Corporate Libraries: Bellwether of Change for the Library World at Large

Bibliotecas Corporativas: referente de cambio para el mundo de las bibliotecas en general

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Abstract

In this article, the authors argue that the lessons learned from the increasing closures of corporate libraries that began in the 1980s can be applied to the wider library community. These closures have accelerated since the 1990s due to corporate cost cutting measures and the ever increasing availability of internet services that bypass the information professional. Above all, the authors argue that corporate librarians have often failed to align their services to the priorities of the companies they serve. This has resulted in their institutional marginalization and the eventual closure of the library. The authors make the case that, among other types of libraries, the sacrosanct place of the academic library at the center of the university is not guaranteed. The information era with its vast digital resources has and will undermine the physical assets of traditional libraries as well as the customary role of librarians who staff them. Academic librarians will increasingly be expected to show administrators that their services are aligned to their institution's strategic priorities and that their libraries are providing added value to its customers, namely, the students, faculty and staff of their college or university. If they do not do so, they very well may face, in the not so distant future, what may now seem unimaginable –the reduction or closure of the academic library in favor of customer-accessed digital information services.

KEYWORDS: Corporate libraries, academic libraries, closures, added value, decline, alignment, strategy.

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Resumen

En este artículo, los autores argumentan que las lecciones aprendidas de los crecientes cierres de bibliotecas corporativas que se iniciaron en la década de 1980 se pueden aplicar a la comunidad bibliotecaria en general. Estos cierres se han acelerado desde la década de 1990 debido a las medidas de reducción de los costos corporativos y la creciente disponibilidad de servicios de Internet que pasan por alto al profesional de la información. Por encima de todo, los autores sostienen que los bibliotecarios corporativos han fracasado a menudo para ajustar sus servicios a las prioridades de las empresas a las cuales sirven. Esto ha dado lugar a su marginación institucional y el eventual cierre de la biblioteca.

Los autores resaltan que, con respecto a otros tipos de bibliotecas, no se garantiza el lugar sacrosanto de la biblioteca académica en el centro de la universidad. La era de la información con sus vastos recursos digitales tiene y socavará los activos físicos de las bibliotecas tradicionales, así como el papel de los bibliotecarios que las atienden. Se espera que cada vez más los bibliotecarios académicos deberán mostrar a sus autoridades que sus servicios están alineados con las prioridades estratégicas de su institución y sus bibliotecas están proporcionando un valor añadido a sus usuarios, a saber, los estudiantes, profesores y personal de su facultad o universidad. Si no lo hacen así muy bien pueden enfrentar, en un futuro no muy lejano, lo que puede ahora parecer inimaginable: la reducción o cierre de la biblioteca académica en favor de los servicios digitales de información, accesibles a los usuarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: bibliotecas corporativas, bibliotecas académicas, cierres, valor añadido, decadencia, alineación, estrategia

Introduction

*I*n the past few years we have co-authored a series of articles to assist special/corporate librarians weather an unprecedented wave of closures and reductions. These articles led to the publication of a book, *Special Libraries: A Survival Guide*, which included special libraries in North America, England, Australia and New Zealand. My co-author and I believe the lessons learned are instructive for all types of libraries.

Background

Corporate libraries have always been sort of a stepchild of the library world and were thought to be dependent on the success of their parent organization while subject to the vagaries and changing needs of their employers. The difficulties faced by corporate libraries have been the subject of rumors and innuendo in the literature for decades, until a study was released on *Closing the Corporate Library* in 1982[1]. The author of this study tied the failure of these libraries directly to a disconnect in meeting the needs of their parent institution. In some cases, the library was needed for only a short period of time, usually in conjunction with intensive research. In other cases, the library, which had not heretofore been subject to close evaluation by management, suddenly found itself under the watchful eye of a cost-cutter who demanded accountability. Thus, the value of the corporate library was dependent on the immediate need for information services. When that need was met, the library's value was called into question and its days were often numbered.

The rise of on-line services gave new life to many corporate libraries as librarians mastered the complexities of these services and were able to monopolize access to expensive databases. Soon, however, these databases became easier to use and many

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[1]   Matarazzo, James M. *Closing the Corporate Library: Case studies on the decision-making process.*

aggregators offered them for a flat fee on an annual basis. Librarians were still able to keep the searching for themselves, until they became bottlenecks in the research process and the database aggregators began marketing directly to end users.

