What's Wrong with Library Organization?

Factors Leading to Restructuring in Research Libraries

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The library literature and discussion in the profession leave the clear impression that many academic librarians, particularly in research libraries, believe that the traditional organizational structures of academic libraries are becoming obsolete. Factors such as increasing automation, the growing availability of electronic resources, the changing fiscal status of libraries, evolving information needs of users, the need for staff to have more autonomy and control over their work, and a general reconceptualization of library services are forces that seem to call for more flexible and dynamic organizational structures. Carla J. Stoffle and her colleagues at the University of Arizona recently have stated the case for radical organizational change.[1] Others see the need for more gradual and evolutionary change.[2]

In spite of the widespread recognition that organizational change is needed, the predominant forms of organization in research libraries appear to be resistant to fundamental change in their underlying structure. Survey results suggest that, while automation and other changing conditions have caused organizational adjustments within divisions and departments in a number of libraries, basic structural change on a library-wide scale remains relatively rare.[3]

The study on which this paper is based sought to discover and analyze the factors that energized change in a small group of libraries that have experienced various degrees of restructuring.[4] The libraries studied were the University of Tennessee, the University of Texas, Vanderbilt University, the University of Wisconsin, and Yale University. At the time of the study in 1991, these libraries recently had undergone reorganization or relatively rapid periods of organizational transition within a traditional framework. The changes ranged from the elimination of traditional technical services departments and the use of self-management teams at Yale, to a general library-wide restructuring at Wisconsin, to a major but less radical change at Tennessee, to what might best be described as modest administrative realignments at Vanderbilt and Texas.

The structures in place at the time of the study have long since been altered by ongoing organizational development. It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze and evaluate the specific organizational structures in these libraries. Rather, the paper will attempt to show the common threads of mo-

tivation in vastly different examples of reorganization.

The study might best be described as a qualitative field study. On-site visits ranging from two days to one week were made to each library. Internal background documents generously were provided by all libraries, but the principal data consisted of transcripts of in-depth interviews with administrators and staff members at all levels. The study sought to elicit and organize the perceptions of key respondents in the libraries and to identify common themes, strategies, and insights abstracted from the context of specific libraries. Respondents had been participant/observers in the reorganization process from a variety of perspectives and offered their candid observations on the assurance of anonymity. As many as thirty respondents were interviewed in some libraries.

The observations reported here were chosen because they fell together as underlying themes when the observations from all of the libraries were aggregated. The precipitating causes or official rationales for reorganization varied, ranging from staff reductions due to budget retrenchment to the need to accommodate automation. These factors, however, would not have necessitated major organizational change had leaders in the libraries not already been inclined to restructure due to a sense of inadequacy in the existing organizations. When observations from the libraries were combined, considerable agreement existed on areas of organizational performance that needed improvement.

The observations constituting the "organizational diagnosis" in the subject libraries can be grouped into four clusters: those related to organizational rigidity, with a consequent need for more flexibility and adaptability; the need for a stronger external or client orientation; the need to improve the library as a work environment and to revitalize the staff; and the need to develop a structure that would improve various management processes such as communication and library-wide coordination. These concerns appeared to be the underlying motivations for organizational change, although other reasons, such as automation, were often given official prominence.

Need for Organizational Flexibility

A number of observations centered around the lack of flexibility, adaptability, or "responsiveness" in the organizational structure. The composite image of earlier organizational

structures was of organizations that were rigid, fragmented, and resistant to change. There was a perceived need for a freer and more open organizational environment. Listed below are observations relevant to this dimension as paraphrased from the interviews.

- The organization was biased toward the status quo; there was resistance to analyzing services, policies, procedures, and organizational structure to determine if they could be improved.
- The library had not adjusted adequately to major changes in emphasis or direction within the institution.
- Functional divisions were too rigid; it was difficult to coordinate priorities operationally or to respond quickly to acute changes such as budget shortfalls or reductions in staff.
- Problem-solving capabilities were underdeveloped, especially with respect to operational problems that crossed traditional functional divisions.
- The structure was a barrier to assignment of staff to cross-functional, interdepartmental, or interdivisional programmatic initiatives.
- The library was not oriented to the future and to changes that would be necessary to capitalize on new technologies; the library was "focused on the traditional" and not open to new technologies or new ways of doing things.
- Many staff held to beliefs in "time-honored myths" that had not been examined critically; the traditional organization reinforced this attitude.
- The "traditional walls" between functional units were too strong; there was a lack of "cross fertilization" among functions such as collection development, technical services, and public services.
- The value system was not centered on flexibility and responsiveness.
- The organization was stagnant; a "shake-up" was needed to demonstrate that organizational change is possible and desirable.
- The organization was "overly structured" and too formal; it did not encourage formation of informal working groups and problem-solving teams (e.g., setting up committees was a "major deal" including formal charges, elaborate schemes of representation, etc.).

