

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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Bigger than the Both of Us: Considerations before Partnering and Merging

by Susan Stroyan Anderson

I recently had a conversation with my provost about the new hat I've been wearing this year -- Outreach Coordinator. What started as a "congratulations" talk soon moved into a more in-depth discussion about how outreach became an important part of the library's strategic initiative. Libraries have gone from marketing discrete programs to the university community into partnerships of library services with many different units throughout the campus. As we talked, I realized just how transformational this has been for the library.

In the early 1980s, it was rare for librarians to be collaborating with information technologists. But within ten years, the Internet changed the library environment and stand-alone applications between library and computing services became quite common. By the late 1990s, most academic libraries had some kind of combined or shared experience with Information Technology Services (ITS) departments, or were partnering with Writing Centers, Faculty Development Centers, Academic Advising, Career Centers, Multicultural Centers, and/or other student affairs services from the extended campus.

The question now is: Are all these mergers/collaborations/partnerships working? Or have they become the new 'in' thing to do without considering all the consequences/benefits/side effects. It's time to take a closer look at why libraries are partnering or merging... or not...with other academic and student affairs units.

Why Now

Clearly higher education is under siege from a public demanding funding cuts and greater accountability. Moreover, the economic crisis is forcing

colleges and universities to look for ways to save money. Developing partnerships among campus units is one potential cost-saving measure. Institutions are reviewing how they do and what they do to remain viable educational establishments.

At a time when funding is stagnant or declining, most organizations are facing increased costs to invest in infrastructures. Legacy computing systems need replacement, ubiquitous WiFi needs to be installed across the entire campus, and broadband capacity needs increasing to deal with the constantly growing online traffic. These are all examples of massive costs that must be addressed in a period of budget retrenchment. Securing funds for new building projects is difficult if not impossible, so new ways of finding space are needed. Sharing space between existing departments to make room for new programs is increasingly a strategic direction.

In the early 1990s, as resources became digital and patrons no longer needed to enter the library building, librarians began to take their programs outside the walls of the physical library. Outreach campaigns opened up new relationships and awareness of services. Small collaborations developed into larger more formal partnerships. At the same time, librarians realized their mission had shifted from being caretakers of a repository collection of physical materials to one of helping faculty and students with critical thinking, evaluating resources, and producing knowledge.

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Of course technology and the Internet have also transformed student learning. Changes in pedagogy from the classroom lecture to include virtual classroom to interactive learning has evolved the definition of student/teacher/librarian relationships. Providing learning spaces for these new teaching styles, both in classrooms and nontraditional locations such as libraries and writing centers, presents new prospects for learning.

Campuses where information literacy is now emphasized have provided greater opportunities for partnering between the library and the campus writing center. When the library and the writing center collaborate with the classroom instructor, the goal is to design an assignment that incorporates research into the writing, which teaches how to cite sources accurately, and how to write clearly. This requires both an information literacy component and writing assistance. Potential partnerships include collaborating with both the faculty in designing the assignment, and with students to create successful papers.

As enrollments have dropped and student populations have diversified, university administrators realize that more than the intellectual development of students is necessary for retention percentages to remain stable. To face this challenge, college and universities have turned to their Student Affairs department to initiate a variety of programs to develop the whole person. Special programs to meet the needs of specific populations have emerged: multicultural centers, orientation week, summer reading programs, attention to international student and other nontraditional students in hopes of better preparing them for the college experience. Many campuses give multicultural students and international students unique orientation experiences. This is an opportunity for the library to provide special tours, supply hand-outs about library programs and services, present information literacy vignettes, and integrate library staff into these orientation programs.

These transformational ways of learning have now created a very

student-centered environment. The current generation wants what they want when they want it. They expect considerable support for the systems they use when they need that support; they expect those needs to be anticipated. Libraries provide authenticated web access to their databases, some libraries provide 24/7 reference services, and or have afterhours “knowledge databases” that can provide specific local information to their patrons. These students’ expectations drive many of the library services and pressure other academic support services to be available during expanded hours.

On many campuses, the library is open the longest hours of all the buildings. It is a natural evolution for the library to be the physical space under consideration for other student-centered services that require satellite locations. Having the Writing Center tutors and First Year advisors available after regular business hours meets the needs of busy undergraduates. In Michigan a library was built with the idea to include these services in it. A Learning Success Center (tutoring), Faculty Development Center, and an Academic Project Center were all part of the plan. The synergy among these different areas provides opportunities for collaboration, both formal and informal, between faculty and student groups.

