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Views versus Visions: Implementing the Library’s Vision in the Real World

INTRODUCTION

Throughout institutions of higher education, the view of the library takes on many forms: the president may be inclined to see the library as a money pit; the faculty view of their library allocation approaches that of entitlement; some undergraduates view the library as a neat place for an inexpensive date; and the librarians as the place where “My Collection” is kept.

While these stereotypes may appear all too familiar to some, they bear an element of truth. These, and other stereotypical views of the library, derive from the past; libraries and librarians are now in a period of substantial transformation, transition, and opportunity.

This paper speaks to both the evolving role of libraries and to a process for changing the library’s institutional position. If you want to be somewhere else, don’t stay where you are. But, how do you manage the transition?

THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE LIBRARY

Change is never easy. It can be exciting and energizing to reenvision one’s role. However, when change involves the abandonment of comfortable paradigms and assumptions and the actual implementation of the new vision, we all may stumble and fumble. The first step toward implementing the new vision is the transition from our old assumptions to acceptance of the reality of the information age. In particular, there are three dangerous assumptions to be overcome in making the transition to the “real world”:

1. the library as the “heart of the institution” versus the library as part of a mix of information services;
2. the concept of mastery of information versus the proliferation and fragmentation of information;
3. the conviction that "there'll always be a library" versus user-based information services.

It has been clear for some time that, despite our protestations and the high-flown language of our accrediting agencies, the library is not at the center of scholarship in many institutions. This is particularly true in the sciences, where high-speed, nearly universal network access provides researchers with the capability of sharing work in progress long before the work reaches publication. It is becoming increasingly true as well in other disciplines—not just the social sciences and business, but the traditionally "library intensive" humanities. As the medium in which information is encapsulated becomes less important, and as more information becomes available in digital form, scholars expect to be able to access information from their desktops, instantaneously. Delivery of that information is provided by a variety of sources—both subsidized campus services and a range of commercial services. While the library may mediate some of the resources and services, the mix increasingly requires librarians to cooperate with a broad range of new colleagues, including computing specialists, commercial information vendors, information developers, and information users.

We have been accustomed to considering ourselves capable of mastering "the universe of information," even though we've been commenting on the "information explosion" for the past 20 years or more. We have been attempting to fit the new information—exploded, fragmented, and proliferated—into our old patterns. We had some limited success when we were attempting to deal only with print resources; when we attempt to impose our old patterns on the new forms of information—digital data, audio, video, multimedia—we are finding the old patterns increasingly inadequate. We have to be able and willing to provide our institutions with both access to and training in the full range of information resources, replacing the concept of "mastery" with an acceptance of adequacy in an environment of lifelong learning and change.

One of our most cherished assumptions, even though we seldom articulate it, is that there will always—must always—be a library. But our institutions and users have no vested interest in libraries per se. Instead, each user is looking for the quickest, easiest, cheapest access to exactly the information he or she needs. Our users, and our institutions, expect responsive, cost-effective information delivery from whatever source. Unless the library is able to develop a range of user-based services, we will become an increasingly irrelevant warehouse, out of the mainstream of academic life and funding.

If we accept these realities—the library as part of a mix of information services, the continuing fragmentation and proliferation of information, and the user as the basis for services—then how do we use this acceptance and understanding to survive in the reality in which we find ourselves? We see—and have begun acting upon—three essential components for survival:

1. grounding the library in the particular institution;
2. involving the library and librarians in the sociopolitical matrix of the institution;
3. making proactive use of new technologies and services.
THE LIBRARY AND ITS PARENT INSTITUTION

Institutions—even the largest or most prestigious ones—are increasingly conscious of their “market niche” and target their programs to maximize their advantage. Libraries, likewise, cannot afford to be generic but must increasingly become identified with the specific goals and expectations of the parent institution. At Bradley, for example, the university has made a specific commitment to maximizing technology for pedagogy and the curriculum. For the library to maintain its significance to faculty and students at Bradley, then, we have used technology to increase access to our resources and services, pushing out the walls of the library to deliver information and services to student and faculty desktops. The particular mix of resources and services—the vision of the library—must be rooted in the dynamics of the particular institution.

