

2000 Fall Conference Report

Forging Partnerships Between Libraries and IT

The Oklahoma ACRL Chapter held its third annual fall conference on October 27, 2000 at the University of Central Oklahoma Campus. Each speaker offered interesting and cogent insights into interaction between libraries and technical support staff to some 50 participants from across the state. All speakers stressed the need for campus departments, once separate, to work together and think as a cohesive institution rather than as separate units. A summary of each speaker's talk follows.

Dr. Phil Moss, Associate Vice Chancellor of Technology, Oklahoma Board of Regents

“Working Together, Working Apart: Convergence or Collaboration Within the Library and Information Technology”

Moss began by discussing the State Regent's goals for using technology in higher education, which include:

- Access to higher education
- Equity of access among students
- Quality assurance
- Efficiency

He stated that students do not care where information and services originate as long as they work well. He advocated for improved service to students and spoke against “functional silos” – that is, departments offering services disconnected with the institution as a whole. Moss advocated thinking on an institutional level rather than a department level, a measure that could result in major changes in university operations. For example, Moss suggested that smaller institutions might merge administrative functions in order to serve better their student clientele. Improved services are primary concerns, and cost savings is secondary.

Moss emphasized thinking of the entire institution, not just of a library or IT unit; the infrastructure as a whole should maximize the benefits for students. A student centered approach should also focus on teaching, not on technology alone. He ended with a quote from Peter Drucker: “The future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed.” Integrating services and rethinking infrastructure within institutions would help distribute academic services and resources more evenly.

William Crowe, Spencer Librarian, University of Kansas

“A Pot of Messages”

William Crowe spoke about his past experience as the former Vice chancellor for Information Services, Dean of Libraries at University of Kansas. Crowe defines Information Technology as the means to capture and organize society’s knowledge and information for use at a later date. Archaic Cuneiform tables had the same function. Crowe likened these to an “Ancient Palm Pilot”. Crowe feels that librarians should “hold fast to our basic values”. For example, privacy is a key issue for librarians: they need to remember their basic values and not allow technology to overwhelm these values.

Like Moss, Crowe urged the building of partnerships across departments in an organization with the ultimate goal of improved service. He made simple but effective suggestions bridging gaps between IT departments and libraries, such as taking an IT person to lunch or sharing training sessions. He stressed the importance of communication and overall objectives rather than the medium of transfer.

Dennis Aebersold, Chief Information Officer, University of Oklahoma

Dennis Aebersold discussed the rapidity of advancement in the IT world. With the pace so quick, IT is no longer a “backroom” service; instead it is moving to the front lines of customer service. In the past, relations between IT and other campus units failed due to insensitivity to particular cultures, campus cultures, and turf protection. However, people in higher education must prepare for several new technologies in this environment of constant change: wireless campuses, new methods of verification/ authorization of users, remote access, and self-checkout. IT support is crucial for these services to work efficiently.

He believes that university campuses should prepare to serve as a training ground for people with good technical skills who will then move on to higher paid jobs in the private sector. He maintains that the library will be one of the many academic units on campus that will play a part in the overall institutional goal of the eUniversity. In the era of ever changing technology, the ability to change skill sets is crucial. He recommends hiring for behavior and communication skills rather than for a specific skill set.

Aebersold also stressed the importance of eliminating the “we” versus “them” mentality so common in university settings. Instead, the “we” or “us” should be the university, and all areas should strive to add value to the university. Aebersold also recommends outsourcing more sophisticated and costly operations to maintain the highest level of modern technology on campus.

Ann Blakely, Head of Reference, University of Tulsa

Ann Blakely offered a real world example. She spoke of her positive experience with an IT-library merger at the University of Tulsa. Initially, she was reluctant to support the merger because of early frustration, but they created a viable working relationship after about six months. Blakely now reports that they have a successful team able to benefit from each other. IT personnel have offices in the library, creating a closer relationship ultimately beneficial to the students. They have frequent meetings to clarify issues, positions, goals and culture differences. This interaction has made a positive and lasting difference.