LET'S ALL BE OPEN HERE:

How Communication Transformed One Library's Budget

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INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries are continually facing new budget challenges and need to be innovative in responding to those challenges. In this environment, a study describing the successful strategies for getting library faculty on board with a new budget model is highly relevant. This paper will present strategies for conceptualizing and implementing a new library budget model at Brigham Young University (BYU). We will describe how we used open communication to shape and refine both the process itself and the end result.

BYU has long used a method of distributed decision making where subject librarians are responsible for the collection development within their assigned disciplines. On paper, decisions about how these individual budgets were distributed was assigned to our Associate University Librarian (AUL) over Collections and our Collection Development Coordinator (CDC). In practice, however, years of a flat budget had meant that the budget distribution decisions boiled down to "the same as last year." As a member of the collections team, and in consultation with the AUL and CDC, I proposed that the collections budget was in need of an overhaul to update our distribution method to a data-driven process that would better support all areas of campus.

The distribution of the collections budget had not seen a major modification in over twenty years. In that time, research and teaching on campus had changed dramatically. We were also coming from a very opaque allocation method where each librarian knew their own budget, but not how it compared to their colleagues or how it fit into the collection budget as a whole. Our goals for creating a new budgeting method were to address the gaps that had developed between the library's funding and the university's priorities and do so in a method that increased transparency and understanding within the library as well. Barnes and Schmitz identified that "data-driven solutions will be feasible and sustainable only if leaders create and implement those solutions with the active participation of people in the communities that they target."[1] Using a framework of community engagement strategies enabled us turn this project into a truly collaborative endeavor rather than a top-down mandate.

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WHAT IS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Community engagement is the process of "inviting community members into the decision-making process to assess, plan, implement, and evaluate solutions to issues that affect their daily lives and environments."[2] Community engagement principles can be used to strengthen relationships, increase knowledge and understanding, as well as informing decisions and shaping future directions. Based on the core belief that those affected by a decision deserve a say in the decision making process, the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a spectrum of public participation "to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process."[3] The IAP2 spectrum includes five methods which provide a good structure for incorporating different levels of engagement. These are listed in order as Include, Consult, Involve, Collaborate, and Empower. The level of community control over the final decision increases moving through these levels. Each of these methods may be appropriate depending on the specific project. It is also possible to mix and match different methods to craft an interactive and engaging decision making process that is built on a foundation of open communication.

There have been several articles about applying community engagement methods in libraries, but most focus on the role the library can play in getting the community involved in government decisions or other civic participation. Although designed as a tool to guide these types of conversations, the IAP2 spectrum also has potential to influence internal policy decisions within an organization. "Community engagement is a multifaceted notion with increasingly wide acceptance in a variety of disciplines."[4] When applied as a change management tool within an organization community engagement methods can help administrators design a process that will "improve the quality of decisions, help create support for decisions, and support effective implementation of decisions."[5] Goulding identified that building trust between decision makers and the stakeholders affected by the decisions is a key outcome of community engagement.[6] Implementing community engagement measures is not a magical solution to eliminate disagreement, but it can be very effective in fostering understanding of why decisions were made and increasing acceptance of new directions.

Community engagement "is most effective when strategies are planned, the process is authentic, citizens feel their input is valued, and the process results in informed decision making."[7] Careful preparation and planning is critical before beginning a community engagement effort, whether for an in-house or an external audience. It is important to clearly define the need for the planned change and the ultimate goals which the project hopes to accomplish. This provides the organizers and decision makers with a standard to measure feedback and determine which suggestions to implement. Identifying the stakeholders and deciding which community engagement methods to utilize are also important parts of preparation.

BUDGET REALLOCATION PROCESS AT BYU

We began the process by conducting a literature review of budget models in other Universities. What we found was that there were many, many different methods used. Even when limiting the literature search to those that used some kind of formula to allocate funding, we found that what worked best for each institution was often very specific to that institution. If we found an article that said they did not include factor x we also found another one that said that factor x was the most important item to consider. As Wu and Shelfer put it, "different populations are likely to value different allocation amounts in different ways when there are known (or predictable) budget constraints."[8] This discovery emphasized the importance of creating a formula that would work for our library, our University, and ultimately best serve our patrons. Using each of the methods listed in the IAP2 spectrum, we were able to design a process that would meet our goals.

