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Anne Marie Casey

Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, caseya3@erau.edu

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Use of Academic Library Strategic Priorities during Severe Budget Reductions

A Study of leadership and Management

Anne Marie Casey, Simmons College

Problem Statement

By committing to specific priorities while engaged in planning, an academic library can allocate resources to the areas of greatest importance and set goals that advance that organization in the direction of meeting the highest priorities. During periods of relative stability, priorities can offer a guide to allocating resources. In less favorable periods, such as an economic downturn, they may guide decision-makers through the reallocation of resources.

Despite the potential benefits of established strategic priorities, no research has examined this subject in regard to academic libraries. This study fills that void by investigating how libraries use strategic priorities at a time of severe economic recession. Do they maintain, abandon, or re-evaluate and adjust priorities and why? Do library managers exhibit leadership or management in their handling of priorities? How do library priorities fit into the institutional context?

Gaining an understanding of how libraries use priorities and the impact of that use following a severe recession could guide others in the effective application of priorities. By discovering whether library managers exhibit effective leadership or management behaviors in their use of priorities may provide evidence of a style and process useful for others to adopt under similar conditions.

Procedures

Research Design

- Case Study Method
- Multiple Case Design

Site Selection

- Institutions with Carnegie Classification of Master's L: Master's Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
 - Large enough to offer multiple degree programs
 - Often served by one main academic library
- Five states with highest unemployment rates in November, 2009
 - California
 - Michigan
 - Nevada
 - Rhode Island
 - South Carolina
- Searched Web sites of 45 institutions for evidence of strategic plans that include priorities
 - Discovered five such institutions
 - Two had plans that were not current
 - Resulted in three institutions in California and Michigan

Objectives

- To identify the extent to which library priorities fit into the institutional context.
- To identify whether library managers exhibit specific leadership or management traits.
- To identify the use of academic library strategic priorities in response to severe budget reductions.
- To identify whether the library maintains, abandons, re-evaluates and adjusts strategic priorities in response to severe budget reductions.
- To identify the extent to which the library applies a particular priority in response to severe budget reductions.

Methodology

- Visited each of the three case study sites, labeled case A, case B, and case C in summer 2010
- Conducted personal interviews with:
 - Library directors
 - Chief Academic Officers (CAO)
 - Representative of institutional Planning, if such a department exists
- Conducted focus group interviews with:
 - Management Team members
 - Librarian volunteers
 - Staff volunteers
- Document Analysis
 - Strategic plans
 - Other planning documents
 - Minutes of meetings and other internal communication case studies shared

Findings

Institutional Demographics

Institutions	A	B	C
Enrollment – Fall 2009	35,000	25,000	9,000
Percent graduate students	17 percent	14 percent	14 percent
Budget reductions – FY10	\$40 million	N/A	\$12 million
Enrollment reductions – 2009-10	10 percent	N/A	5 percent
Number of libraries	1	1 central, 1 branch,	1
Director's supervisor	CAO	CAO	CAO

General

Case A

- Largest of the three cases
- Have been experiencing budget reductions for many years but recession has increased them
- Have been engaged in strategic planning for many years
- Library planning is strongly aligned with institutional planning
- Priorities remain intact regardless of external environment; goals change if necessary
- Communication channels within and outside library appear strong

Case B

- Have not experienced budget reductions to this point but anticipate them
- Formal planning has been in place about five years
- Library planning is strongly aligned with institutional planning
- Priorities guide decision-making
- Communication evident but managers acknowledge they need to improve

Case C

- Smallest of the three cases
- Experienced some budget reductions in past but worsened since recession
- Formal planning for more than a decade
- Library planning is strongly aligned with institutional planning
- Communication strong throughout organization
- Flat organizational structure; director and faculty librarians provide direction; additional managers supervise
- Much cross-training to ensure all service areas covered

Thematic

Management

Components of management exist at all levels of the organization from the director to the staff. Management is specific to the appropriate level of the organization.

Evidence-Based Managerial Leadership

Managers use data to make decisions. This includes evaluation of stakeholder needs and satisfaction, student learning outcome assessment, and return on investment reports.

Change

Managers and staff are innovative in their approach to external changes. They employ new technologies where possible; cross-train to maintain services; and reengineer or abandon processes where appropriate.

Employee Participation

Librarians participate in the management of the three organizations; staff are involved in planning and empowered to make decisions in their own areas. Shared vision is evident at all three cases.

Communication

Managers take communication very seriously and provide information where appropriate. Staff are not aware of communication regarding priorities but understand and follow priorities.

Service

Service to students and faculty is the strongest priority in evidence at all three libraries. It is the unspoken priority that provides the foundation. It is what keeps the doors open. The staff at one of the libraries go so far as to say that library customer services is considered better than any other department on campus.

Leadership

The components of leadership are apparent in the style of all three directors and in many of the managers as well. Librarians and staff also exhibit some aspects of leadership.

Leadership and Management

Characteristics of Leadership and Management*

Management	Leadership
Establish agendas	Create a vision
Set time tables	Clarify big picture
Allocate resources	Set strategies
Provide structure	Communicate goals
Make job placements	Seek commitment
Establish rules and procedures	Build teams and coalitions
Develop incentives	Inspire and energize
Generate creative solutions	Empower subordinates
Take corrective action	Satisfy unmet needs

*Adapted from *A force for change: How leadership differs from management*, by J. P. Kotter, pp. 3-8. Copyright 1990 by The Free Press.

Preliminary Conclusions

- Libraries align their priorities with those of the institution.
- Chief Academic Officers respect directors and include them in decision-making with college deans.
- Management traits exist at all levels of the organization.
- Leadership traits are apparent among the directors and other managers.
- Libraries use strategic priorities to guide decisions related to budget reductions.
- Internal and external communication about the library response to budget reductions is a priority.
- Libraries maintain priorities regardless of external pressures.
- Goals may change; priorities are constant for the life of a given strategic plan.
- Library personnel at all levels view service as the unspoken priority that underlies all they do.
- Strategic priorities *do* guide decision-making in response to budget reductions that is considered appropriate and fair by all stakeholders of the library.

Ideas for Further Research

1. Do these libraries maintain priorities because strategic planning is very important to leaders?
2. Should the research be repeated with libraries that do not display current strategic plans?
3. Or the research be repeated with libraries that do not engage in strategic planning at all?
4. How important is formal strategic priority-setting to maintaining core services during a recession?
5. Are the priorities strong because of the leadership styles of the directors?