

Money & Management

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Strains and Joys Color Mergers Between Libraries and Tech Units

By ANDREA L. FOSTER

Adrift. Dysfunctional. Desperately needing a change. The adjectives sound like descriptions of a bad relationship, but about three years ago Xavier University, in Cincinnati, applied them to two of its departments.

Both Xavier's library and its information-technology unit were in terrible shape. Xavier had hired four chief information officers in five years, its technology was obsolete, its library and IT staffs didn't talk to each other, and students had to jump through hoops to do online research.

David W. Dodd, the CIO who arrived at Xavier in 2005, said students and faculty members wanted three basic things: "Provide the services I'm looking for, in the manner I want, and *get out of my way*." They weren't getting any of them.

The solution was to scrap traditional library and technology units in favor of one with librarians and technology experts working side by side, responding to students' needs for immediate, round-the-clock access to electronic data and interactive Web applications.

A \$28-million building called the Learning Commons will be erected to house the organization and serve as a center for various educational programs. Users will be able to get technical help, use multimedia software at any one of a bank of computers, view the library's online holdings, and have their reference questions answered.

The library, which will be attached to the new building, is being refashioned as simply a warehouse for books.

Xavier is among at least three dozen colleges that have taken the drastic step of merging their library and technology departments. The mergers are happening at small liberal-arts colleges after take-charge leaders — usually CIO's — arrive and see traditional boundaries between library and technology work blurring. Those leaders observe increasing amounts of scholarship being digitized, students doing research online, library books sitting unused, and a constant stream of requests for computer and Web support. They want the flexibility to allocate funds where they are most needed, be it hiring an instructional technologist or purchasing an e-book collection.

The transition can be bumpy. Most often, library and technology personnel end up reporting to the CIO, and sometimes the position of chief librarian is eliminated. The loss of autonomy can rankle the library staff. College officials also say that the model does not work at large research universities and that those hoping to save money with these mergers will be disappointed; salary and technology costs can rise.

Books Are Played Down

Traditionalists may not like hearing Mr. Dodd speak of his new unit, which he talks about as if he were a restaurateur ushering in the fast-food model. "Services have to be seamless, highly satisfactory, and self-driven," he told a group of college officials in October at the annual conference of Educause, a higher-education technology group.

He cited a 2005 report by the OCLC Online Computer Library Center, a nonprofit group, which says 84 percent of students start research projects by retrieving information via a popular Web search engine. College officials should not denounce that, he added. Instead, colleges "have to be better than Google."

At Xavier that has meant pumping up the institution's Web portal. With knowledge of students' majors, Xavier sends them the names of relevant databases and librarians who know the best resources for their interests. The students can contact the librarians in person or online. For faculty members, research papers will be added to the portal as part of the institution's plan to build a digital repository.

Mr. Dodd said Xavier's "Organization 3.0" also recognizes reduced demand for books. About 40 percent of the library's books have not been circulated in at least 10 years, and were transferred to an annex. The relocation freed up the first floor of the library for an "information commons" that began operating this month. It will serve as a prototype for one in the Learning Commons, to be completed in 2010.

Mr. Dodd came to Xavier because the institution, and most importantly its president, embraced this vision. Xavier eliminated the position of head librarian after that person retired in May 2006.

The blended model does not always work, as Mr. Dodd learned from bitter personal experience. He tried to help integrate the library and technology units at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte when he worked as a technology administrator there. The plan foundered, he said, because administrators were afraid to dismantle "silos" that, in Mr. Dodd's view, had librarians and techies stuck in their own stale cultures.

Other college officials say it is hard to blend the two departments at a research institution like Charlotte, which has more than 22,000 students. The bigger the university, the more complex its structure and the more it relies on specialists. They are not used to working across boundaries and have more clout to resist change. The mergers work best at small colleges, said Chris D. Ferguson, who oversees a blended organization as associate provost for information and technology services at Pacific Lutheran University.

User-Centric Service

At Xavier, which has 6,700 students, librarians and technology workers were told they must collaborate and have been retrained to facilitate the process. Thirteen librarians have been split into two groups that each include technology employees.

One group, called Discovery, is the most visible. It caters to students who need help running computers, getting their reference questions answered, or who want to sign out material. The unit also responds to faculty members who seek assistance with software or hardware for classes. The other group, Content Management, does collection development, cataloging, and assembling of digital data.

One change resulting from the new model is that students who want to use laptops in the library are no longer sent across the campus first to have their machines reconfigured. A technician in the library, part of the Discovery team, adjusts the laptops' settings so students can immediately gain access to the wireless network.

Other campuses have discovered different benefits of an integrated organization. Mr. Ferguson of Pacific Lutheran said that, since a merger in 1996, his technology staff had been infused with the librarians' culture of catering to clients, and that librarians were influenced by technology workers' ability to keep current with

technology trends.

An official at Brandeis University, which has had a merged unit for three years, said librarians and technology professionals recently cooperated to install a new course-management system. Perry O. Hanson, Brandeis's vice president and vice provost for libraries and information technology, said that before the merger, people were "tripping over each other."

Elusive Savings

But cooperation and efficiency does not always mean economy.

"If you're going into it trying to save money, you're going to probably make decisions you'll regret," said Eugene L. Spencer, who led a merged unit as the former associate vice president for information services and resources of Bucknell University.

Many merged organizations can end up spending more money. The Learning Commons at Xavier, for example, is costing so much — part of a \$110-million campus project — that the university is appealing to alumni for donations to construct the building.

Payroll costs can also go up. The skills of information-technology experts are in greater demand outside academe, so they tend to earn more than librarians. Merging the two staffs, said Robert E. Renaud, CIO at Dickinson College, sometimes drives librarians' salaries up so they are on par. That's what happened at Dickinson, he said, which has had a merged unit since 2004.

Despite the prospect of higher pay, librarians are divided about the integrated organization. Alison W. Morgan, a Xavier librarian, says that although none of her library colleagues have departed as a result of the merger, some accepted their new responsibilities reluctantly. Ms. Morgan supports the merger and the new job descriptions.

At other colleges, librarians described being shunted aside after mergers. After Gettysburg College integrated its library and technology departments in 1995, the case became notorious among college officials as a cautionary tale of how *not* to do a merger. Robin Wagner, Gettysburg's library director, published a harrowing account of the integration in *Books, Bytes and Bridges: Libraries and Computer Centers in Academic Institutions* (American Library Association, 2000).

Traditional library and information-technology staffs at Gettysburg were replaced with process-oriented groups such as "selection" and "delivery" teams. The selection unit included anyone who selected things, be they coffee, software, or books. Ms. Wagner, a former reference librarian, said she was reprimanded for "undermining the purity of the teams" after she answered a reference question while serving on the "training" team. Answering a reference question was the purview of the "response" team.

Tensions arose when technology workers, ponytailed young men, began sharing the same office space with librarians, most of whom were older women, said Ms. Wagner. According to her account, the men brought in a huge microwave, were slobs, had messy cords dangling from equipment, and said they worked much harder than the librarians who left work at 4:30 and took breaks throughout the day.

The merger lasted three years. During that time six of nine librarians left. All the technology workers stayed. Now there is collaboration between technology workers and librarians on projects like digitizing special collections. But each unit has its own budget and leader.

To avoid Gettysburg-like meltdowns, "the answer is to use a light touch," said Chip German Jr., who leads a blended organization as the CIO of the University of Mary Washington. "This means not going in and

insisting on personnel changes, not suddenly moving people around into different physical locations and forcing combinations where they don't feel natural."

At Xavier, though, there's no going back. Mr. Dodd tells his staff, "Go fearlessly into the future."

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