

Incremental Reorganization at a Regional Comprehensive University: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper will discuss a series of incremental reorganizations, prompted by a variety of simultaneous challenges. Incremental reorganizations have been an effective approach at this library, as opposed to restructuring the entire library at one time. This paper will discuss these serial restructures, as well as their drivers, including retirements, departures, and the overlapping and gradual modernization of library services, systems, and spaces. This paper will also discuss how best to approach staffing reorganizations for increased chances of success.

Introduction

As a new director beginning duties during the fall 2012 semester, it was immediately clear to me that the library would face several key retirements, as some librarians and staff members in leadership positions had been serving for decades. Indeed, the wave of retirements and other departures began in early 2017. In addition, some library services required modernization, and the continuing move from print to online resources had affected individual workloads. The situation was an opportunity to reconfigure staffing to update or add services and meet new needs.

Incremental reorganization has been an effective approach at this library, as opposed to restructuring the entire library at one time. This paper will discuss a series of incremental reorganizations, prompted by a variety of simultaneous challenges. As Johnson, Jennings, and Hisle (2011) found, the process was not a direct path, with one change happening as a result of another, but was instead accomplished in phases over time. This paper will also discuss how best to approach staffing reorganizations for increased chances of success.

Literature Review

Library organizational structures of the twentieth century were arranged hierarchically by department, with defined divisions of labor and strict rules and regulations (Simons 2018). Although these structures were effective, they were rigid and ill-suited for modern academic libraries, which must operate in fast-paced and sometimes fluid environments (Simons 2018). Neal and Steele (1993) advanced several important principles and assumptions to encourage organizational change, including widely distributed administrative responsibility; integrating important operations; structural flexibility; focusing on the library user; encouraging innovation; defining and supporting central programs and activities; and devoting more funding and staff time to professional development. This is a long list of challenging tasks, and indeed, Jakubs (2008) states that “reorganizing, retraining, and rethinking what we do are among the most difficult yet potentially most rewarding challenges we face” (241).

Much has been written about staffing reorganizations and change management. These processes require preparation, long-range vision, and steadfast leadership, as well as persistence and the ability to be flexible. Ultimately, change leaders must understand that adapting new workflows and realigning work assignments requires changing the organizational culture (Carrillo and Gregory 2019). Simons (2018) pointed out that leaders of change efforts must remember to “focus on the people,” and that a methodical approach has the best chance of success. As we saw with the COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns of 2020, change can sometimes happen very quickly, but long-lasting change comes from steady leadership, ongoing communication, and building a collegial team (Carrillo and Gregory 2019).

No discussion of the literature on steering change initiatives would be complete without mentioning John Kotter and his classic book, *Leading Change*. Introducing his Eight-Stage Change Process, Kotter (1996) states that positive change is often associated with a “multistep process that creates power and motivation sufficient to overwhelm all the sources of inertia” and that such a process is never effective “unless it is driven by high-quality leadership, not just excellent management” (20).

When guiding change within an organization, researchers agree that the importance of the management team cannot be underestimated. Library leaders must understand that they have important roles in sustaining and changing organizational culture (Onwubiko 2022). Without the full commitment of the management team, a change initiative may fail. As Simons (2018) states, “There is no change without the vision, support, and guidance of a change effort

at the top levels of leadership” (77). Therefore, it is essential to have the correct people in the correct roles (Fox and Keisling 2015).

Although it is vital that staff members trust the library’s leadership, those leaders must also trust the staff to understand their work and make constructive contributions to the reorganization process. The management team should “listen to feedback, address concerns, and have the agility to make quick adjustments in the process” (Carrillo and Gregory 2019, 31).

Library leaders must also know staff members well enough to anticipate how quickly a change initiative can be accomplished, when to speed up, and when to pull back (Mierke and Williamson 2017). Along these lines, successful reorganizations rely on a well-prepared staff, making training crucial, especially on new duties or software. Williams (2023) advises setting aside time for employees to take part in self-directed learning and arranging opportunities for professional development, which can “foster an energized, creative staff” (44). Wissinger (in Dearie, Meth, and Westbrooks 2018) states, “No employee should be reassigned to a new area without training, support, and mentoring” (183).

