

The Library and Academic Computing Center: Cultural Perspectives and Recommendations for Improved Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Technology has become a dominant factor in the daily operation of academic libraries. In small-to-medium-sized institutions the introduction of technology could not have happened without the assistance of the academic computing services department (ACS). It has become apparent that major cultural differences exist between the library and ACS. In many institutions, these differences have led to unproductive relationships. This paper looks at the roles of the library and the ACS on campus, their level of interaction, and their differing organizational cultures. Recommendations to improve the working relationship between the library and ACS are also offered.

Introduction

During the past two decades, technology has become an increasingly dominant factor in the daily operation of academic libraries. Recent history has seen the implementation of online library catalogs on massive mainframes, the development of CD-ROM based services, and most recently, the use of the Internet and local area networks as common library tools. In most small-to-medium-sized academic libraries none of these developments could have happened without the assistance, guidance, and support of the Academic Computing Services (ACS). As contact between the library and ACS increased, it became apparent that cultural differences between these two organizations exist. In many institutions, these differences have led to unproductive relationships where a high level of distrust between the library and ACS is the norm. This paper examines differences and similarities between the library and ACS from an organizational culture perspective. Using this view as a reference point, this paper offers recommendations to minimize conflict.

Organizational View

From a cultural point of view, the library and ACS are in many respects fundamentally different. But as different as they are, they share one fundamental component that holds them together. Both organizations' functions are tied directly to the use of technology in the support of their institution's academic mission. Problems arise from the fact that, apart from this common general mission, they have little else in common. The literature is filled with illustrations that emphasize the differences between the library and ACS. Many of the characterizations are not positive. One observer stated, "Most typically, the relationship between academic librarians and computer professionals has been one characterized by unease, caution, lack of knowledge and understanding, and occasionally mistrust."⁽¹⁾ Or put in a slightly different way, "The two often report to different people in the university hierarchy, do not talk to each other, and lack comprehension of what the other is trying to do."⁽²⁾ When relationships are discussed in the professional literature in this manner, and are accepted as the status quo, it is no surprise that deep-seeded problems are common.

It is clear that a great deal of what divides the library and the ACS can be traced to the differences in the tasks that they perform. The different tasks require different skill sets, and thus attract different types of people. In defining the roles of the library and ACS the literature is, again, rich with illustrative examples. A traditional view has the library acting in the role of campus repository whose day-to-day functions include the "acquisition, lending, and borrowing of organized packaged information," staffed by professionals conversant in people skills, "organizational knowledge, marketing, training and sales."⁽³⁾ The ACS's main task concerns, "supplying machines, procedures, and people for activities that include inputting, manipulating, sorting, retrieving, and displaying information," staffed by technical experts in, "system development, telecommunications, and product development."⁽⁴⁾ In general organizational terms, this has led to the library benefiting from, ". . . centuries of tradition during which it has developed standards, philosophies, and procedures . . .there is a very distinctive scholarly professional culture."⁽⁵⁾ The ACS draws upon, "...thirty to forty years of formal organizational existence. It has a particularly strong technical orientation which exists in a volatile entrepreneurial environment with rapidly changing generations of operational technologies."⁽⁶⁾

Over time both organizations have evolved to take a form that best suits their unique tasks. A view of what each group has become serves as a starting point to examine long-standing similarities, and more importantly, differences.

The Library World

In order to understand basic library culture, the services of a fictitious librarian, Sheila, will be used. What follows is Sheila's description of what she does in her job, and what qualities she sees as being helpful to possess to be a successful librarian.

"I guess the most important quality that any one librarian can possess is the ability to really connect with people. Sure it helps if you can fix a broken PC, or know how to create a Web page from scratch, but what I've been hired to do is to assist the students, and the faculty at this college in finding the information that they need. I've been here for twelve years now, and in that time I've seen quite a few changes. Micro film, main frames, PC's, CD-ROM, the Internet, and the World Wide Web. All of these things are great but they only serve to assist us in the delivery of information. In most of these cases we only moved to the new technology because a new product came along that performed better than the old way. Times of changing technology are always stressful. Things just seem to move so quickly. I usually hear about a new product, then I find out that we have found the money to pay for it, and then wham, it shows up on our doorstep. I then have to stop and figure out how to market the new product to the users in the library."

"My service orientation probably goes back to my days in my Masters of Library Science program. There I discovered that I really enjoyed the interaction with people, and because of this I chose to specialize in reference services. At all of my previous jobs leading to this one the same was true, servicing the needs of the library user is job one. In the Academic Library the students and faculty come first. I feel that reporting to the Academic Provost drives that point home."

I am very happy in my current position, but I can look forward to eventually becoming the Head of Reference. I've been here long enough, and I think that the current Head of Reference will be retiring soon. I will probably stay here for the foreseeable future. I've made a lot of friends here, even with the two men that work here. The basic job, and pay scale, of a librarian is pretty much the same everywhere so I won't benefit much by moving around".

Sheila's monologue is packed with information that gives insight into the unique culture of the library on a college campus. Below is a table that lists the cultural attributes taken from Sheila's description of her job.

