

Change in Academic Libraries

Never noted for their willingness to accept innovative suggestions and implement change from outside sources, academic libraries have remained institutions in which changes in service policies and programs originate from internal sources only. In order to shift to an orientation that seeks to develop new and expanding service programs, the establishment of research groups could do much to improve both the services offered by a library and its role in the academic community. While certain constraints always limit modification or the initiation of services, a properly constituted research group could do much to generate a climate for change, provide feedback to the library, and successfully continue to develop new and more effective library and information services.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIES attempting to accommodate change, aside from selecting a new chief librarian, have employed two basic strategies. The first is to establish a committee within the library organizational structure, imbue it with the necessary legitimacy, provide it with needed resources (mainly in-house talent), and attempt to integrate its activities into the normal operation of the library. Such groups vary in composition and structure. They may include specially qualified staff members operating as upper-level administrators or lower-level beginning staff.

The second basic strategy is to bring outsiders into the library organization and employ them as consultants. This alternative can also range from a serious and concerned effort to improve existing problems to an elaborate and sometimes expensive ploy. While there

are many mixed strategies, requiring various combinations of external and internal assistance, most academic libraries utilize one or the other or a combination of the previously mentioned strategies.¹

The experience libraries have had with specially constituted in-house groups has varied greatly. Because most academic libraries are reactive support service institutions, several barriers which can impede successful change and innovation must be overcome.² These barriers include the bureaucratic phenomena of functional specialization, a traditional professional-managerial orientation which renders nonadministrative or nonmanagerial librarians as secondary citizens, a lack of awareness or training in administration and management by middle- and upper-level library administrators, and a lack of staff participation in the decision-making process. When closely examined, the bulk of many academic librarians' work is what administrative theorists might classify as "organizational maintenance" work.³

Even though some of these investiga-

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tory or planning groups have tried to generate innovative change, the vast majority still find themselves captured and co-opted by the system, or reduced to advisory sounding boards. The difficulty was clearly stated by Robert Merton when he observed that the bureaucratic intellectual "who must permit the policy-maker to define the scope of his research problem is implicitly lending his skills and knowledge to the preservation of a particular institutional arrangement."⁴

Employing consultants to survey a problem or broad area of difficulty and to present findings or recommendations is a traditional method of reducing organizational barriers within academic libraries for the consideration of original alternatives. Various bureaucracies, especially municipalities, have popularized such an approach. Lack of adequate financial resources, of locally available talent, and a failure to acknowledge persistent problems have provided the primary impetus to this approach. Since most academic libraries cannot afford to fund a permanent planning or research group, the consultant is an attractive alternative.

When closely considered, the consultant approach is safer than doing nothing. Inaction, particularly if antagonists and critics inside or outside of the library perceive difficulties, can lead to review or investigations by faculty advisory committees, academic administrative boards of inquiry, etc.; the results of such investigation may provide critics with pertinent data which will catalyze radical change.

There are many ploys an academic library administrator can introduce to scuttle new ideas, however, especially in the use of consultants. One of the most popular methods is to recommend as a consultant a colleague who is the chief librarian at a large and prestigious academic library and who has a similar approach to the preservation of the traditional concept of library service, organi-

zation, and structure.⁵ Too often the chief librarian and this consultant are friends, and any recommendations that will be made can be expected to contain only minor suggestions for change or only those of an acceptable nature as perceived by the library. On the other hand, if a consultant is hired who is an unknown quantity to the library, a different strategy may be employed. Since a consultant must rely upon information to conduct his study, and as only the library possesses much of that information, the library administration if it desires can effectively reduce the impact of a consultant by cooperating with him on a selective basis only. When the consultant presents his conclusions and makes recommendations for change, the library administration simultaneously asks whether factor "x" was taken into account; when the consultant indicates that factor "x" was not cited in the set of provided data, the library administration may then produce additional information in question which may cast doubts about the validity of not only the conclusion but of the entire report.

This is but one of many situations that could describe, admittedly slightly in caricature, experience in the use of consultants to bring about change in academic libraries. This is not to say that consultant experience in academic libraries has been all bad; there are some examples of success.

