

Helping the Hand that Feeds You: Supporting the Research Needs of Campus Executive Officers

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Introduction

Academic librarians serve a wide variety of users, but often minimally support the information needs of their campus executive officers. The Executive Research Service (ERS) at the University of Michigan's University Library provides research support, opportunities to connect the library to its campus executive officers, and creates good will with these important constituents. This paper shares the history, philosophy, and implementation of the ERS, ideas for implementing a new service in a challenging economic environment, and models for providing a similar service on other campuses.

History of the ERS at Michigan

The ERS has been an active service at the University Library at Michigan for several decades, however, it was not branded and actively marketed until the early 2000s. Previously, the service had a librarian who specialized in helping the executive officers with their information needs, but it was solely reactive, and there was not strong knowledge of the service within the Library (in order to make referrals), nor was there solid or uniform knowledge of the service on the part of campus officers. With a change in librarians coordinating the service in the early 2000s came the idea that it should be branded in order to more actively market it to a broad range of campus officers. The ser-

vice was then labeled the Executive Research Service (or "ERS" for short). A campus email address was set-up, letters went out to an array of campus officers, and the information requests began steadily arriving. Since that time, more sophisticated marketing has occurred, including producing a signature image which appears on magnets and post-cards, and requests have steadily increased. Today, a team of three librarians are the core staff for the service, with other librarians assisting when needed. Each of the librarians devotes part of their larger positions to the service, while one coordinates the internal and external communication for the service.

Literature Review

A search of library and information literature reveals little material on the topic of specialized library services designed to meet the information needs of university executive officers. Long a core service provided by corporate and hospital libraries, specialized executive research services in academic libraries appear to be less common. In corporate situations, librarians or information specialists are expected to provide the required information to the executive when s/he needs it and in the desired format.¹ This same level of personalized service can also be provided by academic librarians to campus executive officers.

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Stebelman, et. al. (1999), describe the position of faculty outreach librarian at George Washington University. In addition to outreach services to the faculty in general, Stebelman also makes house calls to key administrators. Senior executive level administrators (president, vice presidents and deans) are contacted by personal letter with an offer for the librarian to provide instruction on internet skills either in workshops geared to administrators or one-on-one in visits to the administrators' offices.² Hurst (2002) describes providing orientations for administrative and support staff. She indicates that their needs are "quite different than the research-oriented needs of faculty and students," and are more apt to be pragmatic and time sensitive.³ Though focused more on enhancing administrator's technical skills, instead of providing customized library research services, many of the "essential traits" for the faculty outreach librarian are also important for those providing executive research services: leadership skills, entrepreneurship, comfort communicating with faculty, willingness to learn different ways to market library services, excellent writing and analytical skills, a willingness to be proactive (seeking out users in their offices and other venues outside of the library), and the ability to work independently.⁴

From the user's perspective, in addition to answering reference questions, the executive-focused research service should compile material to save the executive time in reading (by focusing on the key material for the decision or investigation), provide prompt service, and analyze and digest the data so it can be provided in a well organized way.⁵ In an example of a hospital librarian who worked closely to provide information to a Chief Learning Officer during a time of dramatic organizational change due to a merger of several hospitals, Maietta and Bullock (2009) indicate that a "key element to the success of the partnership was the building of trust that the information flowing between the CLO and the librarian would be accurate, timely, in a format that was usable, and not contain certain information that could not be shared immediately with others."⁶ Thus, another key element of executive research services is a high level of confidentiality.

