



Shaping the Future of the Small Liberal Arts College Library

*John Tombarge and Luke Vilelle**

Introduction

Libraries are being challenged to adapt to both a rapidly changing information ecosystem and a constantly evolving environment for higher education. In the face of these challenges, which often mean significant budget and staffing cuts for academic libraries, library directors are envisioning new futures for their organizations. Recent studies have investigated how large research library directors are making decisions and implementing organizational change; this study focuses on liberal arts college library directors and compares their decision drivers and approaches to those of their larger library colleagues. Liberal arts college library directors are, after all, operating in a sector of higher education where some institutions are facing existential crises caused by rapid demographic changes. We find that these directors share many values with larger library directors, including prioritizing incremental change and staffing needs; they stand out, however, for their strong focus on institutional needs.

Literature Review

Academic libraries are changing dramatically as financial pressure forces leaders to increase organizational efficiency. In 2017, Christine Wolff-Eisenberg released the results of Ithaka S+R's third survey of library directors in an effort to reveal how libraries are changing and to provide insight into strategy and leadership issues facing library directors. The survey included responses from 722 library directors (a 49% response rate).¹ Results were broken down by institutional type (Baccalaureate, Master's, and Doctoral) and provided comparisons to the results from the two previous surveys. The study provides insights into how directors allocated resources between collections and staffing and shows trends in collection development and library services. It also reveals that library directors had a declining sense of support from their institutions as well as a declining sense that they share the same vision with their supervisors.² While the report shows trends and likely future decisions, the survey questions did not investigate why or how decisions were made.

John J. Meier investigated how library directors make decisions about their organization's future and effect institutional change. In his study, Meier interviewed 44 deans and university librarians at large research universities that were members of the Association of American Universities. Meier hypothesized that organizational change in academic libraries was primarily concerned with changing titles and roles of existing positions and departments rather than with comprehensive reorganization. He also expected change to be driven by financial constraints and personnel changes rather than by strategic initiatives.³ He found that directors are most likely by far to make decisions collaboratively with members of their senior management teams⁴ using incremental change to accomplish their strategic priorities. While vacancies and budget challenges present the most frequent opportunities for change, library directors construct a shared vision and strategy to drive this change.⁵ After senior library leadership, directors relied most commonly on advice from other ARL directors, followed by advice from campus leadership and other library staff.

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Roger Schonfeld investigated organizational structure and related leadership and change management issues in large research libraries in his 2016 study. He interviewed 18 current or recently retired directors of institutions belonging to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) who are “believed to have been innovating.”⁶ His interviews showed that libraries have shifted their emphasis and organizational structure from a focus on the collection to a focus on leading change in research and in teaching and learning practices, while also addressing university strategic imperatives. As a result, directors are gravitating towards structures that support innovation and make it easier to incorporate new services.⁷ Directors emphasized the need to build a strong leadership team that focuses on the needs of the library as a whole and translates the library’s strategic direction into operations.⁸ Strengthening the library’s relationship with faculty and students is a high priority, with several directors emphasizing that the entire organization must be outwardly focused. The director’s ability to articulate strategic objectives across the whole library is vital, as is empowering staff throughout the organization to focus on strategic priorities rather than simply on operational responsibilities.⁹ Schonfeld concludes that it is increasingly important for the library to become more integrated with institutional strategies, and regular efforts are required to align the library’s strategy with that of its parent university.¹⁰

In their two studies investigating decision making and leadership in libraries, Meier and Schonfeld focused on larger universities because, as Meier explained, “these institutions face particular challenges due to the size, scope and breadth of their missions”¹¹ and, as Schonfeld wrote, their “organizational size and complexity adds an important dimension to the research questions under study.”¹² Both studies indicate that the primary source of advice for the director is the senior leadership team. Schonfeld demonstrates the importance of the university and its strategic priorities in decision making regarding the library’s strategy.

Deficient in this body of literature is a similar study including or focusing on interviews with liberal arts college library directors. The question therefore remains as to whether Meier’s and Schonfeld’s findings are applicable across the variety of libraries at liberal arts colleges, where teaching is emphasized over research. This study looks at how these libraries address pressures for change similar to those affecting large research libraries.

