Op Ed — Rhetoric, Library Management, and Organizational Mergers: Why We Can’t Talk Straight about Integrating Library and Computer Center Services

by Steve McKinzie (Director of Library Services, Catawba College, Salisbury, NC 28144; Phone: 704-637-4449) <smckinzi@catawba.edu>

Recently the Council of Independent Colleges (CIC) and the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) sponsored a conference for senior college and university administrators at Kenyon College (March 2006). Ostensibly, the conference explored “Integrating Library and Computer Services.” The program featured an array of CIOs in charge of newly-minted IT/Library merged organizations, and it touted an accompanying assortment of academic deans and college presidents who had helped engineer such couplings.

I didn’t attend the gathering, but the promotional email list postings and the personalities involved suggested the event was first rate — its program enlightening and its presenters distinguished. But there was a downside. The conference illustrated a disturbing truth about libraries, IT, and their respective management. We don’t do organizational change well. That is, we don’t discuss it even-handedly. We don’t deal with it objectively.

Instead, we lapse into promotionalism. We champion whatever is different, whatever is new or possibly whatever seems to be more technical. Such was the case at Kenyon College. Despite the event’s quality and high-profile personalities, the conference (if the program agenda is to be believed) entertained scant dissent and gave small credence to counter arguments. Indeed, the whole conference operated under a single premise — a premise spelled out in the most uncompromising terms on the conference’s Website: “Merged information service organizations create the best environment for fostering breakthrough scholarly activity.” Not only that, the college presidents who spoke argued that merged service organizations enhanced institutional prestige, increased efficiency, and attracted potential students. The faculty who came claimed that their own research had attracted potential students. The faculty who worked directly with users — the merged-service organization publishing industry has little hard data to prove its contentions. It is as if the war victors have written the history books, or more to the point, it is as if a few radicals have engineered a revolution, labeled those who wonder about its success as counter revolutionaries, and explained away whatever the human and service cost.

Consider some of the facts about mergers. facts that simply go unreported in the literature or little discussed at professional conferences. A number of libraries have seriously considered merging their IT and Library organizations and then backed away from the decision. In Pennsylvania, Elizabethtown College spent more than a year studying the question after the retirement of their library director enabled them to consider the option. They decided that a merger was not the right choice for their institution or good for their users. A number of other colleges have followed suit. Some, such as Elon University in North Carolina, even chose a different option. They decided to blend but not merge. There, the university CIO and the University Librarian cooperated to create an extremely close working relation with their respective organizations. Even so, they kept the organizations themselves separate, spawning a richly collaborative but clearly non-merged service environment.

Examples demonstrate another side to the merger discussion — one seldom heard and little discussed. Mergers can sometimes fail our users. They can sometimes harm the quality of the institution’s information service. Similarly, other organizations’ paradigms may work as well or better than the typical merged scenario. In the final analysis in most service environments, quality user service depends less on the management system employed than on the caliber of service displayed by those in closest contact to the users — hands-on librarians and information professionals. This is something that most rank-and-file librarians will tell you straight out, although they don’t seem to be the ones who make the conference circuit or write the articles.

When all is said and done, if a library or if an institution’s IT department puts user needs and service above everything else, they are on the right track. Anything less, regardless of the management structure involved, is a serious derailing. We are here to serve our users the best way that we can. It is that simple. It is only common sense to insist that more than a single service organizational structure can accomplish that.