This Changes Everything: Transforming the Academic Library

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ABSTRACT. Library users and their expectations for services and collections have changed. Among the factors driving change are: networked technologies, powerful search engines available to all, social technologies and the digitization of everything, to name a few. A research university library staff reorganized to meet changed expectations and succeeded in transforming the organization and its culture. This article describes alterations in the library’s key functions that produced a new level of readiness to serve the university’s students and faculty into the future. The transformed library is outward facing, de-siloed, technology diffused, collaborative, and operated by an engaged staff who demonstrate leadership in small and large ways in all sections of the organization.

KEYWORDS organizational change, cultural change, technical services, collection development, branch libraries, leadership

The year is 1985. Seventeen-year-old Marty McFly, from a dreary and unhappy family in Hill Valley, California, climbs into an enhanced DeLorean. At the moment he achieves the speed of 88 miles per hour, he triggers the DeLorean’s time machine and finds himself stranded thirty years in the past, without enough fuel to return. He meets his high school-aged parents, changes and un-changes the past to avoid causing difficulties in the future, and finally makes his way back to the future after charging the DeLorean with a bolt of lightning transmitted from the town clock. Though Marty tries not to alter history, he returns to 1985 and finds his family transformed into a model of success and happiness.

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As Sul Lee suggests with this conference theme, there are interesting parallels between this story and current efforts to develop research libraries from lumbering old-fashioned organizations into agile, change-oriented enterprises pointed directly into the future. Like Doc Brown, the tinkering mad scientist who builds the time machine, librarians continually tinker with our past forms, reshaping them to reflect our perceptions of future needs. Much evidence indicates that transformation, not tinkering, is needed now. As the authors of the report “Redefining the Academic Library: Managing the Migration to Digital Information Services” write, “Prognosticators have been warning of the disruptive capacity of computers, networks, and other digital information technologies for at least three decades, and predictions of the local library’s demise can be found as far back as the 1960’s. There are a number of reasons to believe that ‘this time it’s different’” (Education Advisory Board, 2011, p. 5).

For these reasons and more, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) decided in 2004 that it was time to reinvest in the library. The improved economy was generating new revenue, and the University administration decided to improve library funding. After decades of making do, librarians at last had a chance to upgrade. Salaries improved, acquisitions increased, a new storage facility relieved desperate collection overcrowding, staffing for technology was increased and the hardware and software budgets grew significantly.

With funding relief at hand, the library leadership team began to envision a series of reorganizations that would align workflows with new technologies, modernize collection development and provide new scope for service innovation. And so over seven years—even in the face of subsequent economic downturn—everything changed. Together librarians and staff made such extensive and fundamental alterations in the way the library functioned that we believe the library to be transformed.

Transforming an institution with long traditions is difficult. Many features of the academic library have tremendous power to resist change: acres of print collections; aging and inflexible buildings; state and private institutional governance structures that include outdated personnel and financial regulations; multiple conflicting customer profiles; and, not least, librarians’ own perceptions and biases.

This article defines five conditions that characterize the UNC library after reorganization. The renewed library is outward facing, de-siloed, technology-diffused, collaborative, and operated by an engaged staff who demonstrate leadership in small and large ways in all sectors of the organization. In systematic reorganization the UNC library staff sought to plant and nurture these characteristics. That these conditions are uniformly present throughout the organization indicates that the staff succeeded in transforming the library and, most important, its culture.
As has been widely noted, library users and their expectations for services and collections have changed. Among the factors driving change are: networked technologies, powerful search engines available to all, social technologies and the digitization of everything, to name just a few. Some outside forces are friendly, such as collaborative relationships with other nearby research libraries. Others, such as ongoing fluctuations of state funding, seem more like friendly fire.

As UNC library staff worked to fulfill new expectations, they accomplished nothing short of transforming the organization and its culture. This paper describes alterations in the library’s key functions that produced a new level of readiness to serve the university’s students and faculty into the future.

