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Information Consulting: The Key to Success in Academic Libraries

Abstract

Information consulting is essential to the success, lasting impact, and viability of academic libraries. Traditional liaison programs, while helpful, are too passive and lack impact. Topics such as the driving forces behind the need for information consulting, the implications of implementing a consulting program, and the elements of successful consulting are explored.

The viability of academic libraries is increasingly at risk due to organizational developments, technological changes, the changing nature of information services, and the evolution of scholarly communication. These developments are forcing libraries to face the challenge of remaining viable and integral participants in research and educational processes at academic institutions. Academic libraries must continue to market and provide value-added services to increase their efficacy, visibility, and image on college campuses. In such a time of challenge and opportunity, academic librarians and libraries must be effectively integrated into the instructional and research fabric of colleges and universities. Information consulting with scholars facilitates the integration of libraries into critically important teaching, learning, and research processes.

Information consulting is a dynamic, interactive process in which librarians are full partners with faculty and students, facilitating teaching and research. The information consultant cultivates active partnerships with students and scholars, collaborating on the design of meaningful learning experiences for students and providing relevant value-added information. Key elements of information literacy and scholarly information are integrated into the consulting relationship. Delivering the right information to the right people at the right time underscores the value of librarians and libraries. To remain relevant, librarians must become effective consultants. engaging scholars in an

active consulting program, librarians, and as a result the library as a whole, are actively integrated into the scholarly activities of the academic institution. Librarians and libraries that do not become effectively networked on campuses via consulting will be less relevant and will not be included in scholarly communications and research processes. This will affect status as well as budgets, available resources, and services.

This article focuses on consulting with faculty, administrators, and other related scholars. We are not referring to classic or standard “faculty liaison” programs. Traditional liaison programs are simply too passive. Existing research does not sufficiently address issues of relevant high-impact consulting in the academic environment. Current programs are too insular and library-focused rather than client- and institute-focused. The outgrowth of subject specialists in academic libraries to facilitate collection development and handle complex subject-based research is a step in the right direction, but the changing nature of scholarly communication and inquiry requires a more dynamic, communicative, and customized approach. The current literature and existing liaison programs provide a sound basis for cooperation with scholars. However, they do not stress the necessity of high-impact information consulting that leads to effective partnerships among librarians and faculty. Academic libraries must promote information consulting that is dynamic, proactive, and adds value to the organization.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a description of the faculty liaison program at George Washington University, Stebelman and others focus on the significant influence that faculty as well as administrators have on library budgets, resources, and service capabilities.¹ Faculty and administrators comprise an influential and powerful constituency for academic libraries. Dramatic changes in scholarly communication also call for increased interaction with the university’s scholars. It is interesting that the program calls for one

“faculty outreach librarian,” as opposed to a comprehensive information consulting program.

Several articles argue that liaison programs are needed to communicate effectively with faculty, to provide value-added services, and to collaborate with scholars on issues of teaching and learning. The collegial bond between librarians and faculty is discussed.² Lipow reminds us that faculty serve as an important entrée to the students.³ A series of articles provides practical tips and suggestions for working with faculty.⁴ *Liaison Services in ARL Libraries* also suggests ideas, options, and methodologies for “getting in the door” and succeeding in partnerships with faculty.⁵

In “Guidelines for Liaison Work,” a compilation of “best practices” published by the American Library Association in *RQ*, *liaison* is defined as “the relationships, formal and informal, that librarians ... develop with the library’s clientele for the specific purpose of seeking input regarding the selection of materials.”⁶ This definition reveals a key point that tends to underscore the articles published on working with faculty. The literature focuses on the librarian/liaison as essentially a bibliographer or collection development officer, not as an information consultant who is actively engaged with scholars in a full array of instructional and research activities. Programs described in the literature tend to be more passive, not dynamic and proactive.

