

Bob Schoofs

Abolish the periodicals department

How one library restructured and redistributed the work

As academic libraries strive to meet the challenges of the 21st century, we need to examine new ways to fulfill our educational mission. Simply continuing to do things the same way we always have is no longer an option.

On the one hand, technology is rapidly changing how we go about our work. On the other hand, competition among institutions of higher learning is such that only those who provide the best educational experience for their students will thrive.

Faced with these challenges, college and university libraries have implemented a variety of reorganizational strategies. A review of the literature provides copious examples.

More recent examples include the excellent article by Mori Lou Higa and others describing changes at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center¹ and the collection of articles edited by Bradford Lee Eden, which deals specifically with the reorganization of library technical services.²

For its part, Grand Valley State University (GVSU) has taken the unusual step of doing away with its periodicals department. This article will explain how and why this happened.

Organizational challenge

GVSU is a Masters I institution of approximately 20,000 students, whose libraries are staffed by 26 professional librarians and 31 support staff (FTE). Located in West Michigan, GVSU has two main campuses and several smaller facilities.

GVSU has grown rapidly from its origins in the 1960s to become the institution it is today. One area in which that growth has outstripped the facilities is the library. Realizing the need for bold new leadership, the former director's position was converted to a deanship. A national search resulted in the hiring of an energetic new dean in the summer of 2005, Lee Van Orsdel.

Not only did the library need a new dean, it also needed a new organizational structure. The former structure, in which every librarian reported directly to the director, was suited to the much smaller organization in which it originated. The more complex realities of the present required a radically different approach.

While library faculty members were in agreement that a new structure was needed, how to go about designing this new structure was unclear. Even before the new dean was hired, a group of librarians proposed the Provisional Organization for Communication, which was adopted in January 2005.

In this plan there were six groups: public services and library instruction, electronic resources, purchasing, collection development, access to resources, and branches and special services. Library staff self-selected into one or more of these groups. Acknowledging the importance of having the involvement and buy-in of all staff, the hope was that every staff member would select at least one group.

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Each group then elected a leader who met and communicated regularly with those in the group about issues of interest to the group. The leader of each group also represented its interest on the newly formed Dean's Advisory Committee, which consisted of the acting dean and the representatives of the six groups.

This Provisional Organization for Communication did help begin the process for structural change on a limited basis. It also provided elected representatives from throughout the libraries for the Dean's Advisory Council, which played a crucial role in the reorganization that followed.

Restructuring

When the new dean arrived in the summer of 2005, she knew restructuring the library organization was a high priority. Since there was already an elected representative group in place (the Dean's Advisory Council), it was decided that this body would be an appropriate one to tackle this task, working with the dean. The former acting dean was added to the group under the new name of the Transitional Advisory Council.

In discussing reorganization of the libraries, it became obvious that a whole new model was needed. So the council imagined what the libraries' structure could look like if started from scratch. Doing this helped us to realize that we were devoting too much staff time and expertise to some functions (like distance education) at the expense of other more critical needs (like effective liaison relationships with the academic departments on our campuses). The council also decided that it was no longer in the best interest of the libraries to have a separate periodicals department. Several factors contributed to this decision.

One factor was the decision to move ahead aggressively in converting paper journal subscriptions to electronic format. This shift greatly reduced staff time previously spent on activities like check-in, processing, claiming, and binding.

Another factor was the establishment of a new position called electronic resources administrator. This person is responsible for set-up and maintenance of electronic resources of various kinds, including electronic journals.

Previously electronic journals, like paper journals, were managed by the periodicals department, although there was some overlap with other areas of the library for journals accessed electronically via database aggregators. With the reorganization, the electronic resources administrator was assigned two to three additional staff to help with this work as part of an Electronic Resources Management Team.

As of 2006, the libraries have about 1,200 print subscriptions. This number will continue to decline as more titles are converted to online versions. But who is handling these subscriptions now that there is no longer a periodicals department? On a processing level, this work is now folded into a new Acquisitions/Cataloging Team, which is responsible for the behind-the-scenes work for library materials in all tangible forms (i.e., excluding electronic resources).

The new director of access services librarian will provide oversight of this unit as well as manage some of the larger issues in dealing with the libraries' subscription agent.

The more professional aspects of serials work formerly handled by the periodicals librarian will now be dispersed. Subject librarians who were formerly assigned individually to specific academic departments have now been formed into teams by broader disciplines. Part of their new assignment will be selecting appropriate resources in all formats for those disciplines. Previously subject librarians were largely responsible for monographic purchases. Journals were handled differently since many are of use to more than one department, and, unlike monographs, initiating a subscription has budgetary implications beyond the current year.

Further coordination of serials subscriptions is now done by the collection development librarian, another new position in the library.

The final part of serials work formerly done by the periodicals department was the physical maintenance of the periodicals collection.

In the main library periodicals are shelved together on one floor of the library. Maintaining these shelves of bound back issues and current issues was part of the regular work of the periodicals department. This work has been taken over by a new Stacks/Inventory Management Team. Formerly the libraries circulation department took care of stacks management for monographs, and the periodicals department did so for periodicals. The new Stacks/Inventory Management Team now handles this for all formats.


Summary

As part of a major reorganization of the GVSU Libraries, the periodicals department was disbanded. Work formerly done by the department is now dispersed to several other areas: the Electronic Resources Team, the Acquisitions/Cataloging Team, the Stacks/Inventory Management Team, teams of subject librarians, the director of access services, and the collection development librarian.

The efficacy of these changes will need to be monitored, with subsequent modifications made, as needed. What is true in life is surely true in academic libraries: the one constant is change.

Notes

1. Mori Lou Higa, Redesigning a library's organizational structure, *College and Research Libraries* 66, no. 1 (January 2005), 41-58.

2. Bradford Lee Eden, *Innovative Redesign and Reorganization of Library Technical Services: Paths for the Future and Case Studies* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited 2004), 480. 

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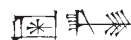
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