Examining the Organizational Structure
Of Academic Libraries

Essay 2

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**Introduction**

Current authors in library science literature assert that organizations in today’s information environment are facing an unprecedented level of change. Rapid advances in technology, increasing cultural diversity, complexity of economic activities, increasing organizational interrelationships, and developments in special expertise characterize present society. Libraries, these authors maintain, are not immune to these changes; they share with society at large a need for improved organizations that better manage the current environment (see Deiss & Giesecke, 1999; Honea, 1997; Phipps, 2001).

There is general agreement among authors in library science literature that library organizations at large need to assess their organizations within the context of recent environmental changes. In this paper, however, I will focus primarily on academic library organizations. I will address the unique environment in which these libraries function, discuss the established hierarchical structure in which the majority of these institutions currently operate, and offer alternatives to this established structure. These alternative structures, I assert, might allow academic libraries to more capably cope in the present environment and better position themselves for future changes.

**The Current Environment of Academic Libraries**

Presently in academic libraries, the rising costs of library materials is leading to fewer purchases and increasing dependence on interlibrary resource sharing. Electronic resources are augmenting and, in some cases, replacing print resources. Many academic libraries are experiencing diminishing percentage shares of their overall university budgets, or even more substantial budget cuts (for example, see Lubans, 1996).

In conjunction with this state of rising costs and diminishing resources, expectations of academic library users are changing. Faculty and students expect that libraries which support academia should provide the most recent in technological advances. They expect to find information relevant to their present needs easily and efficiently.

Some authors assert that changes generated by the current information environment may threaten the very existence of academic libraries. The most present danger to academic libraries today, these
authors argue, is diminished reliance upon the academic library in research and teaching. Phipps (2001), for example, argues that academic libraries, as they are presently configured, are in danger of “increasingly being marginalized within the educational and research process” (p. 636). In the technology-enabled environment within which academic libraries operate, Phipps maintains, there exists a substantial threat of competition. There is a real possibility that the corporate world will develop capabilities so valuable that users will turn these sources in lieu of the library to fulfill their information needs. A primary focus of academic libraries today, some authors argue, should be in understanding their users' needs and ensuring the competent delivery of goods and services, so as to avoid becoming obsolete (see, for example, Phipps, 2001; Todaro, 2001).

**A Backdrop: Organizational Theory**

In recent years, authors of organizational management theory have discussed and debated extensively a perplexing question: Which organizational structure is most capable of surviving the inundation of change inherent in today’s information environment? In this debate, it seems there is only one point on which theorists have reached general consensus: organizations today must be capable of flexibility, and of evolving and learning continually (see Deiss & Giesecke, 1985; Honea, 1997; Perrow, 1985). Deiss and Giesecke eloquently write: “the ability to challenge assumptions and mental models is key to organizational learning and organizational learning is key to survival and success” (p. 100).

What history has shown, and what many researchers in organizational management theory have concluded, is that likely there is not one structure that will best support all organizations today. The size of an organization, level of homogeneousness of its culture, nature of its product or service, and other factors all will influence which structure will prove most successful in supporting an organization (see Ouchi, 1993; Perrow, 1985).

**The Current Organizational Structure of Academic Libraries**

Like other organizations, libraries must assess whether or not the way in which they are structured today will allow them to succeed in the future (Todaro, 2001). In an assessment of academic libraries, one must address the following questions: How are academic libraries currently organized?
Does this structure provide the flexibility needed in the changing environment? If not, how might these libraries better function?

*Current Organization of Academic Libraries*

The majority of academic libraries today are organized according to a traditional hierarchical structure. Honea (1997) describes in detail the principles of this structure:

The organizational principals of the typical academic library are essentially those formulated by Frederick Taylor at the opening of (the twentieth) century. Supervisors (are assumed to) possess the knowledge necessary for the performance of those tasks under their supervision. These tasks and the knowledge to perform them are allotted according to principals of efficiency to the workers who perform them within their prescribed purviews. Each level is supervised by the level above it…based on the assumption of successively superior expertise. The formal organization assumes a pyramidal form of increasing expertise and authority for supervision. The hierarchy (within academic libraries) is…commonly a “high” one, with multiple management levels (p. 184).

