

What Chief Academic Officers Want from Their Libraries:
Findings from interviews with Provosts and Chief Academic Officers
Leigh S. Estabrook, Library Research Center
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Summary:

Administrators in higher education have historically evaluated their schools, departments and programs on three factors: (1) quality of that program, often as measured by some external body such as the National Academy of Sciences; (2) centrality of that program to the mission of the academic institution of which it is a part; and (3) demand for the offerings of that program. In recent years a fourth factor—cost of the program relative to those other factors—is often added. Librarians seeking to understand how to make themselves most valued and valuable would do well to keep these in mind. This is the central finding from a recent survey of Provosts and Chief Academic Officers conducted on behalf of the Association for College and Research Libraries and her President's Program Committee by the University of Illinois' Library Research Center. Provosts and Chief Academic Officers want their libraries to be good—they link the quality of their library with accreditation, with academic success and with satisfaction from faculty and students. They also want the library to be central to their campus, and those institutions that have invested in creating library learning centers are highly valued by their administration. And they want their libraries to be used—to be active and to be filled with faculty and students. Perhaps surprising is the finding that while Provosts and Chief Academic Officers wanted to know their librarians were doing everything possible in resource sharing and in making their libraries efficient, few administrators I interviewed talked about costs of the library as a major concern. It is as if they have adjusted to the constant increases and think they are just the cost of being an academic institution. In fact the most significant complaint about cost made by any administrator was from one who felt his librarian was not asking for enough and thus the library was at the bottom of peer rankings.

Background:

In Spring, 2006, I interviewed twenty-five Chief Academic Officers (hereinafter referred to as CAOs) from a diverse group of colleges and universities. Universally those interviewed were enthusiastic about contributing their views; they were generous with their time and knowledgeable about their libraries, sometimes at a level of detail that might astonish many librarians.

Members of the 2007 ACRL President's Program Committee provided recommendations of institutions. From that list I selected them with a desire to represent diverse types of institutions. A staff member of the Library Research Center (University of Illinois) and I scheduled the 20 minute appointments. Initially I conducted interviews with 18 CAOs) and suggested stopping at that point because the answers were becoming redundant. At the request of the Committee, I interviewed an additional six CAOs to create a slightly broader representation of community colleges and large institutions. The two-year and community colleges were found to be significantly different from four-year

colleges and from universities. And the organizational placement of libraries in two-year and community colleges varied widely. Some libraries are part of student services, others are joined with learning centers or with information technology (IT). One institution included in this study had moved its library's budget and reporting line three times in the past two years. For this reason, the following report treats these two year libraries separately and provides only a few generalizations.

The findings of these interviews are consistent with—but more extensive than—Beverly Lynch's face-to-face study of the president and provost of 6 academic institutions that included a question about "Who and What Influences Decisions about The Library."¹

What do they want from their libraries?

Overall most of the CAOs interviewed are aware of and think highly of their librarian and library's role in the college. Above all they want their library to be used. CAOs want libraries to have current resources, to meet the information needs of research faculty, and to determine overall which resources will be used more (some have pushed more to e-resources because of this). Many of those interviewed emphasized how important to them their library's physical, political and intellectual connections with the campus is to them. As one provost said, "For me then the library has to be a dynamic... always keeping ten steps ahead of what is happening, what is the best way to support enterprise." Another said proudly:

no longer are we the kind of campus where you come [to the library] every now and then...we have classes held there b/c they want to tap into the resources...more and more things that are so important that need to be done in conjunction with the library resources...how to use the databases.

Pointing to the changing business models in academia, one CAO put these other comments in context:

...what we see today in top academic leadership is people who are not academics themselves or whose priority is not the academic mission, but the business model of advancing the institution. They are going to invest in things that they can point out, not the number of people who appreciate we've doubled the size of the collection.

Those with new libraries are particularly supportive of having learning centers that include instructional space, faculty offices and library programs and services. And they want their students and faculty to be satisfied! Repeatedly during these interviews I heard comments about how much CAOs pay attention to user satisfaction. Complaints are still used as a litmus test of library efficiency and relevance for many Provosts

The CAOs are generally knowledgeable about issues facing their libraries such as costs of materials, challenges of licensing agreements and rising serials costs. CAOs of

¹ Unpublished Powerpoint slides provided by Professor Lynch

four-year colleges and universities (not the 2-year and community colleges) frequently said they want high quality library collections and services, even if it costs more.

What do they want from their librarians?

Most CAOs interviewed expressed trust in their director/dean of libraries. In particular most said they had confidence that the librarians are doing all they can to keep costs down by evaluating what is necessary to stay current in the collections needed by faculty and programs. It is important to note that the CAOs contacted were suggested by members of the President's Program Committee; so members may well have had some sense that the libraries they were recommending were, to their knowledge, doing well.

Many CAOs interviewed stressed the importance of his or her library director's embracing the changing library landscape. They want a librarian with a service orientation who sees and understands the need to work with not only faculty and students but also with information technology specialists: someone who is effective in both collaboration and communication. And CAOs want information; for many, the more information the better, especially in terms of benchmarking, comparative statistics, and evaluations of costs vs. value.

Those CAOs who revealed concerns about their librarians had two types of complaint. First, the CAOs want their librarians to come to them and ask for resources. One CAO complained of the library director who was not aggressive enough: who knew the budget was tight so felt they shouldn't ask for more. Another said,

I think a director who was energetic and full of ideas [...] would be banging on my door saying we need help. Silence makes it easier for me but doesn't do any good for the library. I have been pushing him to tell me what the needs are and fight for them. I can't get him to move. A little bit in over his head. I'm not going to do his job for him.