Many of these observations and conclusions were shared with me in 11 small-group meetings that I held with 80 staff and librarians during the fall of 2011. I asked participants to identify the library’s most significant changes in recent years and to determine which changes were truly transformational. Participants also differentiated between changes that occurred as a result of outside forces and those that arose from within the organization itself. The five characteristics of the transformed library explored in this paper arose from these meetings.

In the retelling, these developments sound very much like small incremental changes over a long period. Also, they have a “Back to the Future” feeling because we deployed some old models reconfigured for current and future needs. Nevertheless, we are convinced that we succeeded in changing everything, that is, everything that matters most.

THE OUTWARD FACING LIBRARY

We know now that the long decline in annual building-based statistics represents real and permanent change. Today’s successful academic library faces outward to connect with patrons. No longer desk-bound, librarians meet with faculty members outside the library building, in faculty offices, departmental meetings, and informal settings. UNC health sciences librarians report spending more time in the various colleges they serve—for example, Medicine, Pharmacy and Public Health—than they do in their own library offices. Consultations that do take place in the library are now in such specialized settings as the Undergraduate Library’s Design Lab and Media Resources Center, where students learn graphic design and multimedia production.

When the collection was entirely print-based, the service dynamic was oriented toward the resources. Bibliographers and branch librarians maintained knowledge of the curriculum and research interests through conversations with faculty members, but the librarian’s primary attention was inward on assembling a physical collection based on selections from catalogs, firm
order slips, and approval plans. Journal cancellations even required faculty members to come to the library in order to see lists of candidate titles.

In reorganizing, UNC librarians chose a collection development model of departmental liaisons that pointed the service dynamic outward. The same individuals who offer classroom instruction, research strategy development, software selection and use, and the preparation of course resource lists now also develop collections in their areas of expertise.

Like collection-building, services also face outward. Chat reference, for example, moves the service where the user is. Student use of mobile technologies has motivated librarians to push services and resources out to individual devices. One discussion group participant commented that there has been a “shift from behind the desk, to creating tools and resources on the micro level, then recreating them on the macro level to be pushed out to groups.”

Course management systems also move services out to the user. In fact, traditional library services, such as course reserves, can now be managed by faculty themselves in Sakai or Blackboard.

Use of collections, too, is pushed outward. Faculty and students consult licensed electronic resources and digitized books, journals and primary resources from the home, lab, office or classroom. Even in the realm of traditional materials, UNC successfully moved more than one million printed volumes from the main library to offsite storage with only a few complaints. People can order these titles online for next-day delivery, again moving traditional library functions into the user’s realm and adding to the library’s outward-facing profile.

Throughout the course of the small group discussions, participants repeatedly emphasized the benefits of being an outwardly focused library: the more that librarians go to the user, literally leaving the building and the protective barrier of the reference desk, the better able they are to keep the library relevant to user needs.

Outward service orientation raises the question of the role of library facilities. For now, they remain an important part of the picture. Although print circulation continues to slide, students visit some library buildings as much as ever. Late-night and 24-hour facilities are in demand. Through focus groups and surveys, students tell us that a scholarly library atmosphere late at night in the main library is an important counterpoint to the bustle of the undergraduate library, the student union or dorms and apartments.

UNC’s primary library buildings are symbols of learning beloved by many citizens of the state. They represent a bridge between past and future. However, these buildings sometimes inhibit transformative change. It is very difficult to re-envision traditional services when tens of thousands of square feet are dominated by old-fashioned and inflexible shelving. A user walking through a UNC library building might wrongly conclude that, except for paint and upholstery, very little has changed.
A common theme among all eleven discussion groups was transformation in the way library staff work with each other. In the transformed library, boundaries between departments are permeable or invisible. Staff jobs change as the library changes, with new duties bringing together new work teams that will almost certainly change again in the future.