What’s Right for You

How do you decide if a merger or a partnership is right for you? Ideally, each party needs to have a strong successful program, organizational flexibility, and a staff with the ability to shift and balance workloads. Yet in most real life situations some catalysis such as a director position opening or “a prolonged melt-down of services” causes the administrators of an institution to push for two units to consider joining forces.

A merger is where two units come together and become one. Recently we have seen ITS units and libraries merge on some campuses and we have seen them unmerge too. More recent library outreach efforts have netted partnerships or collaborations with Faculty Centers, Multicultural Centers, Career

Centers, Academic Advising and many units within Student Affairs. In these cases, the two separate departments have found a common goal in meeting students’ needs and have combined efforts through a service to meet that expectation. The service continues as long it is deemed needed, until money runs out, or individuals committed to it leave. Whether a merger or partnership is right for your campus, there is a process and considerations that can be helpful in making the decision.

Considerations

When contemplating alliances—be they full mergers, two-unit partnerships, or one-time collaborations, these considerations should be taken into account. Experience has demonstrated that it is important to carefully weigh all relevant considerations before entering any organizational change. Not all of the following points may apply to your situation, but considering each one ahead of time should help to build a stronger more relevant program at your institution and help determine if now is the right time to move forward with plans.

- Support from University administrators is vital in understanding the goal and the process if integration is to be undertaken. The President, Provost or Academic Dean must signal strong unwavering support to the campus through the inevitably difficult initial stages.
- The physical location of a new or combined service is crucial to its success. For example, if an ITS and Library help desk are combined to create one Help Center for the campus it needs to be located on the entry-level floor in a heavy traffic location. Wedging it into a basement corner that just happens to be available is asking for failure.
- Take advantage of the experiences of others. Review what has worked and not worked at other institutions. Visit at least a few similar organizations. Although there is much written in the literature, people will tell you more in a face-to-face meeting than what you can glean from reading an article.

- One person needs to be in charge so the leadership of the merged unit is not in question. One person needs to be responsible for seeing it through the merger process and being held accountable for the endeavor. Staff, faculty and administrators need to know to whom to turn with questions or concerns.
- Develop new rules, patterns of social behaviors, organizational hierarchies, and goals. Two professions brought together do not necessarily have the same cultures or core values so it is important to have a safe environment where these can be openly discussed and agreed. This helps create better collaborative working relationships. (IT and library cultures are known for being significantly different.)
- Plan for time away from regular duties and from growth. Any merging of services or units will take significant time. Loss of attention, lower efficiency and less effectiveness are all possible as staff focus energy on merging. Accepting this and being open about it may waylay some morale issues.
- Personnel cost savings are often not initially realized. Reorganization and retraining create new costs for staff time. A continual cost for staff development needs to be considered in the strategic plan. Differences in classification (faculty status vs. staff) and wages should be discussed openly and early to avoid significant friction created by these issues. The evaluation program needs to have a process that will handle employee discontent as that can become costly in terms of time and effort.
- Willingness and ability to adapt plans as the situation dictates is essential. A plan must be sound to begin with but as new information becomes available, minor adjustments may be needed along the way.

Good Reasons for Partnering Services or Merging Units

There is no magic checklist that guarantees success; local conditions will dictate what is best for your organization.

Experiences from other institutions, however, have shown that there are a number of good reasons for partnering services or merging units.

- Combining the two will strengthen both areas. A Writing Center and Library have many common goals: for example, guiding students through the writing process, assisting students who may be unclear about assignments, assisting students to evaluate resources, and preventing plagiarism. Bringing the two under the same roof can provide opportunities to share limited staff and time to advance goals in new ways: train tutors to provide research help, help instructors design assignments, create joint newsletters, and sponsor joint presentations.
- Integration will advance the mission of the institution. Not only are institutions trying to develop scholars but they also acknowledge their responsibility to develop information literate and lifelong learners. A library partnering with a student service such as Career Centers and Academic Advising can integrate information literacy objectives into students' lives outside the classroom.
- Units have some shared values. Writing Centers and Libraries share these values: growth of critical thinking skills, combating plagiarism, and development of solid resources. Placing the Writing Center in a library helps demonstrate the commonality between research and writing.
- Combined services can improve student retention and contribute to their successful experience. At a school in Illinois, Academic Advising, Career Center, Writing Center and the Library have joined forces to provide a location to equip students with resources needed to succeed in their studies and their evolving personal endeavors. This one-stop-shop approach helps the student early on to develop a sense of belonging and academic success in an easy meaningful way.