The understanding of the dynamics of the institution does not come from librarians holding themselves “above” or aloof from the politics and sociology of the institution. Instead, we have to accept new roles within the decision-making environment of our institutions. We need to develop as “movers and shakers” within the institution—roles with which we have not traditionally been comfortable and which our institutions have not traditionally allocated to us in other than pro forma ways. In the same way that we've developed access tools to maximize the use of our collections, we need to develop our political skills to maximize the library's participation in institutional decisions, from research to curriculum to budget allocation.

If we have shaped the library to the particular institution, and if we have integrated the library and librarians into the political and sociological fabric of the institution, we can develop and deliver services that anticipate the needs of our users. It isn't enough to react to the expressed needs of our patrons. As the information experts, we need to be constantly looking ahead at new technologies and new services that can contribute to the success of our patrons and our institutions.

NEW ROLES FOR LIBRARIANS

In the new reality that we've described, with the required survival skills outlined above, there are formidable expectations of the “new” librarian. These characteristics include the following:

1. expanded collegiality within the information community;
2. expanded collegiality within the institution;
3. visionary as well as pragmatic administrative acumen;
4. proactive and adaptive skills.

We have long prided ourselves on our interlibrary cooperation. We must expand that concept and stretch our abilities so that we can effectively cooperate with our colleagues in the broader information community of which libraries are a part. We need to understand and speak the language of telecommunications, networks, database development, publishing, information marketing, multimedia—all of the broad range of information services and media. If the
library is to remain an integral part of the information mix, librarians must participate in the development and implementation of the full range of technologies.

To complement this broader collegiality, librarians must also develop collegial relationships within the institution. This may take the form of working with a biologist to develop a database of local fungi, with a nurse practitioner to develop a demographic profile of a service area, with a journalist to develop a policy on privacy and freedom of information, or with the Art Department to develop a curriculum in the book arts. If we are to retain and enhance our value to the institution, we need to help our colleagues understand that the library and librarians can contribute directly to their success in their own fields. And all this collegiality will go for naught if we do not have the necessary administrative skills. It is not enough to be able to balance this year's budget (although that skill is becoming increasingly challenging). We have to be able to develop a vision of the future, to institutionalize that vision, to implement the vision within the local environment, and to change the vision and implementation to accommodate changing technological and institutional variables. We must be able to articulate and defend our role in the educational process, as well as to account for the resources that we manage. It is as important that we be able to negotiate the political and sociological shoals of our institutions as that we be able to manage the technology.

Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural dictum holds true in libraries as well: "Form follows function." There is a temptation to focus on the format or medium of information, rather than on the function that we provide. We must be proactive and adaptive in all areas: information access and management, organizational structure, programming and services, and collections and resources.

IMPLEMENTING THE VISION

The vision that we've outlined for the "new" library and librarians is a daunting one. While we recognize that implementing this vision will be stressful for all involved—instiutions, libraries, and individual librarians—we can propose some strategies to mitigate the stresses involved in making the transition to the new roles: professional development, team work, developing an explicit statement of expectations, excising the "deadwood," and maintaining an emphasis on quality service.

Professional Development

There is much discussion in the profession about the future, and the "visions" group supported by the Council on Library Resources has done a good job of focusing the issues and fostering discussion. Part of that discussion has focused on the education necessary for the "new" librarian. We all feel comfortable with formal education as a tool for changing the profession. We recognize the role of workshops and training that focus on the use of particular tools, techniques, and resources. There is another type of professional development, however, that we need to begin using more effectively—the
development that occurs when a library staff discusses a substantive issue and
develops its own sense of the issue and approach to the situation. Although
many of us feel uncomfortable in setting ourselves up as “experts” among
our peers, at Bradley we’ve adopted a program of in-house professional
development. Periodically, each member of the library faculty leads a discussion
on an issue of his or her choice, first with the library faculty and then with
the full library staff. Using these regular opportunities to move beyond day-
to-day limitations has been very effective in building a common vision of where
we are, where we plan to go, and how we plan to reach our goal.

Team Work

We’ve also used outside facilitators to help us develop a sense of ourselves
as a team. In developing a set of “team norms” at a workshop two years ago,
we found a remarkable unanimity in our perceived need to “share the load.”
This is particularly important in dealing with changes. It is less threatening
to take the risk of assuming a new role when that risk is shared by others,
and when the new role is broadly accepted and understood. It also makes it
more difficult for a single individual or a small group to undermine progress
toward the new role when the whole group has made a commitment to the
new vision.