In a library characterized by rigid organizational structures, each staff member in a unit learns only one job, works mostly with other unit employees and reports to one supervisor who is charged with keeping everyone fulfilling their assigned duties. Piling up work completions, whether books re-shelved or catalog records submitted, becomes the chief objective of the section and staff orientation remains rigidly inward. Supervisors avoid releasing staff for development opportunities inside or outside the unit and committee service or team participation are considered distractions from unit production. Ironically, the production levels in such units tend to decline over time, further dragging down staff morale.

To change the way the UNC library builds collections, reference and collection development merged, eliminating a formerly rigid organizational line between the two. This wasn’t simply a merger on the organization chart, but a fundamental change in the jobs of over thirty librarians. The library no longer has bibliographers; all Research and Instructional Services librarians now have selection responsibilities. In addition, acquisition budget lines were streamlined and pooled into five fund groups representing broad disciplinary areas such as social sciences, humanities and so on. A team of librarians representing multiple subjects now manages each fund.

As boundaries between funds disappeared, interdisciplinarity became easier to support. One librarian commented that a recent serials review process in the new organization generated a sense of shared responsibility for the outcome. Librarians actively managed the process as teams, rather than being dragged along by it. Communication improved among selectors and between selectors, technical and fiscal services staff, and faculty members.

In siloed organizations where communication among units is limited, perceptions of inequity develop. One selector said that teams would not have worked in the old organization: “People would have thought that one person would spend all the money.” In the new organization everyone can see all the funds and, with fewer fund lines, teams must work in a collaborative and cross-disciplinary way to allocate them.

Discussion group participants agree that this reorganization was transformational. One librarian commented that the reorganization has given each selector a better overall sense of the library and its budget, and has allowed reference and collection development librarians to exercise a greater range of skills and responsibilities. Trust has increased, and the sense of satisfaction arising from successful collaboration is apparent. As an added benefit,
collection development is more efficient, fund assignment is faster and accounting practices have been simplified.

Staff also report transformational changes in technical services, where a division-wide reorganization in 2008 restructured units to recognize the growing shift toward electronic resources. Some say that the transformational action was subscribing to vendor-produced cataloging and processing for printed materials. This change freed staff to perform more complex work, such as configuring records from e-book or journal packages to enter the catalog.

Acquiring large numbers of electronic works changed nearly everything in technical services. Beyond the planned reorganization, budget reductions and hiring freezes between 2008 and 2011 reduced the size of the technical services workforce. To handle increased complexity with fewer staff, supervisors have implemented extensive cross training. Departmental and unit barriers have given way to cross-sectional groups which reconfigure often to address changes in workflow, new technologies, or new formats.

Discussion group participants had quite a lot to say about these developments:

- “Cross training to upgrade skills to shift to electronic [publications] is really happening now.”
- “There is more cross-departmental work. Organizational boundaries are softer. Staff are no longer intimidated to talk to each other. Jobs didn’t used to cross over. Silos are gone by default.”
- “Jobs have become more technical. For example, Gobi does batch uploading that requires work similar to programming. There are fewer positions but each has more complex work—can’t prescribe workflows. [Staff] have to make independent choices.”
- “Things are changing so fast that whatever is now will be different soon. Cross training is used all the time. Being in a constant state of change, people are giving up bean counting. As a field we [technical services] have let go of particulars to capture broader patterns.”

One area that continues to chart a path toward transformation is Special Collections, which has for decades been severely siloed in five separate collection and service units all in one building. The organization has successfully centralized technical services operations to make economies and to standardize practice. Research and instructional services staff have cross-trained across collections. One staff member said that working with others across the collections was eye-opening after years in just one area. However, limitations of the building itself, the prohibitive price tag for needed renovations, and the need to find just the right balance between eliminating silos and preserving the strong historic identity of each collection all make large-scale transformation a work still very much in progress.
THE TECHNOLOGY-DIFFUSED LIBRARY

In the fully transformed library at UNC, technology expertise flows to staff and users alike. In technical services, where use of various systems has been a major component of jobs for decades, there is a significant change in workflows. Batch uploads of electronic journal packages and e-book aggregations call for staff programming expertise. Employees who continue to perform traditional tasks connected with paper-based resources have been cross-trained into technology-rich positions. In collection development, librarians mastered online vendor order systems, creating a literal plug-in to technical services operations that was lacking when collection developers preferred manual processes.

