
Academic Libraries for the 21st Century

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Abstract

This paper focuses on new paradigms and strategies that are ought to be considered from the perspectives of information technology and the critical information needs of academic library users, amidst the stress of reduced budgets and decreased buying power. The paper also discusses the effective solutions to meet the evolving information needs of the campus and the larger academic community.

Keywords : Academic Libraries, Paradigms, Consortia

0 Introduction

Academic librarians all over the world are facing new challenges. Economic downturns in many regions have seriously diminished the fiscal bases of many colleges and universities and, consequently, the financial resources of academic libraries. The economic crisis and devaluation of currencies in Asia, for instance, have directly and indirectly affected academic libraries in the region. At the same time, as a result of rapid technological advances, all academic libraries experience escalating expectations and demands from library users. Like executives and managers in the business world, academic librarians are expected to achieve greater results with fewer resources.

Many academic libraries have, over the years, consistently added new services as the opportunities and needs arose, to the point of adding a whole electronic services dimension, while discontinuing only the least significant services, if any. In view of the decline in general funding and the steady erosion of purchasing power caused by inflation, libraries have often accomplished these changes by reallocating internal resources, constantly defending existing human and financial resources, and successively adding to the workload of everyone. How can we better respond to these challenges? What is the appropriate role for academic librarians to play in this new context?

1. Responding to the New Context

Among the things we urgently need to do are reshaping the vision of academic librarianship and adopting new concepts and principles to guide library management, especially in the light of what is going on in higher education. Of course, no librarian agrees that academic librarians operate in competitions due to distant learning opportunities created by other colleges, universities, as well as by profit-making institutions, have become the main concerns.

At the same time, the international network of information and exchange is increasing connections within and across disciplines and creating new fora. The quest for scholarly information has expanded significantly and is now coupled with desires for swift and better services. We also see a growing number of information providers outside libraries. Academic libraries are deeply involved in a global arena. Our perspectives and service programs must reflect this context. Academic libraries need to, among other tasks, provide all students with the information-seeking skills needed not only to be productive learners but also life-long learners and efficient contributors to intellectual, cultural, and social endeavors no matter where they will eventually work and live.

2. Renewing the Service Orientation

Rapid technological changes and advances require an ever more adaptive and sophisticated workforce. We need to cultivate a new workforce of electronic resources librarians, information managers, system integrators, and the training and education providers to conceive, build, and implement a wide array of user-oriented applications using innovative information technology. Information technology solutions will only be successful if we directly focus on the work force, which is expected to satisfy the critical information needs of our users.

Academic libraries should consider establishing a central training office. The office would be enabled to charge to provide consistent, comprehensive training in electronic technical skills, instructional delivery and design, managerial supervisory skills, and continuing education for librarians and staff. It could also develop computer-based instruction for student assistants and voucher personnel to provide training in core competencies needed for working in academic libraries.

At the same time, we need to rethink about some of our assumptions about how library human resources are disbursed especially how library professional staff is deployed. There is also a need to increase collaboration among library units. We need to be prepared to foster new endeavors that cut across traditional functional boundaries. The team concept should be revisited and reemphasized. To be successful in the 21st century, academic libraries need to be more proactive and more customer service oriented. The complex challenges of the next ten to twenty years require creative leadership, drawing the best from both library leaders and followers in order to meet the demands of their situations and achieve goals and processes that are beneficial to the academic and global community.

3. Learning Organization

Information technology has changed and will continue to do so both in form and substance in academic libraries. It is time to re-evaluate service models that have functioned for years. We have to creatively identify new solutions to old problems and achieve results. Being prepared to manage changes can furnish us with the ability to flourish. We should attempt to reestablish standards, criteria or benchmarks that are considered to be basic to quality library service. Although the definition of quality library service is often elusive and difficult to articulate, self-study or self-evaluation sets into motion systematical review of library mission, goals, outcomes, effectiveness, and commitment to improvement.

Academic libraries in the 21st century need to be learning organizations. The concept of the learning organization started in the private sector where continuous monitoring, updating, and changes are critical for staying in business. A learning organization is skilled at taking advantage of both formal and informal learning opportunities and changing its behavior and direction in response to what it learns. People in the organization continually enhance their capacity to create what they want to create through continuous testing of experience; they transform that experience into knowledge that is accessible to the entire core purpose. While this seems straight-forward and easy, it takes effort to focus attention on learn, an organization and relevant to its then to turn that learning into change. And we need to monitor change and effectiveness constantly.