When a team is working toward substantial organizational changes, there will be challenges, unforeseen obstacles, and errors (Johnson, Jennings, and Hisle 2011; Hackman 2017). Researchers advise practicing honesty, transparency, and active listening throughout these challenges and committing to resolving problems together to build trust, maintain progress, and motivate change (Hackman 2017; Carrillo and Gregory 2019). Managing the change process can be made easier by advising library employees what is happening before it begins; being thoughtful about what information is shared with certain employees and when; and acknowledging that staffing, workflows, systems, and needs are fluid, so the process is never really complete. “It may have less urgency, but it will never have less importance” (Brannon, in Dearie, Meth, and Westbrooks 2018, 103).

The literature is clear that during a change process, library leaders must be attentive to the concerns of staff members while encouraging, praising, and celebrating employees who try new approaches (Jakubs 2008; Mierke and Williamson 2017). The library’s management team must foster a workplace where “change is welcomed” and must be prepared to capitalize on new opportunities (Jakubs 2008). As Mierke and Williamson (2017) stated, “Fostering innovation, creativity, and risk-taking requires engaged employees who are empowered to exercise leadership, and who are not afraid to try something new—even if there is the chance it may not work out” (12).

Finally, library leaders must acknowledge that organizational change can be upsetting, uncomfortable, and difficult (Simons 2018). Change necessitates letting go of what is

comfortable and this loss can cause emotional reactions (Jones et al. 2019). The management team must recognize these losses, have sympathy for the employees who are experiencing it, and must show respect for how the ways of the past laid the groundwork for new processes (Simons 2018).

Background

Phase 1. 2018–2020: Administration, Reference and Instruction, Technical Services, and Scholarly Communication

Beginning duties during the fall 2012 semester, the new library director oversaw the library's associate director; the university archivist; the web and systems coordinator; and the head of circulation. Other duties included administering the budget; personnel matters and hiring; promotion, tenure, and reappointment; and space and strategic planning.

In 2016, in preparation for the retirement of the library's associate director, work began on a succession plan for the library's technical services area. The library's associate director oversaw the technical services unit and collection development and planned to retire at the end of 2017 after 47 years of service. She also assisted with the budget, long-range planning, and building issues. In administration, three positions were created because of the retirement of the associate director: assistant director for collections and resource management, assistant director for public services, and a scholarly communication librarian.

The library's long-serving monographs librarian was promoted to assistant director for collections and resource management, effective January 2018. This librarian oversaw monographs acquisitions, interlibrary loan, and cataloging; took over collection development from the retiring associate director; and assumed responsibility for e-journals, serials, and databases from the serials librarian. The technical services unit was renamed resource management, supervised by the assistant director for collections and resource management, with four support staff members reporting to her. The serials librarian was moved to a newly created position as scholarly communication librarian, enabling the library to centralize various scholarly communication services and prepare to implement an institutional repository, which launched in fall 2019.

Finally, a newly created assistant director for public services position was filled in July 2018 to oversee a new unit: circulation (one administrative staff member, the head of circulation; four staff members; and two graduate assistants); the reference unit (four librarians; two graduate assistants; and a social media intern); and scholarly communication. The assistant director for public services also assisted with building issues and oversight of the library's

committees. The library's reference and instruction unit was short-staffed due to an early retirement for medical reasons and an unexpected resignation between May and June 2018, leaving only two fairly new librarians in the unit. A new reference librarian and a new unit head were hired in February and March 2019 and the unit was renamed research services.

By the end of phase 1, the library director was overseeing the library's two assistant directors, the university archivist, and the web and systems manager.

Phase 2. 2021–2023: Administration and Resource Management

During the fall 2020 semester, both of the library's assistant directors left the library. One retired and the other left the institution for another position. A talented research services librarian was promoted to assistant director for resource management and user experience, effective January 2021, but this left her position in the research services unit vacant with only three librarians remaining in that unit.

As of January 2021, having taken over the departing assistant director for public services' direct reports, the library director oversaw the assistant director for resource management and user experience, the university archivist, the web and systems manager, the head of circulation, the head of research services, and the scholarly communication librarian. The new assistant director for resource management and user experience oversaw four library assistants, collection development, interlibrary loan, acquisitions, and cataloging. She also assisted the library director with the budget and long-range planning.

