What’s in a Brand? The Art Library and the Changing Academy

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Introduction

Rather than a theoretical piece, or a practitioner’s perspective on the current state of art libraries in academic institutions, I have written a “think piece” which raises more questions than can be answered. My perspective is that of a librarian in a specialized art and architecture library in a multi-library organization at a large private university.

Three distinct instances prompted me to think about the place of such a library in a large academic setting: 1) continuous, sometimes nuanced, and sometimes radical reorganizations of academic libraries along team-matrix principles; 2) several articles which my colleagues read on the topic of the future of the academy, part of a small collegiate seminar entitled “Libraries in the Ivory Tower” which I organized a few years ago, that approached the library from the perspective of a business analysis; and 3) my university’s strategic plan, begun in 1994 with the first re-organizational phase, and now elaborating a second major re-orientation as a building block toward academic excellence in the twenty-first century. As I thought about these developments, I could not help but wonder in a broader sense about the future of academic libraries, and particularly of the specialized branch libraries. Academic libraries are in the midst of organizational crises, and I was interested in exploring the background for this. Are we facing a critical situation because of the ubiquitous and all-pervasive presence of the Internet and related technologies in academia? Are we responding to the changes in economic models of higher education, or has there been a more general shift in academic culture that is the primary impetus in the re-birthing efforts of twenty-first century academic libraries? It seemed to me that the current efforts to define the academic library’s place within the larger institution have to do with organizational branding, directly related to both economic and cultural shifts within higher education.

A Quick History of Ideologies in the Academy

In 1945, a distinguished committee of Harvard faculty issued a book entitled General Education in a Free Society, commonly known as the Red Book, and also known as The Harvard Report. It endorsed a pedagogic philosophy, a unified system for general education guided by liberal ideology to counteract the onslaught of other ideologies perceived to be in dangerous conflict with the American civic and political culture, notably Communism. The basic idea in the Harvard Report was that of a core curriculum, nonspecialized, in which classic texts of the Western tradition are read for what they have to say in themselves, rather than through some disciplinary matrix...These texts serve, in theory, as a vocabulary of ideas shared by all the members of an otherwise diverse and mobile society...as a ‘binding experience’.

The ideals of the Harvard Report held sway for thirty years, until the 1970s, which saw the beginning of a tremendous backlash against what were seen by many students and academics as blind ideals of meritocratic education, and particularly against the imposition of scientific objectivity on the humanities. In the last thirty years, many academic curricula turned away from the paradigms of knowledge to paradigms of interpretation, and moved toward the postmodern, interdisciplinary inquiry into the foundations and dissemination of knowledge within our society.

The time period between the end of World War II and the development of the ideological backlash constitutes a period of tremendous growth in American higher education, a period known as the Golden Age.

The number of American undergraduates increased by almost 500 percent, the number of graduates students by nearly 900 percent...At the height of the expansion, between 1965 and 1972, new community college campuses were opening in the United States at the rate of one every week...After the Second World War, the national government began the practice of contracting research out to universities...directed principally at science and foreign languages...After 1975, though, the higher education system changed. Its growth leveled off, and the economic value of a college degree began to fall.

The waning of the Golden Age in the last twenty-five years also corresponded to shifts in student demographics, moving universities to place prime importance on lifetime education. In addition, the adoption of new technologies in academia has, as we all know, affected the trajectory of higher education, and engendered a debate over the allocation of resources for residential and distance education, as well as over the economic and cultural values placed on the various types of degrees and certification. At the start of the twenty-first century, we now find many students who are older than twenty-five, fully employed, and non-residential participants in higher education. Demand for lifelong learning requires higher education to teach “how-to-learn”
skills in preparation for an increasingly sophisticated workplace. “Traditional” higher education is now seen as merely transferring content (or knowledge, to use an old-fashioned word). And technology has expanded access to higher education, at least in some areas, via online learning, increasing the competition between universities and their libraries, and online institutions and the Internet, within the marketplace of ideas.

In addition to ideology and technology, economics is a major driver of academic culture. For much of the post-World-War-II period, the higher education industry was stagnant due to high entry barriers (i.e., the expense of starting an entire educational institution), excess supply of faculty and graduate students, stagnating faculty salaries, and limited competition and rivalry among institutions. Given the current changes in demographics, emphasis on skills, and technological ubiquity, the commercial sector has started infiltrating the academic market. Private sector investors and firms now sell university course materials directly to consumers while retaining intellectual copyright for the institution instead of the individual faculty member; textbook publishers sell Web-based content supported by online tutors; online universities target older, non-traditional students or focus on skills-training. This competition is driving universities to look at intellectual property rights, the efficacy of traditional education, and the place of its faculty and knowledge-skilled workers within the institution. The academic industry is attempting to redefine its niche, to strategically ally with other institutions, and to embrace Internet-based technologies for a variety of administrative and curricular needs.

“Branding” and Academic Libraries in General...

This emphasis on the economic reality has affected the culture of academic libraries, and not just directly in the form of budget allocation. More than ever, librarians are expected to account in very tangible ways for what it is they do and why. How do our operations add value to the business of the university? How effective are our services and how do we measure them? What do our collections actually cost to acquire, manage, and circulate? Can we showcase a big bang for the buck to uniquely support the mission and strategic goals of our universities? Academic libraries are very much in the throes of adopting management assessment tools, of defining our “products” and “services,” and particularly of presenting our “brand” to our “customers.”

