

Partners in Time: Creating Organic Connections Between Library and IT Divisions at Bowdoin College

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Discussions of merging library and information technology departments within higher education have waxed and waned over the past three decades. Recently, in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Foster wrote, “Mergers are still happening at smaller liberal arts colleges because the staff within the two organizations is still a manageable size; merging at larger universities has not proven very successful.”¹ Is it possible that one reason for the failures of early merger efforts was the narrow focus on integrating the organizational charts and physical spaces of library and information technology departments without considering other elements crucial for success?

Ferguson, Spencer, and Metz expound on the four important dimensions of integration of library and information technology operations.² The administrative (responsibilities, planning, budgets) and physical (office and service area space) dimensions are just half of the equation. The collaborative (operational) and cultural dimensions are equally important. The collaborative dimension covers “the extent to which staff and leaders presently work cooperatively on projects,

share financial resources, and deliver services jointly” and the cultural dimension considers “the extent to which the participants experience separate organizational cultures, have evolved understandings about working together, or are actively developing joint values, a shared leadership philosophy, an organic sense of purpose, or unified/shared service models.”³

While the physical dimension is explicit with collocation of offices, information commons or help/reference desks, the cultural dimension is the most implicit, and thus the most difficult to measure and to change. Kaarst-Brown, *et al.* define culture as “the practices, values, beliefs, and underlying assumptions of formal and informal groups.”⁴ They go on to state that the “assumptions about how to operate become so implicitly imbedded in the underlying assumptions of action that they are difficult, if not impossible, to articulate.”⁵

Much has been written on the cultural clashes that occur when merging library and IT operations.⁶ In this paper, we will describe an alternate approach to integrating Library and IT services, an approach

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based on developing cultural understanding and appreciation rather than on the elimination or merging of cultures, and that we suggest, enhances services to our user community. Integrating cultures often results in one culture dominating. The early fears of a merged library/IT organization were partly the dread from both the librarians and technologists of losing their own occupational culture, which they held dear. The unique cultures of librarians and technologists can be important to retain for staff members' feelings of affiliation, morale, and professional development outside of their own institution.

The differing cultures of the Library and IT groups do not have to merge altogether; however cultural understanding and appreciation is essential. Kaarst-Brown, *et al.* state, "Lack of common cultural knowledge may negatively impact organizations because communication requires a common language about the business."⁷ Our approach was to reduce miscommunication, resentment, and fear through a sharing of cultures.

When institutions expected the cultural and collaborative dimensions of integration would naturally emerge after physical and administrative integration, often tension resulted, for example, at Gettysburg College.⁸ By focusing more effort on the cultural and collaborative dimensions, integration becomes a way of thinking and behaving for staff members, rather than a forced approach.

To be successful the collaborative (operational) dimension of integration requires honest communication and trust. Rentfrow states, "Part of the difficulty in promoting collaboration is that different groups too often misunderstand the types of work performed by their colleagues across the campus."⁹ Collaborative services and projects involve learning more about the types of work their colleagues do and opening themselves up to new ways of working.

Armed with the knowledge gained from institutions that merged the library and IT departments over the past decade, and our conviction that organizational merging was not in the best interest of Bowdoin College, we sought a new model of Library and IT integration. Rather than taking a top-down approach of combining organizational charts, we wanted to create a cultural exchange so that cooperation would occur organically and in places we would never have imagined.

Bowdoin's Library & Information Technology Organizations

The Library Department has as its head the College Librarian who reports directly to the Dean for Academic Affairs, the chief academic officer of Bowdoin College. With over 200 years of history, the Library was actually formed before the College itself. Currently the Library has 33 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members and approximately 15 FTE student workers.

The Information Technology Division has existed, in various names (originally Data Processing then Computing & Information Services), for 40 years. Until 2003, IT had reported to the Vice-President of Finance & Administration. In 2003 a Chief Information Officer (CIO) position, which leads the 41 FTE division and reports directly to the College President, was created.

Over the past decade a degree of tension existed between the two departments. Some services that had been the responsibility of the Library (audio visual services and academic computing) were moved to the Information Technology Division. The Library is not only a partner with Information Technology, but also a client, given the amount of technology infrastructure necessary to support the library database, website, and technical equipment. Like other departments, the Library and IT must compete for staff and financial resources.