In 2021, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting enrollment decline, a university-wide hiring freeze was put into place for all but absolutely essential positions. The library was short-staffed, along with many other units on campus. In addition to the two assistant directors who departed during the fall 2020 semester, a staff member in resource management had retired in May 2020, and another two staff members left for other opportunities at the end of 2021. As hiring was on hold due to the pandemic, a support staff position from the library's administration office was reconfigured to assist in resource management.

During the spring 2022 semester, the university-wide hiring freeze was lifted. The library hired a new cataloging and resource sharing librarian, a position that was created from the former research services librarian's line, as that librarian had moved to an assistant director role. During the summer of 2022, the library attempted to fill the assistant director for public services position, but the search failed. The position was rewritten and reposted, but the search failed again.

By the fall 2022 semester, the assistant director for public services position had been vacant for nearly two years. The library was not functioning optimally, and it was time to move forward after a period of intense focus on COVID-19 pandemic-related challenges. In light of the two failed searches to fill the position assistant director for public services position, the assistant director for resource management and user experience and the library director began work on a staffing reorganization.

The reorganization went into effect between January and June 2023. The remaining assistant director gave two of her direct reports and some of her duties to the new cataloging and resource sharing librarian. The assistant director took over two of the library director's direct reports: the web and systems manager and the scholarly communication librarian.

By July 2023, a new leadership team had been formed with the newly promoted associate director for resource management and user experience, the university archivist, the head of circulation, and the head of research services, all four of the library director's direct reports. At this time, the library also implemented a new strategic communication plan, including a new Liaisons to External Groups & Organizations (LEGO) Team, which will be of service as the library moves forward with the reduced staffing structure in administration. This plan formally assigns some of the work done by the assistant director for public services before her departure in October 2020.

The library's associate director for resource management and user experience oversees the resource sharing and cataloging librarian, the web & systems coordinator, the scholarly communication librarian, four library assistants, chairs the LEGO Team, and will oversee a new digitization unit.

Discussion of a New Approach: Incremental Reorganization

Modernization of Services, Systems, and Spaces

The approach taken at this library has been to implement rightsized, incremental reorganizations, rather than sweeping, one-time change. The thought of re-organizing can be intimidating, but taking an incremental approach can cause less disruption, feel more comfortable, and increases the chances of lasting success (Carrillo and Gregory 2019). Treating some changes as pilot projects and introducing them in graduated steps, as Carrillo and Gregory (2019) advised, has also been helpful.

One of the biggest drivers of the reorganization phases in this library—aside from librarian and staff retirements and departures—was the overlapping and gradual modernization of services, systems, and spaces. While the library had been an early adopter of e-books and

chat reference service, and interlibrary loan service was excellent, other services remained quite traditional, including instruction.

Beginning in 2017, with the hiring of a new research services librarian, the reference and instruction unit began moving toward online and in-person consultations, as well as instruction via Zoom. Chat reference was already in place, and the library moved to a new, modern tool to host this service, which led to more emphasis on chat as a means to interact with library users.

With the hiring of a new head of research services in early 2019, the unit began transitioning to a consultation model that culminated in the removal of the library's reference desk in summer 2019. At that time, two service desks were consolidated into one, creating a single service point for circulation and first-level reference service. As librarians were no longer required to staff the reference desk, they were freed for other duties and found themselves more able to perform instruction in classrooms across campus, rather than only in the library; had more time for in-depth, one-on-one consultations; and were able to embed themselves in academic programs and courses more often.

The library also modernized its information systems during this time, including implementing a new discovery layer, a new ILS (integrated library system), self-check stations, an institutional repository, and more. These systems improvements had the effect of releasing some staff and librarian time. As others have found, staff members are now able to do some duties that had been previously performed by librarians, and in other cases, staff time has been freed by eliminating work that is no longer necessary or a priority for the library (Bright et al. 2018; Carrillo and Gregory 2019).

Finally, although the current library building opened in 2006, some spaces—especially on the main floor—have been updated in recent years. As McCaffrey (2019) found, the use of library spaces has become more diverse over time, now encompassing not only quiet study but also group work; spaces with special technology; rooms for students participating in online classes, meetings, or interviews; as well as coffee shops and meeting spots.