In a study of information seeking behavior by chief executive officers, Keane (1999) found that "when managing incoming information, executives think more in terms of advancing specific issues than they do about the information itself. This means that

in working with executives, we are better served by looking at informational activity through the lens of 'issue management' rather than information items per se. In short, executives relate better to issues than they do to information. Information is a means to an end, not the end itself."⁷ In a survey of 27 hospital CEOs who used their library, 37% indicated that they prefer the librarian to prepare a synopsis of what was found in the literature, 41% want to get the original documents, and 22% said that how they prefer to receive information is situational.⁸

Marketing and Evaluation of ERS

The Executive Research Service exists primarily as a reference and research service for the university's executive officers. For a large research institution like the University of Michigan, this means a large clientele of potential patrons, inclusive of a multitude of campus administrators and offices. For example, in addition to the university's highest officers such as the President, Provost, and Vice-Presidents (along with their support staff), also included are the offices of the General Counsel, the regents of the university, the Development Office, the Government Relations Office, etc. The ERS is also offered to the Deans of the many schools and colleges that comprise the university's academic departments. There are 12 different schools and colleges for undergraduate study alone, along with additional graduate programs. In all, approximately 60 executive officers comprise the ERS clientele.

Marketing and evaluating this type of service presents some unique challenges due to the extraordinarily busy nature of the clients' schedules. Asking the Provost or the Dean of the Graduate School to fill out a survey will not work! Rather, marketing and assessment are concentrated on their support staff, and figuring out ways to entwine the ERS librarians with the work of the officers is a more effective way to reach the officers themselves. The ERS coordinator serves on several advisory boards and campus committees for the Provost and Vice-Presidents through faculty governance. Staying on their radar and informally reminding them of what the Library can do for them in their numerous roles is quite effective. Through these contacts, relationships develop and other opportunities inevitably arise.

The history of communications with one particular Vice President on campus is a good example of this type of relationship building. After serving on the Vice

President's campus advisory board, and participating in an annual week-long leadership development program she sponsors, the coordinator of the ERS was invited by the Vice-President to serve on the jury to choose the next round of program participants. As a result, at least one librarian has been able to participate in the week-long leadership program each year. The ERS team also compiles the information used in the leadership program each year. The intertwining of straight library information provision with the work of the Vice President's office is a perfect example of how the ERS creates opportunities for the Library to contribute and benefit from close relationships with campus executive officers.

Other types of marketing include:

- Special branded magnets and postcards have been used to keep support staff informed about the array of services and types of information the Library can provide to assist them with their speech-writing, background research, and other support roles, along with the contact information for placing an ERS request.
- Sending formal letters on Library letterhead to each new executive officer introducing them to the service, and offering to meet with them individually to determine their information needs, and understand their areas of interest.
- Periodic emails to officers updating them on new information in their areas of interest, ensuring they remember to use the service, and offering assistance around specific issues arising on campus or in higher education. Topics such as diversity, globalization, study-abroad, learning communities, etc. have been a few such areas where information has been offered.

Evaluation of services is another challenging area because of busy executive officers' often hectic schedules. Whenever we deliver a service, we include in our in-person or electronic delivery several informal questions including whether the information delivered meets their needs, and a reminder to let us know if they need anything else. Through this simple and informal method, we have learned much about how each officer prefers their information packaged, how much information they prefer, and whether or not we have met their needs. Negotiation of deadlines up

front when taking the request is very important, and meeting those deadlines is essential to running the service. Even if we have to pull in extra librarians to help with the requests, deadlines are always met.

Typical Types of ERS Requests

With such a large clientele, our patrons' needs are understandably diverse in nature. Campus administrators have research needs related to their management roles in making decisions about university business and initiatives, which may translate to requests for corporate financial information or statistics, literature searches on higher education topics, or verifying sources for quotations used in public speeches. One such example of this category of request is illustrated by the preparations for the 150th anniversary celebration of a particular academic department. The ERS librarians, in conjunction with designated librarians from the University Archives, researched and presented archival resources on the history of the department and the university. Requests of all kinds may come directly from campus administrators themselves or from their support staff.

The same campus administrators may also have teaching roles at the university, and may request more "typical" reference help—i.e., finding suggested resources on a certain topic, tracking down citations, or help setting up a course site with course management software. An example of this type of request can be found in one dean who requested to have an ERS librarian come to his office to walk him through searching the Library's catalog, indexes relevant to his class, and setting up a Sakai course site.