A number of those interviewed, particularly those who were strong advocates for organizational change, perceived that previous organizations embodied values heavily oriented towards stability, maintenance of the status quo, and a lack of openness to change. The need to create an organizational structure that was more adaptable and flexible than previous forms emerged as the most prominent element in the underlying motivations for change.

The need for flexibility and adaptability frequently was described in connection with automation and the climate of fiscal uncertainty. The goal of reorganization was not merely to accommodate a specific new phase of automation, such as adoption of an integrated library system, but it was to devise

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an organizational structure that would be more receptive to technological innovation in general and facilitate the adoption of future technologies. Likewise, the goal of reorganization caused by retrenchment was not merely to absorb a new round of budget cuts, but to develop an organization that would be more responsive to continuously changing resource levels.

Flexibility and adaptability were discussed by interviewees as closely associated concepts, but with differing emphases. Flexibility implies the ability of the organization to deal with routine operational problems and program development issues in a non-bureaucratic and responsive manner; it relates to the ability to make graceful short-term adjustments that do not interrupt a long-term, unified thrust towards fulfilling established organizational goals. Interviewees often associated flexibility with "problem solving," balancing staff resources with priorities in short- and intermediate-term time frames, and responding effectively to operational crises and opportunities.

Adaptability, on the other hand, relates to the ability of the organization as a whole to adjust to a new set of environmental conditions. Adaptability implies flexibility in a more general and strategic sense — the ability to change directions, to incorporate major new technologies, and to reorient the organization as a result of new resource levels or institutional goals.

Problems of limited flexibility and adaptability were seen as having two primary sources: a rigid, functional segmentation of the organization that fostered bureaucratic management styles (a flexibility dysfunction); and the narrow and insular view of the library within the university (an adaptability dysfunction). Greater flexibility and adaptability were seen as crucial to organizational effectiveness in a changing environment.

Need for External or Client-Centered Orientation

A second group of observations revolved around the need for a stronger client-centered orientation, more effective ties with the institutional community, and an external rather than an internal focus; previous structures were described as tending toward insularity. Interviewees' observations in this category are transcribed or paraphrased below.

- The organization was too focused on internal procedures rather than externally on constituencies; an insular view prevailed both within departments in the library and in the library with respect to the institution as a whole.
- There was a need to develop service programs more responsive to the requirements of specific disciplines or clusters of disciplines or more specifically oriented to different levels of use — i.e., undergraduate and research.
- Insufficient attention was given to external liaison; more staff should be involved in this activity.
- An organizational structure (or management process) was needed to assist management staff at the departmental level to transcend focus on departmental concerns.
- The entire organization was focused on day-to-day activities; an organizational structure that would support a more strategic approach within the broader environment was needed.
- The library staff, management, and administration should be more aware of and responsive to "educational issues" on campus.
- The library administration should work more closely with the university administration and spend less time in internal management.

• Some units did not have goals that reflected users' needs; too many operational decisions were made "for the convenience of librarians."
• The library had a negative image as being unresponsive to certain constituencies.
• Some departments were "self absorbed;" units were "isolated within their own perspectives" and often worked at cross purposes with other units in the library.
• It was important to understand the needs of new constituencies that had not been served in the past.
• Operational decisions did not vary sufficiently according to disciplines; policies and procedures were too general and based on librarians' long standing assumptions about users; librarians were uninformed about changing information needs in various disciplines.
• Vital expertise in the library was isolated from both internal and external users by the organizational structure.
• The organization did not encourage strong "client relationships" between individuals in the library and individuals in the user community.