Academic libraries must also adapt their organizational models to include support for campus-wide initiatives, not just library endeavors, and organize in ways that enable the library to thrive in a digital future (Jakubs 2008; Murray-Rust 2017). Staffing reorganizations and advances in library automation have allowed this library's leadership team to undertake new initiatives that support the entire campus. For example, a scholarly communication unit was implemented in 2018 and a university-wide testing center was opened in the library in 2022. During the 2023–24 academic year, the resource management unit will implement a digitization unit, centralizing scanning for interlibrary loan, course reserves, the institutional repository, the

library's controlled digital lending pilot, and more. To meet the needs of the campus, the library director has redirected positions that supported outmoded functions.

The library's updates are popular with users, and these moves aligned with the library's mission of advancing the discovery, sharing, and preservation of knowledge by providing exceptional resources, services, personnel, and spaces. The combination of services and systems updates, modifications to the library building, and retirements and other staff departures drove incremental re-configurations of the library's staffing.

Leadership Team

The library's leadership team has changed several times since 2017. The membership of the team has changed from two, to five, to seven, and back to five, with different positions included, depending on the composition of the library staff at the time. The library director has learned, as did Bright et al. (2018), that creating a strong management team is not something that is done once and for all time. It is a process that must be managed, involving frequent communication and team building (Bright et al. 2018).

The leadership team often acts as a guiding coalition (Kotter 1996), especially when formulating, communicating, and executing planned changes. A guiding coalition that trusts one another and works together "can process more information, more quickly" and can implement new ideas faster because the group was involved in and is committed to the decisions that have been made (Kotter 1996, 55-56). As Kotter (1996) stated, "the combination of trust and a common goal shared by people with the right characteristics can make for a powerful team" (65).

A strong management team is also ideally suited to identify tasks and processes that can be eliminated to make time for new library and university priorities (Jakubs 2008). The reason these changes are being made—and the value of the new priorities—should be made clear to everyone in the library (Jakubs 2008), and the management team can help to make that happen. Library leaders should identify and reward staff members who are innovative and creative (Jakubs 2008), since engaging and empowering employees is a crucial stage in accomplishing a shift in organizational culture (Mierke and Williamson 2017). When embarking on a change initiative, including reorganizations, the leadership team can help to make expectations clear and reasonable, and should supply appropriate resources to foster a "flexible and supportive" work environment (Watts 2019).

Process

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

Clear, frequent communication is crucial when leading change. Fox and Keisling (2015) stated, “Communicating the vision requires focused attention from leadership and is a key element in change management” (530). Aim to share as many details about upcoming changes as possible, including explaining what the change is, why the change is happening, and how it will affect people within the library (Simons 2018).

Simons (2018) advises making change central to library leaders’ “core” messaging, updating employees about progress at every opportunity, and telling “success stories about the change process” (62). Including this information in library newsletters, regular staff updates, or library events normalizes change, provides opportunities to celebrate victories large and small, as well as space to acknowledge great work. Use as many channels as are available to share your message and repeat it at every opportunity (Simons 2018).

Sustaining the interest of a large team is difficult in a busy and fast-paced environment. Therefore, library leaders should ensure that meetings are efficient and productive, ask for feedback from the entire team regarding the changes that are being put into place, and provide frequent updates (Johnson, Jennings, and Hisle 2011). Indeed, Bright et al. (2018) found that involving staff members in discussions on proposed and in process changes helped staff members to adjust. Likewise, communication outside the library is also important. Hackman (2017) advised contacting the Human Resources department early in the change process, as this unit can help to avoid potential problems and keep upper administrators advised.

Experience at this library has shown that keeping employees updated, as much as possible, every step of the way, is crucial for the success of reorganizations large and small. Full, in-person updates—with time for questions and answers—are provided by the director three times a year and smaller monthly updates are provided via email. Frequently sharing information about staffing and duty changes means that employees are not surprised when changes happen within the library (Gaetjens 2019). Regular updates also keep other units within the library informed, as workflow changes in one unit can have unforeseen effects on other library departments (Hackman 2017).

Library leaders keep their own teams informed, and this, along with regular all-staff updates, leadership team meetings, and update meetings for library committee chairs, allows the leadership team to receive feedback from and involve many people in new initiatives. Maintaining a steady flow of information—across groups and between the library leadership and

the staff—builds trust, eases stress, and improves mutual understanding (Johnson, Jennings, and Hisle 2011).