Finally, campus senior officers are also researchers, and many of them try to keep up in their fields, and even continue to publish. Thus, several of them request assistance with literature searches, and help identifying relevant places to publish both in their fields of expertise and in administrative publications. An example of this type of request can be found in one associate provost who was publishing research on the globalization of higher education, and was in need of a set of publications to which s/he might submit the article.

Like other reference services, once an individual staff member or administrator has used the ERS successfully, that individual is more likely to become a repeat customer. Many of our requests come from a "core" group of executive officers.

Managing the Flow of Requests

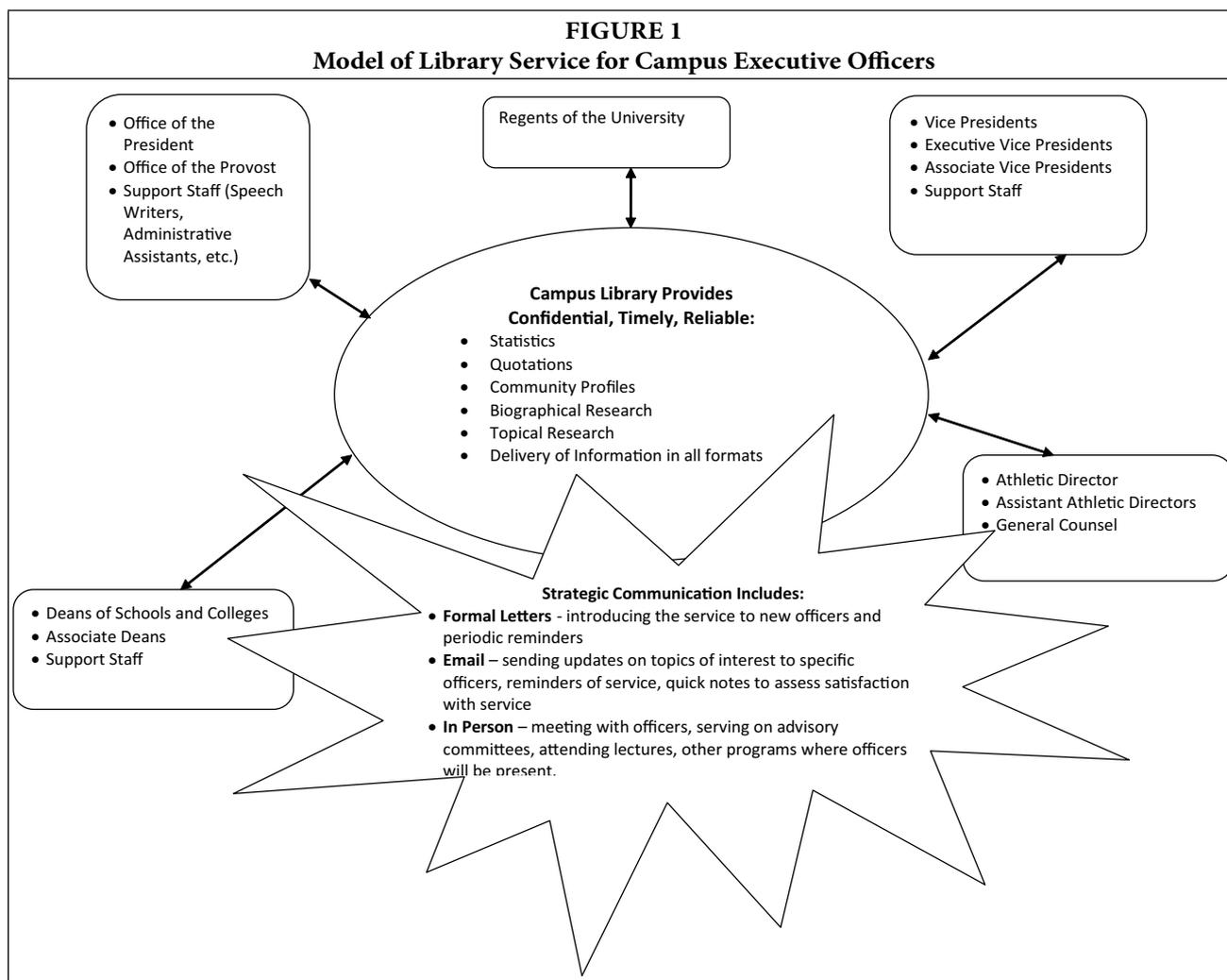
Because some ERS requests are lengthy and require a substantial amount of research time, and because the service is not any one person's full-time job, three librarians staff the Executive Research Service. Dr. Karren Downing is the primary contact for the ERS, while Pam MacKintosh and Shevon Desai act as support and backup when needed. Having multiple librarians answering questions also allows us to respond rapidly to any requests. Many of the more labor-intensive requests are actually recurring projects or programs for which our services are needed every year.