Beginning in the 1990s the corporate library was seen in a different light. For some, the study "Valuing Corporate Libraries: A Management Survey"[2] provided a lift in the spirits of corporate librarians largely because of the way the study results were marketed. The marketing genius at the company that co-sponsored the research wrote an inspirational public relations piece that was printed in many trade and professional publications almost verbatim, while the real message of the study was lost. The major finding of the study was that only one-third of the corporate managers surveyed could articulate the value of their library; the other two-thirds did not know!

Just three years later Thomas Davenport and Lawrence Prusak would shake-up the corporate library world with their article "Blow Up the Corporate Library,"[3] in part because it appeared in the *International Journal of Information Management* and, therefore, would have been read by those in management, and partly because it stated that libraries were being left behind and growing increasingly irrelevant just as managing information was becoming more essential to corporate success. Dr. Roger Jester, IBM's Manager of Management and Communications at this time, illustrated just how far corporate librarians were from the business they were meant to support. Jester wrote:

> I find it strange that in my two decades of experience in a major American corporation, I have yet to see corporate librarians attending business results or product review meeting. I have attended my fair share of business strategy sessions with colleagues from practically every

corporate function but I cannot recall a single instance when a member of the librarian's staff was present.[4]

Jester categorized librarians as being outside the mainstream of the businesses they serve. Despite this quote appearing in Special Libraries, the magazine of the Special Libraries Association (SLA), it is hard to know if anyone actually read it, judging by the fact that not much changed.

Yet another blow to corporate librarians occurred in 1995 when the authors of the 1990 survey repeated their study and contacted the same firms. *The Value of Corporate Libraries: Findings from a 1995 Survey of Senior Managers*[5], noted about a twenty percent decline in the number of corporate libraries and still, fewer staff members in the library, and still, two-thirds of the corporate managers who had no idea of the value of their library to their firm. Without a clever marketing person to spin the results as had happened in 1990, and the bad news was ignored and the authors - heroes and award winners in 1990 - were put on a short leash and refused funding for the next proposed study. Apparently only good news was welcome.

In 2007 an article by James Matarazzo and Toby Pearlstein introduced a method of evaluation to assist corporate librarians in evaluating their services.[6] In this article the authors noted that membership in SLA had declined by twenty percent and suggested this was a reasonable proxy for what seemed to be happening to the number of corporate libraries and corporate librarians overall (i.e. closures or severe cutbacks). The authors now believe there has been a 40% decline in SLA membership and suggest again, a relationship between the number of special libraries and membership in the Association after a continued wave of closures and staff reductions.

While the *Standards for Special Libraries* specifically requires evaluation, few special librarians perform evaluations

2   Matarazzo, James M., Prusak, Laurence, Gauthier, Michael R. *Valuing Corporate Libraries: A Senior Management Survey*; and Matarazzo, James M., Prusak, Laurence. *The Value of Corporate Libraries: Findings from a 1995 Survey of Senior Management.*

3   Prusak, Laurence, Davenport, Thomas H. Blow Up the Corporate Library. *International Journal of Information Management.*

4   Jester, Roger E. To the Ends of the Earth: Librarians and Management Information Needs, *Special Libraries*.

5   Matarazzo, James M., Prusak, Laurence. *The Value of Corporate Libraries, op cit.*

6   Matarazzo, James M., Pearlstein, Toby. Corporate Score, *Library Journal.*

on a regular basis. In the past, and going on for almost a decade, this author taught a course at the SLA Annual Conference on the topic of demonstrating value. The class was always crowded, yet few of the attendees seemed to practice what they had learned when they returned to work. It is a mystery as to why this is the case (though we can speculate: no time, no staff, no interest from upper management, it is too hard to quantify what we do, etc.) especially since all other functions in corporations are evaluated fairly regularly. Instead, praise from those for whom information was provided upon request and/or salary increases were a proxy for serious evaluation of the services provided.

When their firm suddenly decided to evaluate all cost centers with an eye toward identifying all "unnecessary" activities, library managers felt blindsided and were frequently not even consulted by upper management. Rather, the higher-ups would send the request for assessment downward through lower level managers who felt little qualms in "throwing the library under the bus" in order to save their own department or function from the cost cutters.