The entrepreneurial perspective is stressed for information consultants in special libraries. Martha Strizich discusses information consultants in the private sector, indicating that a successful consultant is part librarian, part entrepreneur, and part computer specialist.⁷ Effective consultants possess relevant expertise and an entrepreneurial spirit. They are also optimistic, enthusiastic, confident, and self-disciplined. Strizich’s assertions are supported by Vickers in “Information Consultancy in the U.K.,” with an emphasis on entrepreneurial activities.⁸ *Information Consultancy* is a comprehensive analysis of information consulting for information scientists. The book

outlines successful practices as well as the qualities needed to succeed as a consultant.⁹

The managerial and business literature is filled with articles that discuss the nature of consulting, providing suggestions on becoming effective consultants.¹⁰ A significant number of the suggestions are directly applicable to success as an information consultant in the academic library. Librarians need to be more aware of the practices of effective consultants in business or the private sector. The reality of “bottom lines” and the importance of the entrepreneurial spirit are elements that will readily contribute to success as an information consultant in colleges and universities.

THE DRIVING FORCES

The driving forces behind the need for active and engaging information consulting in academic libraries include: the growth of interdisciplinary research; changes in information-seeking behaviors and practices; the fact that information is no longer location dependent; the changing nature of scholarly communication; the growing reality that some scholars do not view traditional libraries as essential elements of the university community; and the fact that faculty are essential to the success and viability of academic libraries. While a number of these forces are interdependent and related, they all point to an important opportunity for academic libraries. Academic librarians cannot assume that students and scholars will continue to view libraries as principal information options. Powerful forces continue to alter the concept of the library in academic communities while changing the information needs and information-seeking behaviors of library users.

Developments in information technology and the rapid pace of the information explosion¹¹ are two main catalysts for changes in academic libraries over the past two decades. Technologically driven changes have altered the nature of information services and librarian-client interactions. The de-emphasis on the actual physical library

and the move to space- and time-independent services has reduced the necessity and frequency of client visits to academic libraries.¹² The World Wide Web, as well as other means of electronic information delivery, has allowed libraries to deliver services and information to clientele on their desktops. The growth of services such as end-user remote database access, full-text online resources, e-mail and real-time chat-based “ask a librarian” services, digital libraries, and electronic interlibrary loan and document delivery requests have combined to decrease the importance of the physical library and as a result, decrease the natural visibility of libraries on college campuses while altering the dynamics of the librarian-scholar relationship.¹³

The information explosion is obvious and well documented. In addition to the large quantity of print materials, the volume of information available electronically is increasing exponentially. The number of Internet hosts increased from under 20 million in January 1996 to over 70 million in January 2000.¹⁴ The volume of scientific information has been increasing dramatically, according to studies conducted by Derek Price, John Naisbitt, and Andrew Odlyzko. With interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary initiatives and with the emergence of new disciplines, it is likely that the volume of information will continue to increase.¹⁵

One must also consider traditional scholarly information-seeking behaviors and practices among certain segments of the academic community. Scientists and engineers have a well-established tendency to consult other sources of information before turning to libraries.¹⁶ While traditional in person visits to libraries continue and electronic information resources provide libraries and their respective clientele with innovative and effective access mechanisms, libraries cannot ignore the possibility, and in some cases reality, of becoming passive providers of information. The net result is that librarians need, and must embrace the opportunity, to engage scholars with innovative and effective services that stretch beyond traditional library boundaries.

Essentially, the move to electronic services and information provision reduces the physical role of the central academic library and drives librarians to adapt library-bound services, transcend traditional boundaries, and move from reactive to proactive service models.