Explicit Statement of Expectations

Once a vision has been discussed and adopted, there is a tendency to assume
that everyone is proceeding identically or equally toward implementation of
that vision. This assumption is seldom warranted. Instead, it is critical that
the new expectations—the new role—be explicitly incorporated in the goals
and objectives of each member of the library staff. The new expectations should
be included—with room for flexibility and allowance for failure—in the
evaluation process both within the library and within the tenure and promotion
guidelines of the institution. Unless the new roles are recognized in the
institutions reward structure—salary, job security, and status—it is easy to pay
lip service only to the new vision, while effectively reinforcing the status quo.

Excising the Deadwood

Even when we have concentrated on professional development, built
effective teams, and developed reward systems for change, there will be situations
and individuals that do not adapt to the new roles. It’s threatening to the
whole organization when a supervisor begins to excise organizational deadwood,
whether programmatic or personnel. However, if we are to move forward to
implementation of the vision, we have to be willing to accept the responsibility
for making those decisions and carrying through with them. The excision may
be organizational, like eliminating the pet program or service of a particular
member of the faculty or staff. It may be preemptive, like not writing a
recommendation to library school for someone we don’t believe has the ability
to fully participate as a “new” librarian. Most painfully, it may be the dismissal
of a member of the library staff who has not been able or willing to accept and participate in the new vision. As administrators, we like to believe that we can build consensus and commitment to the new vision, and we tend to view it as a personal failure when an individual fails to make the transition. It is essential, however, that the whole library—programs, services, resources, and personnel—be committed to participation in the new vision and roles. Terminating employees is never easy, but we must recognize those situations where it is required and be prepared to act on our judgment.

Emphasis on Quality Service

Throughout all of the planning and implementation, an emphasis on the reason for the change—on quality service that meets the needs of library users—helps to focus library staff on the end, rather than on the changes that are bringing about that end. At Bradley, we’re in our second year of a “service excellence” program. All members of the library staff and a number of students and teaching faculty are involved in activities focused on improving the quality of the services the library provides. While some of the improvements implemented as part of this program are small, the total program is making a significant impact on the way the library operates. Perhaps even more importantly, the service excellence concept is helping staff to concentrate on the outcomes of changing roles and expectations, rather than on the stresses of actually implementing the changes.

FUTURE OF THE LIBRARY

Neither envisioning new roles nor implementing them will be easy. However, if libraries and librarians are to maintain their value within higher education, we must begin to take action. Unless we plan for the future and then take steps to make that future a reality, we may be locked into the past, with no future at all.

The future view of the library, then, is one of a range of activities and services—not necessarily a place—that is central to the academic and research missions of the institution. In this vision, the library and its employees are capable of participating at least as peers, if not as visionaries, of the information age. That means guaranteeing the availability and developing a mastery of the tools and techniques of tomorrow: computers, high-capacity storage media, networks, multiple information formats and information access tools, as well as the traditional print forms. It also means developing a mastery of our social and political environment: proactive leadership, service emphasis, and integration into the institution. The transformation required for fulfillment of our new visions need not be completely realized to achieve results; rather, we will see the institution’s view of us change even as we begin the transformation.

BRADLEY’S EXPERIENCE

The last half decade has been one of significant activity and change at our institution. Within the span of six years, we completed a major capital
campaign, constructed six major buildings, created a new administrative unit housing the library and all other information units, and went through a strategic planning process and North Central institutional accreditation. We've about planned and studied ourselves to death. However, these processes have presented us with a singular opportunity to put into practice the philosophies and theories described earlier, with the result that we have begun to transform our library fundamentally and reshape the campus vision of the library and its institutional role.

During the period 1984 through 1988, Bradley conducted the largest capital campaign in its history, with a focus on brick and mortar expansion and renovation. Among the projects included in the campaign was one to renovate the library and double its size. Then, in the spring of 1986, an administrative restructuring took place at Bradley. Among the changes made was the creation of a new unit named Information Technologies and Resources. The library, computing services, telecommunications, AV services, instructional television services, and the campus public radio station were all placed within this unit. This administrative structure has helped to place the library at the center of information services, both in planning and in current practice.

