



Merged service outcomes at Earlham College

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper aims to provide an overview of merged services arising from the integration of library and information technology units at Earlham College. These services may serve as a model or resource for other institutions.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper reviews six years of integration experience, discussing assessment and current goals.

Findings – The paper demonstrates the benefits of integrating library and information technology units in ways that respect the unique strengths of each contributing unit and that are sensitive to local conditions.

Practical implications – Library/information technology integration can result when staff from different units work together to provide services for which responsibilities overlap. This type of integration can occur without significant restructuring if shared values and a willingness to collaborate already exist.

Originality/value – The paper provides insights for administrators and librarians considering a merger of library/information technology units, demonstrating how the integration process does not necessarily entail a radical change in doing business.

Keywords Academic libraries, Communication technologies

Paper type Case study

Introduction

This article presents the service outcomes of the integration of the Earlham College library and information technology (IT) units into a hybrid organization; what seemed like a done deal at the outset is now experienced as a continuous change process with no end in sight. The article first provides a context for the integration. It then provides examples of merged service outcomes at Earlham before explaining how the organization uses assessment data in its service planning. The article concludes with a look at how assessment data and an ongoing sensitivity to local conditions have shaped efforts that seek to blend overlapping library/IT functions in terms of both position responsibilities and building architecture.

Context: an integration sensitive to local conditions

When Earlham considered integrating its library and IT functions in 2000, the experiences of other liberal arts college models were available for guidance. For example, Gettysburg College had merged its Computing Services Department and the Library into a single division called Strategic Information Resources in 1993 before reverting back to separate units (Wagner, 2000). Kenyon College had already combined its library and computing center into a single division in 1997 and created several “librarian and technology consultant” positions that radically blended librarian and IT staff roles (Oden *et al.*, 2001). It was already apparent that, as an



overview article later observed: “the reasons for undertaking an integration of IT and library organizations can vary considerably from institution to institution” (Ferguson *et al.*, 2004, p. 40).

Library and IT integration at Earlham resulted largely from local personnel matters and skill sets. First, Earlham faced the retirement of its long-time director of Computing Services and the hiring of his promising yet comparatively inexperienced successor in 2000. Second, Earlham had an experienced library director in place and a solid library program. Sizing up the situation, the College president consulted with the dean of the Faculty and decided to integrate library and IT functions in order to affirm and better develop available existing talents, with an eye to the future of technology and the continued vitality of the units involved. When the resultant Information Services organization was formalized in January 2001, Earlham had just been selected for the Association of College and Research Libraries “Excellence in Academic Libraries” award in the college category, singled out for “almost 40 years of excellence in contributions to student learning; in partnering with faculty; and in the transformation of the educational program of Earlham College” (American Library Association, 2001).

Since its 2001 creation, the Library director has also served as the coordinator of Information Services. This title was carefully chosen by the Library director to reflect the “spirit” or “character” of Information Services, an integrated organization that merges services but not organizational structures. The organization is managed by four unit directors at the same level trying to synchronize services whenever possible, with the coordinator of Information Services acting as the conduit to the senior campus administrators and the wider campus community. Information Services covers an expanding set of responsibilities related to IT. In 2001 it comprised the Libraries, Computing Services, and Media Resources. It now includes the Libraries, Computing Services, Instructional Technology and Media, and Web Management and Services, with the latter reporting to both Information Services and Public Affairs, a unit of Institutional Advancement.

Information Services reflects wider campus governance patterns at Earlham that are based on principles and practices of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). Decisions are routinely made in a flattened organization using a collaborative style after broad consultation among relevant constituents. From the beginning, senior campus administrators did not impose a mandate to integrate nor decree any change in the missions of the units involved. Nor was the integration meant to signal any form of grand philosophic statement about the primacy of merged organizations. It could even be said that Information Services is “only” a nominally merged construct. For example, individual units conduct their own budgeting processes and personnel assessments and the four directors coordinate their services by means of consensus. Since the individual units did not (and do not) confront restructuring issues, they are able to leverage the ontological strengths stemming from their unique professional cultures. Intentional coordination has led to better communication and a synergy that aids all units, in general facilitating the cross-pollination of IT skills and a greater emphasis on customer service. Specifically, it has sparked the creation of important merged service outcomes that can be grouped into three broad categories: orientation sessions, policies, and infrastructure.