Dramatic increases in interdisciplinary research have combined with technological developments and changes in scholarly communication to fuel the need for information consulting in academic libraries. Interdisciplinary research is growing dramatically. Interdisciplinary centers and research institutes being created on campuses worldwide are representative of current interdisciplinary trends. As new fields of inquiry develop and the literature in scholarly disciplines comes from increasingly varied sources, scholars will continue to use and demand increasingly different information resources and services. For example, a study of the literature in chemistry indicated that nearly 50% of the cited articles were not in chemistry.¹⁷ Interdisciplinary teamwork is interactive, dynamic, and complex. More value is added if librarians participate on these teams as organizers, integrators, and interpreters, facilitating efforts to illustrate and synthesize different points of view.¹⁸

The growth of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research programs reduces the viability and legitimacy of liaison programs organized along departmental lines to provide basic library services. Standard liaison models based solely on departmental organization and dependent on clientele to generate information requests can be easier to conceptualize, implement, and maintain, but they are not the most effective approach. Interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary research requires academic librarians to customize their services and work in flexible teams to anticipate, adjust to, and satisfy divergent forms of scholarly inquiry.

A critically important driving force behind the need for information consulting programs is the central role faculty play in the success of academic libraries. Scholars

want information professionals to be proactive. Stahl states “Proactivity is therefore the first trait I want in a librarian at my home institution.”¹⁹ Tseng indicates that “if librarians wish to remain relevant, they must focus on the information provider/user relationship. They must seek to package, customize, and market economically useful information in more appealing and aggressive ways. Otherwise, others will no doubt come to the market-place and take over the information vending role as suppliers, thereby rendering mainstream librarians and information professionals anachronistic and redundant.”²⁰

Anne Lipow’s article on the “how and why” of faculty outreach asserts that these activities are “critical to the viability of librarianship in an academic institution”.²¹ Additional weight is given to the issue of faculty influence on the success of academic libraries when considering the increasing view among faculty that the library is no longer an essential element of the campus community. Faculty and administrators are the primary agents in determining library resources, the library’s overall impact on the campus community, and librarian status and compensation.²² Poor service, miscommunications, and misunderstandings impact faculty and administrative views on and use of the library, thereby influencing their intellectual, vocal, and financial support. Faculty also constitute a key entrée to graduate and undergraduate students. As faculty and administrators filter their perception of the library onto the student body, they wield significant influence over student use and recognition of the library.

Technology has driven changes in scholarly communication as well as dramatic changes in information-seeking behaviors and practices. As a result, scholars physically visit the library and engage in face to face encounters with librarians less frequently. As scholarly communication and information seeking gravitate toward online sources, customized web portals, and desktop access, students and scholars become more dependent on remote computer access but at the same time more overwhelmed by information noise and in need of information literacy skills. The result is twofold.

Scholars need personalized assistance to effectively locate information and minimize information noise. At the same time, they are performing more and more research from their offices through the desktop. How then can we reconcile the need for customized assistance with the reality of scholars performing research independently of the library? One answer is information consulting.

DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE

The term “consulting” implies two roles: the consultant and the client. It also implies that the client is seeking advice from the consultant (who is seen as the “expert”) in order to find a solution to a problem or need. In the academic environment, consulting is much more. To remain a relevant and vital part of the academic environment librarians must embrace a philosophy of consulting that looks beyond traditional library roles such as collection development, reference services, access services, and circulation.

The *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition for the verb *consult* is “to take counsel with; to seek advice from.” That is certainly a familiar definition. However, the OED’s *primary* definition is even closer to the mark: “to take counsel together, deliberate, confer.”²³ These definitions reflect the key differences between traditional liaison activities and information consulting. The liaison tends to be more passive, providing advice and counsel when approached by scholars. In contrast, the consultant takes the initiative to develop active partnership with scholars, conferring and deliberating on important instructional and research issues. Consultants anticipate and assess information needs, delivering value-added information and services in a timely way. When consulting with individual scholars, it is clear that the consultant is working with him or her to find solutions to their unique research or instructional needs. The consultant is providing counsel and giving advice. But true Information Consulting fulfills the definition of *taking counsel together* and *conferring*.

Consulting is about partnerships. The cultivation of partnerships with scholars is a strategic activity. When librarians approach their work with scholars as a partnership there are major implications. Rather than an atmosphere of “cooperation,” where either party has their own goals and they cooperate for the purpose of achieving those goals, there arises an atmosphere of “collaboration.” Each person brings their own goals to the partnership, but together they define shared goals and work to achieve those shared goals.