THE RESEARCH GROUP APPROACH

Considering both the basic resistance to change of a library organization and the nature of changes which loom not far distant, it is imperative to pursue a strategy known as the participative management approach.⁶ My conviction that participation is a proper approach is strengthened by the fact that participation can and should be made meaningful. Therefore, the first step to be considered is the composition of a research group organized to study, recommend,

and seek the implementation of better library service policies and programs. Ideally, it should include representatives from academic teaching departments, a representative sample of managerial and nonmanagerial librarians, and where appropriate or feasible, student representatives. The research group should help define problem areas, specify areas of needed improvement, and increase relevance of the service programs of the library. In return, exposure of library members to the rigors of specifying objectives and service deficiencies will be beneficial to the library.

The research group should further the objectives of change and innovation in several ways. First, if it is to be successful and persuasive, it must develop a commitment within the group to pursue its investigations beyond the initial exploratory stages.⁷ However, once the service policy of the library is changed, or is sufficiently modified and operationally functional, the research group appears to facilitate the development of commitment to change.

Second, conversations and discussions within the research group should encompass all probable reactions to change, thereby insuring that typical reactions are easily accommodated in reports and recommendations. While recommendations may frequently be rejected because of simple, easily corrected objections, the research group can provide a forum for thoughtful interchange wherein all but substantial disagreements can be settled. In essence, the research group should provide opportunities for innumerable "dry-runs" of ideas and proposals. The questions posed by the librarian members of the group should provide a built-in screening process.

Finally, the research group should introduce a semiformal communication channel within the library and its organization structure. The normal communication channels of most academic

libraries follow typical bureaucratic patterns, even though there are some well-developed informal channels. However, the research group could provide an even more effective medium for exchange within the academic library's organizational structure. The director, the associate or assistant director, and the upper echelon library systems analyst should not, except in special cases, be full members of the committee. These individuals might, however, be acknowledged as *ex officio* members and be given the task of advising the research group and evaluating its work. Academic deans, heads of departments, or the director of research on campus should likewise be excluded from the group. Because of their campus positions, they could intimidate or easily monopolize the group. Hence, to insure wide participation and support, the library's director should be convinced that he and his administrative staff should limit their roles to advisory and evaluative roles.

THE INITIAL APPROACH

Once constituted, the research group should devote itself to uncovering potential areas for change and innovation. To be successful, a detailed understanding of the organization, its goals, and its needs is necessary. To accomplish this best, the research group should initiate a comprehensive interview program. Interviews should be conducted with staff of various ranks, assignments, and locations (e.g., branches outside of the main library). In addition, faculty members and key students should be identified and interviewed in order to survey library service programs peculiar to them.

These interviews should allow the research group to gain a detailed knowledge and understanding of both the basic operations and the existing service patterns of the library. During the interviews, explicit questions must be

asked to determine the areas in which members of various library departments may feel that beneficial change might be introduced. The probing should result in an extensive list of possible items of varying degrees of generality, importance, and feasibility.⁸ These items, along with items that may be generated independently by the researchers, can be reviewed and classified into categories of varying importance and level of generality. Broad areas might be classed as having substantial potential for improvement through the introduction of new service concepts or some form of technology. Because so many of the items will overlap, a detailed analysis of each would be inefficient and very probably too time consuming. Hence, a system of weighting items should be used to single out the areas with the greatest potential; a special study group from the research group could easily accomplish this ranking.

Even at this early stage, the library must be fully involved in this definition and search process. It is essential that the research group ask the proper questions. Furthermore, if change is to be implemented successfully, the library must be committed to the selection and testing process.

Creation of a workable relationship between the research group and the library administration might pose several problems. While there may be ample agreement as to the need for change, the responsibility for initiating, reviewing, and implementing change in academic libraries has traditionally rested with the chief librarian. A recent survey uncovered few change committees or task forces constituted to search out areas where change would improve either the organizational structure or service policies of academic libraries.⁹ The bureaucratic structure, traditional work roles, and the use of professional staff combine to make change difficult to implement in academic libraries.

More than one chief librarian recently interviewed was quick to suggest that the existing organizational structure of most academic libraries was a constraining influence and that an on-going research group might circumvent some existing barriers.¹⁰ Almost all high ranking library administrators interviewed felt that the action of the individual librarians would not suffice to change the structure of the library's organization or its service patterns.