Customers of company libraries cannot, in general, save the library in troubled times since that are not typically high enough on the corporate ladder. Furthermore, when cuts are being made, it is a tense time when keeping a low profile is the rule of thumb. While this seems a defeatist or cynical attitude, I have seen many occasions and heard many personal anecdotes across a variety of types of organizations that bear it out.

Many firms are making serious and determined moves to limit expenses. The money saved is now being used to buy back shares and/or to increase dividends. The money not spent on the library or other services considered "non-essential" could even be used to buy another firm as a way to grow the business.

Why does this matter for Academic Libraries?

Corporate libraries have faced a confluence of pressures that has driven how these libraries and the librarians who work in them have had to alter their perceptions and their strategic and operational approach to what ser-

vices they will provide and how they will provide them.[7] While many of these pressures are beyond the control of the library, how corporate librarians have responded has created a body of lessons, both good and bad, that can be useful for other types of librarians so that they can be ready to respond as these pressures build up in institutions.

In 2009, Sue Edgar asked the question "Is the Bell Tolling for the Death of the Corporate Information Unit"?[8] She argued that corporations want to reduce headcount and costs and "scale back and reassess business need." Edgar noted that these are "harsh economic times and businesses are changing, priorities are altered and there are casualties." Edgar challenged information professionals to enter a new economic era.

In 2013 Bain & Company, the global management consulting firm surveyed 1200 corporate executives.[9] At the time the survey found the confidence level of these executives was down in light of a slow recovery and some new challenges. Their new priorities were revenue growth, cost reduction, and increased profitability. These executives were looking for new and creative approaches to cost reductions to help them fund investments or meet earnings targets.

Like corporate libraries, academic libraries are in the midst of facing these same circumstances and having to respond to challenges to their traditional place on campus (both figuratively and literally). Like corporate libraries, academic libraries are part of institutions that have a bottom line to meet and like corporate librarians, academic librarians are increasingly being required to rethink how they can contribute (and demonstrate that contribution) the their organization's sustainability.

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[7] Matarazzo, James M., Pearlstein, Toby. Corporate Libraries: A Confluence of Forces Pressing on their Future. *Journal of Library and Information Sciences*

[8] Edgar, Sue. Is the Bell Tolling for the Death of the Corporate Information Unit? Business Information Review.

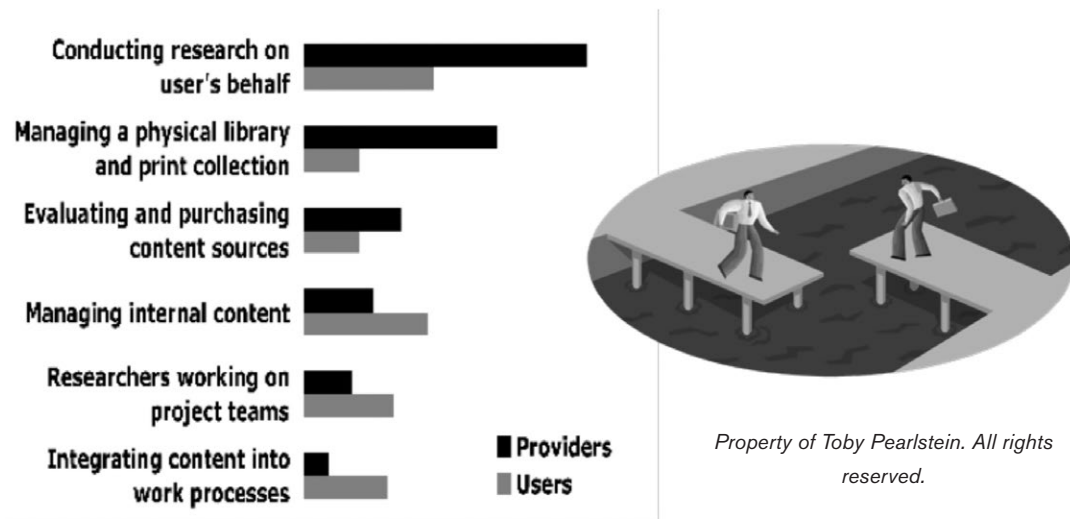[9] Rigby, Darrell, Bilodeau, Barbara. Management Tools & Trends.

