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Exploratory Essay

Info 204: Information Professions

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Abstract

The library is a cornerstone institution that is wrapped within education and public service. Whether a public, school, academic or special library, the entity many know and love serves the single purpose of assisting its patrons by providing easy access to resources. These resources diversify and strongly become a centerpiece to that particular societal grouping, whether public, school, etc. The concern, however, lies in the evolution of the library and its role in society. As technology constantly advances itself, it alters the needs of society and how the library can present those needs in the best way. For example, eBooks are a newer format of literature in digital form, making it easier to be accessed, but libraries must reorganize themselves to present these files for their patrons to use. With the dynamic nature of libraries, staffs and administrations must prepare themselves for the future shifts with strategic planning and looking into the best ways to adjust their approach. There is significant research considering the improvement of library future preparation.
Essay

Libraries are constantly functioning to give their patrons the absolute best possible experience, providing for them various resources and guidance to those resources, while also pushing them to understand said resources so they can use them in the future without assistance, and be self sufficient. But with changing technology and services, libraries must be increasingly prepared to shift their focuses to best serve those newer and changing needs. Academic libraries find themselves in an especially dynamic area, as universities and colleges manage budgets for a variety of departments and educators find themselves relying on the library to supplement their educational standards, however academia can leave the librarian in the dust, lacking the respect for their contributions and meaning. For libraries to effectively morph themselves to conform to audience needs, they need to ensure that the efforts of academic librarians is respected.

Wheeler and McKinney studied the opinions and perspectives of librarians in higher education with regards to their role as educators. Most librarians found that as educators, they lack the same social standing as typical professors and other educators. Despite a majority seeing themselves as educators, they lacked the respect for their own work and saw a difference between their role and the professor’s role. They see teaching as an extension of their usual work, but experience challenges from “faculty and learner buy-in” and the confidence in their teaching ability (Wheeler 2015). These same librarians acknowledge that as educators, they lack the formal training to provide a strong sense of education. 15/78 librarians surveyed by Wheeler and McKinney found that they had formal teaching training, with the rest and majority finding themselves gaining that experience on the job. Unfortunately, this means librarians do not have a foundation or true pedagogy to base their approach upon, resulting in very varied instructional experiences. Said one librarian, “I think we’re really important, and I think that we should be up there and have the same kind of, you know, level of respect… as the academics” (Wheeler 2015). This type of opinion indicates that improvements need to be made to dramatically change the view of librarians at the academic level. Whether it is overall education or the structure of involvement for librarians, change is needed to better the librarian’s stance to contribute to the library at the collegiate level.

In a similar study, the Library Journal found in an “unscientific” survey, that librarians have a surprising viewpoint of their role in a general sense, including academic libraries. Most saw that their roles are rooted in “handling data”, providing their audiences the access to resources to explore, interpret and find various forms of data, while also using data to judge their own initiatives in the library. They also saw that their qualifications were rooted in “computer expertise”, combined with a sense of strong “people skills”, so as to best assist any and every patron in what is a growing technological world. Most surprising by the study, however, is the confession of many of the surveyed librarians that the future librarian must be qualified in a particular pedagogy more so than in library sciences. As one librarian articulated, “those of us already established in the library profession, especially hiring managers, we collectively need to get over the notion of the MLIS as sacred fetish credential” (2015). This suggestion of other degrees being best for preparation in a library role, stating that MLS or MLIS degrees are merely “technical degrees”, shifts the focus on librarian qualifications outside of the norm. This has to be considered in strategic plans, understanding what an organization’s approach to hiring will be, and considering what the focus should be in their particular want for employees.
As Stephens has discovered, what can really affect the idea of the employee hiring is the approach of the library in the first place. “Redesigning learning spaces” within academic libraries can see a flurry of activity that encourage a variety of people to approach it with their needs (Stephens, 2015). “Smart library spaces”, harnessing new technologies for a varied mix of knowledge and culture will allow new standards of services to be addressed. If the approach of the library is defined, with resources and spaces recognized and planned properly, then the hiring process and desired qualifications can be addressed in the best way possible, emphasizing the points made by Wheeler and McKinney.

Now while acknowledging the changes in the library and its changing role within the audience, what also has to change is the way employees and advocates approach the way libraries prepare and should change. Huwe conducted research in regards to this, finding that what really can drive libraries toward proper change and improvement in the right direction, whether with services or employment choices, is to “know the insiders” that make the decisions for future planning within the library. As Huwe found, libraries change and move their services and spaces in a variety of ways and needs. In one example, a science building was added to a higher education campus but without the idea of a library in addition to that. Blueprints completely left out the idea of a library. Another example, at a business school, demonstrated how other parts of the university began to impede on the new library’s space, taking rooms and other spaces within the building, until the staff made it clear that they needed to re-establish its role in 2014 by showing the advancements of technology and how it can impact the student body positively. Activist librarians helped push a more positive dialogue in planning circles.

Accenting this is Casey’s research, that goes into a strong example of how to construct a strategic plan. While some may see that plans are a “waste of time” without buy-in at the “grassroots level” of an organization, Casey found that the Hunt Library instituted a strong plan for future establishment of plans. They encouraged the director to attend staff meetings to ask for ideas for all levels of staff. Index cards were passed out to be submitted anonymously to provide variety in opinions of the strategic plan. They encouraged staff to provide commentary, suggestions and other forms of data to critique the plan, which was emailed to all employees, regardless of their level. In doing so, it fostered a sense of pride, Casey found, that pushed the employees to accomplish the goals and other ideas they proposed, knowing that they owned a portion of the library’s future. Buy-in was strong amongst staff and the goals were more closely related to what was required or wanted by the typical patrons that visited, because the lower level staff always interacted with these people and recognized what was needed to provide the best possible service.

Ultimately, while libraries are ever changing, the strategic plan, working in accordance with what is desired from current employees which then carves out the hiring approach for future employees, can set a library in a position to truly dictate its future and determine its essential nature within a community, particularly an academic library. If librarians are able to find from students, by pushing administrators to research it, what is most needed from them as professionals, than the library can plan itself to work in accordance with that, structuring itself to those needs while hiring and training employees to fit those needs.
Resources


