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Transforming the Library: The Case for Libraries to End Incremental Measures and Solve Problems for Their Campuses Now

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In an article published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* University of Texas System Chancellor Mark Yudof wrote, "Mark Twain would recognize the situation. Everyone talks about the governance and financing of higher education, although, as in the case of the weather, few feel that they can do anything about it."[1] Much agony has been expressed over higher education's immediate future in the United States and elsewhere, given the movement to regulate academic and financial management from the outside. Many colleges and universities respond to societal pressures by pursuing change in small, incremental steps. Yet those same pressures for accountability, affordability, and access to education require an institutional response that demonstrates agile planning to achieve high performance, including for libraries. What possibilities are there for transformational change in libraries? A case for appropriating transformational models in academic libraries will be explored in the article that follows, focusing in particular on libraries in *public* colleges and universities.

Does Incrementalism Work Anymore?

In *Managing Today's University,* Frederick Balderston observed that "university resources are scarce relative to hopes and needs, and it must be anticipated that this condition will dominate decision making in the 1990s, and beyond."[2] For higher education, the 1990s were marked by constant adaptation to economic fluctuations and changing priorities of federal and state governments. American public colleges and universities have been battling resource scarcity since the troubled decade of the 1970s, when an unfortunate mix of economic stagnation and inflation quelled decades of growth on college and university campuses. Since then, the realities of resource reduction and higher tuition costs outpacing the Consumer Price Index have become fixtures in higher education, causing administrators to search for solutions to maintain the vitality of their institutions.

Unfortunately, much administrative action has been short-term, goaded by economic uncertainty of the time and significant, often unanticipated changes in the environment for teaching and research. More often than not, administrators' solutions represent little more than incremental shifts in a strategy rooted in a bygone era of continuous growth, followed by decades of "holding the line" in the face of economic and political pressures. Colleges and universities can no longer afford incremental shifts, with their unintended consequences of muddling through rather than solving problems. They must turn their energies toward a dramatic restructuring of their institution and contend with the discomfort and apprehensions associated with transformational change.

For libraries, transformational change is a welcome strategy. The idea that transformational change can be associated with the high performance library can be found in the teachings of the late Peter Drucker, and in particular the thesis he presented in his book, *Post-Capitalist Society.* In that work, Drucker characterized the role of the organization as a "destabilizer," one that "must be organized for constant change."[3] He continued, "Social innovation is as important as new science or new technology in creating new knowledges and in making old ones obsolete. Indeed, social innovation is often more important."[4] He later wrote:

> Every organization of today has to build into its very structure *the management of change* . . . It has to build in organized abandonment of everything it does . . .

But *the ability to create the new* also has to be built into the organization in three forms: a commitment to continuous improvement in organizational processes, development of "new applications from its own successes" and learning "how to innovate."[5]

In other words, transformation becomes an interactive process between an organization and the broader society. For academic libraries this has required managers to pay

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attention to internal processes and external relations within and beyond the campus.

During the decades that higher-education institutions have struggled with economic, political, and social challenges to the status quo, academic libraries have been the sites of considerable changes in the constitution and delivery of information. This was due largely to advances in technology and the evolution of a professional workforce hired for knowledge and subject specialties rather than skill sets. Likewise, we have experienced important transformations in the community of users to which Drucker refers, a diversity of its demographic character and disciplinary and interdisciplinary interests. However, many libraries seeking transformative solutions find that the logic of incrementalism continues to prevail among administrators, boards of trustees, and legislators.[6]

Moving Beyond "Muddling Through"

In their 2003 article on transforming higher education, Guskin and Marcy wrote that while muddling through problems is "a time-honored practice for dealing with recurring fiscal problems in higher education, [it] may actually undermine the nature of the academic profession. . . . Over time, this will eventually mean that academic offerings will be less and less and that the quality of learning will be seriously diminished."[7] Decades of continuity and adherence to a culture of growth may have done much to hamper the need for fundamental reorganization of the university enterprise and to resist changing its own culture. As Hawkins and Battin stated,

> Libraries and computer centers have radically altered both themselves and the higher education landscape, albeit in an incremental fashion. True transformational change continues to be constrained by the misguided belief that the technological revolution can be contained within the old organizational structures. Succumbing to the mirage of continuity that denies the need for financial and management reorganization and the belief in a technological panacea that will miraculously transform an historic tradition of knowledge creation and transmission by the simple substitution of digital for analog technology will only increase dysfunction and paralysis. To recognize the new conception of the library is to recognize and accept the inevitability of a new conception of the university.[8]

Hawkins and his colleagues recognize an acculturation and acceptance of the idea of transformational change in libraries. What they argue is needed is a breakthrough of sustained transformation, especially as an organizational response to changes in the communities served by libraries. Examining four specific trends may help libraries move forward in this regard.

