organizations as well as their views on service offerings and collections" (Long & Schonfeld, 2011, p. 5). The survey was completed by 267 library administrators at four-year colleges and universities providing a solid overview of the current attitudes in academic library management. One of the key findings was that, surprisingly, only 35% of respondents claimed to have a "well developed strategy to meet changing user needs and research habits" (Long & Schonfeld, 2011, p. 11). So, while Trzeciak's methods may be deplorable to many librarians, he is still doing more now than many other academic librarians. Academic libraries are used to having an important place on their campuses, but a combination of shifting research habits and environmental transformations have reduced the significance of the traditional value that they offered. The methods that students and faculty want to use to find and access information have

changed. Unless academic libraries are able to strategically plan for change and develop a
culture for change in their employees, they will be left behind by the very people they seek to
serve.

The Need to Change

Over the past decade, academic libraries have faced new growing pressures:
technologically, economically, socially, and politically. Where they used to be the main source
and curators for information resources on the campus, they now compete with the ubiquity and
distribution of electronic resources. This spread of information on the Web has raised questions
about why the library is even necessary. Financial environments have become more difficult,
requiring libraries to better demonstrate how they contribute towards the academic mission and
values of the institution. Libraries have an increased emphasis on accountability from their
parent institutions that are in turn accountable to their accreditation agencies or the government
for results. The very roles of academic librarians have been transformed as their duties get
affected by new responsibilities being added and obsolete ones being discarded. Sheila Corrall
(2010) in her case study on educating librarians in the United Kingdom, says, "Key features of
the contemporary landscape include overlapping roles, broad skillsets, stretched identities,
specialised niches and competency gaps in strategic specialities" (p. 576). The skills that
librarians are gaining from their education or developing as they work are not syncing with the
roles they are being asked to perform.

In 2006, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) organized a series of
interviews with Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) and Provosts to gain an understanding of how
libraries were perceived by the administrative officials ultimately responsible for many of the

decisions that affect academic libraries. Many of the CAOs believed that it was important that

his or her library director was "embracing the changing library landscape" (Estabrook, 2007). It

is important for the libraries to demonstrate that they were managing obstacles like rising serial

costs or changing user habits as efficiently and effectively as possible. Estabrook (2007)

explains that the CAOs in this study were less concerned about the money involved, in fact some

wished that their library directors ask for more resources, and instead placed emphasis on the

"library's overall role in their institution."

In order for libraries to continue to have relevance on their campuses, they have to make

sure that they are able to foresee the coming challenges so that they are able "to make good

decisions about service priorities, resource allocations, and organizational structures" (S. Rogers,

2007, p. 366). Since it would be useless for libraries to be able to see the changing trends but not

be able to react, it is also necessary for libraries to develop frameworks so that they are able to

adapt to changing pressures. There must be not only the capability to manage the changes, but a

culture that can accept the changes must be present.

Trends for Organizational Changes in Libraries

During the 00s, several major Australian university libraries underwent significant

organizational changes. These changes were precipitated by shifts in the higher education

models (Kealey, 2009; Saw, Lui, & Yu, 2008), or by a self-assessment that indicated that the

current library organization was no longer capable of properly serving its user base (Wells,

2007). In reviewing these organizational changes, there were several trends in how the libraries

changed. Specifically, three different areas were emphasized in the new organizational models:

an increase in technical competencies for library staff; a focus on service and supporting the

research of the institution; and, attention to leadership and management structures.

It is not breaking news that technology has become very important for librarians to do

their jobs and provide the library's services. The impact of information technology in the library

has led to the prioritization of the provision of training and support to library users (Saw, Lui,

Yu, 2008, p. 56). The University of New England (UNE) in New South Wales conducted a

thorough study to understand what would be required for their reference staff to be able to

operate in a changing environment. They found that while the staff had a "flexible attitude

towards technology, there were weaknesses in skills involved in using the library's latest

equipment and software skills (Leong, 2008, p. 81). The library staff was then able to focus on

improving these areas through their staff development programs. In a similar vein, the

University of Queensland developed a program for library staff to gain training in information

and communication technology. These staff members then are capable to serve as basic systems

librarians for their libraries, handling much of the low-level and first line support (Saw, Lui, Yu,

2008, p. 56). Since it has become important for librarians to be comfortable with current and

emerging technologies, Carroll (2010) points out that information technology has become a

major component in many librarian education modules (p. 579). Both the libraries and the

librarians need to be technologically capable to be able to be fully ready for a changing

environment.

Another trend in academic library restructuring has been an increased focus on service

and meeting the research needs of the students and faculty. According to Ithaka S+R's survey,

94% of the respondents say that supporting teaching and learning as a very important role for

their libraries (Long & Schonfeld, 2011, p. 23). In order for the libraries to accomplish this, the

librarians need to reach out beyond the walls of the building and affiliate themselves closer to the

campus community. At the University of Arizona libraries, which have also seen an extensive

restructuring recently, there is a connection development team that "is always looking for ways

to connect and communicate with [Research Support Services] customers by keeping an eye on

campus events where the library can be involved and opportunities to promote RSS" (Andrade &

Zaghloul, 2010, p. 279). The librarians at the University of Queensland acknowledged that in

order for the library to service its users appropriately, they would need to exert their presence

outside the building. They have actively aided the faculty in easing the transition of first year

students into the university (Saw, Lui, & Yu, 2008, p. 60) and developing a First Year

Engineering Center where the librarians have a presence to answer queries and help students

develop their information skills (p. 62). Since it can be difficult to assess how libraries are

supporting the learning and research of their institutions, it becomes important for the library to

communicate frequently with the academic departments to not only find out better ways to serve

the campus, but also to get an idea of the effect they are having.