Identify Community

Primary stakeholders in this project were identified as the subject librarians who would be most affected by any changes to their assigned budgets. At BYU, our subject librarians are organized into three departments according to broad disciplinary associations: Humanities, Science, and Social Science. Each librarian within a department then has their own assigned areas and an associated fund code for each campus department which

they support. Our proposal was to move to a formula based allocation method which would directly tie those individual fund code allocations to the size and activity of each department. As discussed later, we were able to adapt the final implementation of the formula to address community feedback while still utilizing data-driven principles.

Inform

We began the process of community engagement by informing our community of the importance of the project, the unacceptable consequences of maintaining the status quo, the ultimate goals of the budget reallocation, and our commitment to keep them involved in the decision making process along the way. Wang & Wan Wart argue the better stakeholders are informed, the more they are able to constructively contribute to decision making and be engaged in the process in a way that increases trust in the final result.[9] Throughout the process we kept the principle of Inform at the forefront. This was critical to help us meet one of the project's goals of increasing transparency surrounding budget decisions. We kept our community informed with how their feedback was shaping the process and what they could expect from us and from the process in the future. We also created a website to keep track of all of the questions we received regarding this project and provide a record of our answers that could be referred back to later. The website also presented data not previously readily available to our subject librarians, such as student and faculty counts within each area of study at the University. This information highlighted the discrepancies which had arisen between the library's previous budget allocation and current areas of emphasis at the University. By being open with this information, we increased understanding among subject librarians about the necessity of a new budget model.

Consult

Community consultation is the process of informed communication on an issue prior to determining a direction on that issue.[10] As mentioned previously, when we conducted our initial literature review there was a huge variation in the factors deemed important by other libraries. Walters identified more than sixty variables that have been used by various libraries as factors in their formula based allocations.[11] In order to consult our community on which factors were most important to them, we started by compiling a list of all of the factors used by other Universities. Then we created a survey asking our subject librarians for their opinions on which factors were important for us to consider at BYU. After we closed the survey, we went through the results and identified the predominant themes that our subject librarians had identified as important. The next step was to tie these themes into measurable factors that could be put into a formula.

Involve

Under the Involve level, stakeholders are involved in planning and helping to shape the project's process.[12] In order to get the best feedback for this step of the process, we felt it was important to allow our subject librarians to see the potential consequences of different decisions. My colleague Jared Howland created an interactive online tool to help subject librarians gain a better understanding about how their feedback would shape future directions. This tool allowed librarians to input different factor weights and then see in real time what effect those weights would have on how the budget was allocated.

To involve our librarians to a greater degree in this step of the process, we scheduled several different listening sessions in a variety of venues in order to solicit many different viewpoints. After holding a meeting with all subject librarians to introduce them to the online tool, we allowed them time to experiment with it on their own. We then scheduled department level meetings where the subject librarians within each discipline could speak freely about their questions or concerns about the process and the results of the tool.

At this time we were focusing solely on our monographs budget and not including serials and databases within this framework. The overwhelming feedback we received was that this was unfair and didn't take into account how disciplines vary in how dependent they are on different formats. This feedback caused us to take a

step back and delay implementation for a year in order to broaden the scope and take a more holistic look at how the library collection budgets are allocated.

We continued the previous patterns of informing, involving and consulting while doing extra preparation to add additional data to our budget formula and the associated website. Adding data for the additional formats of serials and databases did not require us to change the proposed factors at all, but did require gathering additional metrics and then reporting on how we had incorporated those metrics behind the scenes. After the online tool was updated we again gave our subject librarians time to explore the different options. Then we administered a survey asking each librarian to independently weight the different factors based on what they felt was most appropriate. When we grouped the results of this survey by department, it was clear that the departments had large differences in what they considered important. We addressed the differences in department priorities by adding an additional engagement method that prioritizes bringing stakeholders to a shared understanding.