- Cost savings can be realized through shared purchasing. Purchasing in quantities will bring down costs of the equipment.
- Services can be streamlined. Combining ITS computing lab and library computing can streamline services for students. A reference desk will do a good job of assisting a student define or refine a research topic, determine what information is needed, locate access to resources and even help evaluate them. However, word processing, spreadsheets, and project development software is often only on the computers in the ITS labs located in another facility. Combining the two computing facilities into one location within the library provides students access and support for both.
- Help can be centralized when units are co-located. On many campuses both ITS and the library each have a Help Desk. If a client is struggling with a library database while sitting in a computer lab, from whom does the student seek assistance? Is this an ITS problem? A library problem? And why should the student have to ponder this question? When services are combined, the one Help Desk person troubleshoots the problem.
- Bringing services into one location can break down silos and hierarchies which have been thwarting innovation. At a large institution in California both the Library and the Dean of Students Office were independently working on plagiarism and academic dishonesty issues: the Library from the standpoint of helping students find appropriate sources and using them correctly; the Dean of Students Office from the standpoint of administering the student code of conduct. Through a series of fact-finding communications, it became evident that both departments had common interests: understanding legal and ethical issues surrounding information use and access. Goals for academic integrity were identified and collaborative efforts

were undertaken to create a self-paced online tutorial that focused on the conventions of academic writing, the attributes of sources, and what constitutes plagiarism. Thus, by discovering a new ally and developing a partnership during a difficult budget time, a new innovative program was born.

This list is by no means comprehensive or complete but it provides a good starting place for two units to begin a conversation. Individual institutions will find their own partners or possible merger units through mutual agreed upon goals and values.

Poor Reasons for Partnering Services or Merging Units

Listed here are some reasons other institutions have found partnering or mergers were not particularly successful for them. If you are considering integrating two units for any of these circumstances, you might want to take a step back and rethink the situation.

- Loss of identity for either or both units may occur. This can be a political capital loss for administrators and create a significant morale problem.
- Library provides services at no charge while the department to be merged charges and this difference cannot be resolved; i.e., the loss of revenue would be too great for integration to be successful.
- The Library does not have physical space for proposed new service or merged units.
- Strong resistance to projected change by employees of either unit or well-meaning faculty.

This is often the reaction to a top-down decision made by the provost without consulting the affected parties.

- Campus administration is not fully supportive of the proposed merger.
- Trying to improve a weak unit by marrying it to a stronger one. Unfortunately, what usually happens is that the weaker department drags down the stronger one because of all the energy and resources necessary to bring the weaker one up while integrating the two. It is rarely successful.
- Combining operations just to save space when intellectual rationale is lacking.
- Needing to downsize simply to save money. Reviewing some of the points already mentioned will attest to the time, energy and costs associated with combining two units. History has proven that this is not a cost-saving endeavor.
- Promoting a merger simply because other organizations are doing it.
- The only objective is to decrease the number of direct reports to the provost or other top administrators.

Any one of these conditions can undermine a merger or a budding partnership. If the decision is made not to integrate, alternatives are available such as greater inter-organizational collaboration, cross training, and stronger communication between the units.

Assessment

Finally, if an alliance of services is the right course of action, the new program should be assessed

as part of the library's on-going evaluation of services. Librarians need to know, as part of their own assessment activities, whether these new groupings of services are meeting the goals as outlined in the campus' strategic plan. The program should also ask these questions: How has this experience supported the college or university mission? How have they continued to complement each other's responsibilities? Will the clients view the combined services as improved? Have new services emerged? What kinds of cost savings have been realized? Assessment not only needs to understand the user experience today but also anticipate what direction the units might take in the future.

Going Forward

The success or failure of a library partnering or merging with other campus units will be determined by local personalities, relationships and historical conditions. On many campuses, the library has already collaborated with others on campus. Having these shared experiences gives them the familiarity with cooperative work environments and an opportunity to take the leadership role in developing any new alliances. Campus administrators must ask: How will the merger/collaboration/ partnership successfully support research, teaching and learning? Why is my institution attempting this activity at this time? What can be gained? What might be lost? A clear strategic plan pursued by all parties should emerge from these questions in order for the success of merged units or partnered services to be accomplished on any campus.

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