*Effectiveness of Organizational Hierarchies*

For at least three millennia, hierarchies have been used by organizations to layer staff into formal levels of work responsibilities and accountability (Owens, 1999). The hierarchical organizational structure has survived for good reason. Hierarchies have proved exceedingly successful in allowing organizations to employ large numbers of workers and to preserve accountability for the work they do (Jaques, 1990). Further, historically, organizational hierarchies have proved capable of great stability (Honea, 1997).

In recent years, authors of information science literature have begun to criticize the efficacy of traditional hierarchical structures in academic library organizations. These authors argue that organizational hierarchies, as they are currently structured and utilized, are not the most effective means to respond to the increasing amount of change faced in academic library organizations. Although hierarchies indeed are capable of great stability and survivability, they argue, hierarchies are relatively inflexible and function best in a static environment (see, for example, Honea, 1997).
However, neither these authors nor organizational management theorists have proposed to date an organizational structure that has proved more successful than the organizational hierarchy.

**Pushing the Hierarchy to Productivity Limits**

Despite the drawbacks of hierarchy, then, attempting to discard the structure all together is not necessarily the best solution to today’s needs. Jacques (1990) maintains that a change from hierarchy to some other sort of structural form is not what is required in the present information environment. Instead, he argues, what is needed is a better understanding of how hierarchies should work—how they can be utilized to achieve a “more effective deployment of (employee) talent and energy,” and release and sustain among employees both inventiveness and adaptability (p. 127).

It may be possible to retain the structure of the hierarchy along with its inherent benefits—organized framework of communication, reliable structure for accountability and advancement, and so forth—yet make changes within the structure that allow the organization to function with greater flexibility and efficacy. For example, the hierarchical structure might serve as a platform in which teams can operate. Further, an organization might cultivate an environment within the hierarchy in which individuals close to the base are more involved in decision-making, and more fully empowered generally.

*A Team-Based Approach within the Hierarchy*

Authors of organizational theory, when discussing hierarchies and teams, tend to support one organizational form or the other. However, it is possible for the two structures can co-exist. An organization might be structured according to a hierarchy, but facilitate a team-oriented approach within the hierarchy. According to Lubans (1996), this structure proved successful at Duke University Libraries.

In 1985, Duke University Library Organization assessed the current information environment and determined that it was necessary to change its traditional bureaucratic structure to an organizational structure that could more nimbly handle change. The organization moved to “participatory structure” which not only permitted, but also invited, participation among employees at all levels within the organization. Basically, this organization moved to a team-based approach within its
existing hierarchy. To accomplish this, the library emphasized the value to the organization of each person’s perspective. They moved decision making closer to where the actual work was done. The library initiated separate discussion forums for supervisors, support staff, and librarian. The forums addressed similar topics and input was directed to the administration through structured channels. Every employee had a voice, and many staff ideas were implemented. “The notion of someone not being allowed to think library-wide and to talk laterally to a colleague in another department was relegated to the ‘old way’ of working…” (Lubans, 1996, p. 29).

By moving to this team-based approach, Duke University Libraries sought to eliminate complexity, duplication of work, and irrational organizational processes. The Library discovered that many redundancies had been built into the hierarchy, layer by layer, by management. They streamlined their processes, which resulted in increased productivity and satisfaction of staff. All of these changes were made while still preserving the structure of the hierarchy. In the words of Lubans, Duke University Libraries “pushed the hierarchy to its productivity limits” (1996, p. 29).

**Moving Decision Making Closer to the Source**

Owens (1999) states that one of the largest problems with hierarchy is the placement of the decision making power at “the tip of its symbol—the pyramid” (p. 583). Ouchi and Price (1993) maintain that hierarchical organizations are “naturally and inevitably hostile to the growth and needs of individuals” (p. 62). Inherent in hierarchical organizations, these authors argue, is a structure in which individuals higher in the pyramid impose commands and restrictions on those in lower-level positions, fostering dependence and restricting psychological success of the less powerful.

Honea (1997) asserts that this issue is particularly important in academic libraries. “The traditional hierarchical administrative structure in academic libraries,” she maintains, “is in internal conflict with its own culture and is ineffective for dealing with a rapidly changing environment” (p. 183). Academic libraries operate within academia, Honea writes, a culture in which individuals are expertise-oriented, of high intellectual ability, and allowed and encouraged to operate independently. Academic library staff members are drawn primarily from this academic environment. And, particularly in recent years, staff members even at the lowest levels have been required to specialize in specific areas. Thus, Honea argues, the library has evolved in the direction of an expertise culture, consistent with the University environment, while its formal hierarchical organization has remained
position-oriented. The result, Honea maintains, is tension and conflict between expertise-oriented employees and the position-oriented organizational hierarchy.

