Current News

Library-IT Partnerships: New Services for New Campus Demands

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By Stephen R. Acker, Michael D. Miller

The roles of central information technology and library organizations are being transformed by demands that new campus services be delivered more effectively and efficiently. Both organizations have reasons for paranoia and reasons for optimism as they look into the future. Properly conceived, library-IT partnerships can reduce threats and increase opportunities.

Nicholas Carr's Harvard Business Review article of May 2003 ("IT Doesn't Matter") argued that information technology is moving rapidly into commodity status, and prudent managers should look to control costs rather than attempt to innovate services. The Library community has concerns that the value of their physical presence may be lost in the rush to networked access to electronic resources (Prinsen, 2001). These are but two voices framing concerns about the roles that information technology organizations and libraries will play in higher education's future.

To proactively address such concerns, universities have begun experimenting with such innovations as "information commons" and "digital unions." These projects recognize a need for new working relationships and organizational structures to continue to deliver on services that have been heavily funded in the past. In this article, we discuss several of the strategies that Ohio State and Michigan have undertaken to build the trust and coordination needed to succeed in the re-forming academic landscape. Both approaches focus on "living together" as the best approach to understanding and valuing each organization's traditions and contributions to campus learning needs.

In the summer of 2002, Ohio State began a systematic evaluation to identify a new course management system to meet exploding student and faculty demand. We identified "integration with library services" as one of our important CMS selection criteria. At the same time, national and local architect teams were competing to renovate Ohio State's iconic William Oxley Thomas Library, scoped as a $100 million project with a 100-year lifetime. In those competing architectural designs, information and learning technologies were acknowledged as important but treated only as requiring "flexible space." This seemed a rather weak directive on which to plan a project of this magnitude.

The director of libraries and the CIO agreed to co-sponsor a project to better understand integration of instructional technology with library resources on one hand, and how library space allocation and services might change on the other. The result of this shared need to "envision the future" was a project called The Digital Union. The project is an experiment in organizational collaboration toward meeting new end user needs and establishing new roles for delivering library and IT services in combined spaces.

After about ten months of planning, resources were identified to build a technology-rich
"test bed" in the Science and Engineering Library, an inviting physical space that had been experiencing a reduction in foot traffic because of the network-based research habits of the science and engineering faculty and students. A 2,000-square-foot computer lab previously dedicated to rows of word processing and e-mail access stations gave way to a space with all furniture on wheels, wireless and wired access from anywhere in the facility, robust external networking and storage, and collaborative staffing (http://telr.osu.edu/digitalunion).

The mission of OSU's Digital Union was defined as meeting faculty and student needs from idea generation to final presentation, using the research skills of the librarians and the production skills of the information technologists. Because both librarians and instructional technologists planned, resourced, and staff the facility, it offers a microcosm of what the two organizations might become in the future.

While both the library and the CIO organization committed funding for space renovation and technology, external partners also contributed substantially to the project. We presented this facility as a usability lab in which to evaluate new ways of conducting instructional and research practices. As the faculty and students use the technology, they respond to surveys and in focus group settings about their preferences, successes, and frustrations in the new academic work environment. Technology vendors and architectural vendors donated, or offered their wares at greatly reduced costs, to help frame the questions and hear their answers. We garnered the support of central administration by offering these same data as protection from, or at least mitigation of, the financial risks facing the university concerned with supporting new academic practices. For example, the Digital Union is evaluating media production technologies, the creation of electronic theses and dissertations, ePortfolios, and institutional repository requirements. We realize that each of these areas requires cross-trained information technologists and librarians to coordinate and improve such services for our patrons.

The University of Michigan's Media Union was founded in 1996, offering a unique combination of resources including: audio and video production studios, a 3D Virtual Reality Lab, teleconferencing suites, hundreds of computers in a wireless environment, and one of the most technologically enabled libraries in the country. It is home to three diverse units: the Art, Architecture, and Engineering Library (AAE), the College of Engineering's IT group (CAEN), and the Media Union Programs, UM's digital media and courseware development groups (CHEF, Sakai). The environment offers ample opportunity to explore the linkages and potential of IT/library partnerships. Over the years the Media Union partners have gone through multiple organizational phases in an attempt to better deal with the many issues that arise from sharing the same facility and attempting to collaborate on projects.

More recently the UM campus has developed a philosophy of IT stewardship that it calls the IT Commons. The IT Commons approach is intended to build community and relies heavily on the personal commitments of the people "at the table" with the vice provost for IT working on behalf of the whole university. The strength of the IT Commons approach has been to create a new sense of energy, creativity, and cooperation among IT units across campus. By eliminating duplication of effort and fostering a climate of collaboration it is also more consistent with today's economic reality.

The Media Union has adopted the IT Commons approach as a means of refocusing and renewing its efforts. The impact has been dramatic. Using professional facilitators to guide the process, the staffs of three Media Union partners participated in a series of "Intensives" to vent history, share information, and generally develop a new appreciation for each group's abilities and concerns. Many opportunities for mutual support, cooperation, and collaboration have since been identified and initiated.

On March 19, 2004 Michigan's Media Union was re-dedicated as the Duderstadt Center, honoring President Emeritus James J. Duderstadt. After eight years of operation and much organizational transition, the Duderstadt Center has found a renewed sense of purpose and more opportunities for collaboration as a result of participation in UM's IT Commons initiative (http://www.umich.edu/itcommons/). The partners jointly sponsor a "technology innovators" speaker series to attract the hottest minds to campus to inspire students. The library and CHEF worked closely together to move eReserves into the CourseTools environment. The three partners have collaborated on improved adaptive technology access and are currently in the process of designing new "collaboration stations" to support student study teams. The Usability Lab and the library have worked together to do user testing
the AAE library's new Web site and on the organization of the forthcoming University Library's LMS Web pages. Better understanding of the goals and limitations of each of the partner groups has led to more realistic expectations and a greater willingness to support the university through shared expertise and resources.

Information technology and libraries are enduring infrastructure providers in higher education, yet both feel uneasy about their future centrality. IT is concerned about becoming a commodity and librarians wonder if their current resources and services are becoming irrelevant. If a partnership based on shared, incremental experience can be built, this alliance and its exchanged wisdom can greatly assist the university in these investments and visioning of university support needs. If instead, IT and libraries oppose one another in budget deliberations and infrastructure advocacy, both organizations, and the university at large are the losers. We argue for the importance of taking small pragmatic steps with which to inform new organizational thinking, and for collecting quantitative and qualitative data to track and fine tune the development of collaborations.

Both the Digital Union and the Duderstadt Center are environments conceived to help their respective universities "make learning happen" (Bennett, 2003). If we can keep thinking centered on this objective, we should be able to overcome the different perspectives that IT and the library bring to serving this common goal.

References:


About the author: Stephen R. Acker is research director for the Ohio Board of Regents Collective Action Project and associate professor of Communication The Ohio State University. Mike Miller (smillerx@umich.edu) is director, Arts & Engineering Libraries at the University of Michigan.

Proposals for articles and tips for news stories, as well as questions and comments about this publication, should be submitted to David Nagel, executive editor, at dnagel@1105media.com.