Second, the CAOs want their librarians to establish effective working relationships between IT and library directors especially when the two are not integrated organizationally. As one noted, it would be:

“a problem if they [the librarians] weren't coming to me asking for things to provide better service or to do their job better. I see enough people who want a salary increase or don't like their department chair, but when people what new technology to interface two systems to improve access – that is good.”

Librarians who appear to face the most complex organizational challenges are those in two-year and community colleges where the lines of authority, roles and relationships between librarian and IT director are often quite uncertain and may even change frequently. One academic administrator expressed her concern about her library and her desire to provide more support but noted that the library is now under the IT department

with an IT director who has redirected parts of the library budget to IT needs. (To the administrator's credit, she has been giving the librarians extra money on the side to compensate for the money lost; but this is hardly a rational management structure.)

CAOs also revealed a number of other personnel issues that affect their relationship with their library director. Provosts who are new to their position are less knowledgeable about their library and its director. Were it not irresponsible research, I very much wanted to call the librarians at these institutions and tell them to make themselves present as quickly as possible in the affairs of the college or university and to get on their CAO's calendar. CAOs who saw no integration between library and technology or to a lesser extent library and instruction also viewed the library in a more negative light. Finally, the interviews revealed a few CAOs who seemed to have personality clashes with or lack of respect for their library director—situations in which it might well be best for the library director to look for another job.

What about library funding?

This study was driven initially by a sense that CAOs are concerned about the costs of libraries and that librarians need to understand how to improve the way they make their case. At least for the institutions in this study, CAOs are not as concerned about money as they are about the library's overall role in their institutions. Many CAOs are fully aware of various strategies their libraries had adopted such as consortial buying. They recognize the higher-than-inflationary increases for library materials and the needs for new technologies and want to have confidence that their librarians are managing resources as efficiently and effectively as possible in managing resources. As one interviewee said,

[Some of the things I look for are] “what cost savings method have the librarians tried to employ to make sure we are getting the best benefit for our dollars. What collaborations have we tried to ensure with other institutions. I certainly do try to support requests. I need to be sure they are being really good stewards.

In most of these institutions the library budget tends to be limited to a certain percentage of the overall institutional budget; but many CAOs have supplemental funds they routinely allocate to the library. [A] “non-recurring bail-out is almost standard,” as one participant said. One institution now budgets the library costs in the same category as utility costs—a way of recognizing cost increases that may well exceed the percentage increases the academic institution allocates to salary and operating cost increases. Even in institutions in which the library is seen as fully central and tied closely to the strategic plans of the institution, library funding is available for the needs not wants of the library staff.

Several CAOs revealed some of the difficulties they have in supporting increased collections costs. Two of those interviewed mentioned members of their Board of Trustee members who had asked why the college needed a library when Google provides access to so much information. Additionally, one CAO noted what is “most challenging

is adding new faculty and they need increasingly specialized materials...trying to get close collaboration between dean of faculty and librarian when new faculty [are added].” This CAO was not the only one to discuss the importance of collaboration between the librarian and academic departments in collection development. One noted that this type of collaboration was critical during budget time because all deans in that institution worked together in the budget process including those deans at whose table the library director sits. “The close link to the academic program is essential,” said one CAO.

Finally, we asked CAOs about their expectations for fund raising by their library. Few had any expectations. Several mentioned the coffee shop in their information commons; a few said that they will send their librarian out as a spokesperson for the university and for the library; but the group of individuals interviewed for this study rarely considered important such activities as grant writing, fund raising and any other activities initiated to bring in additional revenues to the library.

The Annual ALA conference will provide the opportunity to explore further a number of these issues. Three of the CAOs interviewed for this study will be panelists at the ACRL President’s Program. Appended to this document is the questionnaire used as a guide for the interviews.

ACRL Presidents Program
Interviews with CAO/Provosts

Prelude – Thank you very much for taking the time to talk with me. I am calling on behalf of the incoming president of the Association of College and Research Libraries. As part of her initiatives, she seeks to help members of this association to understand better how the library fits into your institutions' strategic plan. Libraries are changing rapidly with the greater availability of online information (much of which is available because of libraries) and ubiquitous computing. They face those changes when higher education is changing with similar speed. I would like to ask you about the relationships between the library and your institution with particular reference to resource allocation and the ways in which the library communicates to you, the chief budget officer. I promise the interview will last no more than 20 minutes.

I'd like to begin by asking you what factors inform your decision about how much to allocate to the library? (probe, if necessary, about budget process)

Let's back up and look at the library's budget in the context of resource allocation for the campus at large. What can you say about that? [probe:--how do librarians fare in relationship to other academic units, for example, arts and sciences?]

Can you tell me about your expectations for library in the following areas:

Grant support?

Income-generating activities (e.g., charging for some services like interlibrary loan and printing)?

What about services that have not traditionally been seen as part of the library's role—for example a coffee stand in the library, credit classes, etc.?

Fund-raising from alumni and friends? Relationship with the foundation?

The answers to this interview will be combined with about results of about 40 others to help inform librarians about ways in which they can be most effective in working with their academic officers/immediate administrators. . Is there any other specific advice you could give to them?

Thank you for your time. We will mail you a copy of the results of this survey when it is completed in about 3 months. In the meantime I hope you will call or email me if you think of other points you would like to add.