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The Journal of Academic Librarianship



Academic Libraries' Strategic Plans: Top Trends and Under-Recognized Areas



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 2 February 2015

Accepted 12 March 2015

Available online 31 March 2015

Keywords:

Academic libraries

Strategic plans

Trends

Content analysis

ABSTRACT

Rapid developments in technology, as well as changes in areas such as scholarly communication, data management, and higher education pedagogy are affecting user expectations and forcing academic libraries to develop new resources and service areas. No library can respond to every new trend in the field, but where are academic libraries generally placing their priorities right now, and to what extent are they responding to emerging trends? Through a content analysis of academic library strategic plans, this study examines the stated directions and goals of libraries to discover the extent to which they are monitoring and addressing emerging and traditional program and service areas, providing a perspective on how academic libraries are addressing current issues, and how they plan to allocate resources in response to trends.

Academic libraries are facing enormous pressures that require them to respond and adapt in order to remain relevant. Rapid developments in technology, as well as changes in areas such as scholarly communication, data management, and higher education pedagogy are affecting user expectations and forcing academic libraries to develop new resources and service areas. At the same time, these libraries must balance new initiatives with core service areas such as instruction and collection development. In addition to responding to current trends, academic libraries are also being challenged to anticipate future needs and to develop innovative initiatives to meet those needs.

No library can respond to every new trend in the field, nor should they. Decisions about how to prioritize and allocate resources should be aligned with the mission and goals of the library's parent institution. Colleges and universities are facing their own pressures, driven by increasing demands from stakeholders to hold themselves accountable, especially in terms of student outcomes such as persistence, graduation, and employment, as well as student learning outcomes, or changes in knowledge and behavior as a result of educational programs. In turn, these institutions are looking to their departments to demonstrate how their programs and services support and further the mission and goals of the college. In this environment, academic libraries must monitor both the trends in the library and information science field as well as those in higher education more generally in order to determine where to focus resources and efforts.

But where are academic libraries generally placing their priorities right now, and to what extent are they responding to emerging trends? Library and information science (LIS) literature is rife with articles and reports that track trends in the field, make predictions, and advise libraries on how to implement plans and programs related to those trends. Few studies, however, have examined academic libraries' planning documents to see how they are prioritizing among the competing issues and challenges facing them. This study aims to address the gap in the literature. Through a content analysis of academic library strategic plans, this study examines the stated directions and goals of the library to discover the extent to which they are monitoring and addressing emerging and traditional program and service areas. Academic librarians and library directors will be interested to see which issues and challenges are receiving the most attention, and how their peers are prioritizing those areas. The study will also offer campus administrators a perspective on how academic libraries are addressing current issues, and how they plan to allocate resources in response to trends. Library faculty might also be interested in the results, as understanding which trends are having the most impact in their field could inform curricular decisions and program emphases.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on trends and issues impacting library and information science is abundant, and includes changes in technology; scholarly communication, including open access; data services; assessment and

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accountability; and changes in higher education pedagogy. It would be impossible to offer a comprehensive overview of current library trends. Rather, this review will look at the areas as identified by major professional and research organizations, including ACRL, Horizon, and Ithaka S + R, followed by an overview of studies analyzing library strategic reports.

TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

Every other year, ACRL issues a list of the top trends impacting academic libraries. The lists from the two most recent reports, 2012 and 2014, reveal a number of important issues, some of which were carried over from one list to the next. For instance, trends related to working with data appear on both lists, including data curation (Association of College & Research Libraries Research Planning and Review Committee, 2012), and opportunities for librarians to collaborate and partner with researchers using data (Association of College & Research Libraries Research Planning and Review Committee, 2014). The importance of demonstrating the library's value through assessment initiatives also appears on both lists. ACRL also highlights issues of open access, the importance of student success and student retention; technology impacts including mobile devices and device neutral platforms; altmetrics; digital humanities; changes in scholarly communication; and changes in user expectations. A supplemental environmental scan points to several similar areas of concern including the impact of budgets and rising prices, noting that "the watchword is still cost" (Association of College & Research Libraries Research Planning and Review Committee, 2013, p. 2). The scan asserts that academic libraries are further impacted by changes in higher education pedagogy and delivery, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs), the unbundling of higher education, changing student demographics, open education, and trends toward competency-based learning. ACRL predicts that many of these trends will require academic librarians to rethink service provision, which could result in new positions and new competency areas that might entail reskilling of professionals.

