What happened to the library?

When the library and the computer center merge

by Robert Renaud

I should have seen it coming. I called a senior faculty member to invite her to a meeting in my office in the library. She readily agreed, adding, "You still do call it the library, do you?"

The subtle jibe reminded me of the unease in some quarters about the merger several years ago at Connecticut College, where, until recently, I worked as associate dean of the library and computing. For some faculty, the merger symbolized how "computers were taking over," eclipsing the humane values inherent in books and reading. Although I considered this view somewhat simplistic, it pointed to deeper and unresolved tensions surrounding how colleges manage information.

Bringing unlikely bedfellows together

At first blush, libraries and computing seem unlikely bedfellows. The academic library exists in part to build coherent collections over time that will, with hope, support learning, teaching, and scholarship. This long-term orientation can lead to a certain justifiable conservatism as librarians attempt to build for the future on the groundwork of the past. This deliberate quality can frustrate those within the institution pressing for rapid change. On the other hand, it matches the methodical pace of campus governance, placing librarians firmly in the cultural camp of the faculty.

In contrast, computing staff can appear to faculty as both remote and mysterious. Faced with overwhelming complexities and rates of change, computing professionals can go into "siege mode" as they struggle to maintain service while coping with the latest Napster-like threat. By its very nature, computing forces a short-term perspective. Although the best computing departments plan ahead, budget wisely, and generally keep their cool, the centrifugal forces exerted by information technology can pull them away from faculty.

The different cultures of libraries and computing create stereotypes. At a conference I recently attended, a librarian referred to the computing staff at her campus as "cowboys," lone guns who made changes affecting the whole institution without consultation. On another occasion, a computing professional referred to her college librarian as a "deer caught in the headlights," paralyzed by the changes around her. As with all stereotypes, there is a germ of truth in these caricatures. In fact, they come into stark relief when a college decides to merge its library and computer center.

About the author

Robert Renaud is director of the Waidner-Spahr Library and associate dean of the college at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, e-mail: renaudr@dickinson.edu.

> **. . . a librarian referred to the computing staff at her campus as "cowboys," lone guns who made changes affecting the whole institution without consultation.**

What leads a college to merge these seemingly disparate units? The answer to this question lies in the changes that took place in the 1990s in how information technology was applied to teaching, learning, and scholarship. Cheaper personal computers, better software, and, above all, the emergence of the Internet led many on college campuses to ask how to apply computing in a coordinated way. It seemed that different people had different pieces to the puzzle. Librarians knew how to bring coherence to the new wave of information, discriminate between what was of value and what was not, and talk with faculty. Computing staff knew how to design and build the campus network, budget effectively, and deploy computers to faculty and staff. Bringing these two units together, through either outright mergers or tighter collaboration, was a logical response to these emerging opportunities.

Measuring the success of mergers

Did the mergers succeed? As may be expected, the answers are yes, no, and we are still waiting to see. First, though, the prior question of what we mean by a merger needs to be asked. For some colleges, merging the library and computing meant keeping these units separate but having them report to a single boss—who was by the end of the 1990s often called a chief information officer or CIO. In these cases, the library and the computing departments remained intact, with staff collaborating in much the same way that they would have if the "merger" had not taken place. In most cases, the CIO created by these changes was a librarian, at times adding to the consternation of computing professionals who felt passed over.

In other cases, the merger went much deeper. In these instances, librarians and computing staff were mixed into teams that bore scant resemblance to any recognizable struc-

ture. At Connecticut College, for example, the rare book librarian, the Web developer, and the switchboard operator found themselves on the same team. To those outside the department, these combinations could seem bizarre, leading to the suspicion that the reorganization was "innovation for innovation's sake." To those working inside the department, the churning of positions and roles actually worked well, often to the surprise of everyone involved. Although people from drastically different professional cultures were thrown together, they found that all the resources needed to accomplish goals were within the same unit. The need to assemble the pieces of the puzzle from different departments no longer existed.

Although generally successful to date, merged library and computing departments face growing pains. Despite years of tight collaboration, librarians and computing staff live in separate worlds, with their own professional associations, certifications, and standards. It is not unusual, for example, for staff in merged departments to speak of the library and computing "sides," and of the need to negotiate the balance between them. This suggests that the organization represented by merged departments is, in the words of the Panasonic commercial, "just slightly ahead of its time." Clearly, it is ahead of the ability of professional schools to supply the right mix of communication and technical skills needed to make a merger work consistently. Some programs, such as library and information science and instructional computing master's degrees, almost get it right. However, as one library dean said to me, "We are creating a new profession, and we are just not there yet."

After several years at Connecticut College, I also discovered a relationship between the depth of the merger of library and computing and the ease of managing the resulting department. In general, the deeper the merger, the higher the benefits to the college but the harder it is to manage the department. Conversely, the more superficial the merger, the lower the gains, but the easier it is to manage. This begins to make sense when we remember that mergers bring very different skills and cultures together. In deep mergers, the mix of staff brought together in new teams brings unexpected insight to problem-solving.

On the other hand, it requires a high degree of coordination not to run off the rails. In more superficial mergers, the library and computing "sides" remain essentially intact, making them both more recognizable and easier to manage. The proof of this pudding consists in the difficulty of recruiting deans for merged departments. The pool of individuals who know enough about both computing and libraries to lead these departments is minuscule. In practice, because they often have had long years in leadership positions on campus, librarians often end up heading these units.

Moreover, there is the issue of scale. Most merged departments exist in smaller institutions, typically liberal arts colleges. It may not be practicable to merge libraries and computing centers at large, research universities, where bringing together hundreds of staff spread across many locations frustrates efforts to create teamwork. Indeed, the central computing departments of many large state universities find themselves unable to control the information technology investments of grant-funded units, professional schools, and branch campuses.

Paradoxically, the emergence of merged organizations and the new attention to digital media in the 1990s coincided with a golden age of physical libraries. The decade saw a boom in academic library construction and renovation as many colleges decided to use the campus library to symbolize their commitment to scholarship. As colleges experimented with how best to orga-

> **. . . a computing professional referred to her college librarian as a "deer caught in the headlights," paralyzed by the changes around her.**

nize themselves to respond to emerging opportunities, they also recognized that, to paraphrase John Seely Brown and Paul Duguid, information has a social life. The stubborn survival of the library suggests that digital and physical media will coexist and that colleges will need to bridge the very different demands of these formats in real time and space.

Finding the right mix

Do merged library and computing departments make sense? To repeat an earlier answer, yes, no, and we are still waiting to see. Although the need to collaborate to support faculty and students as they learn to adapt information technology to the curriculum and to research is clear, exactly how to organize to achieve that goal in every college and university is not. In the end, colleges will have to experiment to find the right mix of staff, services, and technology for their particular needs. However, although the landscape will surely change, we can be certain of one thing: we will still call it the library. ■

Local control, global reach

The OCLC FirstSearch service delivers a world of information to your users, with a focus on your collection. Through unparalleled resources like WorldCat (the OCLC Online Union Catalog) that are enhanced by searching tools and system features you can customize, FirstSearch makes finding information convenient for your users and affordable for your budget. Your users have access to the holdings of thousands of libraries worldwide, full text from more than 9,000 serials (including 3,300 electronic journals), and best of all, the riches of your library's collection.

www.oclc.org

OCLC Online Computer Library Center

OCLC—Furthering Access to the World's Information