A final key aspect of clear and frequent communication is providing safe space for library staff members to discuss the changes and articulate their concerns (Bright et al. 2018). Library leaders who are implementing new workflows or structural changes should consider having more meetings—full group, small group, and individual—to provide support, talk through any problems, address needs, and create opportunities for staff members to be heard (Bright et al. 2018). Check in with people who are taking on new duties, as they often have contributions that may have been overlooked by upper administrators and ask how things are going to find out what employees need.

Keeping employees apprised of changes can help organizations to achieve agreed-upon goals. As Watts (2019) stated, “If the team knows where they are headed, all the members can steer in the same direction” (226). Simons (2018) put it well: “No one ever said, ‘You’ve given me way too much information about the changes that are coming my way’” (61).

Training and Paperwork

Implementing and sustaining organizational change requires planning, and staff members must be prepared for new duties and responsibilities. To execute their missions, academic libraries need staff members who are performing at high levels (Onwubiko 2022).

One way to achieve high levels of performance is to foster and support the library as a learning organization, which Mierke and Williamson (2017) define as “one that tries something new, learns from what works and what doesn’t, and continually readjusts and regroup” (12). Simons (2018) said that a substantial staff development and training program will build staff members’ trust that they will be adequately prepared for new assignments, and such programs help to grow an organizational culture of leadership development at every level (Mierke and Williamson 2017).

In addition to training, it is important to stay on top of paperwork during a reorganization. Position descriptions should be kept up-to-date, as these documents can quickly become inaccurate, and a good time to review them is at the time of annual evaluations. Ensuring that employee voices are considered and respected as a part of the reorganization process can be motivating, especially if major changes to individual job duties are being considered, and library employees should understand their new job duties and how job performance will be assessed (Wissinger, in Dearie, Meth, and Westbrooks 2018). Finally, keep organizational charts current,

and make notes on personnel adjustments at least once a year, as it is easy to lose track of changes over the course of time.

Resistance

At any point during a change initiative, library leaders may encounter resistance from the library staff. Members of the management team must attempt to predict where resistance may arise and be prepared with strategies to counteract it (Mierke and Williamson 2017). It is vital that library leaders remain focused on library employees who want to move forward, and not be sidetracked by employees who are “actively disengaged” (Mierke and Williamson 2017, 8). With adequate preparation and strong leadership, resistance to new initiatives can be managed.

Bright et al. (2018) suggest creating time for “safe” discussions, making it clear that staff members can reject changes when possible and appropriate, acquainting the staff with new software or technology as early in the process as possible, providing professional development opportunities on communication preferences and styles of learning, and, if appropriate, introducing the staff to other library units and processes.

To build confidence in the change process, consider creating some early wins (Fox and Keisling 2015). Carrillo and Gregory (2019) point out that easy wins can be created by changing things that the library staff is already against, for example, eliminating certain tasks or workflows, rearranging office spaces, or approving new ideas that are exciting to the staff. Easy and early wins can improve morale, especially when staff suggestions are integrated into the change process (Fox and Keisling 2015). These wins offer encouragement and provide a feeling of momentum for library employees (Fox and Keisling 2015).

Finally, it can be helpful to meet with individuals or small groups to listen to the reasons they may be resistant to change (Fox and Keisling 2015). Employees want to be heard, even if their concerns cannot be addressed immediately. Indeed, when employees feel that they have had opportunities to share their viewpoints, and that these viewpoints have received thorough and thoughtful consideration, they may feel more committed to the impending organizational changes (Simons 2018).

Conclusion

Reorganizations, even incremental ones, require sustained effort. Processes like these can be long and difficult and may surface fears that must be carefully resolved. At this library, success has been found by focusing attention on the library staff and remaining flexible and patient.

Clear and frequent communication is vital, as is providing space for library staff members to express concerns and ask questions.

Experience at this library has also shown that creating a strong management team is an ongoing process that requires attention and intention but is well worth the effort, as the leadership team can make or break any effort toward change. A leadership team that is well-informed and involved in making decisions can help to achieve and maintain organizational change.

Finally, changes may not go smoothly, and challenges will surface, but experience at this library has shown that keeping employees updated about all phases of the process is crucial for the success of reorganizations large and small. Above all, remember that organizational change is a journey, not a destination.

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