Leveraging institutional collaboration for the benefit of academic libraries

As a powerful combination of facilities, resources and expertise on campus, the library can be a lodestar for other departments. Discover how the University of Denver Libraries prospected for collaboration opportunities, delivered significant benefits, and forged solid gold relationships.
Finding synergies between the library and other departments and units within an institution can be an effective way to support the strategic plan of the institution overall, and the strategic plan of each supporting department or unit. This case study highlights three examples of such collaborations and covers impact and benefits, tips for academic librarians to increase inter-departmental collaboration, and how to overcome barriers to collaboration.

Introduction

Academic librarians’ core competencies can be leveraged through collaborations within their institution. These internal collaborations can help raise the library’s profile together with the appreciation of students, faculty and administrators, while helping the institution execute its strategic plan.

Inter-departmental collaboration creates tangible benefits — and on the flip side, the library and indeed the overall institution puts itself at risk when there is a lack of collaboration. Without collaboration, there is a loss of efficiency. Furthermore, if academic librarians don’t promote their own expertise and usefulness, the library appears less relevant. It may be perceived as only a building where students go to study, and a website with links to articles. The library could thus miss out on funding. One way for librarians to demonstrate their value is through collaborations, which should be seen as a great opportunity.

Michael Levine-Clark is the Dean of Libraries at the University of Denver, where the University Libraries have worked successfully with various departments and units across the institution. Here Levine-Clark shares in detail three inspiring examples of priceless inter-departmental collaborations.

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Dean of Libraries at the University of Denver
Collaboration example 1: getting the most out of faculty profiles

The University of Denver was not centrally managing its faculty profiles. Thus, they were not being updated or displayed with consistency from department to department. It became apparent that the university needed a unified approach so the profiles could be easily accessed, kept up-to-date, and searched.

Five departments are creating the system for faculty profiles:

- University Libraries
- Division of Marketing & Communications
- Office of Research & Sponsored Programs
- Office of Institutional Research & Analysis
- Information Technology

Each department has its own motivation for streamlining a faculty profiling system, as Levine-Clark illustrates:

Marketing & Communications wants to get information about our faculty out to the world. The Office of Research wants to present the research of our faculty, and they also want to better understand that research. The Office of Institutional Research manages the software into which faculty are required to enter their publications every year in order to be considered for a merit increase and ultimately to be considered for promotion or tenure.

Surprisingly, even though librarians’ core expertise is metadata, the library was not top of anyone’s mind, and the other departments did not initially turn to the library to spearhead the project.

We volunteered to work with these partners on developing a tool that would do all these things. In the library we have metadata expertise so we can clean up existing metadata about faculty publications that are in this system managed by the Office of Institutional Research. We also think we can automate harvesting of metadata about faculty publications into this system, which will save faculty time and angst going forward.

Once we have clean metadata about faculty publications, we can use that to feed into faculty profiles. Because they'll all be coming from the same system, they'll be presented in a uniform way. Along with this, we're asking faculty to enter a brief biography into the same system, so that can also be drawn on to present a uniform faculty profile.

This cooperation is already yielding significant benefits: to the faculty directly, to the library’s understanding of the faculty’s research areas, and to the university’s marketing department.

We're working with multiple different units to improve understanding of what our faculty do, and to present that information to the world. This is useful because it gives us a better understanding internally of what faculty do ... and it’ll be useful for prospective students who are trying to learn more about the university. It’s certainly useful from the perspective of Marketing & Communications because they can connect our faculty to media and other opportunities, for the faculty to get information about their research out there.
Collaboration example 2: leveraging archiving expertise for records management

The University Libraries recognized an opportunity to put their records management expertise to use, while saving the university time and money. The bulk of the library collection is housed in the Hampden Center, a large off-campus storage facility. Leveraging their core competency of archiving, the University Libraries offered to build a records management program utilizing the Hampden Center.

For this program, the libraries are working with two business units, Shared Services and the Department of Enterprise Risk Management. Levine-Clark explains that for these two offices, “There’s a great interest in making sure that the university records are stored, protected, and destroyed when scheduled so we’re complying with regulations about retention and destruction of records.”

Though permanent records have always been under the remit of the libraries, temporary records were not. The University Libraries realized that the relevant scanning, archiving, and storage processes were already in place. So they simply created software to manage the temporary records and their destruction schedule.

Even while raising the quality of the records management, this collaboration creates considerable savings.

We don’t have to pay a third party to store them. [The third party] charges quite a bit of money to store the records; to deliver anything back to campus; to bring it back to storage again; and then finally, to destroy those records.

We realized we could do all of those steps for more cheaply and we could even use our existing scanning equipment that we use for interlibrary loans to scan any documents that somebody might need while they’re stored out there.

That’s a collaboration with two business units on campus that saves people time and saves the university quite a bit of money. It leverages our archiving expertise, and it leverages an existing building. We built large portions of that storage facility to store archival materials — and archival materials look very much like university records.