ORGANIZATION OF THE RESEARCH GROUP

Ideally, the research group should be organized so that representatives from academic teaching departments might raise various issues regarding protective library attitudes toward service and technology programs. The library members of the research group should bring their practical experience to bear in explaining or clarifying these issues. It is imperative that a dialog be established as soon as possible between faculty members who will be investigating the library's service programs and policies, and library staff who deal with them on an everyday basis. The organization of the group could be based on a series of assignments. In this way, the issues raised during the interview process could be examined by the entire research group and then assigned to individual members or small groups of members within the research group for detailed analysis. This would enable each meeting to consist of a general critique of work done in response to specific assignments.

Concerning the early work of the research group, much of its efforts will probably not be appreciated by its members. There are bound to be teething problems with the concomitant need to develop a feeling for its role vis-à-vis library service modification and innovation. Some members of the group seeking to protect the library might develop a defensive attitude. However, since it

would be nearly impossible to transfer recommendations from the research group into direct library service programs without the library's cooperation, and since the process of introducing service and technological improvements into the library is likely to be a lengthy process, there is little need for the library to feel threatened.

One immediate spin-off from the mere initiation of a research group will be a better understanding among the members of the academic library of the diversity of its service programs, the complexities of innovation, and of the problems associated with introducing change within complex library organizations.

One measure of the research group's effectiveness will be its ability to remain flexible enough to deal with a variety of library service issues. Issues raised during the general research group meetings can be carefully analyzed if library staff participate who possess special knowledge and experience. Such meetings could be considered as encounter sessions, conflict resolution sessions, etc., and could significantly influence the solution of many problems. While lasting operational solutions would require that appropriate library administrators and members of concerned library departments participate, the research group's meetings could outdistance the traditional library approach, i.e., working within the established organizational structure.

Having observed and reviewed the actual behavior of similar research groups in nonprofit and research organizations, especially those attached to university research bureaus and institutes, certain behavior patterns are prevalent and easily identifiable.¹¹ The cited survey found that library staff members became more vocal about their problems; they were frequently able to discuss complex problems with faculty and research staff, and recommend solutions addressed to

causative factors rather than symptomatic ones. Regarding leadership, a sense of group action and decision-making developed in all but two of the groups investigated. In both of these situations (one in which an assistant university librarian and the other in which the director of a research bureau were members of the research groups) the research groups had been led into belaboring the "careful problem definition" approach to service or structural change. Once a research group develops its own leadership, it can move forward to initiate and formalize test and evaluation procedures.

OBSERVATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

When evaluating the role of a research group, it is essential to remember that the basic intent is to foster a particular type of change in a specific type of library organization. The change will be primarily service-oriented, with the usual complement of social and political side effects. To foster or promote change that involves specialized knowledge within a library with the involvement of faculty talents and their specialized knowledge not present within the library's organization will present particular challenges to an academic library.

In many respects the creation of a research group and its work, especially if successful, will not bring about major or revolutionary changes in a library's service program or organizational structure. In most cases, the library will continue to function in a bureaucratic fashion while continuing to allocate the necessary resources, i.e., time and personnel. However, one long-range benefit of the group might be the fostering of an attitude which is more receptive to change. Yet once a research group begins to recommend programs for test and evaluation purposes, or begins questioning various segments of the academic community to identify and define

problems, an interesting effect may take place. As the research group begins to seek feedback from students, faculty, and staff, it can gain acceptance and become a recognized part of the library's organization. This recognition will likely enhance the group's effectiveness.

Whether or not any dramatic or far-reaching changes immediately occur in a particular academic library as the result of a research group, a new unit within the library will have been created and given life. This unit can serve an important role by providing a representative forum for the legitimate discussion of change within the library. Without such a unit, the opportunities for significant change and innovation in an academic library will continue to be minimal.

