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The Future of Public Services, Challenges and Opportunities
IRIS Management Group Meeting, Thursday, August 4, 2005

Why are we adding library units when it would be cost effective to consolidate?
[Remarks prepared and presented by Don Schnedeker]

If we were going to create a University Library today, we would probably not build a system with twenty units, or would we? If we started a library today, we would want an organization that is agile, innovative, flexible, service minded, customer oriented, creative in problem solving. These are the Cornell Library values.

We need these qualities in order to respond to the changes that are taking place in our environment. At the same time, we face the financial pressure to do more with less. This pressure pushes us to look at consolidating operations in order to recognize some savings. I would like to argue that the Cornell Library with multiple units is a decentralized organization and as a decentralized organization it has the organizational structure to support the values, qualities and characteristics that will help us deal with the challenges that we face in the future.

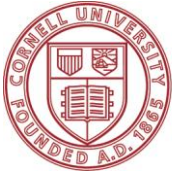
There are two main benefits from decentralized structure. The first lies in its potential for improving the quality of decisions. [Vancil] The second important benefit is motivation. Let me see if I can explain.

In order to improve service and foster innovation the staff who work with our clients need to be able to make decisions – adjust policies and procedures to fit situational needs. Decentralization calls for this delegation of decision-making and the assignment of responsibility with the people providing service. Moving decision making down through the organization is a characteristic of decentralization.

Decentralizing decision making empowers staff and this helps build their sense of commitment in addition to improving responsiveness and innovation,. Decentralization also serves to put in place two key ingredients of motivation, autonomy and responsibility.

We see this happen with unit libraries on a day to day basis. Central policies are given a local flavor or implementation. Issues and problems typically get addressed or resolved within the units. Familiar faculty and students get personal service and we start to think about ways to extend this personal service to broader groups.

Another characteristic of decentralized organizations is the ability to bring together groups of people or experts to solve problems, generate new ideas or implement new



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programs or services. Teamwork and the ability to create teams are vital in an innovating organization. We use teams and working groups throughout the library to solve problems and move ideas forward. In a unit library, we have a built-in cross-functional workgroup. Staff can see what each other is doing, how problems get solved and decisions are made. A small unit has more transparency than a larger unit. When staff take some responsibility for the entire unit, we can improve service.

Decentralization extends beyond the notion of unit libraries. While we have seen the addition of unit libraries over the past twenty-five years we have also seen an explosion in the development of other units, like Preservation & conservation, DLIT, Metadata, Administrative Operations & LHR and more. These units were created to address a problem or to help us develop innovative solutions or cope with a changing external environment.

We have also seen the development of 'ad hoc' groups. We created the Business Information Group to see if we could learn from one another; to see if we share any common concerns and to bring together our experts from across campus together to address concerns and generate new ideas.

On the other hand, when we consolidate units, we can realize some savings by eliminating redundancies and streamlining processing. This is productive when we have operations that are production oriented and benefit from economies of scale. One cost of consolidation is that we shrink the interface that we have with our clientele. Our interface with the public is where we provide service but it is also where we collect information about clients needs. Looking ahead, it is important for us to preserve the channels, contacts or service points that we share with our clientele.

Public service also acts as the sales force for the library. Here the advantage of units is that we share a facility with our clientele. As we walk around our buildings, we are reaching out to our clientele.

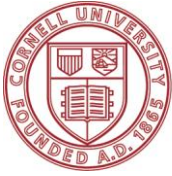
If we were to centralize units, we would also lose local autonomy and decision making. This can affect our ability to 'personalize' responses to our clientele – flexibility, innovation, customer orientation...

Looking at units today, they appear to be thriving. We have new or recently renovated facilities. Despite their smallness, unit libraries have dedicated clientele and supporters.

Teamwork, flexibility, innovation and customer orientation are things that can be encouraged in a centralized organization. So what makes units different.

I came up with a couple of differences...

First we recognize that our environment is undergoing dramatic changes – computers, the internet, data processing are changing the way that people work, study, and do research –



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New students and faculty are coming to campus with expectations that are different from their predecessors.

In most of the smaller units, we are embedded in a school or department. The entire unit staff is involved in public service and has contact with external clients. Staff is all touched by the changes that are taking place in our schools. The small unit staff also lends itself to a team approach where we can develop strategies for dealing with change.

At the same time, our proximity to our clientele and our ability to give 'personal' service gives us the opportunity to identify and help people that are having difficulty with change.

Looking ahead, the challenges that we face will probably require innovative solutions. Innovation implies the ability to try new things and the ability to fail. In a mature organization, there is a tendency to rely on practices that worked in the past. In larger organizations stepping outside of the practices or patterns of the past can bring attention, good and bad.

In a small unit the scope of this attention can be limited. If something fails, we move on and try something else!

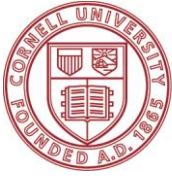
Let me summarize what I have said. The Library is a decentralized organization. This is good. Decentralization distributes decision making. Along with distributed decision making, decentralization increases our level of autonomy and responsibility. These are key factors in motivation. We have the ingredients for an innovative, service-minded, customer-oriented, creative organization.

From a Unit library perspective, what do I see as trends for the future –

First, we have moved away from the era of answering quick reference questions; characterized by 'hours on the desk,' question counts, and finding solutions to bibliographic and information questions or problems.

We find ourselves embroiled in more in-depth research support characterized by extended dialogue or give & take with a student or researcher. This ongoing nature of our work suggests that we are creating and building **relationships** with researchers. We are partnering with researchers. Our clients return to us with follow up questions as they work through a project. Occasionally, they consult us at the start of a project. (This is a real signal that we have established a relationship!

Looking ahead, it will be our relationships with students, faculty and administrators that will help secure our financial future. These relationships start out on a personal level then the qualities of the personal relationship are extended to the organization.



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We need to find ways to share our contacts and relationships with students, faculty and administrators so that we can improve service by personalizing it. At the same time, we need to protect the privacy of individuals.

We should continue to look for creative ways to consolidate work that has production characteristics while preserving the aspects that help us establish and build relationships.

Find ways to do less with less. By this I mean we should be looking for partnerships and affiliations that can help us extend our services. In the Management Library we offer a copy service for faculty but we don't do the copying. We page materials and deliver them to the copy center. We should continue to work with vendors to build in features in their products that our clientele wants. Vendors can also provide us with data on our clientele so that we can better understand their needs.

We will also partner with teachers and researchers in building collections. Part of our collection effort will use their expertise. We will move to more just in time acquisitions, rather than just in case. The collection that we preserve for the future will reflect the current collection needs of teachers and researchers.

As electronic resources begin to dominate print, we have begun to rethink the Library as a place.

Centralizing or intensifying physical collections may yield some of the savings of consolidation and help us better preserve and secure our materials at the same time. With twenty units we may have opportunities to experiment with library facilities. I expect that we will see more library space that is people friendly. More people space in libraries means that we will need to develop programming for that space. Incorporating our partners like food service or computing is an example.

These are my thoughts today. They are subject to change.

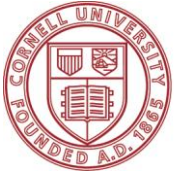
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