Methodology

This study seeks to identify how, in a time of significant change for libraries and liberal arts institutions, liberal arts college directors utilize their staffs and organizational structures to move their libraries forward. The authors hypothesized that decisions would be heavily influenced by campus culture and change driven by financial necessity. It was also expected that there would be a high degree of resistance to change because of the significant length of service of many library employees.

Twenty library directors were selected for interviews based on their reputations as innovators, with an eye to inclusion of a broad spectrum of traits, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, and size of library. The interviews were conducted by the authors via telephone or Skype between January and December 2018 and the audio recorded for later analysis. Participants were promised that their comments would not be attributed to them. To help preserve this anonymity, the paper omits gendered pronouns and uses “they,” “them,” and “their” as ungendered singular pronouns and the term “director” universally, regardless of the library director’s official title.

The authors adapted their interview questions (Appendix A) from a range of sources, including Schonfeld, Meier, and the *Ithaca S+R 2016 US Library Survey* report.

Following Schonfeld’s analytical approach, this report is a narrative summary of the interviews conducted, and it cannot be viewed as scientific analysis. No statistics or percentages are included in the presentation of the results. Before conducting the study, the authors submitted the research protocol to Washington and Lee University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), which approved the project as “exempt” research and did not require a full IRB review.

Results

Campus Needs Are Paramount

How do library directors determine the direction of their organization? How do they make decisions about their library's future?

One theme echoed through all responses: decisions are driven by local factors. Whether through consultations with all library staff, conversations with campus community members, or connections to a university strategic plan, these library directors focused nearly exclusively on their local context.

More than half of the directors mentioned consultations with the entire library staff.

- “Being a small library, it’s really important to engage with all the staff. I do provide opportunities on a regular basis for engagement.”
- “This campus has a culture of bending over backwards to consult everybody and making everyone feel they have an opportunity to provide input, so I try to do that in every case.”

Even more common was ongoing engagement with their campus communities.

- “Decisions were often made based on user feedback from students and faculty which was received through formal surveys like MISO or through more informal means such as questions posted on whiteboards.”
- “We identify stakeholders and speak to them throughout the process.”

Engagement with the local context also means engagement with university missions and strategic plans.

- “Decisions we make are guided by the needs of the larger institution.”
- “It’s institutional alignment, looking at institution mission and strategic plan.”
- “A lot of the work I do is conversation with the provost about academic goals of the university, how can the library support them, what are the new programs being developed.”

One large component of research libraries’ decision-making, surveying the landscape and talking to colleagues at other libraries,¹³ was mentioned by relatively few liberal arts college library directors. Even these mentions of the national landscape, though, generally referred back to the local environment, as in this comment:

- “We generally try to look at what is going on beyond the library and even beyond campus.... For example, there was a lot of commotion years ago around social sciences and data, and we hired someone in a position, ...and by the end of the first year we were getting compliments from professors about the quality of data that students were able to assemble with the new hire. In this case we were staying relevant both at our institution and in regards to greater trends, without just jumping on a bandwagon that didn’t improve the conditions of our campus.”

About half of participants reported that they use strategic planning in setting the future vision and goals for the library, and half did not. Meier’s study found similar results—slightly less than half of AAU directors talked about library strategic plans driving their decisions.¹⁴

There did not seem to be any relationship to library size or budget. The most common reason for not having conducted strategic planning was that they had delayed the planning process in order to synchronize the library’s process with that of the college. Again, this indicates the importance of college culture and priorities in setting library vision and goals. Note the contrast from Meier’s findings, where only one in four large research library directors were using a university strategic plan in decision-making processes.¹⁵

Of those liberal arts college directors delaying the strategic planning process, most had already created a library mission statement, vision statement, and/or a document stating library values, all of which are processes often included in strategic planning initiatives.