From a personnel perspective, a research group may produce some anticipated and salubrious consequences. The desire to explore new concepts and ideas in a relatively risk-free atmosphere may draw out some members who are presently reticent, especially librarians. This atmosphere can motivate individuals to adopt an active role in searching out useful information both for the research group and for the furtherance of knowledge in his or her field. Also, the research group can provide a commodity in short supply at most academic libraries—managerial slack.¹² Too many academic librarians at middle management levels and above, or in the positions of specialists, do not have the time within the pressures of the day-to-day routines to think in terms of long-range change. Most academic libraries provide little if any opportunity for collective "thinking ahead" activities. Too often, academic libraries overburden their librarians with maintaining the status quo, or perhaps planning a suitable extension of the status quo for the future. A research group could provide the necessary time for librarians, faculty, and research staff to engage in meaning-

ful participation and individual investigation and thinking.

Conclusions about change in a library bureaucracy are very important. The primary constraints to change in a library, as in most bureaucracies, are the risk structures, the reward structures, and the structure of the organization itself. In each of these areas, the research group approach can be used to minimize these structures. First, by including faculty and research staff (and students, where feasible), the risk of proposing change in part is transferred outside of the library. This relaxing of one critical barrier to wholehearted cooperation and participation can be of enormous benefit to academic librarians and libraries as well as to the academic community in general. Second, the research group can establish a norm of participation predicated upon critical evaluation and initiation of change, thereby shifting the normal reward structure back toward symmetry. More likely than not, there will be substantial disagreement at times among the research group members and other top decision-makers in the library, and this disagreement may be generated in great measure by the freedom of expression that can and should be the norm in the research group. While criticism is always difficult for a library to absorb, a group of this nature can criticize fairly both organizational procedures and the performance of staff employed by the library. Finally, the research group could represent a beneficial aberration to the library's present organizational structure, and might be able to circumvent some of the usual library constraints. Such a group may be more successful if it can begin with a composition that includes several talented and senior grade persons from the library, the faculty, and the research staff. Although it would be premature and presumptuous to suggest that informal coalitions would develop, their existence

might signal to others their role as a change-oriented pressure group within the library's organizational structure. Furthermore, the inclusion of high ranking personnel might tilt the bargaining scale in the research group's favor.

The opportunities for significantly effecting change, service or organizational, can be considerably enhanced by a participative management approach. Indeed, the extent to which recommendations within a library are likely to be

implemented, and innovative ideas generated and acted upon, depends upon the amount of participation by individuals committed to the process of change. The research group approach can successfully provide meaningful participation in attempts to effect important change in an academic library's service policies and programs. Participatory management can be made to work in an academic library if improved service is the goal of change.

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4. Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (rev. ed.; Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1968), p.272.
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6. Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960), p.130-31.
7. Warren G. Bennis in his stimulating article, "Post-Bureaucratic Leadership," *Trans-Action* 6:45 (July/Aug. 1969), discusses motivation elements that can be employed by groups interested in fostering change and innovation. It is a highly worthwhile piece that academic librarians should not fail to read.
8. Bruce H. Westley and Malcolm S. Maclean, Jr., "A Conceptual Model for Communications Research," in Dean C. Barnlund, *Interpersonal Communication: Survey and Studies* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1968), p.45-54.
9. Fifty questionnaires were distributed in 1969 to a random sampling of academic libraries at two- and four-year colleges, and universities throughout the United States. Forty-four (44) of the fifty (50) institutions (88 percent) responded. Of the responding libraries only two, one a two-year college library and the other a large university library, had on-going research groups or task forces composed of faculty, library staff, and other campus elements to review library service programs and make recommendations for improvement.
10. Approximately thirty (30) chief librarians from a variety of institutions were personally interviewed by this researcher in 1968 and 1969. Various questions concerning organizational structure, strategy for change, identification of change agents, the use of consultants, etc., were put to these administrators. The concepts of a research group as suggested in this piece were presented for their consideration as a method for accommodating change.
11. Dwight Waldo, ed., *Conference on the Research Function of University Bureaus and Institutes for Government-Related Research* (Berkeley, Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1960). In addition to this work, a questionnaire and personal interview survey was conducted in 1968 that sought to determine the existence of group behavior, participatory management, and change groups within bureaus, research centers, and institutes devoted to governmental and public affairs research. Where possible, those research units with change groups were more closely analyzed if they had a library or materials center to more adequately understand the role played by a librarian or information manager.
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