Bowdoin's Goals

In 2005 Bowdoin College Board of Trustees called for more integration between the Library and IT to "control costs." The President asked the College Librarian and the Chief Information Officer to increase collaboration between the departments. He did not specify merging the two departments, but rather left the leaders with self-determination as to what would be the most effective means for integration.

The College Librarian and the Chief Information Officer were clear that integration must improve services for the students, faculty, and staff. As with other institutions, the clients of IT and Library services, to cite Ferguson "are often unable to distinguish clearly between tool and content, and they are increasingly confused about whom to consult for help in accomplishing their work."¹⁰ The primary goal of both departments at Bowdoin is to provide a seamless experience for clients so that they will not have to navigate

between two departments when asking for help with Blackboard, Endnote, or multimedia services, for example. An improved user experience would inevitably lead to more efficient services, the elimination of duplicate efforts, and cost control. Additionally when planning new services, it was not always clear which department should provide that service. An integrated approach to developing new services would help ensure that the services were developed in the most efficient way.

Library/Information Technology (L/IT) Group

The College Librarian and the CIO decided the best way to foster cooperation was by establishing a small group and authorizing them to brainstorm and implement any idea that would result in more collaboration and better services.

In December of 2005, the L/IT group emerged with four staff members hand selected by the leaders—two from IT and two from the Library. The small group was important to encourage creativity and expediency. The Librarian and CIO empowered the individuals to experiment and think outside of their current positions and organizations. The four members have different levels of administrative, managerial and operational responsibilities, yet each member acts as an equal partner in the L/IT Group. One of the earliest stated expectations by the members was that the conversations would be held in confidence and that any positions of power would be left at the door.

The initial meeting was held in the Library, but the group quickly decided to meet in rooms outside of either department to encourage creativity, create a sense of neutral territory and a level playing field. This was especially challenging because both IT and the Library are spread out across the campus in at least five buildings. They even share space in the Main Library. Early in the process, using departmental space would have precluded discussing some sensitive issues within close proximity of staff and discouraged outside of the box thinking, but later shared space proved to be a convenient and useful venue for meetings, reinforcing the sense of common purpose.

While the “where” and “when” were decided relatively early on in the process, the “how” emerged naturally with time. The group felt it was important to share responsibility for the work and to create within

itself a laboratory for collaboration—a “collaboratory” where members could try on new roles, different hats, support one another, test ideas and reject what didn’t work, while refining what did. In order to facilitate that sharing, tools for collaboration became increasingly important. The group adopted Project 37’s Basecamp <<http://www.basecamp.com/>>, a hosted communications and project management tool for its communication and shared work.

After getting to know each other better personally and professionally, in the first few meetings the group focused on defining itself, and created a statement of purpose: *Information Technology and the Library have formed a group to look at the current and potential ways to work together, determine any and all methods of cooperation that would benefit Bowdoin College and create a permanent process for collaboration.*

Getting Together

From our own experience in creating the L/IT Group, we knew that spending time together, sharing ideas and information, and working toward a common goal significantly improved our ability to collaborate. The first L/IT Group challenge was to find meaningful opportunities for the staffs to get to know each other. In order to foster “cross-cultural” understanding and trust, the staffs needed to spend time together in a non-threatening environment and learning about each other’s core values, and communication and management styles. In order to facilitate genuine collaboration, Library and IT staff needed to learn about each others’ staff organizations and responsibilities as well as their colleagues’ daily work and projects.

Without this basic understanding, we could not begin the important work of identifying areas of overlapping interest and responsibility. Without this, our staffs lacked the context they would need to begin to identify synergies in our work and to think creatively about how departmental cooperation could solve shared problems and ultimately ensure a higher quality service for our clients.

Before we implemented specific strategies, we tried to clearly articulate the overall objective of our efforts to all staff, emphasizing the strong level of support we had from Library and IT leadership and the President’s office. Further we worked to characterize the L/IT Group as an agent for change and a model of integration, as well as four individuals committed to supporting our staffs, smoothing out the rough

spots and facilitating the work ahead. Two specific tactics for increasing Library and IT staff cultural and operational understanding were brown bag talks and problem-solving lunches.