The term “branding” in library literature is taken from the field of marketing and pertains to rethinking a mission or to public relations efforts. It refers to ways of conceptualizing the ideal user, the ideal in library services. How do we package our Web sites, our specific services, and for whom? “Branding” is about managing information—not so much the information stored in our physical and digital libraries, but that which we want to communicate outside of the “library box.” “Branding” also helps us define our “customer base,” at least in theory. I mention this because “branding” conflicts with our profession’s democratic principles, to which we often adhere even in the more exclusive academic libraries. The question of branding, of defining what libraries and librarians do is problematic for us not because we do not know what we do and not because we have changed our intellectual and practical premise so radically, but because 1) those who fund libraries at our institutions are not those who usually use the research resources available, and 2) the boundaries of scholarship and access to information have radically expanded beyond the intellectual confines of the library. For example, one reason why the distinction between the “Internet” and the “Library” is so fluid is because the Internet appears to accommodate our users’ economic sensibilities. Thus, undergraduate students routinely turn in passable work, gleaned from information found on the Internet and in digital libraries, and get good grades without going through all the rigors of research and without being particularly information literate. Many researchers would like our catalogs to be like the Amazon.com book catalog, which is easy to use, has qualitative information that is easy to grasp, and is not bound by complex metadata and descriptive conventions. It does not necessarily represent a better managed collection than that found in most academic libraries.

...And Art Branch Libraries in Particular

For those of us in specialized academic art libraries, the slippery slope of branding has specific resonance. Who do we brand ourselves against: the main library on campus with its more interdisciplinary collection scope and more staff; the art library at an institution across town; our primary user departments and the knowledge-base and collegial information environment they represent? As librarians in specialized libraries, we often have tremendous academic credentials, do research (although not necessarily in an academic discipline), and have a defined foundation of principles and practices which guide us in our work. We also have a strong democratic sensibility that allows us to conceive of collections and public service in broader terms than our primary constituents realize. Nevertheless, because our libraries are small and yet holistic in their approach to the needs of users, we often get drawn into questions of what defines the margins of professional responsibilities, such as serving at the circulation desk, or developing and updating Web pages. In seeking continuously to brand academic libraries as responsive to the university user community at large, librarians in many academic institutions have been reorganized into team groups and complex matrix organizations. This leads to protracted and continuous debates on the extent to which matrix organizations reflect and support what an individual library can and should deliver. Are we more customer responsive as art librarians working with specialized collections and providing services to well defined and specialized constituencies, or as team members in a broader, more interdisciplinary context, or both? What is it that we do as art librarians that contributes to our organization’s branding?

It seems to me that specialized art libraries have an ambiguous position that may need to be better defined as our library organizations are transforming themselves. We are expected to bridge the divide between building specialized and researcher-responsive collections (geared more toward the mature researcher rather than the undergraduate) and the larger organizational needs for teaching of information literacy skills and the more general assessment of services. We often have more say, in a management sense, with our immediate constituencies than with our university library administration. Yet, our specialized collections are often used by central administration to showcase the library system or for the purposes of establishing collaborative agreements for building virtual libraries. Our specialized
profession has a long tradition of the research and collections librarian, yet we are expected to prove that our provision of services matters.

One day I was ruminating to a non-librarian friend about the difficulty of working in a specialized library within a large library system which privileged in many ways its main library. It is not that I am opposed to such emphasis on the main library, I am just keenly aware of the pull between the specialized constituency’s needs and the library system’s responsibility to the entire university. My friend’s opinion was that “librarians are super intelligent, highly self-regarding professional individualists, who get self-organized according to administrative or user needs through professional synergy.”

The imposition of a centrally-directed organizational model is inefficient, he thought, because that model offers an imperfect understanding of our self-organizing relationships and how these relationships serve the organization’s vision and mission. I found this idea interesting because it raised the possibility of inefficiencies in formal organizational structures and because it posited that reorganizational mandates may impede a more fluid organizational branding dynamic. This opinion also raised the possibility, not often discussed in management literature, that professional librarians may have the means to self-organize in order to more efficiently carry out the mission of the larger institution while remaining true to professional principles. We “may” be able to self-organize and reorganize, but can we? Will we? Or are we too wedded to our individualist turf to be able to see the forest for the trees and act accordingly?

Conclusion

I have placed academic art libraries within a brief history of the developments in higher education and posited some dichotomies affecting them in the general trends of academic library reorganization. Are academic art libraries, in fact, facing a dichotomy—that of being pulled toward more general (and perhaps generic) library service models on the one hand, while on the other hand having a very strong historic and practical responsibility toward specialized communities and specialized resources? Is this an appropriate way to look at our role in the larger, transformed academic library organization? Perhaps there are different self-organizing relationships that are more germane?

I would like to close with the following amusing, but quite on-the-mark statement: “Libraries are brothels for the mind. Which means that librarians are madams, greeting punters, understanding their strange tastes and needs, and pimping their books. That’s rubbish, of course, but it does wonders for the image of librarians.”

Notes

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 108.
5. Ibid., 58, 66.
6. Andrew H. Nelson, e-mail communication with the author, August 17, 2003.
7. Ibid.