TABLE 1: Cultural Attributes of Academic Library

- Emphasis on contact with people
- Technology used primarily to accomplish service goals
- Roles of organization members well defined and agreed upon
- The major functions of library work do not vary among institutions
- Librarians are products of a shared educational experience, MLS
- Staff turn-over relatively low
- Female dominated profession
- Organizational power derived by formal job title
- Reward system is comparable across the industry
- The acquisition of technology driven by suppliers of information services rather than home grown innovation
- Library traditionally under the Academic Provost with an emphasis on supporting Students and Faculty

Academic Computing Services World

To gain a better understanding of the culture of the ACS, the services of yet another fictitious character will be employed. In this case Charlie, a systems analyst with the ACS will explain what his job is all about.

"In the two years that I've been here a lot has happened. I've been involved with changing our e-mail system, installing a new fiber optic backbone, and creating a Web Page. It seems that everyday the environment that we work in changes radically. Frankly I'm surprised that I've stayed here as long as I have. Usually something more lucrative comes along and I take it. Before coming to work here I was employed at a small start up company. I guess I really like the group of guys that I work with, so that's why I've stayed."

"Our most recent project was really interesting. It followed a department-wide re-organization. I was connected with the project from the initial planning phase right through completion. My job was working directly under the project manager as a group leader. Our team was charged with writing the software scripts to link the network to the phone systems. I had two student workers under me. It was my job to make sure that the scripts they wrote meshed with the requirements of the system. Things went very well. In fact, based on that performance, I was given a new title, Senior Systems Analyst."

"My department reports to the Vice President for Information Services on campus. My time is pretty well divided between keeping the administrative systems running smoothly, and responding to computer-related problems of the faculty and the students. I especially enjoy delivering new technology to the campus. Usually after we install some new piece of equipment, not only do we solve a problem, but we are able to add new services to the college community. A big part of the job for me is the challenge of getting new stuff. Once things get too static, I tend to loose interest."

As was the case with Sheila, the content of Charlie's monologue reveals the basis of how the ACS's culture can be defined. The following table lists the cultural attributes that apply to the ACS.

TABLE 2: Cultural Attributes of Academic Computing Services (ACS)

- Technology is the main driver of services offered
- Change in organizational structure is frequent

- Use of formal project management techniques is common
- Male dominated environment
- ACS under a Vice President of IT with an emphasis on supporting Administration, Staff and Faculty
- Salaries vary greatly throughout the industry
- Staff turn-over relatively high
- Team oriented focus to accomplish clearly defines goals
- Reward system is flexible, based on short-term performance
- People possessing technical expertise operate "behind the scenes"
- Pace of change is fast

Similarities and Differences

The academic library and ACS have evolved into very different organizations. Each requires unique skill sets, personality traits, and training. In each case the day-to-day functions of the job are vastly different. The majority of the library's activities are tied to the immediate need of the customer. A great deal of the ACS's time is spent on the implementation of well defined projects according to a formal schedule. In effect, there is little similarity in what these two organizations do on a daily basis. As was demonstrated with the monologues, apart from the heavy use of technology and the support of the goals of the greater academic institution, the library and the ACS have very little in common.

For many years, the library and the ACS have happily coexisted, each going about their separate ways in the successful completion of their goals. Each group knew and cared little about what the other was doing. Things began to change around the time that libraries started to become automated during the 1970's.

On many campuses, the first interaction between the library and ACS came with the implementation of an automated cataloging system. The relationship between the two groups began to intensify as the library began to use technology in a greater amount, and at greater level of sophistication. The introduction of CD-ROM, local area networks, and the Internet has raised the level of technical competence of the average librarian. At about the same time the ACS was increasingly adding services that were used by the general academic public, not just the college administration and faculty. Now ACS must not only facilitate the implementation of new technology, must also support its use by a wider audience. The effect of these trends finds the library performing the traditional function of ACS, (i.e. running a local area network), and ACS performing the traditional function of the library, (i.e. supporting the use of commercial databases by students and faculty.)

Points of Conflict

The shifting of traditional tasks between the library and ACS has generally lead to conflict, rather than cooperation between these groups on most campuses. Most of the resulting conflict stems from three main points of cultural difference: gender dominance, the view of technology, and the anxiety of performing unfamiliar tasks.

Male Dominated vs. Female Dominated: The degree to which this difference may add to conflict varies from institution to institution. It is reasonable to assume that, in general, ACS tends to operate in an environment that is dominated by males, and the library tends to operate in an environment dominated by women. Typically conflicts that arise concern matters of style and interpersonal interaction. A recent experience of a female reference librarian serves as an example of how this difference manifests itself. She was the only library representative on a task force made up of ACS members that was setting policy

concerning the development of the World Wide Web on campus. During the meeting she quickly became aware that she was in a new environment as descriptions of actions to be taken by ACS members were constantly punctuated with profanity. Based on this encounter the librarian was less than enthusiastic about future contact with ACS.