First, as Drucker and Senge have proposed, organizations should challenge assumptions and practices and abandon the old to allow room for the new.[9] In other words, simply modifying or "patching" old forms of service or products promotes a false sense of movement and importance, and often costs more in the end. Organizations that lack the capacity for self-reflection and the will for an organized abandonment of obsolete practices, services, or products will merely muddle through their problems and, in the long run, their capacity to just hold the line will disintegrate.

In libraries, many old strategies for dealing with issues related to the storage of and access to information have been abandoned. More powerful technologies and databases have replaced many printed indexes and bibliographies, resulting in faster updating and retrieval of information. There have been many discussions about rethinking reference, restructuring cataloging, reimagining collection development, or redesigning job descriptions in libraries to include other competencies. Additionally, the abandonment of manual systems is accompanied by the integration of information literacy concepts into reference and instructional services. In management, many academic library administrators have discarded the concept that funding solely from the *operating* budget allocated by the campus is sufficient and they have accepted the need to supplement it with from external sources such as grants, donations, and endowments.

Second, Senge et al. also suggest a new trend in their book, *The Dance of Change*. In Senge's view, managers confront three challenges to sustaining transformation:

- "Fear and anxiety: triggered by openness and candor among members of the pilot group";
- "Assessment and measurement: the gap between your change initiative and the organization's way of measuring results"; and
- "True believers and nonbelievers: the tendency for profound change to fall into an escalating dynamic of perceived threat and siege mentality."[10]

Here Senge et al. suggests that organizational change can occur through establishment of pilot groups where ideas can be generated. They write that "unless some kind of pilot group can coalesce, new ideas in an organization have no incubator, no place where concept can become capability, where theory can meet practice."[11]

In libraries, substantial investments have been made to preserve common assumptions and values lodged either in organizational traditions or in the remembrance of happier times in the past. Many measures of successful performance have been based on the assumption of growth: for example, in the number of volumes held or acquired each year, staff hired, and circulation of printed materials, reference transactions, and turnstile counts. Martell has observed that

some of these measures may actually decline with improved access, although with improved services.[12] Improvements in Web-accessibility may also have the predictable consequences of decreasing the number of individuals who pass through library doors. Depending on the point of view, such trends can be simultaneously interpreted as a loss of interest in the library as a physical facility and a sign that access to information has increased.

A third scpecific change relates to how trends affecting the nation's public colleges and universities involve significant economic, demographic, and political challenges that have evolved over the past thirty years. These societal trends redefine the nature of library use in an academic environment. Demand for access to higher education by traditional and nontraditional populations will affect how classroom instruction is delivered, as well as out-of-class learning and related academic work.

The cost of enrolling in private colleges and universities will also force an increasing number of talented students to enroll at their respective state institutions as a cost management alternative. These students will demand–as will university administrators–greater accountability and evidence of positive outcomes for their education across institutions, including libraries. As Stoffle et al. have written, "We are being asked progressively more about what we can do to actively help the campus achieve its goals."[13]

Finally, the fourth trend is that the portion of state support continues to shrink for many institutions as education costs increase. Consequentially, many raise the question, "Is there still a public university?" In a 2002 opinion piece published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* then University of Minnesota President Mark Yudof wrote,

> More than a century ago, state governments and public research universities developed an extraordinary compact. In return for financial support from taxpayers, universities agreed to keep tuition low and provide access for students from a broad range of economic backgrounds, train graduate and professional students, promote arts and culture, help solve problems in the community, and perform groundbreaking research. Yet over the past 25 years that agreement has withered, leaving public research institutions in a purgatory of insufficient resources and declining competitiveness.[14]

What remains is the capacity for public institutions to keep their resident tuition lower than either their non resident tuition and fee rates or that of private institutions, and little more. In the minds of students and their families, education comes at considerable cost, whether public or private.

Many libraries have grown accustomed to providing incremental responses to budgetary stagnation, cuts, and reversions that diminish resources to support programs. Some have addressed problems by shifting staff, reducing hours of service, and taking short-term measures to cover both the acquisition and processing of information resources. In other instances, libraries have deferred maintenance or consolidated units solely for budgetary reasons. However, if state appropriations do little more than temper the rise in tuition, libraries will be challenged to build organizational capacity by opening new revenue streams. Being open to new revenue streams will give libraries opportunities to forge new partnerships within the campus community, to raise funds in support of programs of mutual interest, and to develop outreach initiatives that build communities of support for library priorities.