Outcomes: orientations to benefit local conditions

One of the most visible merged service outcomes at Earlham is a mandatory IT orientation session for all incoming students. It dates back to January 2002, when librarians suggested replacing the longstanding library testing session required during New Student Week with an IT overview acknowledging the broader purview of the *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000) and to meet immediate student needs to understand campus online information systems. The idea was embraced, so an instructional technologist and a librarian then met with Computing Services to design 50-minute orientation sessions taught by pairs of instructors from across Information Service units during the 2002 New Student Week. The director of Instructional Technology and Media supervised scheduling logistics for the sessions, with librarians and instructional technologists providing most of the instruction. Computing Services professionals were present to answer difficult technical questions and assist with hands-on activities.

Since August 2002, the required New Student Week IT orientations continue to serve the campus in several ways. Students learn fundamental competencies like how to save documents to their personal file space on the campus network, how to navigate Moodle, the campus course management system and a homegrown course information and directory system. Classroom faculty can then depend on the students' abilities to use Moodle and their campus e-mail accounts. Academic advisors and the registrar rely on the sessions to instruct students about the basics of the campus course registration system. Information Services staff benefit from the high-profile teaching role and are able to better demonstrate their centrality to the educational mission of the college. Since August 2004, the IT orientations have also helped to heighten awareness of intellectual property issues via a discussion of copyrighted digital material – the ethics of illegal file sharing, the concept of academic fair use and its ramifications for copying proprietary images in class assignments, etc.

Just as new students are exposed to intellectual property issues in their first days at Earlham, so too are all incoming faculty. Since August 2003, the dean of the Faculty has invited a librarian to deliver a 45-minute PowerPoint presentation on intellectual property and student plagiarism during the College's two-day new faculty orientation. The presentation covers practical classroom topics like reasons why students plagiarize, assignments that forestall plagiarism, and how to spot plagiarism with reference to several online term paper mills. Instead of dwelling on punitive measures, the presentation links plagiarism to wider problematic uses of digital intellectual property outside of academe, such as bootleg music downloads and pirated movies. Inevitably, the presentation triggers a faculty discussion about both what constitutes fair academic use and the characteristics of students today.

Outcomes: policies to serve local conditions

To help frame faculty and student discussions about academic fair use and other intellectual property issues, senior campus administrators asked Information Services leadership to formalize a copyright policy in fall 2003. Working with the Information Technology Policy Committee – a faculty advisory body – the directors of the Libraries, Computing Services, Instructional Technology and Media, and Web Management and Services drafted a series of salient guidelines. The role of the director

of Instructional Technology and Media was particularly important during this process due to his experience with licensing and copyright issues related to performance and music, although many discussions tended to focus on print materials and electronic reserves. A final copyright policy was vetted after two years of debate and has allowed the campus to begin working toward a shared understanding of the dimensions surrounding intellectual property (Earlham College, 2005).

Whereas senior campus administrators asked Information Services to formulate a copyright policy, sensitivity to the concerns of classroom faculty and students resulted in the creation of *ad hoc* task forces charged with re-examining policies about how DVDs and videocassettes were acquired and circulated. Historically, these visual materials had been purchased outside of the library budget and housed in a separate Media Resources collection with checkout privileges restricted to faculty. This arrangement displeased a new generation of faculty accustomed to regularly using DVDs and videocassettes in their courses; the creation of a Film Studies minor only furthered debate. For years, students had complained about their lack of checkout privileges to such visual materials.

Bracketing the question of acquisitions, two task forces addressed circulation issues. An “in-house” Information Services task force began by considering options for the possible relocation of the VHS and DVD collection, but it became apparent that all answers hinged on circulation policy. A second task force adding three faculty members and student representatives then met and recommended modifying the circulation policy to allow students to checkout DVDs and videocassettes. This task force also recommended that the service point for DVDs and videocassettes be integrated with the library circulation desk at a future date. The circulation supervisors from the Libraries and Instructional Technology and Media afterwards met to develop a policy in accordance with the recommendation of the task force, so that students were allowed to checkout DVDs and videocassettes beginning in January 2007.

Outcomes: infrastructure to enhance local conditions

In addition to policies and orientations, merged service outcomes at Earlham include numerous infrastructure developments. One of the most visible infrastructure changes is the recent collocation of the computing help desk and reference desk on the main floor of the central library. In keeping with the overall “merger” of library and IT at Earlham, the collocated desks more closely integrate service points while organizational structures remain separate. That is, the computing help desk remains scheduled and staffed by professionals with traditional IT backgrounds and the reference desk by librarians. As a result, professionals from both units can leverage their respective strengths and do not confront the knot of personnel and practical issues involved with formal cross-training. To be sure, the librarians sometimes field technical questions and the computing help desk professionals occasionally handle an information resource query. Normally, however, the practice is to refer patrons to the appropriate service point just steps away. Patrons benefit from the proximity of service points, while the Computing Services professionals and librarians gain a finer understanding of their colleagues’ work.