In practice, the consultant becomes a partner in every aspect of academic life. Many academic scholars are not used to partnering in this way. They are used to working in an environment with a high degree of autonomy.²⁴ But once the relationship is established they readily appreciate the benefits to themselves as teachers and researchers. During the research process a consultant learns about the interests of a scholar. With this knowledge one becomes proactive in the delivery of library services both to individual scholars and to groups of faculty with similar interests. Likewise, this activity gives the scholar an enhanced image of the librarian (information consultant) as a professional who they can work with on many levels: research partner, information provider, and valuable resource.²⁵

By virtue of being a holistic approach, partnering with faculty also facilitates other goals. Faculty are more likely to refer students (graduate and undergraduate) to the library or information consultant for assistance, guidance, or instruction. When scholars have a strong relationship with their consultant they are also inclined to invite the consultant to participate in curriculum development. Being involved at this level of academic life allows the library to be proactive in collection development as well as instructional and reference services. It sets up a cycle in which the consultant learns what is needed for the curriculum, the scholar learns what information resources are available for students, the consultant ensures the collection meets the needs of the new

curriculum (in advance of the start of classes), and the scholar designs assignments that make best use of the resources at hand. Wade Kotter describes a similar cycle in terms of a “feedback loop”²⁶ in which faculty and librarian support for each other’s efforts increases positive attitudes in both.

Another area in which a consultant can get involved is the implementation of a set of information competencies for any discipline or field of study. In the context of a consultant-faculty partnership, there is easier access to classes in order to provide information instruction. A scholar who is in a partnership with an information consultant is more interested in inviting the consultant into his/her classroom, often resulting in a partnership that leads to additional information literacy programs. The scholar already knows what the consultant has to offer and they have developed goals together that include information competency and information-seeking skills for students.

Consulting gets librarians out of the library and into the academy! There is evidence of the success of collaborations between faculty and librarians.²⁷ Consulting takes that success a step farther. One of the main benefits of building partnerships with faculty is the creation of trust. When there is an environment of trust and accessibility, faculty are likely to build goodwill for the Library by referring their colleagues to an information consultant. They are also likely to encourage their colleagues to invite the consultant to curriculum development meetings and into their classrooms.

IMPLICATIONS

The primary implications of establishing a dynamic information consulting program include:

- Cultural and philosophic changes are essential;
- Substantial commitment of time and effort is required;
- Relative priorities are affected;

- Libraries are included in important activities (loops);
- Librarians and libraries will be more relevant; and
- Budgets and other available resources will be affected.

The implementation of information consulting necessitates a serious commitment of time, work, and, in particular, philosophy. Without a major philosophic commitment from all areas and levels in the library or organization, consulting will not be successful over time. Directors of libraries must be philosophically committed to the program. Other managers across the library must be committed. Librarians in public services, technical services, and other areas must be involved and committed to the success of information consulting. Levels of commitment will vary, but all must be involved and supportive.

As a result, all professionals need to be aware of the goals and basic activities of consulting. Information consulting must be a strategic initiative that is ongoing, not a one-time activity. Integrated into each librarian's day-to-day activities, consulting is considered strategically important and librarians are expected to be effective information consultants.

Supervisors assess the degree to which successful consulting is attained. The benchmarks for success as an information consultant are discussed by participants in the program and used to stimulate effective performance. In this process, output measures are identified and assessment is not totally based on anecdotal evidence. Administrators must ensure that all participants are aware of expectations as well as the measures of success.

A commitment of time and effort is also essential to success. The activities of consulting need to be effectively integrated into the librarian's day-to-day schedule; these activities are not added on. It is important that other activities essentially support the consulting endeavor. If the work of the institution's students and scholars is integral to the success of the college or university, then working with faculty and students must

be critically important for all librarians. Therefore, the librarians' relative priorities are affected. Effective consulting underscores success for the librarians, for the libraries, and the campus.