The Use of Technology as the Means to an End Vs. an End to a Means: Conflict inevitably arises from the differences in the view of technology by both organizations. The services that the library offers act as the greatest driver of technology in their organization. For example, if the implementation of a new technology can improve the delivery of information, then it will be used. In most cases, the use of technology is reserved for those instances where its implementation solves a problem or better addresses a need. The role of technology in ACS is more complex. To a larger extent, the technology that ACS develops and employs defines the services and tasks that is able to deliver. This means that ACS has to be careful in choosing the technology that it adds to its organization. New technology is added not only to meet existing need, but also as a way to expand the type of services that can be delivered. The emphasis at ACS is to expand the envelope of technology to create new service opportunities.

Walking a Mile in the Other Guy's Shoes: Anxiety levels rise when people are placed in situations where they are not comfortable. Librarians are having to use, and troubleshoot, computerized systems with a higher levels of complexity. ACS is having to deliver a wider variety of services to a larger audience of users on demand. The typical result is conflict over what jobs are to be performed by which organization, and how they will go about it. The library assumes that they are best suited to deliver service to the campus community. ACS assumes that they are the technical experts who can best keep systems operating. Conflict arises when, for example, the library sees ACS perform a function that had traditionally been recognized as library oriented. The library has a real problem with ACS training people how to use LEXIS from the student computer lab. In that same light, ACS is bothered when members of the library decide to forge ahead with building a local area network on their own. Both organizations are convinced that the incompetence of their counterpart will lead to a disaster.

Bringing the Cultures Together: Some Suggestions

The differences, if left unchecked, that exist between ACS and the library only serve to intensify the conflicts that exists between the two organizations. As with most cases, what needs to happen is much easier said than done. In short, the two organizations must somehow work together more effectively. The following shifts in organizational understanding serve as a starting point.

The library and ACS must strive to have more meaningful and constructive contact with each other. All efforts must be made to break the common tendency that has these two organizations meeting primarily in times of crisis. For example, if the only time that the library contacts ACS is when something is broken, or if a quick fix needs to be applied, it is doubtful that the two organizations will ever move any closer than a relationship of client and service provider. Initiating regular formal and informal meetings between all levels of the organizations can break this pattern. More contact in less stressful settings will foster the understanding of common goals, procedures, and cultural attributes. From this mutual understanding, both sides will be better able to develop a stronger relationship built on trust and respect.

Emphasis must be placed on the greater common institutional mission supported by both organizations. It is important to keep in mind that both the library and ACS exist to facilitate the mission of the academic institution of which they are both members. Recognizing this fact places all activities in the proper context. The greater academic institution's mission can be used as a litmus test for evaluating the actions of all

organizations on campus. Activities that may be viewed as personal turf building exercises by rival organizations, may be quite valid when viewed in this context. This ultimately serves as a means of fostering a greater understanding and lessening of personal hostilities between organizations.

Improve leadership by adopting formal project management techniques. This is perhaps the most important of all suggestions. The library and ACS can be viewed as functional units within the larger organization. An analogy can be found by looking at the marketing and engineering departments in technology-based companies. In the corporate world, projects are formed with team members from various functional units reporting to a single project manager. Team members are chosen based on how well their skills satisfy the needs of the project. By transferring the use of cross-functional project teams to an academic setting on a regular basis, the library and ACS will be better positioned, from an organizational standpoint, to work together effectively

Being a member of a formal project team goes a long way to create an atmosphere where members from the library and ACS can work together to accomplish goals that are mutually beneficial. It wipes out the uneven relationships as the common goals of the project become paramount. Formal written project documentation (see exhibit 1) and rewards tied to project performance in a project environment can also serve to keep roles and expectations clear.

EXHIBIT 1: Common Project Documentation Tools Defined

Statement of Work

The statement of work document clearly defines the all of the tasks that must be completed during a given project.

Master Schedule

The master schedule graphically illustrates the time allotted for all components of a project. Beginning and end dates, often called milestones, are also shown

Work Breakdown Structure

Essentially an organizational chart of the project. With this document all project members are matched with their area of responsibility for the completion of a project. The document also reflects team-members' functional expertise and the budgetary allocation for their task.

Task Roster

The task roster clearly lists all project members, tasks that they are responsible for, and end-products are expected from their activity.

Master Budget

The master budget outlines the amount of resources available of each task that makes up a project.

Conclusion

The use of formal project management techniques will help to formalize the relationship between the library and ACS. What is clear to me is that this relationship must be strong to withstand the future demands that will be commonplace in all academic settings. The trend is apparent, the library is becoming more

technologically advanced while ACS are becoming more service oriented. A tremendous opportunity exists where both organizations can benefit from each others skills and experiences. If this opportunity is missed both the library and ACS will become less effective organizations on campus.

Notes

1. Sheila D. Creth, "Creating a Virtual Information Organization: Collaborative Relationships Between Librarians and Computing Centers, *Journal of Library Administration* 19, no.3/4 (1993):113.
2. Marilyn J. Martin, "Academic Libraries and Computing Centers: Opportunities for Leadership," *Library Administration and Management ?*, no.? (1992): 79.
3. Creth, "Creating a Virtual Information Organization,"119.
4. *Ibid.*, 119.
5. Martin, "Academic Libraries and Computing Centers," 78.
6. *Ibid.*, 78.