Focusing library vision on educational outcomes

By Richard Meyer

The goals of the institution are integral to the library's mission

E ffective leadership to improve library quality requires a vision based on understanding the real and meaningful educational outcomes of your institution. Experience suggests that library leadership sometimes fails because it doesn't know where it's going, perhaps because the university has not been clear on its agenda or has not communicated it. Probably most readers have heard the familiar leadership analogy based on the railroads. In the 19th century the railroads were perhaps the dominant force in corporate life. However, by the middle of this century their importance faded, and in the last 40 years the railroads declined into obscurity. This may have occurred because railroads misunderstood what it was they were doing; they thought they were in the railroad business rather than the transportation business. A broader vision could have helped by allowing them to shift into other forms of transport: trucking and airfreight. There was no reason not to do that except that they were unable or unwilling to do anything but run trains on tracks.

The important point here is that leaders require a clear understanding of what it is they are doing. One of the first things taught in management courses relates to the nature of organizations. Those organizations that lose sight of their mission or succeed in completing their mission cease to exist or are threatened by extinction. Once polio was conquered, the March of Dimes had to shift its mission in order to justify its existence. Libraries flounder and sometimes fail to do well because they are not sensitive to this issue. A lot of academic libraries operate on a vague mission to acquire, process, and make available books, media, and journals needed by the faculty and students. That sounds a little bit like a railroader's agenda. Recognizing this trap and that libraries are in the education business—not the book collecting business—has important implications, particularly in a world of quickly expanding electronic resources. Setting a vision derived from tracking down and articulating the educational outcomes of the specific institution will improve the success and robustness of a library. Therefore, it is important to determine the primary product of an institution and to rearticulate that information into a library vision.

Outcomes may vary

The educational outcomes of colleges and universities vary and not all of them fall under the heading of education. In addition to teaching and research—or scholarship—most institutions offer a mix of additional products. Some concentrate on one outcome more than others, and some produce outcomes that they might rather forget but need in order to attract students to their truly educational products. Educational statistics indicate that colleges and universities provide: entertainment, babysitting, job admission tickets, research, job skills, expanded horizons, cognitive development, personal growth, knowledge enhancement, and skills important to graduate school success. Some might criticize this list, but not after considering the real purpose of Division I football and asking why some parents send their children to church-sponsored colleges or why graduates of Northwestern get jobs on Wall Street easier than graduates of less prestigious schools. Certainly some segments of society seem to have a richer understanding of humanity and cultural issues and some people succeed in graduate school better than others. These variations reflect the

*Richard Meyer is director of the library at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas;
e-mail: richard_meyer@library.trinity.edu*

concentration of educational outcomes at given institutions.

Understanding educational outcomes

The issue of concern is to figure out what product or products our own school offers and then use that knowledge to help determine a vision for the library. Only by knowing the true educational outcomes of an institution can the library be effectively directed. To lead means to tend toward a goal or result; that is, librarians need to know what it is that their institution is doing in order to properly establish a reasonable direction for the library. Two broad examples help to illustrate how a clear understanding of educational outcomes may enhance library success.

Example 1. Consider a land-grant institution compared to a liberal arts college. In each case, understanding of educational outcomes plays a major part in determining a vision for the library. Land-grant universities tend to have large enrollments, they receive public funds, and they tend to provide major educational outcomes such as job skills, entertainment, knowledge, and research. On the other hand, liberal arts colleges have smaller enrollments and higher quality faculty/student interaction. Their alumni tend more toward graduate school and their graduates exhibit more fully broadened horizons.

In the case of many land-grant institutions, the general mission is to serve the state with the intention of educating citizens in agriculture, engineering, and practical arts to stimulate economic recovery. They help to produce citizens with skills appropriate to the economic success of the state and to improve the quality of life for citizens through education which provides job skills. Many focus on producing bachelor's- and master's-level graduates with skills that will allow them to take their place in the world of work.

