

New relationships in academe

Opportunities for vitality and relevance

by Donald G. Frank and Elizabeth Howell

The vitality and relevance of academic libraries are increasingly at risk. Faculty and students on campuses do not necessarily view libraries and information centers as the place to go to obtain information for instructional and scholarly needs. In "The Deserted Library,"¹ the author notes that gate counts and the circulation of traditional materials are falling in academic libraries across the nation as students migrate to study spaces in apartments or dormitory rooms, coffee shops, or nearby bookstores. At the same time, use of electronic resources continues to increase dramatically.

Libraries are being used differently. It is not necessary to come into libraries to succeed in academe. Still, the opportunities for academic libraries to be dynamic and vital organizational elements on their campuses are numerous. The ability to seek new or innovative relationships on campuses underscores success and vitality for academic librarians and libraries.

This article advocates the use of the proactive consulting model and explores the nature of the relationships with a changing professoriate. New relationships with "old" partners as well as "new" partners are discussed.

Librarians need to progress from the basically passive liaison model to the proactive consulting model, getting out of their libraries and becoming

information consultants. Consultants work closely with students and scholars in their offices, laboratories, and classrooms. Dynamic and vital bridges are developed with the community of scholars, facilitating an essential integration into the instructional and scholarly fabric. Additionally, information professionals are working with different generations of scholars whose perspectives differ from those of their predecessors.

The changing professoriate: Opportunities for new relationships

Higher education is currently experiencing a dramatic influx of a new generation of faculty. These professors, generally referred to as Generation X scholars, have different skill sets (including technical skills), philosophies of learning, and pedagogical approaches. Ongoing changes in higher education are moving colleges and universities toward a learning-centered model of instruction, with outcomes-based assessment at the model's core. Librarians are responding to these systemic changes in academe. Changing roles for librarians as collaborators, integrators, instructional designers, and information consultants as well as new models of instructional delivery and assessment of student learning necessitate not only increased faculty-librarian contact, but also dra-

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matic changes in the nature of faculty-librarian relationships.

To discuss the changing nature of faculty-librarian relationships, it is useful to examine the classic or traditional model of the modern era. In the variations of this model, the work of the faculty and the work of the librarian have been basically distinct or discrete, but have increasingly merged or coalesced in areas of instructional delivery, assessment of student learning, and other scholarly activities. Recent emphasis on information literacy and the ongoing reexamination of the role and responsibilities of academic librarians in teaching and learning in the academy are intensifying the faculty-librarian coalescence. Still, the overall faculty-librarian relationship tends to be information- or resources-based, or within the constraints of discipline-based expertise, as such expertise is usually valued more than broader skill sets that are more generalizable.

Postmodern faculty, motivated by differing social and educational experiences, have different approaches to teaching and learning. These scholars tend to be technologically savvy and pedagogically experimental. Interested in interdisciplinary scholarship, they are comfortable crossing traditional boundaries. They are also media savvy and do not limit themselves to traditional modes of dissemination of information or knowledge, using Web sites or Web pages, e-mail, zines, and electronic journals routinely. They tend to be more comfortable with varied or multiple perspectives as well as ambiguous or chaotic situations. Work styles are collaborative and "playful," and teaching and interactions with students occasionally exist outside the limitations of the time and space allowed by the traditional classroom. They are reflective, perceiving or sensing value in studying and disseminating experiences of reflection via the "scholarship of teaching" movement.

In addition to their technical orientation, they have the "ability to bring together seemingly unrelated elements from diverse information resources. This talent results in creative solutions to problems and comfort with competition, a reality that many traditional librarians are not prepared to face." They tend to be less hierarchical and are more open to collaborations with colleagues at all levels of the college or university. Their definition of "faculty" expands to include others teaching or participating in academe (consultants, instructional designers, or other specialists assisting with the creation and dissemination of content).²

In "The Postmodern Library in an Age of As-

essment," Kathlin Ray suggests a dichotomy of descriptors for faculty and librarians in the modern and postmodern eras. Modern faculty and librarians tend to be more comfortable with stability while postmodern professionals generally prefer fluidity in interactions, organizations, and information seeking. Certainty is preferred by modern faculty and librarians while postmodern professionals feel more comfortable with uncertainty. The modern scholar leans toward distance while the postmodern scholar seeks participation. Design and totalization are generally preferred by modern professionals while postmodern professionals feel more comfortable with chance and deconstruction. Modern faculty and librarians lean toward the individual and determinacy while postmodern professionals tend to be more comfortable with relationships and interdeterminacy. In particular, the transition from modern to postmodern is underscored by a progression from analysis to synthesis and a progression from control to integration, with learning as the critical organizing principle.³

It is important to note that the above descriptors are indicators of patterns and trends in the transition from modern to postmodern. It is not an attempt to classify or categorize professionals or libraries. In particular, the descriptors are indicative of possible differences in cultures or generations. Professionals may be or leaning toward modern, postmodern, or both. In general, librarians are increasingly likely to be working with other librarians and with faculty who are more comfortable with ambiguity, collaboration, uncertainty, chaos, and fluid systems. They are integrators, focused on learning, and uncomfortable with control. Expertise expands beyond discipline-based specialties to include a variety of practical and flexible skill sets. Academe's learning communities, for example, are dynamic, interactive, somewhat ambiguous, focused on learning, and basically reflect the ideals and approaches of these scholars.