Mentoring and training contribute significantly to the success of an information consulting program. Libraries that embrace the philosophies of the "learning organization" are likely to succeed. Effective consulting is not simplistic. Participating librarians need to know that mistakes are tolerated and that risks are supported. Climates or environments in which creativity and innovation are cultivated tend to facilitate success for consultants. There are numerous roads to success.

The concept of a library as a place is changing and, as a result, libraries that are not actively involved with scholars will not be as effective or successful. Usage of libraries is increasingly changing. Libraries that are philosophically and, in practice, looking outwardly and working with scholars will be more relevant. The opportunities to collaborate with scholars to assess information needs, to provide value-added information, to participate on research teams, and to integrate information competencies into students' learning experiences are numerous. Librarians must get out of the library and collaborate with students and scholars.

Librarians and libraries that do not promote information consulting will be less relevant over time. The information-seeking behaviors and practices of faculty and students are changing dramatically. They are becoming less dependent on libraries. Gate counts in academic libraries have been decreasing for a decade. It's not necessary to come to the library for assistance. Libraries that are not committed to information consulting will be moved out of important "information loops." The implications are considerable. In particular, budgets and available resources will be affected. Construction of new libraries will be affected. Librarians and libraries cannot wait. Consulting with scholars is a necessity.

ELEMENTS OF SUCCESSFUL CONSULTING

Individual skills and attributes, effective processes and methodologies, and organizational support and change are all key elements of successful information consulting. While the authors recognize that few organizations or individuals will have all of the characteristics and skills discussed in this section, we feel it is important to identify the full set of elements involved in successful consulting. Identifying the array of characteristics that facilitate successful consulting allows us to recognize the ideal while identifying areas for growth and development. Not all of the attributes listed here are inherent to academic librarians. That is exactly the point. Academic librarians must look beyond traditional service models and identify areas for learning, growth, and skill development.

Success with information consulting in academic libraries stems from cross-institutional support, training, and resource sharing. It is critical that all library personnel are either involved in or support a consulting program. Different levels within the organization will have varied responsibilities, but strategic consulting requires support from administrators, middle managers, and service-level librarians. Major challenges administrators will face in implementing a consulting program include 1) involving all departments; 2) personnel recruitment and training; and 3) resistance from portions of the staff. Strategic planning and persistent support are the keys in facing challenges to the program.

One of the most important roles for administrators is developing a sound ideological foundation for the program to promote support among other librarians and staff. However, theoretical support is not enough. If individual information consultants do not have the time and resources to successfully integrate themselves into the scholarly community, then the program will fail. Administrators also play a key role in

developing training and assessment tools while guiding change and the growth of the program to meet the needs of particular scholarly communities.

While administrators and managers must provide the resources, training, and organizational support for consultants, the individual consultant must also cultivate and develop specific characteristics that lead to success. In becoming effective consultants, librarians learn from each other by working in teams as well as learning from other professionals with years of experience invested into consulting. Management consultants have refined the foundations and practices of consulting in the private sector for years. Although management consulting addresses different needs and focus areas than academic library consulting, librarians need to examine and apply the significant research and experience that is applicable to information consulting in the academic environment.

Techniques such as establishing achievable goals by underpromising and overdelivering, partnering with clientele, cultivating internal support, managing expectations as well as deadlines, communicating with clients consistently during the course of a project, listening more than you speak, and studying and understanding your client base are valuable skills academic librarians need to cultivate.²⁸ Management consulting focuses on high-impact services to produce tangible results based on the client's needs. Wickham argues that consultants need three sets of skills for success: analysis – to create solutions and effective ideas; project management – to put solutions into practice; and relationship building – to listen actively and communicate effectively as positive solutions are attained.²⁹

Understanding useful management consulting theories such as cultivating organizational support, understanding the client's needs, shaping solutions around a client's actual needs rather than what the consultant thinks the client requires, and communicating clearly with clients provides a sound foundation for information

consultants in the academic setting. Comprehending the needs of the client and shaping solutions around those needs rather than perceived needs are important lessons for librarians to learn. The traditional academic librarian tends to shape solutions around what they think clientele need rather than their actual need. This has hindered our ability to work with scholars as partners. The information consultant must be able to focus on the needs of her respective clientele to develop creative solutions to meet those needs.