The greatest force for technology diffusion has been the library’s aggressive move to electronic books and journals, and the mass digitization of rare books, manuscripts and archival materials in our own collections. Among discussion group participants there was broad agreement that this is overall the most transformational change for libraries, especially when tied to ubiquitous campus wireless and the growing vitality of mobile devices. There remain few jobs in the library that do not assist in providing electronic access to something or use multiple information technologies.

Technology diffusion has occurred in other ways as well. The University recently switched from a menu of productivity packages to a single system driven by one vendor. One systems staff member observed that adoption of the vendor’s sharable calendar service has brought a new level of comfort with technology. The ability to share calendars has softened departmental boundaries and encouraged acceptance of the productivity tools.

In a technology-diffused library, staff members throughout the organization embrace technological change and are willing to take some risk in trying new ones, even suggesting new software or new types of equipment and offering to bring up new systems. Wikis and blogs have pushed communication to a wide community outside the library but they also have the effect of diffusing communication technology skills to more library staff. As utilization of these programs proliferated, staff again became more comfortable with learning and integrating multiple programs and systems.

A challenge in fostering this style of organization is the elimination of purchase and implementation barriers to trying new systems or programs. Management can help achieve the necessary balance between careful resource management and intelligent risk-taking by remaining open-minded when new technologies are requested and providing sufficient application development staff to implement them.

Another risk is change fatigue, which can occur among staff even when most people generally welcome new programs or systems. Ongoing staff development and cross-training can minimize change fatigue by giving those who fall behind the confidence and energy to catch up. Early adopters can
provide a model and inspiration for more cautious colleagues. One discussion participant observed that UNC’s Undergraduate Library has “modeled the flexible, agile, adaptive culture, and that culture has been contagious [in other parts of the library].”

COLLABORATION: A SYSTEMATIC METHODOLOGY

Major collaborative endeavors generally begin when there is something complicated—and usually expensive—to accomplish. Many library staff members noted the degree to which a new spirit of collaboration across library departmental borders had made it possible to accomplish more within available resources and with good staff morale. One librarian commented that the “move from competition to collaboration” and the growing ethos of flexibility and adaptability were similar to a change of business model.

For example, a backlog of rare book cataloging in special collections was steadily diminished when librarians in the main library’s Resource Description and Management Department went to work on it. Previously, requests and permissions would have spent months working their way up and down the chain of command. When the entire science library collection had to be interfiled and re-shelved, the main library circulation manager volunteered to bring a team and do the job. These examples arise from the flexible and cooperative attitudes that the library staff wanted to adopt in a transformation to a different culture.

UNC’s libraries had a model of systematic collaboration to address broad, complex goals close to home, in the Triangle Research Libraries Network (TRLN). The libraries of UNC, Duke, North Carolina Central and North Carolina State universities have worked together on multiple projects in different combinations since 1930. TRLN’s systematic methodology includes planning; ongoing, scheduled communication; performance of work in a time-managed fashion as a top priority; assessing the work and making adjustments; implementation; and more communication.

TRLN’s recent strategic plan, Digital TRLN, included goals aimed at producing one seemingly unified collection out of the four (Triangle Research Libraries Network, 2008). The libraries wanted to create better access to the four collections through a combined search engine that would make them searchable as one. Although TRLN had implemented a custom-built and partially integrated online catalog in the 1960s, each library had since moved to its own commercial ILS (Owen, 1989). As part of Digital TRLN, the TRLN staff and member librarians developed and implemented Search TRLN, a shared catalog index and search engine built on the commercial product Endeca, whose research library use had been pioneered by North Carolina State University. Search TRLN aimed to create a search engine that would
work across these four disparate systems, restoring the functionality of a fully unified online catalog.

