

# Merging Libraries and Computing: Information Services at Lehigh University

Susan Cady  
*Lehigh University Libraries*

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Susan Cady, "Merging Libraries and Computing: Information Services at Lehigh University." *Proceedings of the IATUL Conferences*. Paper 12.

<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/iatul/1996/papers/12>

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*Cady, Susan  
Lehigh University, USA*

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The relationship between libraries and computing units in academic institutions has been a topic of discussion for at least a decade. Cooperation, collaboration, and the full scale merging of these units are among the possibilities that have been considered extensively and implemented selectively. Modern relationships provide some engaging analogies for categorizing these options. At most institutions some degree of cooperation is underway: more than the occasional date. At other institutions, units are involved in high profile collaboration that might eventually result in formalizing the relationship. Still other institutions have actually "tied the knot" between the two. Sometimes these unions were in fact marriages of convenience that ended almost as quickly as the honeymoon. Shotgun weddings with parsimonious administrators pulling the trigger are not unknown. At Lehigh University libraries and computing are headed down the aisle and the wedding march is playing.

Staff at Lehigh have been interested in observing the current state of library and computing relationships in other institutions, particularly those which have undergone a complete merger of units. In 1994 Arthur Young reported that only a few large universities and perhaps a few dozen smaller institutions have placed the computer center and the library under single management [1]. Since a number of these institutions have subsequently abandoned these reporting structures, it is necessary to track divorce statistics as well as the marriages. Young also noted that there is a need to forge relationships at a deeper level than reporting lines on an organizational chart. This can certainly take place with or without a complete organizational merger but it does take on a different character in a merger. Collaborations are usually done on a project basis and offer the possibility of renegotiating the terms for the next project.

## **COMPREHENSIVE MERGERS**

At least three academic institutions in the United States have attempted comprehensive mergers: Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania, Babson College in Massachusetts, and California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks. In December 1993 Gettysburg announced a merged organization which took shape after a year of planning with the assistance of an outside consulting firm. The model that emerged at Gettysburg was heavily dependent upon self-directed teams with names like response, delivery, selection, training. All cataloging was outsourced to OCLC TechPro. More recently Gettysburg has elected to divide the delivery team into delivery technology and delivery access partly because the team had become too big to perform effectively. In addition team leaders have now been appointed to improve cohesion, provide stable channels of communication and increase accountability, a particular concern of faculty who needed to know to whom their concerns should be addressed. A new librarian has been hired recently to provide closer coordination of cataloging and related technical services activities.

The Babson College merger was driven in part by the concept of an information utility advanced by Richard Kesner in his winter 1994 *Library Trends* article on a utility model for information resources [2]. Currently the organizational chart at Babson depicts a Director of Libraries, a Director of Network Services and a Director of User Services reporting to a Chief Information Officer. Thus Babson appears to have retained separate organizational structures for libraries and computing. On the other hand, California Lutheran University, a newer university founded in 1959, has a chart which shows a more substantive integration of computing and libraries under two major units, User Services and Technical Services. Their recent reorganization brought together library services, academic computing, data processing, telecommunications, and instructional media into a new Office of Information Systems and Services. Dotted lines from the CIO to two standing committees - Internet/WWW and Teaching and Technology - are features which suggest an integrated team approach in selected areas without a formal team-based reporting structure. Less integration is visible between library and computing "help" functions based on the chart included in the California Lutheran Campus Profile in the spring 1996 issue of CAUSE/EFFECT [3]. Interestingly, it was the "visionary library director" (now the CIO) who is credited with the success of the new environment by both the University President and the Vice President for Academic Affairs.

### **ALL MERGERS ARE LOCAL**

The success or failure of these matches will ultimately depend upon many local personalities and historical situations. A larger question is why would one attempt to merge in the first place and what can be gained by doing so. Indeed in the midst of the dislocations and personal apprehensions that affect everyone involved, one is inclined to ask this questions repeatedly. Only the passage of time will provide enough perspective to determine whether this is an academic version of corporate "merger mania" or the harbinger of a fundamental shift in the organization of information delivery within higher education.

During 1994, in the midst of a major downsizing achieved through an early retirement program, Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, announced the future merger of the University Libraries with Computing and Telecommunications as part of its strategic plan. This was to be effected upon the retirement of the Director of Libraries and the return to the teaching faculty of the then Vice-President for Computing and Telecommunications. Both of these positions were eliminated and replaced by a new Vice-Provost for Information Resources. The rationale for this change was not extensively elaborated although the increasingly central role of computing and telecommunications in the delivery of information was clearly a major factor. A number of somewhat similar initiatives were underway around the country, some of which were subsequently abandoned.

