The organizational question: informatics and information management in the academic health sciences center*

The changing nature of information and its growth in electronic formats has raised many questions. Today, one of the ongoing questions for health sciences librarians is the ideal organizational structure for integrating and managing information. Integrated Advanced Information Management Systems (IAIMS) planning grants have attempted to identify organizational models as part of the planning process. One of the premises of IAIMS is that the process should create "an organizational mechanism within health institutions to manage more effectively the knowledge of medicine, and to provide for a system of comprehensive information access" [1]. Sherrilynne Fuller summarized results of the IAIMS planning process and remarked that no single model or set of models had emerged. Each institution has struggled to come to grips with the information management problem. As she states, "No single IAIMS model successful elsewhere is likely to be the right one for your institution" [2]. Whether working in a formal IAIMS environment or not, the elusive search for the perfect organizational model goes on.

Organizational questions seem to be everywhere. The terms re-engineering, downsizing, and rightsizing are affecting all organizations today. The public media reports massive layoffs at IBM, AT&T, Apple, and elsewhere. Even the military structure is affected. On February 6, 1994, a New York Times article raises this issue:

We are like the little mammals that appeared when the dinosaurs started dying out . . . we are flexible and mobile. They are not. But the "dinosaurs" see things differently. They are struggling to redefine their mission in a changing and sometimes threatening world.

One year ago, I was asked to put forth the ideal organizational structure for managing information at my institution. I initiated a request to Association of Academic Health Sciences Library Directors (AAHSLD) listserv members for organizational structures that linked libraries and other information providers—particularly in an informatics environment. In November, Elizabeth Eaton initiated another request regarding reporting structures, asking, "Are there directors who report directly to a CIO [Chief Information Officer]?"

The fall 1993 Symposium on Computer Applications in Medical Care (SCAMC) had at least two sections related to this issue, and one of the most popular sessions dealt with "information infrastructure" (e.g., "The CIO and the Medical Informaticist: Alliance for Progress"). In October, the Biomedical Library Acquisition Bulletin (a publication of MLA's Collection Development Section) reported on the changing organizational staffing patterns in collection development and acquisitions in today's information environment. The 1994 Spring Conference of the Eastern New York Chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries focuses on "Re-engineering Library Services" and includes a list of recommended readings. Recently (February 14, 1994), another listserv message was initiated asking for organizational patterns in other medical libraries.

One recent publication, Information Management and Organizational Change in Higher Education by Gary M. Pitkin, highlights the organizational issues in information management [3]. Reviewed in the January 1994 issue of the Bulletin of the Medical Library Association, I believe the strength of this book is the discussion of the functional role and responsibilities of a "Chief Information Officer" and the necessary qualifications [4]. I believe the implications of this function still need to be thoroughly discussed. Unless one is in an institution that has "finished changing," the current dynamic information environment should compel everyone to read this book.

The responses I received to my own listserv question were few but very good. In general, the blending of information management and referral functions of the so-called traditional library with the computer literacy and "help desk" functions of the academic computing center are taking place formally and informally in the forward-thinking libraries of the United States. Scanning the literature revealed that particularly in IAIMS institutions, consolidation at some level of library and computing functions is a major programmatic issue. Although the results cannot be considered complete, organizations that had completed the information planning process did blend these two functions (e.g., Hahnemann University and the University of North Carolina). However, it is very difficult to compare departments, units, or functions at other institutions, because the definition of titles is specific to each institution.

Other listserv responses pro-

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voke further thought. Tom Basler provided some historical data regarding to whom the head librarian reported in 1955, 1965, and 1975. I believe comparative data would be interesting from the years 1985 and, one hopes, 1995. Tom Singarella noted, “the library director who reports at the highest levels of the university not only insures accurate and timely communication, appropriate information policy development, but also the accessibility to directly argue for appropriate fiscal support.” Bob Cheshier brought a sense of humor and realism to the picture by stating, “it seems to be beyond many administrators in higher education, that cooperation and optimum use of funds are not directly related to organizational structure. The best thing one can say about all of this is probably that it keeps life interesting and frustrating.”

The best solution to the organizational question, Where should the library be? was presented by Nina Matheson in response to one of the questions on the AAHSLD listerv in September 1993:

The nature of the institution will determine the admissible scope of the library . . . . As for effectiveness, I could easily argue that effectiveness is a function more of proven ability to accurately perceive needs and deliver appropriately and imaginatively than in structural loci and the mantles . . . . If you are trying to meet a fluctuating and variable service demand and need, you want and need the flexibility of local control of the production.

My understanding of the IAIMS program was that the original intent was to create various models for other institutions to follow. The results tend to indicate that each IAIMS site is specific and the creation of a dynamic and working process is more important than a resulting model or organizational structure. Again, Nina Matheson provides a functional list of organizational requirements for the library:

- the librarian must be a member of the senior leadership team and share in the responsibility for stewardship of the institution,
- the librarian must be privy to all institutional planning and operational information,
- the librarian must be accountable to staff of the institution being served, and
- the librarian must help bring in resources to support the programs of the institution.

I believe each institution must define its organization based upon its own needs and available resources. I throw open this question to you the reader: Where should the librarian report? What do all the changes mean to us?

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References