The information consultant must engage clientele in open communication with confidence and a willingness to listen and learn. Open communication allows the consultant to build rapport and trust with the client, communicate ideas succinctly and precisely, and to effectively market ideas. Communication skills such as active listening, interaction, presentation, and writing will all come into play as consultants work with scholars. Confidence allows the consultant to engage scholars as equal partners, facilitating the development of progressive ideas and solutions. Confidence in one's abilities promotes taking risks, which is essential in building a consulting program. Librarians cannot be afraid of negative or indifferent reactions from scholars. They must be willing to market and try a variety of solutions, some of which will undoubtedly fail but some of which will succeed. A willingness to listen and learn allows consultants to understand and in ideal cases, anticipate the information needs of the client. While identifying information needs and locating available information on the established topic are important skills, the truly effective consultant brings additional analytical skills to the relationship. The ability to process relevant information, identify the information's relationship to the client's need, and draw meaning from information to support decision making facilitates consulting success.

CONCLUSION

Movement toward higher, life-enhancing values represents an increase in value-added services. Movement toward lower, thing-enhancing values represents a decrease in value-added services.³⁰

Charles Martell's quote reveals the true value of information consulting. Rather than focusing simply on the ever-increasing quantity of information, consulting allows librarians to collaborate with scholars on personalized value-enhancing services. Consulting helps us move beyond traditional ways of thinking about libraries and toward innovative ways of meeting the changing needs of our user communities.

Information consulting provides opportunities for librarians to focus on the critically important information provider/client relationship. Librarians must aggressively customize, filter, synthesize, and market information for students, scholars, and administrators. If librarians do not meet the needs of students, scholars, and administrators, they will turn to other sources of information and other service providers. Traditional mass approaches of providing information services to increasingly diverse scholarly communities are no longer effective. Customizing information services is the key to informing and educating our clientele. Scholars fall into a number of varied research disciplines, cultures, and generations that require distinct information services delivered in a variety of formats. Consultants customize and personalize information services, adding value in the process, and facilitating collaborative efforts to transform information into knowledge.

Effective information consulting elevates the status of librarians and libraries. The activities associated with consulting are challenging and rewarding. Librarians work with scholars to develop and refine innovative ideas, to facilitate progress on instructional and research initiatives, to obtain funds for research, and to facilitate student learning by making the educational experience more meaningful. Additionally,

librarians work with scholars to integrate or transfer the results of research into meaningful applications, to examine emerging research areas, to detect and track important trends, and to scan and outline relevant R&D activities and technological developments.³¹

Information consulting facilitates the integration of academic libraries into the instructional and research fabric of the college or university. This integration is essential to the relevance of academic libraries. Information professionals cannot assume that students and scholars will view libraries as viable information options. A strategic integration of librarians and libraries into the scholarly community contributes significantly to institutional success at colleges and universities.

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²⁸ Whitwell & Arganbright, "Ten Tips for Becoming A Great Communication Consultant," pp. 44-45.; Mansdorf, "Ten Commandments for Consultants," pp. 19-24; Schaffer, "Looking at the 5 Fatal Flaws of Management Consulting," pp. 44-51; Schaffer, "Consulting for Results," pp. 44-52.

²⁹ Wickham, *Management Consulting*.

³⁰ Charles Martell, "The Disembodied Librarian in the Digital Age," *College & Research Libraries* 61 (January 2000): 13.

³¹ Mary Pensyl, "Emerging Roles for Academic Librarians in the Technology Transfer Process," *Science & Technology Libraries* 11 (1990): 61-73; David Woods, "American Libraries and Domestic Technology Transfer," *Science & Technology Libraries* 11 (1990): 39-47.