Levine-Clark estimates that the cost of storing and then ultimately destroying a single box of records at the third-party company, used by most of the campus for records storage and destruction, is $66 over seven years. The University Libraries can store the same box for $26, saving the university $40. They have already stored about 1,300 boxes, saving the university over $50,000 across seven years, and there are many thousands of more boxes they could store.

Can you put a value on goodwill? “The aim of the two business units we collaborated with is to ensure compliance and to ensure that the university is efficient and financially sound,” says Levine-Clark. “We work with these units quite a bit. If we can help them save money and time, we are showing that we’re a good partner. Doing a good deed can come back to you.”

The records management also supports the university’s strategic plan: to be unified and less siloed as “One DU” (One Denver University).
Collaboration example 3: the value of “in real life” co-location

Many academic libraries offer co-location of services. In the case of the University of Denver, its main library building, Anderson Academic Commons, hosts:

- Center for World Languages and Cultures
- Digital Media Center
- Math Tutorial Center
- Office of Teaching and Learning
- Science and Engineering Tutorial Center
- Information Technology Help Desk
- Writing Center

To encourage collaboration, Levine-Clark says, “We have quarterly meetings where we bring together the directors of each of these centers. That meeting is run by a librarian. We talk through shared service models, how to be better at referring from one space to another, and how to ensure that we’re following up when we refer. We have more frequent meetings as needed about specific issues if they arise.”

The University Libraries are investigating how co-located services contribute to student success. “We’re working with the Office of Institutional Research & Analysis, which is interested in understanding data about student success, on a number of projects where we’re trying to connect the data we have about student activities with measures of student success. Do students who use multiple service points tend to have higher grades, higher persistence rates, and do better in some measurable way in classes and so on? If we can understand that, then we can build a case that connection matters.

“Because this building has multiple different service points, it’s heavily used,” Levine-Clark continues. “There are always students in here who, maybe if they were studying somewhere else, wouldn’t bother to ask for help with a question, but because they’re already in the building it’s easier to do that. Success breeds success.”
How can academic librarians increase inter-departmental collaboration?

The best way for academic librarians to kick start collaborations is to look for opportunities and to be proactive. Levine-Clark offers his tips.

Actively seek out opportunities:

- Pay attention to problems and priorities on campus and think about where the library can insert itself. You will see opportunities. The faculty profiles example is a good one: we were not invited to be part of that project in the beginning. I inserted us there by talking about metadata and how the library could help with the fundamental underlying data for that project.
- The records management project is another example. We saw a need and knew we had the facilities and expertise to help with that.

Go outside the library and listen for pain points:

- Pay attention to the projects that are being undertaken on campus. Participate in meetings outside the library and listen for the pain points being expressed by your colleagues across the university.

Ask how the library can support the institution’s strategic plans:

- Look at the strategic plans for the university as a whole and for the different departments on campus. Think about how the library can help with those plans. Those are expressions of priorities for different units on campus. If you can come in and say, “I can help you with this aspect of your strategic plan,” most people on campus would jump at that opportunity.

Overcoming barriers to successful collaboration

There are some obstacles to collaborations which can be overcome. It’s important for academic libraries to actively offer help:

Sometimes the library isn’t perceived as a partner for a particular project. For many faculty and administrators, the library is perceived as a place with collections and people who service those collections. One of the barriers is that the library is forgotten, unless you push the library out there.

At times, lack of resources may be a hindrance:

Another barrier is simply bandwidth. We do a lot with few people. Asking people to do more is hard... We don’t have the number of librarians to make some of these collaborations possible. For the faculty profiles, we’re going to have to hire some student labor to work on that project.

Collaborations may reveal unmet needs and take considerable time to establish:

Collaborations can sometimes save time. You take the expertise, the budget and the staff from multiple units and together you can do something more efficiently than if you had done it separately. But collaboration can sometimes take more time. It increases demand, and maybe it shows that there was an unmet need especially if the collaboration is taking on something new.

That said, great efficiencies can be gained in the long run:

Sometimes there’s a huge amount of upfront work…like for the faculty profile system...we have to build a system, we have to build workflows, we have to clean up all the existing metadata in the current system. We have to work with faculty across campus to make sure the metadata we’ve cleaned up is acceptable to them. We have to make sure that those faculty all enter biographies. Once that’s all been done, we will have set up a system that automatically harvests metadata about most faculty publications. Then it will be a matter of working with faculty to make sure that the metadata that’s been harvested is accurate and acceptable to them.

Once we get to that point, the work for us will go down... it won’t be this giant project that it is now... it will be an ongoing maintenance project that we can manage with our current staffing levels. The important thing is that overall even though there’s more time involved for the library, we’re going to be saving faculty time in the long run.

While there may be increased workload in the library due to some of these collaborations, we’re saving the university time and effort.

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—Michael Levine-Clark, Dean of Libraries at the University of Denver
Conclusion
Inter-departmental collaborations which leverage the core competencies of academic libraries are a powerful means to support institutional and departmental strategic plans, to position the library as a key partner, and to drive efficiency. Librarians are advised to look out for opportunities and unmet needs, and be proactive in forging new collaborations.

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