Many directors, both those who engaged in strategic planning and those who did not, stated that there was no history of strategic planning in their library, but only a few indicated that they had little interest in conducting

a formal strategic planning initiative. Library directors in merged library/IT organizations indicated that they did not conduct strategic planning for their libraries because their planning was conducted with IT staff. However, like many other library directors who have not engaged in library strategic planning, the primary vision and goals were driven by the desire to remain relevant to students and faculty and to meet local campus needs. Even without a formal strategic plan, these directors seemed to take a strategic approach to implementing new initiatives.

Said one director: “The library needs to be relevant and sustainable; ...what does that mean? [The library] needs to meet the needs of the academic community—...to see the library as a destination and hub of activity that people choose to come to for whatever reason.”

Administrator Support

Recent published reports indicate a growing separation between college library directors and their direct supervisors, but our participants shared a much different story.

In preparing for this research, the authors reviewed the Ithaka S&R 2016 US Library Survey, which found a significant drop from 2013 in shared vision between directors and their supervisors. Only 55.73% of directors at baccalaureate colleges reported strong agreement with their supervisors on vision, as compared to 67.60% in 2013. Also, directors at Baccalaureate colleges reported the lowest percentage of agreement, below that of directors at Master’s (60.22%) and Doctoral institutions (71.35%).¹⁶ Anecdotal reporting suggests the same—a 2014 article in *Inside Higher Ed*, “Clash in the Stacks: Library directors at liberal arts institutions are losing their jobs as they clash with faculty and administrators over the future of the academic library,” painted a bleak picture for liberal arts library directors.¹⁷

In contrast, our innovating directors told a much brighter story. They told of nearly unequivocal support (though often without the financial resources needed to make some changes happen) from their administration. Only one of the 20 directors specifically talked about an administration that did not share their vision (in their words, that college administration still sees the library as the “building with the books”). All of the other directors shared thoughts along the following lines:

- “The campus is very willing to be taught by the library what their goals and vision should be for the library. They’re very eager and willing partners, even if institutional resources are incredibly scarce.”
- “There have been no problems with the President, Provost, or Deans: they are all on board and get the need to modernize and update spaces.”
- “Senior leadership gives a lot of verbal support, but they are uncertain how to move to more tangible forms of support.”

Some directors did explicitly note the challenge of obtaining new resources, even where administrators are supportive.

- “The challenge is, libraries are expensive, and they don’t always want to give me the money to do things we need to do. In terms of vision and function, we’re well supported. In terms of financial support, it’s easy for them to cry poor when we need more money for databases or subscriptions. It’s a tension point we go back and forth on.”

And directors recognized that libraries are frequently not the top university priority in today’s environment.

- “You have to have the ability to accept [that] the priorities of the university might not always be my priorities. For example, right now, college priorities are raising money to support students and to lower the cost of education to diversify the student body. Many of these things the library can contribute to,

but we're not necessarily going to get the chunk of change that might go with supporting these programs, so finding ways to partner and support these initiatives is really important."

Faculty Support

Across the board, faculty are generally supportive of libraries; however, about half of the directors indicated the need for considerable effort to connect with faculty and help them understand the library in the 21st century as something more than the building with books: "Faculty just don't understand what the library and librarians do, despite the efforts of liaisons." The directors are able to articulate the substance of the lack of understanding, and interestingly enough, this disconnect with faculty is seen as a major obstacle by only one director. All affected directors are working to find better ways to expand outreach and improve communication with faculty to alleviate this divide. One director said, "It's surprising to me how much of my job is marketing." Another said, "Faculty buy-in is always a moving target." Still, most directors feel faculty support the library and its initiatives; as one director put it, "Faculty are strong supporters of the library, but they are not always engaged."

Defined Roles for Librarians and New Leadership Opportunities

Library directors talked about changes across many units of their organizations, but one recurring theme was that they are moving away from generic job descriptions and toward more specific job descriptions—and those specific job descriptions often include leadership opportunities.

In some ways, though many of these liberal arts college libraries do not have big enough staffs to create a formal "leadership team," directors are consciously trying to create opportunities for librarians to bring new ideas and initiatives into the libraries.

