

Editorial

The Rise of the CIO



Over the last decade I have watched, and in many senses participated in, the rise of the Chief Information Officer (CIO) position at my institution. At the Ohio State University, where I served as Director of Libraries, I was on two search committees for our CIO—one recruited in 2000 and another in 2009. The growth in the importance of CIO position between these two searches was striking in many respects, including rising status, responsibility, and influence. In the first search in 2000, there were only a few units on campus—the library, research, and administrative services—that seemed to care much about the relatively new CIO position, but by 2009, every unit in both the academic and the administrative sides of campus saw the CIO as an essential partner or player in their operations. At my brand new institution, a high-tech, start-up, international science and technology university, the CIO and his Information Technology (IT) staff are central to just about everything. The two units on campus it seems everyone must work with, or through, are Human Resources and IT—which, of course, become the units most loved and hated at the same time. From talking with colleagues, I sense that my observation can be generalized to many academic institutions: the widespread growth in responsibility and influence of the CIO (or whatever this position might be called) in universities and colleges.

From my perspective, the rise of the CIO is not the result of self-aggrandizement or empire building—although some CIOs of a certain bent might seize the power opportunities before them—but rather the natural and inevitable reaction to the rapid spread of information technology and its integration into the fabric of all academic operations,

beginning with administrative functions, moving into the research enterprise, and now affecting teaching and learning activities. The library was an early adopter of IT, automating its own operations and then embracing digital content services from publishers and Internet providers. However, in most cases, the library has kept its IT scope clear but limited—collecting and sharing scholarship—and left broader IT services, such as administrative and academic computing, classroom support, computer labs, and tech support to the CIO.

Maybe this is just right and the way things should be between the library and the CIO and his or her sector of IT. The library takes care of content—a certain kind of published content—and the CIO takes care of everything else associated with IT and information services, hence the deserved title of “CIO” and the growth in the position’s influence and prestige. I have had many a librarian colleague warn me to be cautious in relationships with CIOs, to avoid mixing of library and IT missions, to keep our boundaries clear and set. I do appreciate organizational clarity and the value of specialization, but not organizational defensiveness and professional protectionism that I sometimes see in librarians’ reaction to the CIO and IT sector. Pre-information commons days, I remember working in a library that had a computer lab in its central library. The lab was by far the busy place in the library. It needed more space and more staff, but neither the library staff nor the IT staff could see the benefit of working together. It took years to see we had a common challenge to provide effective access to online software and content and only through working in partnership would we be successful.

The CIO and the Library Director's jobs are changing. The CIO's role is clearly expanding. The Library Director's role is not so clearly being redefined in an era where content, media, and technology services merge. Often these two executive positions are on different tracks, one administrative or operational, the other academic, but in reality they both need to straddle both sides of an academic institution. Most importantly both these executives need to coordinate and integrate aspects of their work and responsibility. How best to do this remains an open question that could greatly benefit from more research, case studies, and informed discussion. Organizational structures and relationships are often the result of personalities and local work cultures, but I would like

to see more professional study and reflection on this vitally important relationship between the CIO and the Library Director and their staffs.

If library directors and academic librarians are to expand their roles too—as I have argued in these pages before—into the realms of knowledge management and data curation, then I think they must have a much closer relationship with the CIO and information technology staff. Information policy, architecture, content, and services issues are too big, complex, and interdependent today to be dealt with in isolation or in separate pockets of a university or college.

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