As soon as the libraries began to use Search TRLN, ideas arose for enhancements. Search TRLN was implemented in such a way that any librarian in the cooperating libraries could make enhancements without the time-consuming creation of change lists, central prioritization of requests, and resourcing and scheduling the work. This single decision, made after considerable debate among various committees and the TRLN Executive Committee, created an exciting development environment in which Search TRLN and its implementers flourished. This open approach communicates trust, encourages creativity and bold thinking, and provides positive reinforcement to developers throughout the consortium as innovations succeed.

Some examples of post-implementation enhancements include keyword searching in Asian languages, drop-down suggestion boxes during search, and an unmediated patron document delivery request capability. Shared funding implemented Syndetics' enhanced content services. Many thousands of electronic resources were added to the catalogs, including Encoded Archival Description (EAD) records linked to locally digitized collections. TRLN undertook a grant funded project to perfect workflows for mass digitization of manuscripts collections and it is expected that these materials will also be available through Search TRLN.

Interestingly, Karen Calhoun's “The Changing Nature of the Catalog and its Integration with Other Discovery Tools,” prepared for the Library of Congress in 2006, offers a two-year plan for a systematic enhancement of the traditional online catalog (Calhoun, 2006). Calhoun’s thesis is that the traditional online catalog has been bypassed and therefore provides low value for the investment libraries continue to make. But, she suggests, with a strategy of leading, expanding and extending the traditional catalog, its value can increase. Use of Search TRLN remains robust with annual growth in use. What remains is to assess the return on the investments that all four libraries continue to make in their catalogs.

LEADERSHIP AT ALL LEVELS: THE INFLUENCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

- “Libraries have changed but so have library staff. Their transformed perceptions of their work and of themselves in their work have in turn transformed the library.”
- “[There is] a radical shift where people feel empowered to try intelligent risk, [and are] more agile, more able to adapt. There is engagement in the work.”
- “The top [library] administration initiated change but it came from below as well.”
These comments by library employees express a sense that there has indeed been a fundamental shift. One person commented that change itself was a transformation because things had remained the same for so many years.

It’s easy to identify individuals who made each phase of change successful. There were the administrator and human resources director who led an almost flawless reorganization of technical services. There was the unparalleled leadership of the technical services department heads themselves. But in libraries there are always other leaders as well. For example, one technical services staff member repeatedly reassured her colleagues that the reorganization would be worthwhile and that leaders were trustworthy—all when she herself was nervous about learning new job skills.

In reorganizing collection development, reference librarians recommended the organizational changes and proved to be excellent front-line leaders. Together they created the matrix of subject assignments, designed innovative communication and leadership structures, organized subject teams, and created an intensive training curriculum that included everything from working with approval plans to issues in scholarly communication. In technical services, front-line staff helped lead the way in creating routines and workflows to support the change from three bibliographers to more than thirty-five selection librarians.

In UNC’s branch libraries, there were two individuals who led an orderly and fast process to consolidate science branches, and front-line staff promptly and competently planned and executed the integration of the City and Regional Planning library with the collections and services of the main library.

Many organizations have examples of staff heroism in which one person, perhaps the person least expected, steps forward at a time of crisis. A transformed library has internal leaders in every area of the organization. Several participants in the group discussions remarked on how staff members now feel empowered to identify problems and come forward with solutions. One librarian talked about the distress her department felt when multiple positions were lost during a budget cut. “Not all changes have been easy, particularly budget cutting, [but] people have felt they could find solutions. That was true when we lost positions. The staff used it as an opportunity to reorganize work and become more efficient.”