Generic instruction and/or reference librarian positions are being eliminated in many of these libraries. Here are examples of modified position titles and responsibilities from four of the participating liberal arts libraries:

- Three reference librarian positions reassigned as Research and Tech librarian, Research and Scholarly Communications librarian, and Digital Initiatives Librarian.
- Information services position titles changed to reflect "specific designations and responsibilities."
- Liaison librarians assigned additional responsibilities relating to initiatives such as open educational resources and open access, data management, and copyright.
- An instruction librarian retitled as Information Literacy and Instructional Design librarian.

These changes allow directors to address areas in need of leadership and/or ownership. Thus, an Information Literacy Coordinator became a Coordinator of Teaching, Learning and Digital Humanities. At another library, a Head of User Engagement took the place of the previous Head of Reference.

Another director talked about how they re-aligned two reference librarians, creating "one that's now my Research Services Librarian, who owns how we're approaching reference" and one Special Collections Librarian. This director explained the change thus: "I want to make people really have ownership of parts of the library.... So, yes, things were changed, but it was really about identifying who needed to be the owner, the lead of a particular aspect of library activities, so re-orienting their job description toward that."

Many of these changes constitute recognition that the library director cannot be the lead on every initiative, as this director reflected: "I really trust my colleagues within the library to bring to me any new developments in areas where they're the expert."

Another motivating factor is to communicate to the institutional community the specific work each librarian is doing, both as a method of publicizing the library's work and as a strategy to protect positions, should positions come open.

Library Re-alignment

Meier found that the most common approach to re-aligning staff within AAU libraries was by “changing roles when filling vacant positions.” This approach was slightly more frequently employed than re-assigning or moving individuals from their current positions.¹⁸

In smaller libraries, with smaller staffs and less turnover, would this hold true? Or would directors be more aggressive in reassigning current staff members?

This is a balancing act for liberal arts library directors. Many are impatient to make changes; however, many also see a limited amount they can change until certain staff members leave. Others see a responsibility for directors to act in the best interests of their institutions. On the whole, the directors lean toward incremental change.

“It’s finding the balance between respecting the contributions of staff who’ve been here many years versus the added skills and qualifications needed to address many of the new initiatives in libraries. In some cases, we have been able to move staff into new roles, but it’s very difficult when you have to make decisions about removing individuals.... But many of the individuals were able to retire, so there wasn’t actual elimination or firing. You’re looking at the bottom line, in terms of what you’re contributing to the university. You have a fiduciary responsibility to manage your staff and collection resources in a way that moves the university forward. So retaining staff that are not contributing to moving the university forward... is important to address.”

One library director described their approach thus:

To some extent, [you’re] waiting for people to retire so you can change those jobs and shift them around, or re-animate those jobs. It’s a constant change of jobs and responsibilities, but often it’s not forced and it’s not drastic. Most of time it’s not drastic; it’s a process that as someone leaves, we rethink a lot of what we want to do.

Another director echoed those comments in explaining their realignments:

Each of the adjustments I described was the result of retirements.... We’re such a small organization, nobody’s throwing cash at me to hire new people and do new things. People here really don’t leave; ...you have to find your opportunities where you can.

Many of these opportunities come on smaller scales, as described in the section on newly defined roles for librarians, where directors find initiatives for which current librarians can take the lead.

Obstacles and Constraints

Top obstacles directors face are budget, staffing, resistance to change, other institutional cultural issues, and insufficient library facilities. These obstacles did not seem to vary by library size or budget.

Budgets across the board are either decreasing or remaining relatively flat. Several directors indicated either recent or expected budget cuts, often resulting from enrollment shortfalls, but they also spoke of understanding the larger budget climate at their universities. As one director said, “The library was shielded from the last round of budget cuts, ...but I try to be a good citizen and I don’t ask for steady state budget increases. I take budget responsibility myself, and I don’t put it on my dean.”

While budget challenges often originate outside the library, another significant challenge comes from within: attitudes of long-serving library staff members.

- “One of the biggest obstacles is ‘the way we have always done it.’ Employees [here] stay a long time, and this caused difficulty in recognizing the need to evolve.”
- “There’s general skepticism about the change of the library’s nature and role on campus, and some staff would really prefer working in a library of 1995, particularly long-term staff.”