Elements of a Transformed Library

To meet these trends head on, leaders must create holistic views of the organization and how it fits into the campus, and likewise how the campus fits into the state, region, and broad landscape of higher education. Transformation in libraries will be specific and unique to each institution, but there are several characteristics that can be considered hallmarks of transformative change.

1. *The transformed library seeks to fulfill the campus's goals, even in endeavors that currently do not involve the library.* This represents a significant turn from the time-honored practice of measuring success against peer libraries, in favor of judging ourselves by how libraries help their institutions succeed at integrating campus-wide systems and achieving outcomes related to information technology. Campuses are in need of managers who can integrate information and technology across their unwieldy institutions. Currently, efforts to manage IT are being duplicated in many different units across the campus, and by consolidating these efforts, an institution could provide better service and save resources.

Given the decades of experience in the growth of IT applied to library operations and services, libraries are best positioned to succeed in these efforts and present their case for managing technology on the campus. Beyond their experience managing IT, librarians also have much experience managing budgets, personnel, collections, services, and facilities. That expertise can become increasingly relevant to the campus if staff think about their positions in light of the mission and goals of the campus and not their job descriptions pertaining only to traditional library functions. This flexibility and ability to adopt new ways of thinking about the library's responsibility must be rewarded institutionally by the library. If the emphasis in job performance and assessment is on innovation and experimentation rather than on traditional standards, then the transformed library can make a greater impact on the entire campus.

There are other partnerships with campus agencies that would achieve the university's collective goals. One example is in meeting the campus's goal of information

literacy or fluency. As librarians spend more time partnering with campus units to build the curriculum and take part in instructional design, they will be more influential at helping the campus students fluent in technology and information skills.

For these endeavors to work there must be a culture of assessment that emphasizes the library's contribution to campus goals. College administrators, departments across the board, and campus units are feeling the pressure to assess their competency with greater rigor. The library as a whole should continually assess and be able to demonstrate its contribution to learning and other institutional outcomes. We can assist with that responsibility by developing methods to assess student learning wherever it occurs. For example, this may mean an assessment of information literacy that reaches beyond the library walls and into departmental curriculum and program planning. One example of designing measures to define outcomes in the institution at large is the Project for Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS).[15] The tool goes beyond assessment of the library's influence on information literacy to determine students' growth over the time they spend in higher education, and to discover what role information literacy plays in academic success and retention. In this way, Project SAILS assesses student learning whether it occurs in a department, the library, a service activity, internship, or beyond and thus reaches across the curriculum in a dynamic way.

Assessment of student learning works best when it is a collaborative activity, integrated across the curriculum. Through their experience designing collections, services, and facilities for students; teaching and working with students and faculty; and playing a broad role in the educational mission of campus, librarians have experience to help shape assessment projects in a variety of ways. They have a great deal at stake in the outcomes of these assessment projects and can profit from having robust assessment in student learning.

2. *The transformed library creates new system-wide models that reflect an electronic, rather than print, world of information.* The transformed library must consider its spaces, and how it facilitates (or inhibits) research and learning. Libraries must provide spaces that work for new types of learning and provide both physical and virtual spaces to access information. Today the library's virtual space plays as crucial a role as its physical space, notably as it is expected to be available twenty-four hours a day from any location with an Internet connection. Libraries have extended their services into the virtual realm through chat, instant messaging, and e-mail reference services, often available around the clock. These services allow students to receive individualized help from information professionals at the point of need. By partnering with other campus units, similar virtual services can work across campus; for example, with the bursar's office, the university's writing and tutoring centers, advising departments, and others.

Another aspect of this space is its virtual collections. In the past, when collection development entailed the acquisition of print materials, the mission for library collections was more easily defined. However, the transformed library must manage a broad range of resources, including traditionally published scholarly materials and nontraditional materials such as preprints and data sets. One approach to managing these materials is through institutional repositories. An institutional repository brings together the scholarly output of the university, which can support campus records management, provide greater access to the scholarly and educational creations of individuals, and preserve a greater range of materials and data than libraries can manage traditionally. There are problems to be solved, such as issues involving privacy and self-management issues, but the pros far outweigh the cons.