Missing the Message?

Messages are being sent by management all the time. The goals that are important continue to shift from year to year (if not more frequently) as so often does the reporting structure of the library, and librarians appear to have zoned out on these new directions or decided that the shift is just a passing fancy. Business as usual trumps committing to assist the firm achieve its new objectives.

Regular evaluation and sharing the results up the management chain, not to mention continuously taking the pulse of the organization through networking, are essential in today's volatile world where new priorities are in the air all the time. Things are in a constant state of tumult at most organizations. The authors were consulting at one firm and worked on the premises once a week. In one week's time, the entire Marketing Department was let go. At another firm, a large physical library, in terms of staff size and holdings, was eliminated in one day! This firm now has no collection at all and but a small staff. The few remaining information professionals are directed to help a very specific customer group; everyone else is left to their own devices, literally, with a selection of desktop databases and, of course, Google. The firm has decided that their future is dependent on growth by acquisition and, according to upper management, all the savings garnered through these cuts in costs from the library as well as other departments are being put aside for future purchases.

Alert! This is the time to demonstrate how the library can contribute and communicate up to the decision makers how you will support achieving their goals. It is the time for library management to take the lead and to do its part to make whatever tough decisions are necessary to align with organizational goals. If you choose to marginalize yourself by avoiding or refusing to figure out how you can contribute (e.g. making tough decisions to stop some services, or giving up physical space, or utilizing staff differently), your days are certainly numbered.

In 2009, Matarazzo and Pearlstein began a series of articles in *Searcher Magazine* (now *Online Searcher*) designed to assist special and corporate librarians at a time when the economy was leading to reductions

Conducting research on user's behalf
Managing a physical library and print collection
Evaluating and purchasing content sources
Managing internal content
Researchers working on project teams
Integrating content into work processes

■ Providers
■ Users

and closures at many libraries. The topics ranged from government to publishing to news libraries; all of which appeared to be under stress. The topics also included scenario planning and alternate sourcing, all with an eye to inform and advise information professionals working in special libraries in the United States. In 2013, the authors expanded coverage to include Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand. These articles were revised and updated and published with additional materials in *Special Libraries: A Survival Guide.*[10] The goal was to create a set of pragmatic yet sustainable options for information professionals under stress and for library managers to become thought leaders in their organizations.

Strategic Alignment Or Are We Just not Nimble Enough to Adapt, No Matter how much Time we are Given?

In 1990 while visiting corporate libraries in Japan,[11] Matarazzo and Prusak visited an insurance company. Due to some special circumstances they arrived and had time to observe library use and watch the staff work. The 16,000 books and periodicals on the main floor of the library were organized more like a book-

store, by topic. Another 81,000 volumes stored in the basement followed the more traditional arrangement. The director was later asked about his staff's activities, given that most customers were able to find what they wanted on their own. He replied that the library staff is not responsible for helping those who actually come to the library; rather, they help salesmen in the field, "because selling insurance is the most important activity at the firm" and he had aligned his services with what was most important to his company.

In 2006, SLA commissioned the "SLA Alignment Study" which demonstrated that there was a significant disconnect between what the information professionals surveyed believed were the services they should be providing and what the customers surveyed said they actually wanted and would find valuable. This is shockingly reminiscent of the findings of the previously mentioned 1990 and 1995 surveys wherein two-thirds of corporate executive respondents could not articulate the value of their libraries and documents this gap.

In 2014 SLA and the *Financial Times* commissioned a study to "explore the evolving value of information management in today's society."[12] Remarkably, two-thirds of the corporate managers in this newest survey still could not say that their library added value to the activities of their firm. What message are we as information professionals missing.

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[10] Matarazzo, James M., Pearlstein, Toby. Special Libraries: *A Survival Guide.*

[11] Prusak, Laurence, Matarazzo, James M. *Information Management and Japanese Success.*

[12] De Bono, Caspar, Arnold, Kate. *The Evolving Value of Information Management.*

Since 1990, times have changed; the scope of information needing to be managed has exploded; technology has changed the lens through which information professionals see their services; self-proclaimed self-sufficient customers declare it is all on Google without even understanding what Google is or the nature of the results upon which they are basing important decisions. Our profession has made many strides in gearing our most useful skills to these challenges. Experience has show us that successful libraries align their services to meet their parent organization's strategic direction. Their services and resources are continually evaluated to meet the changing needs of the enterprise. The library staff are involved in the work of their customers so they really understand the customer's needs and provide the necessary information resources to match up with them. Yet for many of us, those less successful, the same disconnects continue to dog our heels.