Collaborate

Collaboration is a "process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited vision of what is possible."[13] We scheduled another listening session with a change to the agenda to make it a more collaborative meeting. Instead of the collections team giving a presentation with little interaction, we asked subject librarians to speak directly to their colleagues and share their reasoning behind how they had ranked the various factors.

We also took the opportunity to collaborate on simplifying the factors we had chosen. In the interest of transparency we had introduced some unnecessary complexity. For example, instead of reporting the total number of student credit hours for each discipline we were breaking this down into four different levels (Introductory, Bachelors, Masters, and PhD). We asked our librarians to openly discuss whether the additional information provided by this transparency was helpful. Although some felt that it was valuable, the majority wanted to collapse these down into a single factor. Overall, we were able to move from using eight factors to these four factors: student credit hours, faculty FTE, average cost across all formats, total usage across all formats.

We then administered another survey asking subject librarians how they would individually weight the new simplified factors. When we grouped the results of this survey by department, the department averages were much closer together than they had been in the previous factor weighting survey. This indicated that the collaboration effort had been successful in helping the subject librarians in different departments to see each other's viewpoints and change their own answers accordingly.

We continued to use a collaborative process as we moved into defining benchmarks to evaluate the future success of our new budgeting model. We scheduled a listening session and asked each department to prepare a presentation on benchmarks that they thought would be appropriate. After these were presented, we held a discussion with all subject librarians and then further discussions with department chairs to narrow down the suggestions to actionable items.

Collaboration is founded on deep trustworthy relationships among community members and mutual commitment to find a constructive solution. "To build such a strong relationship and commitment among members is a long term process and needs concrete planning."[14] We've seen firsthand that a commitment to community engagement and collaboration can require an additional time commitment. We've delayed full implementation of the formula over multiple budget cycles in order to incorporate additional feedback. Although this has delayed full realization of the goals we have for the new allocation method, it has also strengthened the relationship between the collections team and the subject librarians. Since building trust through an environment of transparency and open communication was a key goal of the project, these delays can be viewed as stepping stones to success instead of as a drawback.

Empower

The IAP2 spectrum's definition of Empower, is to place the final decision-making in the hands of the public. Empowering community members means designing processes that have the potential to shape real outcomes.[15]

Cook suggested a "transformation in the process from consultation (for feedback about services) to participation (to develop services) through empowerment (to manage services)."[16]

Although we have delayed full implementation, we have made incremental improvements to our former methods in a way that empowers our subject librarians to be involved in the collection allocation process as never before. Rather than a system in which each individual only knows their own centrally assigned budget, we decided to expand upon our long history of distributed decision making by allowing these individual allocations to be assigned at the department level. Under the new method, the department is assigned a total budget using the data-driven formula. Because of the data transparency we have adopted, librarians can see and understand how the formula's factors influenced the allocation given to each department. Department members must then work together to allocate those funds among themselves. These decisions are informed by both the quantitative data that we provide to assist in their discussions and the qualitative data inherent within those discussions. This new process empowers librarians and departments to make decisions about what will work best for their disciplines.

CONCLUSION

After going through this budget reallocation process for the past four years, our library now benefits from a greatly increased sense of openness and understanding. This new culture of transparency increased trust in the collections team and increased acceptance of the new budgeting model. We have also established new ongoing communication channels, such as monthly meetings between the collections team and the subject librarian department chairs. These monthly meetings demonstrate the value of continual community engagement even after decisions are made and implemented.

The most difficult things to change are administrative and bureaucratic processes, but changing these structures to be more participative is vital to creating trust and acceptance of administrative decisions.[17] The five methods in the IAP2 spectrum are not steps that all need to be taken in order to have a successful outcome. It is not necessary to use all five of the methods when planning your own change management process. Instead you should determine the level of engagement that is appropriate for your project, your timeline, and your community. That being said, we found that gradually bringing in more robust levels of community engagement was very successful in helping our library ascend into an open future of administrative transparency and criteria-based decision making.

NOTES

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