Brown Bag Talks

We launched a series of “brown bag” lunch talks at which staff from one or both departments would present on a topic relating to work in which they were engaged or on new technology or innovative ideas that they felt had potential for use on campus. These “brown bag” talks served to acculturate the Library and IT staff to each other’s language and practices, while also providing snapshots of services and projects, which might offer insights into future collaboration.

One of our first “brown bags” featured the development of the *Scrolls of the Mongol Invasions of Japan* <<http://www.bowdoin.edu/mongol-scrolls/>> project, a website developed by several IT staff that allows users to simultaneously compare disparate versions of the ancient scrolls. Our IT presenter described the technical aspects of development as well as his collaborative approach to working with the faculty member for whom the project was developed. Both Library and IT staff found the presentation to be very exciting and informative.

At another “brown bag” a Library staff member described a recently completed web usability study of the Library’s web page. This stimulated significant conversation and ultimately led to very meaningful collaboration on design concepts for the Library’s next web page revision. Other “brown bags” included a talk by Tim Spalding, founder of Library Thing, <<http://www.librarything.com>>, presentations on electronic journal development and scholarly communications, video streaming and GIS as well as staff rehearsals for upcoming conference presentations. Staff enjoyed learning about the work of their colleagues, even those staff whose work was in a significantly different area of expertise or that did not focus on technology development. And the “brown bags”, which have continued at a rate of two to three a semester, bore fruit, stimulating several successful collaborations and more focused inter-department conversations and serving as an ice-breaker between staff.

Problem-Solving Lunches

Another tactic was to gather groups of staff from both departments who do similar types of work, for

conversation over a free lunch. The small groups were tasked with envisioning ways in which the two staffs might naturally collaborate to ensure effective support for the Bowdoin community. We asked them to look towards the future, rather than dwell on the past in the hopes of avoiding protracted conversation on past frustrations and miscommunications. Our three groups included staff involved in:

- Collection development and asset management
- User instruction/training
- User services, including Library access services and IT help desk staff

We gave each group a very specific set of questions to answer, realizing from past experience that without this starting point, staff can falter and spend too much time trying to figure out the why, what and how of what they are doing. Each group was asked to choose a scribe and to report their finding to LIT. We stressed that no idea was “too crazy, too big or too small” and asked them to focus on ideas what could help our clients/users. Questions included:

- How might the Library and IT collaborate to enhance and/or develop new support services for our users?
- What do you think have been our most successful collaborations to date and why were they successful?
- What role does communication play in successful collaboration and how might we ensure that each department is up-to-date on the projects and programs of the other?

For the most part the outcome was good. Staff had another opportunity to talk informally over lunch and then to focus their attention on a shared task. The resulting reports were packed with many ideas for collaboration, all with focus on the quality of the users’ experience. We learned that communication was a very big concern. Often staff in one department were working on projects that either directly impacted or could have informed the work of the other, but a lack of communication led to a missed opportunity. We learned that these missed opportunities most often were not a result of unwillingness of staff to share information, but rather an inability to make good judgments about what and when to share information due to a lack of understanding of the other department’s work.

Collaborative Strategic Planning

The Associate Librarian and Deputy CIO are both members of the L/IT Group, which made administrative dimensions of integration, such as strategic planning, an achievable possibility. L/IT saw the coordination of a shared IT and Library strategic plan as one approach to improving communications and eliminating barriers to successful collaboration. Both the Library and IT had in place strong strategic planning efforts. However, these planning processes were not coordinated and the resulting documents were not shared with the other department. Over the years, this disconnect in planning processes negatively impacted both units. Our priorities, objectives and timetables were not synchronized, and this led to misunderstandings, staff frustration and project failures or slowdowns as well as some overlap of efforts.

With support of IT and Library leadership, we began sharing information on our planning processes, the content, style and format of our written plans, and our timetables. Since both individual plans were nearing completion, we agreed to focus our attention on content – on finding those objectives and actions that would impact, need support from, duplicate or clash with each other and saving for later the synchronization of the planning processes.