Academic Library Roles and Services

For decades academic librarians have organized collections, purchased materials and arrayed a reference staff to field questions from customers. The need for collections and the traditional roles in the organization of information now have to be considered against a decline in customer use and the rise of networked resources. While the need for a quiet study space on campus will always be there, other roles and services appear to be on the decline. In this light, the challenge is how to invest in and budget for innovation while not throwing out the baby with the bathwater and continuing some traditional services where needed.

For example, if traditional *(i.e.* in-person) reference services are really not needed as much, why not move to remote reference services and have clerical staff at the reference desk? This has already occurred in some institutions where virtual "Ask a Librarian" services have become popular. In the area of collection development, replacing physical materials with collections of eBooks may solve many problems that consume professional staff time.

Recently, through my own college library system, I searched for the current issue of a periodical I needed. I typed the name of the journal in and 7 databases, presumably containing the journal, popped up in the results. The first database actually wouldn't have the current issue until next year due to an embargo. The second database had a similar delay in availability. Frustration got the better of me at that point and I Googled the journal title itself. This brought me to the full text of the article on the Journal's own website and I was able to download what I needed from the public Web.

What conclusion was I to draw from this experience? Theoretically I probably should have learned through some training session that the publisher put certain restrictions on how their current issue's full text articles would be made available via various aggregators. Realistically, though, should I have had to be bothered with that knowledge? You can see how a typical user would draw the conclusion that going to Google should simply have been my first choice since "everything's available on Google." That was certainly the case for me. Here is where the frequent, valid question, posed by those who control the purse strings inevitably gets asked. Why are we spending enormous amounts of our budget dollars on various commercial databases when Google Scholar or just plain Google can cough up the answer in no time at all and with very little effort on the user's part to figure out how to ask the question?

Information professionals know the situation is not quite as clear cut. Here is where the concept of alignment and driving contribution to the organization's bottom line –two tactics that company librarians should know well– can assist academic librarians. Here is where the ability to articulate the librarian's contribution to the organization's goal –graduating well educated students who know how to use information to make good decisions– becomes critical. Making the business case for a better interface that removes the need for the searcher to know which aggregator provides what or making the business case for more focused mandatory information, literacy training that helps the customer understand when to use Google and when not to rely on it addresses the reality of these changing times. The reality is that some-

times Google is the best tool because the question is straightforward and easily answered by an obviously reliable source. In other circumstances, though, without knowledge of all the available sources and their vagaries, the "Googler" may well never find an answer within the time allotted or may find an answer that looks good but is totally bogus, or may find an incomplete answer and make a bad decision absent the full information. The academic librarian, like the company librarian, has to make similarly tough choices regarding investments in resources to support these ends.

Another example: A colleague at a corporate library worked with his corporate manager to end any purchases of print materials. Instead he has subscribed to an eBook service with 35,000 titles in the subject areas his organization needs. He will now only buy a print item if it is not available as an eBook. While there was some resistance to this policy from customers at first, it has now subsided. Now, the small library staff can concentrate on helping customers with more sophisticated research needs. Also, the space occupied by the library is fixed and will likely get smaller as time goes by. The organization of physical materials is no longer an issue and their circulation and availability is not an issue as well. As with any new idea, the support of my colleague's manager was important. So too, at an academic institution, faculty involvement will be needed. As students bear a greater portion of college costs, their input will be needed as well.

This need to get all stakeholders involved in decision making, especially where what might be considered drastic changes are involved, is very typical of the corporate environment and academic librarians who have not faced these kinds of situations can draw from the corporate library experience. Trade-offs come with all decisions. In light of growing developments in the area of distance learning, the need for digitized collections is obvious to both faculty and administration and especially to those students off campus.