In comparison to the problems of rigidity described in the previous section, the perception of insularity was somewhat less pervasive among the various levels of staff interviewed in the libraries. This concern was expressed most strongly by administrators or change agents who had initiated reorganization. Staff at lower levels tended to feel that the library had always had a strong client orientation and did not agree that the library's general value system was insular and self-absorbed. On the other hand, some interviewees at lower levels observed that the organization did tend to make the establishment of effective relationships with constituencies and external units difficult. Some interviewees attributed this insularity to a lack of time away from internal responsibilities and a lack of information and/or delegated authority to act effectively as liaison with external units.

The realignment of a library or a major division such as technical services into a subject-oriented structure was the central theme in two of the libraries studied. Although user-centeredness was expressed as a concern in all libraries, varying perspectives existed as to whether it was primarily a matter of organizational value or of structure. A noteworthy sub-theme in this area of concern was the high degree of interest in better service to specific constituencies and equity of service across constituencies.

Empowering the Staff

A third category of dissatisfaction centered on the need to improve the library as an organization in which to work, both for reasons of staff morale and for operational improvement. Certain units under the previous organizations were seen as failing to provide staff with sufficient variety, challenge, and control over the immediate work environment. The structure provided neither motivation for growth nor opportunity for initiative and engagement in the broader mission of the library. Interviewees felt that the library needed an improved working environment in order to attract and retain energetic and committed staff. Empowerment of staff at the operational level also was expected to result in greater flexibility and more efficient use of staff resources. Observations related to this category are paraphrased below.

• The organization did not empower operational staff to make decisions directly affecting their work. As a result, decisions were not made close enough to the "point of use" and thus often did not reflect specific conditions and circumstances.

• Work assignments did not support staff growth by employing their full capabilities; flexibility was needed in the use of staff knowledge and skills.
• Approaches to supervision were too bureaucratic.
• The structure did not support a broad view of the library's mission among staff; staff needed to discern their contribution to the broader goals of the library and thereby enhance their sense of accomplishment.
• A "team environment" should be created in which staff performed their work in a less isolated way.
• Staff at operating levels needed to take more responsibility for day-to-day work; they needed to take initiative and become less dependent on management; staff tended to rely on the administration to "get things done" rather than take initiative at the unit level; they needed "organizational support" for adopting this attitude.
• Staff did not have access to the information required for planning, organizing, and performing their work.
• There had been little encouragement of staff to get involved in organizational problem solving.
• Some units were "micro-managed," with little or no staff participation.
• The organization encouraged staff to be more aware of the limits of the workplace than the possibilities.
• Insufficient contact among staff at working levels was made with staff in other departments and divisions.
• Staff were "in a rut," job satisfaction was low, and many staff did not feel that they were doing meaningful work.

Criticisms of the library as a work environment were not prevalent in all of the libraries, but, in the libraries in which this category of dissatisfaction occurred, it was fairly consistent throughout the levels of staff interviewed. While some criticisms of this type can be ascribed to dissatisfaction with management performance, in general interviewees tended to attribute the problem to the organizational structure itself or to an ingrained corporate culture.

It is also clear that some persons emphasizing this dimension of organizational failure were influenced by personal philosophical convictions that worklife in general needed to be more exciting and challenging. To them, the libraries' failures were merely symptomatic of general conditions in American life and they had been disappointed that the library "wasn't any different" from other organizations. In the case of some younger professional librarians, the library work environment had failed to live up to idealistic expectations. Many staff who were critical of the library work environment seemed to hold the view that it is the responsibility of administrators to improve the quality of the work experience for staff and that this goal should be a high priority for the library.

Need to Improve Management Process

The final group of issues leading to reorganization combines a variety of problems of management process, role definition, and communication, designated here under the general rubric of "management process." These observations occurred frequently with reference to highly specific conditions in the libraries and showed no clear pattern in the composite analysis except for the fact that each library had a collection of such problems. Some of these concerns had been addressed by changes at the administrative level that did not represent radical changes to general organizational structure. They were rarely a part of the central themes of major reorganizations and many of the concerns remained unaddressed by the changes that did occur. Thus, in addi-

tion to the three distinct categories of organizational weakness described previously, there were expressions of dissatisfaction with a variety of specific aspects of organizational performance. These observations are collected below. As can be seen, some of these points appear contradictory, suggesting that they came from different levels of the organization.