As we expected, we found instances of duplication of effort, but were surprised that although duplicated goals were similar or exactly the same, staff-developed strategies to reach these goals varied greatly and even clashed. We also discovered that departments were working on projects that would be of interest to or be enhanced by collaboration. There were few cases where our timetables and priorities were out of synch. Through discussion of our findings with our respective staff, we were able to start needed conversations between those working on linked projects and to realign priorities and timelines to better ensure the success of our individual and collaborative work.

Both IT and the Library then updated their individual plans to include needed language and developed a short third plan that outlined our areas of collaboration. This L/IT plan was shared with staff, both in writing and through presentations. Communicating the strategic plan yielded another opportunity to stress our commitment to working together, to engage in cross-department conversation and stress the value of relying on the expertise available in both organizations.

Two years later we completed our second round of synchronized strategic planning, but this time we were better positioned to mesh our planning timetables and the format of the plans. We were happily surprised that staff had identified many collaborative opportunities on their own and had already incorporated them into their action plans. There were many fewer disconnects in goals and solutions. The staffs had naturally worked together to develop their goal and action lists.

Collaborative Projects

Clearly there is no substitute for working together on shared projects with real outcomes. It builds strong collegial bonds and helps develop a better understanding of each staff member's talents and expertise, personality and work style. Library and IT staff have learned new skills and approaches to group work, problem-solving and project management from each other. They have the opportunity to get a better sense of difference in organizational culture and how to work within these differences. In addition, working together on a project with a set of goals and a timeline requires staff to acknowledge that this shared work is as important as work assigned by their departmental supervisor. Our list of collaborative projects is long and for the most part reflects successful partnerships. Below are a few examples.

The Library and IT, along with representatives from several other departments, have formed DAM, a group focused on issues relating to digital asset management. Over the past two years, this group has developed campus guidelines on file formats, metadata and workflow for digital audio, video and image collections and is working on a digital copyright statement. DAM participants collaboratively chose and implemented image management software. Future collaboration includes participating in planning for digital production facilities and an institutional repository.

In preparation for discussion on a digital repository, IT and the Library sent a number of staff from both departments to the recent SPARC Digital Repository Meeting held in Baltimore in November 2008. Our goal was to bring staff up to speed on the most current thinking on repositories, but also we believed that, by having both IT and Library staff participate in the same educational event, it would give us a shared understanding on which to base our future planning.

Inclusion Means Success

Finally, we identified “inclusion” as both a pathway to and a measure of our success. By inclusion we mean: better communication and a clearer understanding of when to include staff from the other department in project planning and implementation, workflow meetings, etc. Examples include inviting staff outside of your department to retreats and informal department social activities, to serve on search committees and to partner on projects. A useful example is the inclusion of IT of a Library staff member on the planning and implementation team for the College’s new content management system. Both departments benefitted as did the project as a whole.

Steps to Cooperation between the Library and IT

With increased cultural understanding, different departments with different cultures can learn to trust each other rather than be fearful. The more that the two culturally distinct staffs from IT and the Library worked together – it was absolutely certain – the more everything would change.

Fear may exist at each of Ferguson *et al*’s dimension of integration. Staff may be uneasy that their occupational culture will be lost if their department becomes absorbed into another one. We assuaged this fear by communicating to the staff that our goal was to improve services through integration, not to merge departments for administrative or budgetary reasons.

Staff may be anxious that, through collaboration, members of the other department might infringe on their operational work, or that someone would take away an individual’s control over the way he/she performed his/her daily tasks. We addressed this anxiety by involving the individuals who provide that service in all discussions and reiterating the goal of a seamless and satisfying experience for our clients.

