
Provosts & the Academic Library Perspectives & Insights

OLA Super Conference 2014

Mark Robertson
Associate University Librarian, Information Services
York University Libraries

I. The Research Project

- An investigation into how provosts at Canadian research-intensive universities perceive the role of academic libraries in the context of their evolving institutions.
 - Interviews with provosts explored how these leaders perceive academic libraries in terms of:
 - Alignment with institutional mission
 - How they envision the future of libraries
 - What they interpret to be indicators of libraries' success
-

What is a Provost?

- Provost vs. President?
 - “Chief academic visionary”
 - Provost *and* Vice-president academic?
 - In the US: sometimes called Chief Academic Officer (CAO)
 - In Quebec nearest equivalent: Vice-rectorat
-

Inspirations

- Initial interest in perspectives on “library as place”
 - Future of libraries:
 - Sennyey, Ross and Mills, ‘Exploring the Future of Academic Libraries: A Definitional Approach’, *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 35 (3), 2009.
 - Institutional alignment:
 - Comment by Dr. John Lombardi at the ARL Assessment Conference 2012
-

II. Methodology

- ▣ Recorded telephone interviews
 - ▣ Target population: provosts of Canadian research-intensive universities
 - ▣ Transcription & analysis
-

Criteria for sample

- Provosts of institutions whose libraries are ARL members (16 members)

OR

- Provosts from U15 institutions (15 members)

17 institutions - York University = Sample of 16 institutions

The Sample

- First approached the library directors of each institution for support before approaching provosts
 - 9 of the 16 provosts accepted (56% response rate)
 - Interviews occurred between Feb 1 – April 2, 2013
 - Interviews lasted average of 46 minutes
-

The Interview Questions

1. Institutional Mission and Goals
 - ▣ How do provosts perceive libraries' relationship to institutional mission and goals?
 2. Future of Academic Libraries
 - ▣ How do provosts perceive the future of academic libraries in 5-10 years?
 3. Indicators of Success
 - ▣ How do provosts determine if the library is successful? What are measures of success?
-

II. Results:

a) Libraries & Institutional Mission

- 9/9 provosts related library to the research mission
 - libraries are “mission-critical” “center of what universities do”, “nerve centers”
 - Access to research materials
 - Knowledge life cycle – role in preserving and disseminating
 - Uncertainty about more active role of library in research

Libraries & the Research Mission

- Library is the “**knowledge base** - so we have **repositories** of information and access to information. So as a research university we expect all of our researchers and all of our students to be looking at the latest literature and basing their bright ideas on research that’s been done.”
 - “[P]eople used to say that universities created knowledge, disseminated knowledge and preserved knowledge. And of course, the creation of new knowledge involves a recognition of old knowledge and the synthesis of new ideas of that, and **the library is where those old ideas have been preserved....** So the library really is at the center of that mandate around knowledge generation, knowledge preservation and knowledge dissemination.”
 - “There’s a notion amongst librarians, not just at this institution but other ones that I’ve talked to recently, where librarians are kind of saying, “You know, we’d be really helpful in research grants; we’ll do the background research for you,” and I’m not sure where that came from because you **have to do the research yourself.**”
-

Role in the Teaching/Learning Mission

- 7/9 provosts related library to student learning
 - Library facilities – student learning space (5/9)
 - Library facilities – learning commons model (4/9)
- 2/9 provosts discussed contribution to support of teaching on campus

Role in the Teaching/Learning Mission

- “I think a library has a place, if you will, in terms of the **gathering place**, being the heart of the campus, one of the nerve centers where people go to meet, study, talk and think very carefully about their education.”
 - “I think traditionally we thought about libraries as contributing very much through collections to the academic programs of the university...but I also think that increasingly we are looking at libraries and the role that they can play in the provision of an outstanding **student experience**, and that's not just through collections, right, but that's also through the **services** that they provide and the spaces that are provided to students, you know, through **learning commons** and the like.”
 - “I see an increasing integration between our library and our **teaching and learning center**. I'm not quite sure exactly how that's going to play out, but...I think there's a really important synergy to be had there.”
-

b) Future of Academic Libraries: Collections

- ▣ Collections:
 - ▣ Shift from print -> electronic
 - ▣ Networked and convergent collections
 - ▣ Increasing importance of special collections
 - ▣ “I think that the future of universities is more networks – that in some ways we're evolving back to our medieval roots; and, as such, universities will bring value to that network by their special collections and the things that they have that allow scholarship in that area, and that won't be duplicated in other libraries”
-