This kind of educational outcome could easily lead to a library vision statement that says "[. . .] University will be a national leader in providing access to information and in educating individuals for effective lifelong learning." An emphasis put on "providing access to information" might lead naturally to augmenting the OPAC with locally mounted indexes. This em-

phasis gives students improved access to both the cataloged material in the library as well as to the journal literature. At schools with locally mounted indexes, improved access to information has positively impacted the quality of student papers and, as a result, improved the quality of the campus and the job skills of graduates. Recognizing the major educational outcome of the campus and developing a vision to support that outcome can lead to both a better directed library and improvement in campus quality.

Example 2. A different approach is appropriate at a private liberal arts college where educational outcomes are quite different than the land-grant school. For example, statistics at one liberal arts college revealed that alumni were completing Ph.D.s, law degrees, and medical degrees at the combined rate of 58 percent within five years. This means that students have been choosing the school with longer-range objectives in mind than consuming entertainment or gaining job skills at the bachelor's level. In so many words, the unexpressed vision of this liberal arts college appears to be to educate young people for success in graduate and professional schools. The importance of recognizing this statistic to the success of the campus cannot be overemphasized. The major characteristic that parents and their offspring seek in assessing quality of institutions is high admission rates of graduates to top graduate or professional schools.[1]

In this case, the statistics can be translated almost directly into the vision of the institution. Administrators give every evidence of basing decisions of where to place the allocation of resources on cost/benefit analyses that focus on recruitment of students as the number one concern. The character of the institution is shaped by a leadership vision which assertively articulates to recruits that alumni succeed in graduate school because the institution provides the appropriate education to assure that success.

Given this institutional focus, it is easy to see what the library vision ought to be. There are two variables that the library can impact: one is the level of its resources and the other is the success of students in graduate school. The administration of the library cannot determine the amount of budget allocated to the library,

> **The issue is to figure out what product our school offers and use that knowledge to determine a vision for the library.**

but can influence it. Moreover, focusing on success in graduate school leads to an appropriate vision easily compressed into a simple statement: "Distinctive quality in resources and services to empower students for advanced learning." Obviously, this vision would have its major impact on the bibliographic instruction program. Focusing on making sure that students graduate with the best possible bibliographic skills they can acquire can improve both the overall success of the library and the college in this example. An ability to utilize information resources effectively is essential to success in graduate school. It should be fairly easy to see from this that clear vision, competently expressed, lends focus to library operations, improves success rates, and plays an important role in determining quality.

Note

1. Larry H. Litten and Alfred E Hall, "In the Eyes of Our Beholders," *Journal of Higher Education* 60 (May/June 1989): 302–24. ∎

Notes

1. Paul Coleman, and Ada D. Jarred, "Regional Association Criteria and the Standards for College Libraries: The Informal Role of Quantitative Input Measures for Libraries in Accreditation," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 20 (November 1994): 273–84.

2. Verner W. Clapp, and Robert T. Jordan, "Quantitative Criteria for Adequacy of Academic Library Collections," *College & Research Libraries* 26 (September 1965): 371–80.

3. David Kaser, "Standards for College Libraries," *Library Trends* 31 (Summer 1983): 7–19.

4. Michael Matier, and C. Clinton Sidle, "What Size Libraries for 2010?" *Planning for Higher Education* 21 (Summer 1993): 9–15.

5. Ray L. Carpenter, "College Libraries: A Comparative Analysis in Terms of the ACRL Standards," *College and Research Libraries* 42 (January 1981): 7–18.

6. David B. Walch, "The 1986 College Library Standards: Application and Utilization," *College & Research Libraries* 54 (May 1993): 217–26.

References

Brown, Helen M. "College Library Standards" *Library Trends* 21 (October 1972): 204–218.
"Standards for College Libraries, 1995 edition." *C&RL News* 56 (April 1995): 245–57. ∎