Finally, there is a trend in the importance placed on the leadership and management

capabilities of the library staff. When the University of Melbourne library did their

organizational analysis while restructuring, they noted that there are "skill shortages across the

library and Information Services profession" and that there were indications "that they will have

problems replacing senior staff in leadership roles" (Kealy, 2009, p. 576). As part of their

restructuring, the library focused on creating an environment of continuous learning for skill

development. Similarly, Leong (2008) says that UNE also found that skills in leadership and

influencing others were areas of weakness during their competency study (p. 81). Therefore, as

part of their performance assessments and professional development programs, there is attention

placed on skills like the ability to "engage in educational debate and decision-making", "ability

to influence policy", and "skill in forging strategic alliances and diplomacy" (Leong, 2008, p.

80). It is clear that academic librarians need to be effective managers and leaders as their

responsibilities shift in order to adapt to the changing environments and needs of their

communities.

Change Culture and Management

In 1992, Sears, Roebuck, and Company were at a crisis point, they reported a net loss of

$3.9 billion, $3 billion of which was from their merchandising division (Rucci, Kirns, & Quinn,

1998, p. 85). Something was going wrong and it needed to be fixed before the situation could

get worse. A new director, Arthur Martinez, stepped in and began a program of management

culture changes that sought not only to make Sears a better place to shop, but also a better place

to work. He, and his team of managers, reengineered store operations "with a heavy emphasis on

training, incentives, and the elimination of administrative and other non-selling tasks for sales

personnel," and at the same time revamped the service strategy "to make it more responsive to

busy women and their families" (Rucci, Kirn & Quinn, 1998, p. 85). They found that by making

Sears a compelling place to shop and work, it became a compelling place to invest. Once

business had been turned around, Sears was faced with a new challenge – how do they make it

last? They sought ways to transform the company and develop a system for long-term success

from the short-term survival measures taken. Sears succeeded by building a system where it was

necessary for the entire organization to buy into and support.

Academic libraries that are faced with revolutionary changes in their environments can

learn a valuable lesson from how Sears was able to overcome their own difficulties. If there is a

plan for a major organizational change, library administrators need to ensure that their employees

are on board and support the changes that are being made. Sometimes the changes that are

needed are not going to be the most popular, such as what was suggested by Trzeciak or when

the libraries at the University of Arizona sought to replace their liaison librarian roles and had

employees who did not wish to give up their previous roles (Andrade & Zaghloul, 2010, p. 279).

One way that libraries have been effective in encouraging their employees to adopt major

restructuring has been to include them in the process with participatory management methods.

The UNE library communicated the need for change repetitively and kept the staff involved in

"determining issues and planning organizational directions"; Leong (2008) reports that as a

result, "staff at UNE are positive about change, technology, and their competence. The

confidence is in itself a valuable asset" (p. 84). By keeping the library staff involved in the

whole process, the UNE library gave them the opportunity to make the changes their own, which

in the end made them more accepting of the needs to change as well as the methods.

A final thing to consider when it comes to restructuring an academic library to be more

adaptive to changing needs is that there is a considerable time commitment involved. This

involves not only the analysis stages, but also deployment and the need to get the library staff

invested in the restructuring. The changes for the University of South Wales library were part of

a long process, "because a principle of inclusiveness was adopted" (Wells, 2007, p. 457). They

needed to take their time in order to prepare their staff and users for the change. This

emphasizes the need for libraries to be able to foresee the challenges that will face them in the

future, because even the most adaptable organization is going to need enough time to determine

the correct way to proceed. It is necessary for libraries to be proactive and actually set the

trends, rather than react to the trends they encounter (S. Rogers, 2007, p. 375).

Conclusion

Academic libraries today are faced with many obstacles to their success. Rapid

technological change has diminished their value as information purveyors. The troubled

economy has struck their budgets with a double blow as they have reduced funds to purchase

resources that are increasing in costs. Even their importance on the campus is being questioned

by faculty, students, and administrators. It is important for academic libraries to be flexible

enough to handle these challenges and the new ones that are still to come. They can do this by

restructuring themselves to be a better fit for how their community expects to be served.

In looking at several libraries that have undergone significant re-organization, it appears

that there are three main areas to emphasize in the new models. The first is technological

competency. Information is increasingly tied to computer technology, so having both the

technical infrastructure and librarians comfortable with the technology is necessary to handle the

changes. The second area is a focus on service and supporting the institution's learning and

research objectives. In order to do this, libraries need to extend themselves outside of their

building and become "better integrated with the University" (Wells, 2007, p. 453). The

information content has become borderless, and it is time for the libraries to do so as well.

Finally, there is the need to focus on the management and leadership capabilities in the library

workforce. In order to have a flexible library, you need to have flexible librarians who are able

to guide and direct employees and projects to serve the library.

To enact the changes necessary for academic libraries to thrive, they cannot just develop new organizational models and services in a reactive fashion. They have to take the time to consider what will work best for their library and their institution. Then they have to make sure that both the people inside the library and the people that use the library understand and accept the changes that are being made. This requires careful communication and a nature of inclusiveness that allows everyone to feel that they were responsible for the changes.

Andrew Wells (2007) at the University of New South Wales offers an excellent point to close on:

> A re-organization in itself does not guarantee adequate responses to the threats of relevance and value faced by university libraries. The reorganization is a platform on which new services can be delivered and revitalized relationships with users can be built. (p. 457)

Academic libraries need to change to face the new world that exists around us. Restructuring to better meet the challenges they face is a viable solution, but it may not have the intended results. The libraries need to make sure that in the end they make the best decisions for their institution and their users.

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