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Use of Academic Library Strategic Priorities during Severe Budget Reductions

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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 the 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? So 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
Conducted personal interviews with:
- Anne Marie Casey, Simmons College (Case A)
- Chief Academic Officer, Colby-Sawyer College (Case B)
- University Librarian, Trinity College (Case C)

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. 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. Librarians and staff also exhibit some aspects of leadership.

Research Design
- Case Study Method
- Multiple Case Design

Site Selection
- Institutions with Carnegie Classification of Master’s I: Master’s Colleges and Universities (larger programs)
- Large enough to offer multiple degree programs
- Often serve by one main academic library
- Five states with highest unemployment rates in November, 2009
  - California
  - Michigan
  - Nevada
  - Rhode Island
  - South Carolina
- Searches 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

Findings
Institutional Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total undergraduates</td>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
<td>1,200</td>
<td>800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010 Academic year</td>
<td>PTA</td>
<td>$24 million</td>
<td>$20 million</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budget reductions</td>
<td>FY10</td>
<td>10 percent</td>
<td>15 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent graduate</td>
<td></td>
<td>15 percent</td>
<td>20 percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of libraries</td>
<td></td>
<td>3 central, 1 branch</td>
<td>5 central, 2 branch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director’s supervisor</td>
<td>CAO</td>
<td>CAO</td>
<td>CAO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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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 remain intact regardless of external environment; goals change if necessary
  - 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

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.

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

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?