Such new system-wide models require frameworks that reflect the management, access, and preservation of information in an increasingly broad range of available and important formats. The transformed library will abandon the hierarchy that gives primacy to printed sources in favor of a more fully developed systems that value equally sound, visual, visual, and digital formats. To the extent that libraries develop robust collaborative frameworks for the management, access, and preservation of information resources in all formats, they will support the campus of the future in new and important ways.

3. *The transformed library creates system-wide models that reflect the changing nature of education and research.* One current application of this means providing collaborative spaces for inquiry-based and service-based learning. With the growing focus on undergraduate research and student learning opportunities beyond the classroom, the library's role will need to transform by providing community spaces where these activities take place. The traditional library has supported spaces for individual study and learning, but increasingly they will need spaces for collaborative learning and research. With libraries working alongside campus partners to support these new educational styles and preferences, they can create service learning and research plans for students demanding a richer and more progressive campus environment.

4. *The transformed library influences social policy, including helping to change the processes and products of scholarly content, influence the realm of intellectual property and copyright issues, and advocate for innovations in higher education at large.* As they experience transformation, libraries can become agents of change for the campus at large. Due to their institutional connections, academic values, and tradition of cooperation, libraries are poised to take a leadership role in transforming the entire campus. To do this, however, they must remain active and

influential in the social policy arena, not only in the economic agenda for information, but in political, legal, and social transformations affected by information. This entails collaborating with communities of scientists, historians, and humanities scholars on state and federal information policies, and opening proactive dialogues with commercial and nonprofit information providers.

In the past, libraries have used a variety of coping techniques to deal with changes in scholarly communications, journals pricing, copyright laws, licensing practices, and intellectual property policies. The transformed library goes beyond merely coping by actively influencing those laws and policies that play the largest roles in institutional success. Libraries must become full players and participants in the process. They must insinuate themselves into planning and advocacy in order to affect social policy.

The Transformed Library

There are two added requirements for academic libraries to advance successfully down the road of transformation. Libraries must heed the warning of Magretta by taking on "the more difficult challenge of imposing mission discipline on them."[16] By maintaining focus on institutional mission, the transformed library will not stray into unintended territories that merely satisfy momentary interests. Also, the transformed library will maintain a commitment to the concept of capacity building. Hudson tells us that building organizational capacity "is about systematically investing in developing an organization's internal systems . . . and its external relationships . . . so that it can better realize its mission and achieve greater impact."[17] So, the transformed library is not only mission-focused, but also assesses its effectiveness by the degree to which it realizes direct impacts within the campus community and in the scholarly world.

Higher education is at a crossroads. How academic libraries accommodate changes on campus will define their future viability in academe. Muddling through with incremental changes will doom traditional academic libraries. Transformation does not come without anxieties, without conflicting views about how success should be measured, and without its naysayers. Higher education has struggled to implement relevant transformative models of decision-making in response to ever-changing societal interests and priorities. For academic libraries caught in the vortex of technological, demographic, political, economic, and social change, adopting transformational models will present opportunities for significant realignment of decision-making activities and goal attainment. Transformation for alignment with campus goals is the key–and indeed, the only–way to maintain viability in the academic arena.

References and Notes

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2. Frederick Balderston, *Managing Today's University: Strategies for Viability, Change, and Excellence* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 5.
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6. Charles Lindblom, a leading student of policy studies, argued that the term "muddling through" expresses incrementalism, or approaching change through small, methodical steps. Incrementalists, Lindblom wrote, "believe that for complex problem solving it usually means practicing incrementalism more skillfully and turning away from it only rarely" (Charles Lindblom, "Still Muddling Through. Not Yet," *Public Administration Review* 39, no. 6 [Nov./Dec. 1970]: 517). In a college or university, an academic program under review may be judged by its adherence to continuity, and a library's materials budget may show little deviation over a decade's time beyond its best efforts to keep up with inflation. As Brian Hawkins illustrates, by 2007, purchasing power in eighty-nine of the nation's top university libraries will be 20 percent of that in 1981 should the cost of materials and inflation rates continue to outweigh budget increases in real dollars. (Brian L. Hawkins and Patricia Battin, *The Mirage of Continuity: Reconfiguring Academic Information Resources for the 21st Century* [Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 1998], 301). In *The Dance of Change,* Senge et al. suggest that in organizations change can occur through establishment of pilot groups where ideas can be generated. "Unless some kind of pilot group can coalesce, new ideas in an organization have no incubator, no place where concept can become capability, where theory can meet practice." (Peter Senge et al., *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* [New York: Currency Books, 1999]: 39).
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