Another high-visibility and increasingly important “merged” infrastructure development is the deployment of a proxy server to allow remote access to

proprietary information resources. In an era of fee-based digital content and ubiquitous connectivity, the librarians realized that remote access to subscription content was essential. A librarian researched available solutions and found that the EZproxy software package was the most common option chosen by other institutions. The librarians then contacted Computing Services about the motivating situation and recommended solution, asking for their server-side expertise. After first assigning the job to a gifted Computer Science student with mixed results, the professional System Administrator readily agreed to implement and help maintain EZproxy.

The EZproxy arrangement exemplifies the level of cross-unit confidence that allows professionals with different skill sets to capitalize on their disparate strengths. Computing Services trusted the librarians' reasoning and appreciated their product research; the librarians trusted the server-side knowledge of Computing Services and appreciated their ongoing help. The subsequent EZproxy maintenance arrangement illustrates the "separate but merged" spirit of library/IT integration at Earlham. A librarian manages the required database definitions using his knowledge about the information resources (i.e. the content), while the Computing Services System Administrator maintains the overall proxy software package, upgrading when necessary.

A third merged service outcome related to IT infrastructure is the management of campus computing labs. Prior to the integration, the Libraries dedicated a significant portion of one FTE to manage public computers in the main library and the science library. The duties of this librarian FTE included the purchase and repair of all public library computers. Software upgrades were done on a time-consuming, desktop-by-desktop basis and the library kept a separate inventory of its computers. The Libraries' budget included the computer replacement costs. Since integration, however, Computing Services has assumed responsibility for the Libraries' public computers. The benefits of the new arrangement include a common hardware platform across campus computer labs, a shared inventory, a standard software image that can be remotely administered, and a uniform hardware upgrade cycle paid for out of a centralized, institutional equipment fund. These resultant economies have freed up a portion of one librarian FTE to concentrate on digitization efforts that might otherwise burden Computing Services staff. At the same time, library paraprofessionals now take on the role of scheduling all campus computing labs for Computing Services.

Assessment: measuring local conditions

Information Services now uses formal assessment mechanisms to evaluate its performance and plan for future service improvements, recently participating in two national surveys. The first, LibQUAL + , is a web-based product in which the total results for library users surveyed in a given year offer a context for analyzing the results of each home institution (Association of Research Libraries, 2007). Although focused on library services, LibQUAL + results have significant bearing on any integrated library/IT organization. The second assessment instrument, the Merged Information Services Organizations (MISO) Survey developed by Bryn Mawr College, is a web-based product "designed to measure how students, faculty, and staff use and evaluate the services and resources of colleges and universities with merged library and computing units" (Bryn Mawr College, 2005).

The LibQUAL + survey took place in the spring of 2005. Library users were asked to respond to 22 items relating to the categories “Library as Place”, “Information Control”, and “Affect of Service”. Participants not only rated the quality of service, but also the level of performance they deemed minimally acceptable and the quality of service they viewed to be ideal. The user’s rating of service quality could then be compared to his/her minimum rating as an indication of whether or not adequate service was being provided. The comparison with the ideal level of service provided a measure of room for improvement.

Overall, the libraries performed quite well in comparison to ten other peer institutions (Earlham College Libraries, 2005). Earlham’s most accomplished performance was in the area of “Affect of Service,” with users expressing great satisfaction about professional and paraprofessional employees who give users individual attention, are consistently courteous, respond to users’ questions, and deal with users in a caring fashion. At the same time, though, the LibQUAL + results revealed that Earlham users expressed a consistently lower set of minimal expectations for quality of service and a slightly lower level of desired service than those at peer institutions. In other words, members of the Earlham community expected less and demanded less of their libraries than users elsewhere for reasons unknown.

A committee of library staff looked beyond the overall strong LibQUAL + results performance to identify areas of comparative weakness with room for improvement. One area was specific to the libraries – concern about the service of student circulation workers. Two other areas suggested opportunities for integrated service coordination. LibQUAL + results confirmed the overall dissatisfaction with how DVDs and videocassettes were handled, validating the process designed to move toward integrating the separate Media Resources with the rest of the libraries’ collections. LibQUAL + results also highlighted the importance of the libraries as places, reflecting high-use facilities in need of designated quiet areas, cosmetic changes involving furnishings and general ambiance, and architectural changes to accommodate more technology and group study spaces.