Moreover, Honea asserts, as academic library users are predominantly expertise-oriented faculty and students, there exists in academic libraries another conflict in cultures. When problems arise, independently minded academic users have a difficult time understanding library staff’s need to refer decision making to higher authority. They expect that decisions should be made immediately and decisively by the experts in the front lines. This encourages frustration in interactions between users and staff. Honea argues the need in academic library organizations to “break down the inherent resistance within the hierarchical structure and thrust individual responsibility down into lower levels, where the greatest congruence between contact with problems and necessary information for solving them can be achieve” (p. 186). In other words, those lower in the ranks should be liberated to utilize their expertise to respond to and solve problems efficiently and effectively.

Honea does not assert that hierarchies should be eliminated; she simply encourages a more flexible hierarchical structure—one that balances the needs of formal stability and individual freedom. If individuals are allowed to address problems and tasks within their areas of expertise, Honea maintains, the organization will be positioned to more effectively meet the needs of a changing environment. At the same time these organization needs are realized, personal needs (self-actualization) of employees will be met, fostering higher morale. Greater empowerment and higher morale among staff members will, in turn, lead to greater customer satisfaction (Honea, 1997).

Lubans (2001) agrees with Honea’s conclusion. He asserts that allowing library staff to take ownership of customer problems will result in an increase in customer satisfaction. Lubans stresses that middle management are central to this form of staff empowerment. It is essential, he asserts, that managers support staff crossing departmental lines to assist and facilitate the satisfaction of library users.

**Looking to the Future**

Managers not only must consider their organizations in terms of the present environment, they also must equip their organizations to survive successfully into the future. This requires strategic planning.
**Scenarios in Strategic Planning**

Scenarios are used with increasing frequency by organizations as part of their strategic planning process. Scenario-based planning, fundamentally, is a strategic thinking, planning, and change tool. In scenario planning, managers and staff develop stories of alternative, possible futures. These stories summarize how alternative futures might look, then describe the impacts such futures might have on the organization. Using these stories or scenarios, managers can choose strategies to help the organization move toward its most likely, or most desired, future (Deiss & Giesecke, 1999; Hannabuss, 2001).

Scenario-based planning pushes organization members to expand upon their mental models of how the organization functions. Considering the unknown allows organizations to move beyond “safe” thinking and prepares them to proceed with greater flexibility into the unknown (Deiss & Giesecke, 1999). “Scenarios, above all, are attempts to learn from the future before it happens, and to prepare for action as it unfolds” (Hannabuss, 2001, p. 169).

*Scenario-based Planning in the Modified Hierarchy*

Scenario-based planning is a participative, team-oriented process. Scenario development relies on full participation of organization members in identifying, building, and understanding story lines; scenarios must be “owned” by their participants (Hannabuss, 2001). “Involving as many people as possible in the building of the future scenario allows for a richness of texture and dimension which rarely occurs when the future scenario is devised by a small top leadership group, or, alternatively, a committee or a task force.” In the creating a future, “every employee’s imagination and knowledge is tapped,” as each employee is the greatest expert at the tasks (s)he performs” (Deiss & Giesecke, 1999, p.101).

Thus, the process of scenario development is antithetical to management decision making in traditional hierarchical organizations. Scenarios require participative or democratic decision making rather than “paternalistic, duty-led” models of behavior (Hannabuss, 2001). Conversely, this strategic planning tool is compatible with the modified hierarchical structures discussed earlier in this paper. Organizational hierarchies that employ teams or groups in problem solving and that
provide effective decision making power to lower-level “experts” are compatible with the team-, full-organization centered approach of scenario-based strategic planning.

Summary

Today, most academic libraries are organized according to a traditional hierarchical structure. Although the traditional hierarchical structure provides important accountability and communication channels within the organization, the structure’s relative inflexibility limits its functionality in today’s changing environment. A modified hierarchy that supports teams and/or increases the decision-making power of experts at its base might serve the academic library more effectively. This modified hierarchical organization not only will be better equipped to function successfully in today’s changing environment, it also will be better suited to imagining the possibilities of future changes, and plan and adapt accordingly.
References