As planning for the new building unfolded, the new administrative structure—and the arrival of Ellen Watson as library director—led to a dual planning strategy of enhanced access to traditional library materials, with a greatly expanded emphasis on electronic information resources. The new library building was conceived as a fully networked facility, designed to accommodate both current and future information technologies; the building was dedicated in 1990. The library has become the campus centerpiece and a showplace for campus information technology. The library's exterior is inviting, and its interior comfortable. All of the librarians and staff have networked personal computers, and access stations for network resources and the online catalog are located throughout the building.

The focal point of the library's system of electronic resources is a local area network consisting of approximately 30 IBM and Macintosh workstations connected via Ethernet to a cluster of application servers. The facility is named the Microcomputer Information Center or MIC. The MIC is designed to provide transparent access to personal productivity software, campus and Internet information resources, electronic mail, CD-ROM databases, and ILLINET Online, our online catalog. The network also supports delivery of fax documents and is being enhanced to include an image database of the 14,000 rare photographs in our Special Collections Center. High-speed laser printing and downloading of information to floppy disks are supported from any workstation.

The MIC's information resources are also made available outside the library; for example, the CD-ROM database server, online catalog, and Internet resources can be accessed from faculty offices, residence hall computers, and the Department of English's writing lab. Librarians conduct, and download information from, online database searches; they use electronic and voice mail to communicate with faculty; they receive requests for materials through electronic mail; and they conduct training for faculty and students on a wide range of subjects dealing with academic applications of information technology.

A second major event that has shaped the development of the library was the university's strategic planning process. This multiyear effort got underway in 1987 and involved the entire campus. This presented an opportunity for
our fledgling Information Technologies and Resources unit to develop a long-range plan encompassing elements from all of our constituent units and to embed that plan in the institution’s own master plan. The library was one of the major contributors to the information technologies strategic plan. The recently completed building and its technology were a source of inspiration, as well as of credibility, for the concepts embodied in our plan. Throughout the planning process, the information technologies executive committee met with planning committees from each of the colleges to exchange ideas and to stimulate thinking. This collaboration resulted in a final university plan that embodied many of our ideas in the plans of the academic units and reflected their needs in our plan.

The strategic plan places the library at the academic heart of the institution, providing traditional services and resources as well as new ones based on modern technology. The library also provides a wide range of “high touch” services, such as information literacy training, online database searching, and delivery of documents to faculty office.

Since the university’s plan was published in 1991, we have been vigorously pursuing its implementation. Having gained campus-wide consensus through the planning process has made it much easier to implement many of the campus improvements we sought. It is not enough to change institutional expectations; we must also address performance expectations within the library as well. Thus, we have implemented programs to increase staff awareness and abilities to deal with electronic information resources—both their own as well as those used by patrons. We have also begun a quality assessment and improvement program to become more attuned to user needs and to increase the library’s ability to meet user expectations.

However, we, like many other libraries, are struggling in the battle between budget growth and acquisitions cost increases. Although we have managed to keep up over the past several years, simply maintaining our current acquisitions has prevented us from making needed basic improvements in the scope of our collection. This year, we will have to cancel some journal subscriptions. And prospects for the immediate future are not much brighter. Thus, we have now begun a project to formally replace some journal acquisitions with online information access, a process that will be made somewhat easier because of the earlier planning process. This will occur only in selective areas where the needed online information is actually available, where the cost of online information usage will be lower than the equivalent journal subscription, and where our faculty will agree to the transition. Unfortunately, this combination is, at present, somewhat rare.

CONCLUSION

Within the current range of opportunities and limitations, our goal has been to develop a new, dynamic vision for the library, based on basic institutional needs and supported by all campus information units. By coordinating this vision with campus academic units and embedding it in the institution’s strategic plan, we have made the library’s plan de facto institutional policy. That is
not to say that a cornucopia of funding has as yet appeared; however, we now find the campus and administration generally receptive—and in some cases demanding—regarding the library's emerging involvement with electronic information services. The impressive new building has also helped.

However, the most important achievement has been to reposition the library as a modern, dynamic enterprise—one that is a leader of campus planning, not a follower. This, we believe, will serve the library well, helping us to face both the challenges and opportunities to come.