One director talked about their efforts to encourage long-term staff to understand their vision. This can be particularly important at a small library, where staff expect to be consulted on organizational planning. “There are many members of the staff that have been there for a long time, giving them power to slow things down. I’m trying to present my plans as an opportunity rather than something they have to do.”

Internal obstacles to change, though, are not limited to legacy staff. The small size of liberal arts library staffs presents its own difficulty.

Many directors talked about how limited staff size makes prioritizing essential, thus acknowledging that there will be gaps in some service areas.

Said one director, “We have a very lean staff for an ambitious agenda. There are some areas where we don’t have the bench strength to match our ambitions,” noting, for example, assessment and scholarly communication.

One director noted their own personal change in attitude in recent years, in order to more realistically understand the capacity of their staff. “Over the course of the past three to four years, I’ve pushed back deadlines, pushed back a lot on my desire to get things done really quickly (giving them more time) because I understand it’s not always possible.”

Changing Expectations for Staff: A Case Study of Technical Services

Although participating directors discussed changes across all library units, from archives to access services to instruction to digital humanities, directors talked more about significant alterations in traditional technical services processes and staffing than changes in any other unit.

Significant changes in the numbers and types of materials that these units handle create associated challenges, which many directors discussed.

Some libraries have reduced the number of positions in technical services by moving positions out of the unit. Examples included:

- An alternative formats (dvds, cds, etc.) cataloger position converted to an outreach librarian position.
- An acquisitions librarian position converted to an information services librarian position (with acquisitions responsibilities reassigned to the library’s administrative assistant).

Others have converted multiple staff lines into fewer, but higher-skilled, librarian lines:

- Two print serials positions converted to one e-resources position.
- Multiple technical service positions converted to fewer, higher-level positions with specific knowledge of database management and metadata. “We eliminated the government documents program and created an electronic resources specialist with that position. The elimination of two acquisitions non-professional positions enabled the creation of a second professional librarian position to oversee metadata and electronic resources.”
- Multiple print collections staff positions converted (after retirements from “people who saw the writing on the wall and were not interested in re-skilling”) to a new systems and discovery librarian position.

As the amount and importance of printed materials has declined, directors have been challenged to train staff members (many of whom have only previously worked with printed materials) for new responsibilities with electronic materials.

- “We re-organized the staff; ...the workload was very imbalanced.... What had happened was that everything new that came along (website; electronic resources; etc.) was getting dumped into public services, while tech services was still print-based and operating like a 1990s library.”

The changes in technical services also caused some directors to re-evaluate how their position lines are split between librarians and paraprofessionals:

- “A challenge is [that] I’ve got more staff members than I need and fewer librarians than I need.”
- “Getting more librarians is critical; there’s not as much need for staff positions anymore. The work is becoming more complex, and the expectations are becoming higher. We need specialists and more professionals.”

Because of this, directors may find themselves asking more of their staff members, to the point that they become uncomfortable with staff position responsibilities:

- “We have, especially in collection management, paraprofessional positions becoming increasingly technical, requiring a level of knowledge and skill that I think is unreasonable. It’s beginning to verge on unethical, asking paraprofessionals to do this level of work for this compensation.”

Hypothetical 10% Increase in Annual Budget

Regardless of vision or strategic priority, the real test comes when directors decide how to use new resources, and, to get at this, the authors asked how the directors would use the income of a major gift that increased the library’s base budget by 10% (continuing funding). Those directors with formal strategic goals tended to follow them closely in their responses.

The top response, regardless of library size or budget, was staffing. These responses included new professional positions, new staff positions, pay raises for staff, professional development funds, additional student workers, and new student fellowships. Several directors indicated that the gift would not be not large enough to provide for new positions. Across the board, each director expressed the desire to add new skills and capabilities, but also to reward their staff to the best of their ability. A couple directors specifically mentioned pay raises, but others talked of using professional development opportunities as a way to reward their employees.