In a transformed library, staff members actively manage their work and stay engaged in their jobs. They initiate change and take intelligent risk, if only to step forward with suggestions for improvement. There is a widespread understanding of the transformative power one person may wield. Reflecting a broad organizational pattern, staff members seek professional development and growth opportunities. A good professional development program is critical to sustaining a staff characterized by leadership. Webinars dealing with almost every area of library practice have brought
training and development to a wide range of staff members, and have helped them feel more willing to offer suggestions for change. Some transformations occur when a person leaves a department. One angry or unhappy person can exercise negative influence that reduces productivity, stultifies creativity, and flattens morale. A departure literally changes everything. Backlogs melt away, frontline leadership emerges, nearby departments take note of improvements and step up support and productivity.

But a transformed library is able to benefit from one person with a great idea and the willingness to lead from within to create change that “changes everything.” In the discussion groups, several mentioned the creation of a campus document delivery service as transformative. One librarian saw how this service could be offered within existing resources by reorganizing staff in two departments and changing workflows. She foresaw how it would ensure success for the direct request capacity of Search TRLN, would make the move of almost a million volumes from the main collection to off-campus storage almost painless for users, and would greatly ease the closing of the science branch libraries. For users, no title was more than twenty-four hours away and often there was same-day delivery. In combination with the migration to electronic collections, document delivery eliminated location and distance as factors in choosing library materials. Despite initial misgivings librarians decided to deliver to undergraduates as well as graduate students and faculty; they have not regretted the decision.

**CONCLUSION**

The UNC library has been transformed before. In the first half of the nineteenth century the collection was small, ill-formed, and poorly housed. It moved from the president’s attic to other temporary locations and when it finally landed in a real building it was shelved around the walls of a dance hall (Alcott, 1986, 41). The library was transformed when the University’s two student debating societies gave their combined collections to form a better library, which they even staffed from time to time. Later the University obtained a Carnegie grant for a new library building and the library was moved if not fully transformed again.

The next great transformation began in 1901 with the appointment of Louis Round Wilson as librarian. He built up the college library into a full-fledged university library, in part by developing the funding for a new main building, now named in his honor. Opened in 1929, it is almost as much a symbol of UNC as is the Old Well.

The next transformation occurred beginning in the 1930s and marks UNC’s development into a world-class research library and repository of print materials. Even during the Great Depression, when North Carolina
experienced especially deep poverty, librarians built a national-class collection based on gifts, grants, and federal allotments (McGrath & Jacobson, 2011). In the second half of the twentieth century the collection grew; special collections and branch libraries flourished. Despite uneven funding, the University and the state supported the library. Librarians compensated for funding shortages by attracting gifts of distinguished collections and endowments and pursuing innovative strategies for new buildings.

The process described in this paper, an organizational shift from an excellent 20th-century library to an even better 21st-century library, is probably the most subtle of transformations, yet it is arguably as important as the others. It came about because many library staff members recognized the need for change and felt safe enough to embrace it. Individual leaders emerged with clear visions for the future and staff rallied to make change happen. Again and again, the staff looked to the past for models and then went back to the future to reshape them for new uses.

It is clear that upcoming decades will require further fundamental rethinking of the research library enterprise, if not because of new technologies or changing user requirements, then because few institutions or states can afford the existing models. The changes in the UNC library were not easy and they depended on a number of factors not explored in this paper. For example, an infusion of new funding between 2004 and 2008 made a difference, as did the opportunity to fill at least 40 vacant and newly created positions during that time. The entire process required the constancy of frontline leaders, the will of the staff, and everyone’s belief that they could achieve meaningful change. In some ways this belief itself is the transformation.

In a research library, transformations will not occur as a DeLorean burst of speed like the one that sent Marty McFly on his adventures. Transformations result from layering large and small alterations and adjustments, picking from the best ideas of the present and the past and imagining possible new approaches. A transformed library anticipates altered environments, new user needs and fluctuations in funding levels, and it makes effective changes and adjustments as a natural way of operating. No living organization is ever finished evolving, but the UNC library, whatever the future, is ready.

REFERENCES