A few examples of the types of cyclical projects that we handle as part of the ERS:

Honorary degree candidates—Every year prior to commencement ceremonies, we are provided with a confidential list of individuals being considered for honorary degrees. We compile dossiers on each can-

didate, providing enough balanced and thorough biographical data, along with news articles and other sources, in order for the honorary degree committee to make an informed decision about each person. The list of candidates may include anywhere from 20-30 names; research on each individual takes an average of 2-3 hours.

Collaborative University/State Program—Each year a group of faculty are chosen to go on a week-long "traveling seminar" on the state of Michigan. The group travels by bus to various locations throughout the state, visiting and meeting with local businesses, educational institutions, prisons, civic organizations and others in order to learn about the state's economy, history, government, social issues and culture, and to encourage faculty/community collaborations. The ERS librarians sit down with the organizers to discuss the program's focus for that year, along with



the individual stops on the tour, in order to prepare background materials on each location and/or organization, ultimately delivering a virtual binder full of reading materials for the participants.

For many of the recurring requests, the ERS librarians deliver the materials via our campus course management software. We set up a site and allow access to the folders to the executive officers and their staff. After working with particular officers over the course of several years, we know how each officer prefers their information to be delivered. Increasingly, electronic delivery via secure websites is the preference, although there are still officers who prefer to have paper copies of articles and other information delivered in person. On these occasions, there is the opportunity to have face-to-face time with the officer, and probe as to their satisfaction with the service and any upcoming needs they may anticipate.

Conclusion

The ERS provides a valuable and valued service to the University's senior executive officers. We have received wonderful feedback (both formal and informal) from our clientele and know they appreciate the service we provide. The service also provides valuable opportunities to show executive officers the depth and range of the campus library and librarians' knowledge and expertise. It also provides the Library with insight into the pressing issues and work of our campus executive officers in ways that would otherwise be hidden to us. Finally, the service provides valuable links between the campus administration and the Library, and provides many opportunities for the Library and librarians to collaborate on projects and programs beyond what might otherwise be available.

Notes

1. P. B. Mangla, "Information: An Executive's Life-Line." *Indian Journal of Library Science* 3, no. 1-4 (1977): 3-5.
2. Scott Stebelman, Jack Siggins, David Nutty, and Caroline Long, "Improving Library Relations with the Faculty and University Administrators: The Role of the Faculty Outreach Librarian." *College & Research Libraries* 60, no. 2 (March, 1999): 121-130.
3. Leslie Hurst, "The Special Library on Campus: A Model for Library Orientations Aimed at Academic Administration, Faculty, and Support Staff." *Public Services Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (2002): 51-64.

4. Stebelman, et al., "Improving Library Relations with the Faculty and University Administrators: The Role of the Faculty Outreach Librarian."

5. Mangla, "Information: An Executive's Life-Line."

6. Carol Maietta and Sybil H. Bullock, "A Value-Added Partnership between a Chief Learning Officer and a Medical Librarian." *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (Oct-Dec, 2009): 375-384.

7. D. Keane, "The Information Behaviour of Senior Executives." 1999.

8. Mary McDiarmid, Sandra Kendall, and Malcolm Binns, "Evidence-Based Administrative Decision Making and the Ontario Hospital CEO: Information Needs, Seeking Behaviour, and Access to Sources." *Journal of the Canadian Health Libraries Association* 28, no. 2 (2007): 63-72.