The next most common response was to use the additional funds for collections, with directors at libraries spending less than \$500 per undergraduate student for materials making up this group almost entirely. This is the only area where budget size made a clear and substantial difference in how the directors would use the new funds. Directors’ comments on potential use for collections varied greatly: while some pointed out specific financial needs for collections, such as “It would expand our materials budget to continue to keep pace with increasing costs of serials [and] streaming media...”, several others said flatly they would not use it for materials.

Facilities improvements was the third most popular response, with the majority coming from directors of libraries with larger budgets. Other uses included acquiring or improving an institutional repository and acquiring unique items for special collections. In sum, the results echoed the findings reported in the ITHAKA US Library Survey 2016, where new employees or redefined positions, collection support, and facilities expansions and renovations were also identified as the top three priorities.¹⁹

Conclusion

Institutional needs, while important to directors of larger academic libraries, are paramount to liberal arts college library directors. In a time when the future survival of many liberal arts colleges is in question, it might be said that these directors are hyper-conscious of college goals. Yet organizational structure and staff needs are nevertheless a key focus, as seen in the high proportion of staff-related responses to the Hypothetical 10% Increase in Annual Budget question. And, while like their colleagues at larger academic libraries they are moving incrementally to implement changes, they show greater flexibility in thinking and approach as they address institutional needs. This local focus may be a factor in the unexpectedly high levels of support these directors receive from their university administrations. Future research could explore the impact campus existential crises have on libraries and how libraries evolve to address changing campus needs.

Appendix A. Substantive Questions

1. How do you make decisions about your organization's future?
2. Describe your vision and/or strategic goals for your library.
 - a. Can you share a strategic plan or other document that describes how you intend to implement the vision and/or goals?
 - b. Who is part of the planning process in developing the library's strategic direction?
3. Will the plan or vision require adjustments to the library's organization?
4. What are the major obstacles or constraints you face in achieving the vision or goals?
5. Describe the level of support you receive from campus senior leadership and chief academic officer. Do they share your goals and vision for the library?
 - a. Same question for the faculty.
6. Have you modified or significantly changed positions over the past 3-5 years?
 - a. Do you have plans to modify or change current positions when they open?
7. What is your ability to attract and retain talent?
 - a. What are you thinking and/or doing about increasing diversity in your library?
 - b. What are your thoughts as a library director about preparing the next generation of library leaders?
8. Describe any structural or staffing changes you have made in support of each of the following areas:
 - a. Scholarly services, including, but not limited to, digital humanities, institutional repositories, open access, OER, and digitization projects
 - b. Strategic shifts away from traditional print collections
 - c. Technological expectations for the library
 - d. Instructional and educational support for the college's curriculum.
9. If your library received a substantial gift that boosted the library's annual budget by 10%, how would you use these new funds?
10. Have you participated in any leadership seminars, such as Frye, Leading Change, Harvard-ACRL, etc.?
11. Are there other aspects of leadership that you would like to address that were not covered in the previous questions?

Director Demographics

1. Gender?
2. Race?
3. Age? (use ranges of 10 years)
4. Length of service as a library director? At current institution?
5. Years in the profession?
6. Job title?
7. To whom do you report? (position title)

Library Demographics

1. Budget, including changes over the past 5 years?
2. Library organizational structure (org chart)?
3. Staff size, number of librarians, professionals, and support staff?
4. Status of librarians on campus?

Appendix B

Participants, with institution at time of interview

PARTICIPANT	INSTITUTION
Rick Provine	DePauw University
Neal Baker	Earlham College
Joan Ruelle	Elon University
Scott Vine	Franklin & Marshall College
Denise Shorey	Franklin College
Mark Christel	Grinnell College
Jennifer Gunter King	Hampshire College
Stacy Nowicki	Kalamazoo College
Amy Badertscher	Kenyon College
Heather Slania	Maryland Institute College of Art
Alexia Hudson-Ward	Oberlin College
Isaac Gilman	Pacific University
Darlene Brooks	Rhodes College
Elizabeth McClenney	Roanoke College
Elizabeth Novicki	Salem College
Marta Brunner	Skidmore College
Pat Kreitz	St. Mary's College of California
Cheryl McGrath	Stonehill College
Jane Carlin	University of Puget Sound
Jonathan Miller	Williams College

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