4. Collaboration and Partnerships with Other Units on Campus

Enhanced cooperation between the library and the campus-computing center will provide significant opportunities for improvements in services. The main locus for the provision of information content, however, should be the library. Because of the complementary relationships of academic computing, campus telecommunications centers, and libraries, some colleges and universities have questioned

the appropriateness of their organizational structures, particularly when a significant investment in information systems, resources, and services is anticipated. On some campuses, this has led to the creation of a chief information service position under whose umbrella of responsibility these individual information units may be clustered. While I don't propose such an organizational model, does indicate that there are strong complementary relationships between the library and campus computing services as a result of using information technology. It also suggests that we need to work more closely with people in the campus-computing center to bring about improvements in services.

Some of us tend to think the role of librarians in the college-wide or university-wide planning and the decision-making processes is minimal. Actually, there are many opportunities in which academic librarians can participate in those processes. Contrary to the commonly held perception that university-wide planning activities are the purview of university administration and academic departments, librarians have the potential to contribute to the university-wide planning process. Librarians have planning, writing, communicating, and organizing skills that can contribute positively to the content and substance of these university-wide processes.

A powerful motivator for involvement in these processes is in the affirmation of the meaning and integrity of what academic librarians contribute to instruction and research. Library cooperation with academic departments and units in site licensing for important software and research tools, and design of library instruction to complement classroom learning definitely supports teaching and research more directly. In addition to cooperation and collaboration with academic departments, we also need to maintain regular contacts with them. Some even advocate for having librarians keeping office hours in academic departments. It is argued that this allows the faculty to become more familiar with library services and the librarians to become more familiar with faculty needs.

5. Approach to Outsourcing

As a profession, our objective is effective mediation of information. The more we let go of tasks that distract us, the better able we will be to fulfill our objective. We need therefore to revisit the possibility of outsourcing. Outsourcing is one of the most controversial topics discussed in libraries today. Some librarians argue that in many cases it is done for the wrong reasons and without the research or backup needed to make the operation successful, while others consider outsourcing to be an effective tool for improving service.

It scared people who had the legitimate concerns and made them suspicious of any type of outsourcing. A "middle-ground" objective approach to outsourcing is probably the best approach. It would allow us to eliminate lots of labor-intensive work, and help us focus our skills on the tasks we do best. The essential thing connected to this approach to outsourcing is the training needed to do whatever we are not outsourcing. Concentrating our efforts on the things we do best makes good business sense for the library as well as for the college or university it serves.

6. Academic Library Consortia

The growing number of online databases and digital library initiatives in research libraries bear a testimony to the fact that new information technologies are transforming the way we think about collections. Digital technology, being more about access than ownership, brings immediate benefit to library patrons. Public service staff brings the crucial perspective that a digital collection is not there for its own sake, but for what it can provide to library users in a more accessible format.

The changes being experienced during the present transition to a largely digital environment question the value of investing in models based on a predominantly print environment. They also offer new are forming consortia to provide common access to electronic resources across the Internet, and they are forming these consortia on a nationwide basis. Some of these are INDEST Consortium for IITs and Institutions working Under MHRD, CSIR Consortium for all CSIR laboratories and UGC's INFONET Consortium Co-ordinated by INFLIBNET etc,. These projects provide a seamless network of information resources accessible to all institutions of higher learning in their group, thus contributing enormously to the teaching, research, and service missions of all its participants. These models which offer new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration among college and university libraries, I think, should be seriously considered by all academic libraries if they desire to position themselves strategically for the new challenges of the next century.

7. Conclusion

To face the coming challenges of the 21st century, academic librarians will need to acquire more perspectives and new competencies. They must do more than gain the knowledge must learn to act - to apply that knowledge in different situations. They also need to prepare themselves the complex challenges of the future by dealing with rapid and substantive changes, managing the diversity of people and views, and thinking globally. In addition, they need to focus on both the internal and external variables that affect libraries.

No one would deny that this is both an exiting and challenging time to be in the field of librarianship. But this is also a time that necessitates innovative ways of thinking about services, collections, information access, and also our roles as academic librarians. With the ever-increasing potential of technology, we are continually challenged in our efforts to create a vision for the future that does not quickly become the past. Whether we are optimists about the future or not, it is important that we, regardless where we are, all work together in supporting each other through these exciting and challenging times as our libraries evolve into the libraries of the 21th century.

8. References

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