In any event, academic libraries are going to have to prove value, not- with- standing the general goodwill towards them. How does the academic library contribute to faculty and student recruitment and retention,

for example and to what extent does the library contribute to student success? While these questions might seem ridiculously simple with easy answers on the face of things, there is no doubt that in these times of extraordinary competition for budget dollars they must be answered quantifiably and in a way that speaks the language of the academic administration.

Lessons for Academic Libraries

Academic libraries have a good deal of tradition on their side. These libraries are often at the geographic center of the campus and many are a source of pride and prestige, not to mention a critical component of the accreditation process. However, online resources have made considerable dent in their traditional role as the first step for needed information. While students needing a quiet place to study will make good use of the space provided, other forces are pressing on these libraries. These include reduced need for physical collections, fewer in-person reference questions and less need to organize information in the traditional way. Networked resources have changed everything!

Many academic libraries are working hard at keeping themselves relevant in the digital age. In the past, the pace of change has been slow in the academy. Few, if any question the need for the library as we have known it. However, many colleges and universities now face big challenges in terms of finances, enrollments, and/or relevance of graduates to the job market. As a result, colleges and universities have developed new strategies. it would seem advisable for the academic library to develop goals to assist its parent institution to achieve its strategic direction.

Measurement

Many libraries have recognized the need to measure the success of their programs. Academic libraries have used various tools such as LIBQUAL+ and the balanced scorecard to evaluate their services. These provide comparative metrics that purport to provided measures

of efficiency of library activities. Upper management usually wants more than an answer to the question "how good is the library"? The real question should not be how good is the library vis a vis other academic libraries? Rather, the question they now require an answer to is "how much does the library do for its customers?"

This and other hard to answer questions need to be addressed and the answers communicated to those who decide funding. The academic situation is going to demand clear and concise measures of value or face a less than certain future, inspite of the tradition of the library as the heart of the institution.

Libraries tend to occupy a lot of space and have a large number of staff. Yet more space for special projects and/or for faculty offices seems always to be in short supply. A wave of academic library consolidations seems to be underway at present in department and unit libraries. The excuse is low usage; the goal is to secure that space for other departmental/school use under the guise that the main library will have the materials and it is only a short distance away.

Professional and clerical staff in large numbers currently work in many college and university libraries, especially given the increased need for 7-day a week openings and the many evening hours of service. Salaries and benefits at academic units continue to rise in an environment marked by financial pressure at the state, regional, and national levels. These could lead to unprecedented cuts to those units that do not aggressively demonstrate their relevancy (i.e. contribution) to teaching and research.

Professional staff may resist any planned changes in services or collections. Many began their careers in more traditional roles. Many will have strong biases to typical reference services or organizational operations and will balk at the challenge to change. Instead, individuals will point to the many things that need to be done, particularly in their area of specialization and keen interest. These include data curation, digital humanities, digital preservation, information literacy and a whole host of other worthy projects, each of which require additional resources both human and monetary. But, can all of these interests be accommodated? Which contribute most to the priorities of the parent institution?

Academic library leaders need to view all of these ideas in light of the priorities of the local campus. There will not be only one model of service possible given the needs of the host institution. Higher education is also under pressure because of high tuition and little evidence to demonstrate that the product of their institutions can find meaningful work at the end of four or more years of an ever more costly journey.

It seems to the authors that all organizations are seeking to increase revenue, control costs and explore innovative ways to cut costs. Is this the mantra at your institution? How are you planning to meet these objectives and still provide needed services? You could wait until you are told to cut costs or you can proactively formulate a plan and identify priority services to demonstrate that you are in touch with the major direction of your organization.

A recent issue of LJ Express contained an article by Rich Anderson which explored activities at the University of Utah.[13] The author said that his manager did "this or that" with the budget and aligned the library with the strategic direction of the university. This idea, he said, was suggested to him by a librarian at Yale. Nearly two decades have passed since the idea of aligning library services with the strategic direction of the host institution was introduced. Corporate libraries have been slow to adopt this approach, and have as a result, had membership of their professional association plummet and countless places to work disappear. Will academic libraries be nimble enough to meet the new demands which come from their administration, the student body and the professional staff? All have a claim to the attention of the decision makers. Someone has to lead the way through the forrest of competing demands with the resources at hand.

Librarians are capable of doing a lot of things. It is really not a question of "what can you do?" Rather, the question is "what should you do?" ✛

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