Future of...Library as place

- Library as place
 - Continued belief in the vitality of library as place
 - Parallels between debates with role of “campus”
 - Less defined by collections, more by people
 - Library as “point of integration” or “platform” for learning
 - Only one provost indicated any doubt
- “[T]he physical facility would still be there if it's only in fact ten years. In twenty, thirty years I have no idea”.

Future of...Services/expertise

- Some uncertainty how service and expertise is changing
 - Trend towards embedded librarian roles in research activities
 - Complement librarians with other types of professionals?
(2/9)
 - Collaboration around pedagogy:
 - Leadership role in e-learning, copyright, open educational resources
 - Campus leadership role in assessment & learning outcomes
-

The Future of Expertise

- “There will be services, but they might be different kinds of services that we rely on now....I think expertise might not be so important because...people can get on and read about things and not bother people right now, so I think we’re almost seeing a shift in the expert model there, even though you and I could agree that the expertise is absolutely critical.”
 - “[L]ibrarians would interface with faculty and actually provide service in a more collaborative role. I think that’s something that will change over time and will be increasingly important.”
-

The Question of Disaggregation

- To what extent do provosts see the traditional facets of library work (collections, library as place, services) continuing to define our work?
 - Provosts' responses:
 - Belief in continued relevance of each facet (mutton/wool analogy)
 - Transformation in each area required
 - Trajectories of collections and space well understood
 - Uncertainty re continued relevance of expertise
 - 2/9 provosts were experimenting with the scenario
-

Disaggregation?

- “[I]f you were building a library from scratch, I don’t think you would build what we have now or anything like that.”
 - “So I think that the libraries are being used in part because it’s a kind of a confluence of things that have happened almost independent of each other.... At the same time that students are beginning to see the university as a place to hang out and work together, and they need a space to do that, and it just so happens that there’s this space available in the library because the books left, so that does lead to, in some sense, a separation of those issues.”
-

c) Indicators of Success

- ▣ Inputs/outputs not factors (ie. title counts, size of budget)

- ▣ Identified indicators:

 - ▣ Usage data (4)

 - ▣ Satisfaction – LibQual+, feedback (3)

 - ▣ Reputation of library or director (3)

 - ▣ Budget stewardship (2)

 - ▣ Informal stories

“When I think about it, I go back to our strategic plan and I ask what impact is the library having on those areas that deal with our strategic plan, and in many cases those stories are as important to me as the metrics.”

Indicators of Success cont'd

- ▣ Impacts/Outcomes - important but unattainable?

“The library is providing knowledge services as part of a continuum.... And it should be invisible to people as to where those resources are actually coming from.... The library’s resources are seamlessly integrated with all of the learning resources on campus.... So then trying to parcel out of that what is the actual role of the library, that is going to be, I think, very challenging...In fact, it’s not even clear in some instances when you’re using the library that that’s actually what you’re doing.”

Conclusions

- Provosts are engaged in their libraries; close relationships with Directors
 - Provosts perceive libraries as being substantially aligned with key institutional priorities: esp. research and student learning
 - Strong appreciation for library as place, and its role in student learning
 - Role of libraries in research still largely conceived of as provision of access
-

Conclusions

- Some level of uncertainty as to librarians' new roles in supporting research
 - Collaborative possibilities recognized in curriculum and teaching support
 - A “definitional crisis” in librarianship? Potentially a need to re-articulate the mission of libraries in a digital age
-