### **THE STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS**

The new Vice-Provost for Information Resources, Arnold Hirshon, initiated two closely related planning processes upon his arrival at Lehigh University, the formation of a strategic plan and the reorganization of the previously separate units into one combined unit. Some of the principles espoused by Vice Provost Hirshon as part of these processes were: communication, involvement, planning prior to reorganization,

client-centered focus, and reasonable closure. The primary elements of the planning process were: a staff retreat focusing on vision, values, and mission; cross-functional teams; and campus focus groups. Soon after the retreat in early January, most professional staff and several support staff members began working on the five cross-functional teams to address the issues set forth by the Vice Provost in the charges. The Teams were:

- Client Services
- Information Infrastructure and Services
- Lead Team (four team leaders plus five members at large)
- Resources (budget, personnel, facilities)
- Technology Infrastructure and Services

The Teams were responsible for conducting and recording the focus group sessions for faculty, students, administrators, departmental (staff) clients, and external users. The focus group questions were drafted by the Client Services Team and revised by the Lead Team to consolidate input into one unified exercise for the campus. These activities had to be compressed within a relatively short time to meet the reasonable closure goal, e.g. minimize staff uncertainty and anxiety. The approximate timetable was as follows:

January: staff retreat, teams begin work  
February: focus groups conducted  
March: team mid-term reports  
April: plan drafts released to staff, campus  
May: reorganization drafts released to staff  
June: leadership named, new structure staffed  
July: implementation of new organization

## **TEAM FUNCTIONS AND CHALLENGES**

The work of the teams as described above provided the main input into the strategic plan. They served several ancillary purposes as well; for instance, they provided new communications channels through which staff could share ideas and concerns. The existing channels remained open but became less informative as the process moved forward and the time for reorganization drew closer. Members of the Lead Team also regularly communicated back to their teams as they continued to meet through the weeks of formulating the strategic plan. Thus many staff members had two sources of informal communication--their regular manager (especially if he or she was on the Lead Team) and their Team Leader. If staff lacked details about what was happening, they certainly had a sense of the energy being invested in the process.

The teams also served the function of giving the majority of professional staff members an experience in working within a cross functional team. As mentioned previously, all the teams had members from the different organizational units. Overall this was a very positive experience. A skeptic who did not believe that libraries and computing units have enough in common to warrant merging, observed that if anything would convince him otherwise, it was working with such fine people from the other units. The very interpersonal success of the team experience contained the seeds of one disadvantage. Some challenges to the status quo were stifled despite

instructions from the Vice Provost to leave one's turf at the door, and to work only for the good of the whole organization. A few team recommendations were relatively unchallenged efforts of subunits to carve out a particular niche for themselves. Although it is important and useful to declare that people should retain no sacred cows, that alone does not necessarily make it happen. Ultimately Vice Provost Hirshon and the Lead Team had to intervene in a few situations.

The Team Leaders assumed diverse roles in relationship to their own teams and to the Lead Team at different points in the process. Sometimes Team Leaders functioned as "advocates" for their Team's recommendations during Lead Team meetings, even though the team's position was not wholeheartedly his or her own personal point of view. In other situations Team Leaders might be less forceful in presenting a team position versus their own personal views. If a position were in danger of being rejected by the Lead Team, the strength of the Team Leader's affiliation with that particular idea could be significant. Overall the primary challenges of completing the team assignments fell into three principle areas: making recommendations at the appropriate level of specificity, avoiding recommendations which implied specific organizational structures, and coping with augmentations within the time frame.

Throughout the team process the greatest challenge was finding the appropriate level of specificity for the task at hand. Most of the initial charges were couched in very specific detail. Members less familiar with the topic of the charge expressed concern about making decisions at the level requested. On the other hand, specific charges enabled the teams to swing into action, whether they knew exactly where they were going or not. Furthermore, they were encouraged to recruit help from outside the team as needed. However, when the time came to translate specific recommendations into strategic directions and plans, those groups who had exerted the most effort in producing highly specific recommendations were frustrated when these became encapsulated in broader language and the details of their work were in danger of being "lost". The Client Services and Resources Teams had particular difficulty making recommendations about service improvements, facilities, human resources, and budget without at the same time recommending an organizational structure. At a certain point Vice Provost Hirshon recognized that the wording of some charges contributed to this problem so he revised or withdrew language relating to organizational structure in any way. This process of trying to hit the right level of specificity continued in the Lead Team as well. Recommendations that at first seemed appropriate in terms of their level of specificity later appeared otherwise in the context of the whole strategic plan. Vice Provost Hirshon had a strong commitment to a short, readable document for the campus at large which required some sacrifices in terms of individual pride of ownership or authorship.

## **REORGANIZATION**

After the draft version of the strategic plan was finished, the Lead Team began formulating the new organizational structure. Each member was requested to share his or her ideas on the subject in the form of a chart or schematic. The prospect of sharing these ideas as a nominal group exercise was threatening. A compromise was reached in which the sharing took place in a meeting with immediate opportunity to amplify and clarify without advance distribution of charts. After this initial leap, charts and boxes were drawn and redrawn, debated and discussed. Several times entire levels

were eliminated as Vice Provost Hirshon questioned the value added by an additional reporting level. The first version of the new organization, shared with the entire staff showed nine direct reports but no additional levels of hierarchy. Subsequently the Lead Team decided that certain functions required so much coordination that they should indeed be grouped together (see final chart in ~~Figure 4~~ - not available). Even so, the new organization is relatively flat having only two levels of hierarchy in an operation that includes approximately one hundred fifty people. One of the greatest difficulties was in naming the new organizational units. A concerted effort was made not to use names that had previously been in use and not to use terms like libraries and computing.