According to the Horizon Project's report, academic libraries will continue to be impacted by changing technologies and related standards, including mobile devices, open access, and bibliometrics, as well as the Internet of things, the semantic Web, and linked data (Johnson, Becker, Estrada, & Freeman, 2014). Beyond technology changes, the report suggests that a focus in higher education on multi-discipline research and other collaborative projects will provide challenges and opportunities for libraries. Many of the issues and concerns raised in the broader field of higher education, such as course credit for life experience, emphasis on career or professional education (Quinton, 2013), the demand for accountability and assessment (The Lawlor Group, 2014) including evidence of achievement of student outcomes (Henry, Pagano, Puckett, & Wilson, 2014), and the evolution of online learning (Johnson et al., 2014), overlap with those in academic libraries, and reinforce the immediacy of these trends.

Ithaka S + R reports that faculty primarily see the library as a buyer, ranking its role as purchaser of materials as most important, with roles in supporting instruction and research less so (Housewright, Schonfeld, & Wulfson, 2012). These faculty members are increasingly turning to the Web for materials—although there seems to be some modest increase in the use of the library catalog—and are indicating a preference for online versus print resources. However, closer analysis of the survey shows that these preferences vary somewhat by discipline. In general, humanities faculty ranks more of the library's various roles as important than did social or hard science faculty (Schwartz, 2013).

Academic library directors highlight the library's instructional roles and support of information literacy as most important, a commitment which "may have far-reaching implications for how they prioritize their other functions" (Long & Shonfeld, 2013, p. 6). Directors also acknowledge budget pressures which could impact their ability to engage in new initiatives. They generally identify their staff as a top

priority. They acknowledge lack of staff skills and competencies in emerging areas as a challenge, and indicate plans to make resources for professional development and continuing education available for re-skilling. Despite the challenges, most directors report feeling prepared to meet changing user expectations.

STRATEGIC PLAN ANALYSIS

Strategic planning is "a systematic process of envisioning a desired future, and translating this vision into broadly defined goals or objectives and a sequence of steps to achieve them" (Roberts & Wood, 2012, p. 10). The process typically involves six steps: developing a vision; developing a set of core values; conducting an environmental scan; developing goals and strategies; implementing and assessing the plan; and revisiting the plan (Dole, 2013). In addition to an environmental scan, which analyzes external factors impacting the organization, libraries involved in strategic planning might also benefit from a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, which examines internal factors (Morgenstern & Jones, 2012). The SWOT analysis and environmental scan are important steps in strategic planning, as they help the organization to take stock of the internal and external situation and make informed decisions about how to move forward. The strategic plan itself and each of its goals or strategies should be assessed against specific metrics. As such, it is necessary to establish who will be accountable for each aspect of the plan (Forbes.com, 2011). While the specific goals of a plan will vary from one library to another, libraries do not operate in a vacuum. It is important for the library to align its strategic plan with the mission and goals of the larger institution, in order to demonstrate how it directly supports those goals and mission (McNicol, 2005). Viewed as a whole, these plans can offer a perspective on how libraries are envisioning their future, and where they are planning to concentrate efforts and resources.

Several studies have used strategic plans as a source of information on the priorities and directions of academic libraries. Many of these libraries align their own plans with that of their parent institution. Indeed, as it is impossible for academic libraries to respond to all the trends and challenges in the field, they can use the mission and goals of the college as a guide for prioritizing their goals and allocating their resources (McNicol, 2005). Bielavitz found programs and services related to community engagement in the strategic plans of libraries of the Coalition of Urban Serving Universities, which supports a core tenet of these institutions (Bielavitz, 2011). Because alignment with the parent institution is so important, academic libraries will often redirect their plans as institutional priorities shift (McNicol, 2005). For instance, the library might adjust its programs and services to meet the needs of a college that is putting increased emphasis on research.

A review of Canadian and American academic libraries' strategic plans and annual reports against ACRL trends identified space, off-site storage, assessment, development, and staff as emerging themes (Staines, 2009). The study also found that Canadian planning documents incorporated more language around user needs and expectations, suggesting they take a more user-centered approach to planning. Budgets have been identified as one of the top issues addressed in academic library strategic plans (Caldwell, 2005). Indeed, Clement (1995) found that many Association of Research Libraries (ARL) used their strategic plans as a tool to deal with budget cuts. Similarly, fundraising has become a priority in many academic library strategic plans as those libraries struggle to meet increasing user demands and more expensive resources with decreasing budgets (Brown & Gonzalez, 2007). Other areas of focus include information literacy and instruction, storage challenges, and personnel issues (Caldwell, 2005).

Marketing has been identified as a key element of strategic plans, as a way to promote awareness of library resources and services (Smith, 2011). Incorporating marketing can increase the chances of achieving

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