Librarians as information consultants: A key to successful new relationships

Academic librarians need to be assertive information consultants, conferring and collaborating with faculty as full partners. Integrating information literacy into all relevant curricular options necessitates ongoing faculty-librarian collaborations in which courses and programs are planned and designed. Information consulting connotes activity as opposed to passive liaison models.

The information consultant's success is based on several attributes or characteristics. Consultants are credible, with appropriate academic credentials, including graduate degrees. A philosophy of continuous learning is cultivated and promoted. Consultants appreciate and understand the utility and complexities of information and are able to manage information effectively. They focus on content, with value-added information tailored or customized for scholars. The delivery of content is emphasized over the delivery of documents. Consultants are optimistic. Problematic situations are viewed as opportunities to move ahead.

Consultants are assertive communicators. They listen actively, examine complex variables, and use analytical and interpretive skills to make informed decisions. In particular, they are advocates for the information needs of a specific clientele. Consultants are able to promote or market information services and are public relations specialists. Creativity and innovation are valued by information consultants. They prefer and seek organizational cultures in which creative risks are supported. Consultants work effectively on cross-functional teams composed of students and scholars from various disciplines. They are collegial and able to attain mutually formulated goals. Consultants are effective negotiators, possessing the political skills needed to work with differing or contradictory requirements of multiple constituencies. They are also aware of the political realities in libraries and on campuses. Consultants are comfortable with ambiguous or chaotic situations and also with uncertainty. Consultants are, in particular, proactive facilitators. They are not location-dependent and are actively involved in the community of scholars. As proactive facilitators, consultants do not wait for ideal conditions. They assess current conditions, make informed decisions, taking creative risks as needed, and move ahead expeditiously.⁴

The information consultant also focuses on the process of learning, working closely with faculty to develop and shape student learning experiences at all levels, including the development of course or programmatic content, the introduction and integration of the key elements of information literacy, and the application of realistic or meaningful problems. Curricula are shaped and influenced by these collaborations. Instructional designers, distance or distributed education specialists, and other computer/systems professionals also contribute.

New relationships with old and new partners

The move to a consulting model affects relationships with existing partners. Librarians work with systems specialists in computer centers to facilitate the delivery of information services and instructional content to students on and off campuses. Librarians also collaborate with computing specialists to develop sophisticated e-reference and e-collections, middleware for digital libraries, and other information architectures. As roles and responsibilities of academic libraries and computer centers are occasionally blurred and confused, ongoing clarifications of relationships is necessary.⁵

New relationships with new partners are particularly important and reflect ongoing changes in academe. The new partners include relatively new librarians and faculty, students, assessment specialists, centers of academic excellence, instructional designers, and specialists focusing on distance education and distributed learning. Relatively new librarians and faculty are likely to view academic librarians as information consultants, collaborators in the processes of teaching and learning, and full partners in scholarly processes. They do not view academic libraries as repositories and are aware of and seek information resources not available in libraries or on campuses.

Connections or relationships with students are also changing dramatically. Students are particularly comfortable with Web-based information as well as virtual reference services and instructional content delivered via technologies. Librarians are now consulting and "chatting" with students in real-time reference services, interactive chatrooms, and threaded discussion forums, in addition to face-to-face interaction.

As colleges and universities move toward creating "cultures of assessment" in which learning outcomes become driving forces for curricular and programmatic changes, academic librarians have opportunities to provide input into what is being assessed across the curriculum and how information literacy fits into that assessment. Assessment is a doorway to a more fully integrated curriculum. As a result, it is essential that one of the "new" partners be those faculty and administrators involved with campus assessment. Ongoing relationships with centers of academic excellence also provide opportunities to integrate academic libraries into important activities and programs associated with excellence in teaching and learning.

As distance education and distributed learning have become integral elements of the educational process in academe, information professionals are collaborating with specialists, including instructional designers, to provide reference services and instructional content to distributed sites. Librarians are communicating with instructional designers, emphasizing the importance and role of academic libraries in the delivery of relevant content in the online environment. Instructional designers become advocates for the inclusion of libraries and information resources in distance education courses and also provide the necessary expertise to integrate information literacy instruction into these courses in ways that are meaningful and seamless. Pedagogical issues unique to the online environment are discussed and refined in these new relationships.

Implications of the New Relationships

New relationships necessitate ongoing changes in attitudes, approaches, and organizational cultures. As the professoriate's information-seeking behaviors and practices continue to evolve, academic librarians need to continually acknowledge these changes, reshaping or restructuring information and instructional services. As a result, strategic priorities are affected and need to be flexible as these changes are indicative of ongoing transitions. Managers and information professionals in general need to rethink and redo within a strategic context as roles, responsibilities, and methodologies are continually assessed.

Organizational cultures in academic libraries are changing dramatically as well and will continue to evolve. The behaviors and patterns constituting cultures are being affected by a positive fusion of different generations, including attitudes, assumptions, and expertise in libraries and on campuses. Librarians as assertive consultants are reshaping communications with faculty, permeating

traditional or historical boundaries, collaborating and allowing creativity and innovation to develop. Librarians have always cultivated relationships on campuses, but the nature of these relationships is changing to reflect new and dynamic learning environments, new and different generations of faculty, and new ways to deliver information services and instructional content.

The diversity of cultures, generations, expertise, ideas, and approaches in academic librarianship facilitates effective communications with the changing professoriate. This positive fusion underscores an effective integration into academe's instructional and scholarly fabric.

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