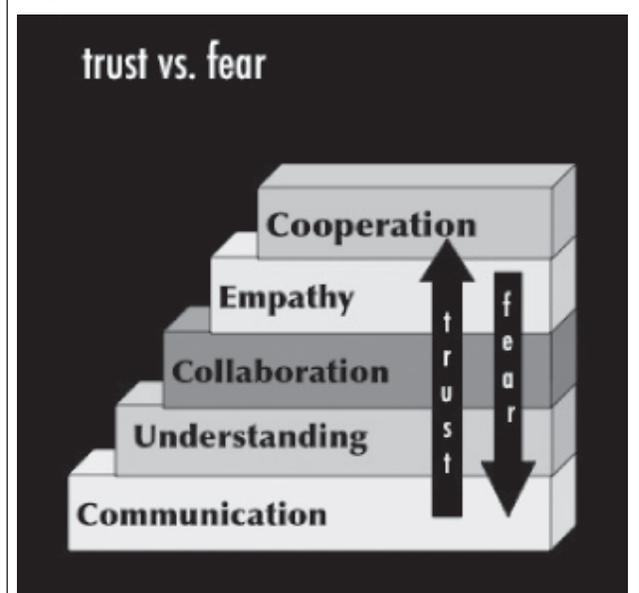
Staff may be apprehensive that a decision about the organizational structure will be made without any input from them. We were in a uniquely desirable situation when the President gave the Library and IT departments self-determination. The L/IT Group tried to convey to the Library and IT staff that they could take control of their own destiny. By supporting and initiating the changes needed to work better together, they could be the drivers instead of the passengers. Any change L/IT was promoting was surely less frightening to them than merging the two organizations.

Through their work, L/IT Group hoped to avoid the feared loss of two occupational cultures at Bowdoin and knew that the speed of its progress was a critical factor in judging its success. L/IT was concerned whether the group had done enough each year to make as much progress as possible to truly change the cultures in each group. During the Fall of 2006, the visiting accreditation team recognized the “fledgling effort” the Library and IT had made toward cooperation. The Library and IT were pleased with progress made, and continue to advance more cooperation.

The L/IT Group developed the “trust vs. fear” chart to help depict the progress that needed to be made in order to “take steps” toward our goal of cooperation between the Library and IT. The goal is full cooperation—“co-operations” or integrated services and processes when it improves services and increases efficiency.

The first step to cooperation is to have a means for effective communication, which can be especially challenging when working across cultures. Implicit goals and contextual background must be communicated explicitly to the partner. Furthermore, vocabulary within one field may be similar in words but different in meaning (e.g., archive, database). These terms need to be discovered and differentiated for communication to occur. With a foundation of good communication, an appreciation of the culture and core values of the partner, cooperation can be achieved.

Figure 1. “Trust vs. Fear”



Lessons Learned

Do not wait for the President, senior officers or Trustees to initiate change for you. By approaching the President during the early discussions about a Library-IT merger, it was easier to become part of the discussion; there was no atmosphere of a “done deal”. He even seemed to be rooting for us to succeed.

Identify the shared “core values” that are present in both departments (e.g., positive user experience) and use them as a means of starting conversations – particularly difficult ones – on a common ground.

Do everything you can to make cooperation commonplace and while you are doing this make sure everyone knows what you are doing and why; make sure that the senior officers are aware of your integration efforts.

Make the collaboration public, by taking on visible front-facing projects together and even meeting in rooms where other staff can see the interaction. Publicize all of your successes.

Ensure that IT- Library collaboration remains a priority by constantly encouraging and empowering the staff to work with members of the other department and to work *well* with them. Eliminate as much bureaucracy as possible when working between departments because it short-circuits relationship building and a feeling of genuine cooperation. Communicate between the organizations the same way you communicate intra-departmentally.

Continue to build on existing trust and respect between everyone: the Librarian & CIO, managers, organizational units, and staff members. Tensions should be appropriately discussed and resolved.

Conclusion

Both groups of staff now seem to understand that there are many advantages to cooperation. First among these is the marked improvement of services to our users. The Library and IT staff can keep their separate identities and cultures, while also relying on their colleagues for expertise. Perhaps more important, when cooperating across groups, staff feel better, and thus work better. We even see a “third culture” emerging among some staff, which may grow with increased cooperation.

The cultural and collaborative (operational) dimensions of integration are the foundation for better communication and more trust, which leads to cooperation between the Library and IT departments.

Diligent efforts toward cultural and collaborative integration, when combined with the shared goal of improving the client experience, may not have the immediate and visible results as merging administratively and physically. However, the outcomes are likely to be more permanent with better communication and more understanding leading to efficiency with high morale. Our next step is ensuring that the organizational change which has begun continues and is institutionalized beyond the four members of the L/IT Group.

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Notes

1. Andrea L. Foster, “Strains and Joys Color Mergers between Libraries and Tech Units. (Cover Story),” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 54, no. 19 (2008): 57.
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10. Ferguson, Spencer, and Metz, “Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts,” 39.