A year after the LibQUAL + survey, the web-based MISO survey was conducted by Information Services in the spring of 2006. Members of the Earlham community were asked to respond to over 200 questions relating to library/IT services. The MISO questions were localized to feature language that would be recognizable to campus users (e.g. “How strongly do you disagree or agree with the following statements with regards to the ECS Help Desk Staff?”) and responses were compared to those at 19 other liberal arts colleges with “merged” library/IT organizations that also participated in the MISO survey during the same time period.

Overall, Earlham scored near the mean for the MISO institutions on approximately 80 percent of the questions (Earlham College Information Services, 2006). Of particular interest, though, were the remaining 20 percent where survey results placed Earlham at or very near the highest and lowest scores relative to other institutions. As with LibQUAL + , local data analysis looked beyond strong results performance to identify perceived weaknesses. In some areas the MISO survey echoed the LibQUAL + results, with for example, concerns expressed about library circulation staff (i.e. student workers) and a low level of satisfaction with circulation services in general that might be partially attributable to technical difficulties involving check-in/checkout software.

Other concerns suggested avenues for improvement. For example, faculty identified a need for Information Services to solve classroom computing problems in a more timely fashion and criticized the current computing Help Desk. Students, meanwhile, were dissatisfied with the availability of status information on computing problems, their level of input into computing and library decisions that affect them, and the overall level of computing services.

Current issues: capitalizing on local conditions

Assessment data and an ongoing sensitivity to local conditions now shape efforts that seek to more intensively blend overlapping library/IT functions. For example, the LibQUAL + survey results calling for improvements in physical library facilities led to the creation of an Information Services task force charged to explore options for flexible technology learning spaces open within the main library on a 24/7 schedule. Instead of militating for a grandiose new architectural building program, the task force recognized local resource constraints and proposed a makeover of the existing, popular facility. Although the proposal was not revolutionary – an information commons collaboratively staffed by librarians and technologists, a café, the incorporation of the writing center, adaptive services, and more group study spaces into the building – it addressed community needs at a relatively low cost.

Senior campus administrators appreciated the pragmatic building proposal. Special funds were consequently authorized to hire an architect to evaluate the potential of the proposal, visit Earlham, and submit a feasibility study against the backdrop of a pending capital campaign. Moreover, the College President wrote exclusively about the libraries as place in his most recent letter to alumni, parents, and friends of the institution, concluding:

We want as broad and thoughtful a conversation about the future of the library as possible. We want to continue to be a college admired and respected for its library excellence (Bennett, 2007).

While seeking to more intensively blend overlapping library/IT functions in terms of building architecture, Information Services simultaneously experiments with blending position responsibilities. Here too, plans arise out of specific local conditions and not a theoretical paradigm that asserts the superiority of merged librarian/computing job descriptions. The institutional backdrop is a strategic plan commitment to “extend the uses of technology” whereby Earlham will “primarily use technology to supplement and enrich our strategies for learning and teaching” (Earlham College, 2002). Now that library/IT service integration has produced the necessary framework of infrastructure and policies, attention turns to the enhancement of teaching and learning.

The plan is to leverage existing strengths. Since the spring of 2006, librarians, instructional technologists, and the manager of the Computing Services Help Desk met to develop strategies to enhance teaching and learning via IT. It is now recognized that the roles and skill sets of librarians and instructional technologists overlap to an extent, with both groups now training users to find and utilize podcasts, customize the course management system, create web sites, develop multimedia presentations, and other software tasks. Most of this training occurs in the context of individual courses. Although the librarians have an established network of connections with classroom faculty thanks to a longstanding, course-integrated instruction program that “has been

considered the exemplar or benchmark almost since its modest beginnings” (Ver Steeg, 2000), until recently the librarians did not partner with instructional technologists for a more holistic information literacy solution. Librarian liaisons to academic programs will soon become Information Services liaisons, teaming up with instructional technologists to magnify joint capabilities. The degree to which a given librarian provides IT assistance to their faculty liaisons will depend on his/her existing aptitudes, again reflecting an organizational culture that is above all sensitive to local conditions.

Conclusion

Library/IT integration at Earlham is never a done deal. It is above all predicated on sensitivity to local conditions and not any form of ideal organizational paradigm. New institutional exigencies, changing staff talents, and technology developments will continue to foster changes in how things get done and will all inflect future merged service outcomes. If the Earlham Libraries have long been recognized as one of the nation’s premier teaching libraries, the current challenge is to maintain this tradition of excellence in an environment where a library is just as much a set of collaborative IT services as it is a collection of books and other materials. In a way that transcends semantic quibbling, the support of the academic program by Information Services arguably now is the library. The extent to which the Earlham Libraries thrive in the future will almost surely hinge on the quality and amplitude of merged service outcomes.

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