The most innovative feature of the new structure is the unification of service functions from libraries, computing, and telecommunications into cross-functional client service teams organized around the college or administrative units they serve. There is also a "student and general" client service team for services less directly linked to the curriculum. The value of client-orientation took precedence over the functional organization of the past. It offers a way to merge units to improve service directly to the client, not just for the sake of change or as a social experiment. The client service consultants on each team will also form a "virtual team" related to their particular function, e.g. desktop computing and communication, collection development and information retrieval, instructional design, and enterprise-wide information. The number of consultants on each team will vary according to the needs of the unit which it serves. Four unit team leaders also double as virtual functional team leaders to provide a necessary structure for communication and coordination without introducing another set of leaders.

One of the topics of intense debate was the management of client services. It was felt that having one manager for this unit was preferable although few people in either profession have in-depth strength in both libraries and computing, not to mention the ability to sustain an innovative style of team management. Ultimately the individual appointed to this position was the former head of User Services within the Computing Center. The former Manager of (Library) Information Services became the Collection Development functional team leader with a dotted line to the Vice Provost and the understanding throughout the organization that she would be part of the "cabinet" of top level leaders. This arrangement should not absolve the new Client Services manager from the need to become familiar with all areas of responsibility. The way in which the infrastructure side of the organization and the client services side will interact is yet to be discovered. Aside from the natural tendency to do things "the old way," there are important issues of security and efficiency to be resolved. For instance, to what degree can system passwords be distributed to allow client services consultants to make immediate changes in the voice mail switch to enable an individual's telephone to be configured a different way and to initiate the proper billing for this service? Additional detail relating to the Lehigh University Information Resources strategic plan and the new organization were available at the time of writing at: <http://www.lehigh.edu/ir/irdocs.html>.

## **TECHNICAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE**

As stated previously, an important question to be addressed is the rationale for combining library and computing operations within an institution of higher education.

Is this the inevitable result of technical change? What institutional goals are met by subjecting loyal and hardworking staff members to the dislocations of such comprehensive change? Tapscott and Caston write at length about a new paradigm in information technology that results from a combination of technical changes and new business environments [4]. In a recent survey of news photography over the last one hundred years, one observer noted that the most profound changes resulted from a new perspective on the part of photographers, not by the improved technical capabilities of cameras, film, or photographic processes. Although the convergence of computing and telecommunications, print and networked information, and analog and digital media is a necessary precursor to organizational convergence such as has taken place at Lehigh, non-technical changes are equally important. Growing global economic competition resulting in enormous corporate change has been making an impact on the increasingly competitive world of higher education. Especially in private higher education, trustees responsible for the strategic direction of colleges and universities are the same individuals who have presided over many traumatic transitions at the corporate level. Whether the downsizing and merging that has taken place within the United States economy will indeed turn out to be "good for the country" or primarily good for the corporations themselves remains to be seen. But these management trends, and the sticker shock of parents at the escalating costs of private higher education are forces which must be recognized. Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof elaborate on aspects of the impetus for change in the higher education arena as it pertains to libraries [5].

## **MEASURES OF SUCCESS**

The greatest test of the Lehigh University merger of libraries and computing lies in the future. No matter how successful the planning and reorganization process is perceived to be, this is only a prelude to the main event. In the first eighteen months one major challenge will be distinguishing between organizational structures and personnel assignments that need to be changed and those that only need more time to mature. Measures of success fall into three areas: staff, client, and the external environment. Through the anxieties expressed during the restructuring it has become obvious what staff members consider to be indicators of success: position re-evaluations (rank and salary); opportunities for advancement, training, and development; equity with pre-existing groups and gender; manageable workloads; and acceptable new supervisors. Client measures of success will be based on whether the services they use have improved significantly. Will clients perceive that the new structure provides a more integrated approach to services? Is the University keeping up with new technology? Is Information Resources able to sustain or improve bandwidth with the ever-increasing use of the Internet and the WWW? Do the clients feel that, in general, neither library or computing services have improved at the expense of the other? Will there be significant improvements in classroom technology? A baseline survey of users is planned for the fall to provide data for later comparisons. The administration will be measuring the extent to which the reorganization allows all this to happen with the most efficient use of existing resources.

Finally, the effect of the Lehigh University reorganization and those similar to it on the external academic library and computing environment is important. Can these new organizations incorporate new technologies and new information delivery

mechanisms easily? If these mergers, however locally successful, exist as aberrations to the norm, it will be difficult to sustain them over time. In the brief history of computer software and hardware, as in the history of technology generally, there are many instances when the successful product or invention was not "the best one" in a purely technical sense but rather one that was adopted as a standard for social or market reasons. Library and computing professionals may feel disenfranchised within their respective professions if they operate in a unique organizational milieu. The inevitable difficulties of functioning within the high stress environment of higher education will be attributed to the unique organizational structure whether it is legitimate or not. Thus we appeal to our sister organizations, such as the members of this technical university library group, to grant us your continued attention and your good will for the future.

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