- More channels of upward communication ought to be opened, especially those by-passing the management hierarchy.
- Horizontal communication needed improvement, not only with respect to divisions and departments, but also among committees, task forces, and informal working groups.
- Administration and management needed to spend more time in library-wide planning in longer time frames, less time on management of divisions or departments.
- There was a need to provide coordination and a coherent thrust to spontaneous entrepreneurial activities such as user instruction and microcomputer-based automation.
- Management level group processes needed fuller development; team concepts were needed in management groups such as department heads.
- Role expectations at middle management level (especially department heads) needed better definition with respect to unit versus library-wide responsibilities.
- Specialists needed to be placed within the organization so that the staff in the various specializations could "mutually inform" each other.
- Better coordination across divisions and units was needed for certain library-wide activities such as bibliographic instruction, automation, and collection development.
- The organization needed to support a "more strategic" approach to decision making rather than "ad hocracy."
- A better "management forum" was needed for "deliberation of issues" rather than mere information exchange.
- No one in the organization was dealing with the "intellectual content" of issues (e.g., bibliographic control policy, collection development, preservation policy).
- More "accountability" in terms of goals related to the library service mission was needed.
- Some levels of management just "passed things up and down the line" without being involved in the decision process.

This miscellaneous collection of points related to perceived poor performance of the previous structure is difficult to classify thematically. It appears, however, that an underlying factor in many of these observations is discomfort related to role ambiguity at various levels in the organization. Examples of conflicting roles include: coordinating role versus directing role; communicating role versus decision-making role; external versus internal role; team member versus departmental or functional advocate; evaluative role versus performing role. These problems could reflect the stresses on an organization "absorbing" change without reorganizing — the gradual emergence of new demands on individuals that are not sanctioned or supported by the established structure nor by newly defined roles in a new structure. These underlying concerns were expressed by interviewees from at least two perspectives — implied criticisms that others were not fulfilling their appropriate roles in light of new challenges facing the library, and discomfort that they themselves were not able to function in appropriate roles as they conceived them due to limited support from the organizational structure.

Conclusion

Aggregating problems from several libraries tends to exaggerate their extent and severity. These lists should not be taken as negative reflections on the subject libraries. Issues of organizational performance in these libraries are no different from those faced by all research libraries. The point to emphasize, however, is that perceived inadequacies such as those described in the four categories above, sometimes coupled with acute situations or opportunities, are the underlying factors that impel leaders to initiate organizational change.

Other surveys have concentrated on factors such as declining resources, new patterns of scholarly communication, information technology, and user demand as factors contributing to reorganization.[5] While important, these factors are not sufficient cause for major reorganization unless there is an underlying lack of confidence in the capacity of the existing organization to handle these conditions. Another finding of the study, which will be analyzed in detail in a paper on the change process, is that staff respond most positively to organizational change aimed at correcting specific problems in the existing organization. Reorganizations based on the convictions of administrators that all libraries must change as a result of general conditions in the information or higher education environments have less credibility. There are also differences in perspective with respect to whether or not radical structural change is the preferred approach to changing the organization. Sound judgment in these areas requires a refined understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing organization as well as the environmental challenges facing the library.

The four categories of organizational failure can serve to focus systematic assessments of organizational effectiveness. They also can provide a framework for defining areas that require ongoing attention in a library following a course of gradual or evolutionary organizational development rather than radical reorganization. New organizational structures also can be designed specifically to address issues of flexibility, user orientation, staff empowerment, and management process if improvement in these areas is established as a goal of reorganization. In short, a thorough understanding of these areas of potential weakness in our present organizations can be critical to developing successful approaches to restructuring research libraries.

References
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[2] Two papers written specifically in response to the Stoffle article state a more moderate position on organizational change. Susan Lee, "Change: But Not So Fast and Not So Much," *College & Research Libraries* 57 (May 1996): 226-28, and Richard Hume Werking, "Changes and Continuities," *College & Research Libraries* 57 (May 1996): 231-33.
[3] Joanne D. Eustis and Donald J. Kenney, *Library Reorganization & Restructuring; ARL SPEC KIT* 215 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, 1996), 4.
[4] The study was conducted by the author with support from the Council on Library Resources. (CLR-851) A full report was submitted to the Council in July 1991 under the title *The Process of Organizational Review in Research Libraries*.
[5] Eustis and Kenney, 4.