Strategic Planning for Libraries in the Electronic Age

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Strategic planning for libraries in the electronic age

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1. Background

1.1 The Institute

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the MIT Libraries have been engaged in formal planning processes for some years now. The impetus for formal planning came from the realization that the Institute was growing but financial resources were not growing as quickly as the Institute. The senior administration realized a need for being able to identify early the directions that were being taken by individual units of the Institute and to examine unit plans in light of the larger mission of the Institute. Since the early 1980s, all units of the Institute have been requested to submit to the senior administration five-year plans for their areas.

1.2 The Libraries

The Libraries, as a unit of the Institute, spent considerable energy over three years, first creating the initial five-year plan, then updating that plan in succeeding years. The initial process for planning in the Libraries was a bottom-up process. Individual units identified directions they wanted to take, innovations they wanted to make, and resources needed to do that. Unit plans were consolidated into division plans, and division plans merged to formulate a plan for the MIT library system. This process was successful in identifying areas of weakness and new directions to pursue. It identified many new resource needs and few sources of new resources. The response from the Institute, however, was limited, and we in the Libraries felt, after three years of long-range planning, that we were not making significant progress.

We were, however, finding ways to do some of the things we identified in the plans despite not receiving new funding. We were also feeling considerable need to rethink our basic assumptions about how libraries should work. We began to look for a planning process that would support the rethinking of our basic assumptions and provide us with insights to do creative reallocations. Our goal was to be able to move forward in a world where new funding is not easy to obtain.
2. Creating a planning process

2.1 Office of Management Studies assistance

We turned for advice to an organization that research libraries created for just such a purpose, The Association of Research Libraries' Office of Management Studies. ARL’s OMS provided us with leadership for the process of identifying a workable planning model for the MIT Libraries. Dwayne Webster, then head of the Office of Management Studies and now executive director of ARL, came to MIT and led a two-day retreat for the Library Council, the group of senior administrators which includes the Director of Libraries, associate directors, and heads of departments.

Out of this retreat came a decision to use strategic planning, rather than the long-range incremental planning we had been using, for our following year’s planning process. We chose strategic planning because it allowed us to look at our total environment, to consider transforming ourselves rather than just extending ourselves.

2.2 The Libraries’ actions

The Libraries chose, at this time, to establish a senior officer, as associate director with responsibility for the planning process. A planning team was established. That team consisted of the associate director for planning, two other associate directors, and three department heads. The team members were chosen for their skills rather than as representatives of particular units of the Libraries. We did, however, achieve, with the six-member team, broad representation from the various library units. The director of Libraries chose not to be a member of the team but, throughout the process, kept in close touch with, and of course, in control of, the planning process.

The role of the team, throughout the process, was to act as facilitator of the process. The content of the plan came, through the facilitation of the planning team, from Library Council. The Libraries made a conscious decision to have this planning process as a top-down process, involving other staff as necessary, but being primarily an activity of the library administration. While this kind of top-down activity goes against the usual collaborative administrative climate in the MIT Libraries, the earlier planning processes, which had been bottom-up, had provided extensive staff involvement. We felt that we could not afford, and would not profit sufficiently from, another massive all-staff effort in planning. This required some further work later on, but turned out to be a good decision for use of time.

3. Actual strategic planning

3.1 The environmental scan

The first act in the new strategic planning process was to do an ‘environmental scan’ — to look at the Libraries themselves, the Institute environment, and the world outside — to identify forces and trends which would have an impact on
the Libraries in the next decade. We used groups of staff, led by planning team members, to do this investigation. We gained valuable information from this process in terms of services and collection, technological developments, education and research at MIT, and the general financial outlook.

In terms of services and collections, we identified trends toward an increased commitment to identifying user needs and to emphasizing access to information over ownership. We identified a need to exploit new technologies for the delivery of information, particularly local electronic networks. In terms of education and research at MIT, we identified growth areas and changes in emphasis and a decline in independent reading rooms. For the financial outlook, we identified a need to monitor economic indicators and attempt to influence those that we could, that is the price of journals and the rate of publication, and the need to reallocate resources to achieve our desired goals.

3.2 Values, vision, mission

As part of the strategic planning process, we needed to come, as a library administration, to a consensus about what are the values in our organization. We did this through a session of the Library Council where we each identified those things that we felt necessary to value in order to move the Libraries forward. We came up with a list of fifty items, which we prioritized into the final short list that guided the planning from then on. The identified values were: strong user focus, integrity of the collections, creativity and innovation, organizational flexibility, and caring for the needs of the staff.

Other critical events in the planning process involved the entire Library Council. They were an envisioning exercise, a re-writing of the Libraries’ mission statement, and identification of desired directions for the Libraries, along with strategies to move the Libraries in those directions. All of these issues were attacked in day-long Library Council retreats, with exercises and discussions led by various members of the planning team.

3.3 Peer institution comparisons

As we began to identify the kind of library system we felt that we wanted to be, we also needed to talk to our peer institutions about their planned directions. ‘Focussing on qualitative rather than quantitative data, we identified a number of institutions which met one or more of the following criteria:

- is taking a leadership role among research libraries in using technology to provide innovative services;
- competes with MIT for students and faculty;
- has a strong emphasis on engineering and science, management, or architecture;
- has begun to redefine the role of librarians.

We interviewed library administrators and staff at Harvard University; Columbia University; New York University; AT&T’s Bell Laboratories; Carnegie Mellon University; University of Pennsylvania; Georgia Institute of Technology; University of Chicago; Northwestern University; Purdue
3.4 Review and completion

Throughout the planning process, the library director and the team kept the provost, the senior academic officer to whom the Libraries report, apprised of our progress. At critical junctures, the faculty committee which advises the Libraries was briefed on progress. After all the retreats, exercises, and site visits, the writing of the plan began in earnest. The plan as completed represents the approach of the Director of Libraries, with considerable input and assistance by the members of the planning team.

4. The results

4.1 A new vision

What were the main characteristics of the resulting plan? The most critical element was the new vision of the MIT Libraries at the beginning of the 21st century. That vision was elucidated as follows.

"Historically, the MIT Libraries have collected and preserved the record of knowledge relevant to the paths of inquiry taken by the faculty, students, and researchers at MIT. The volume of print material relevant to MIT programs is increasing dramatically. At the same time, more and more information important to MIT is being produced and distributed in electronic formats, with multiple paths of access to this information. The increasing creation, storage, and transmission of information in electronic form will enlarge and transform the Libraries as we know them. Electronic information will dictate new roles and relationships for the Libraries. By the beginning of the 21st century, the Libraries will have become an even more dynamic force in integrating information into education and research on the MIT campus.

The library as a place. At the beginning of the 21st century, the MIT Libraries as buildings housing physical collections with convenient spaces for users to consult those collections will continue to be important elements of the Institute community. The Libraries will continue to be a place for self-education and discovery outside the classroom and laboratory; they will continue to be a haven from the pressures of academic life and communal living. They will be a place of particular importance to students, as part of the social and intellectual experience of an MIT education.

MIT scholars will continue to need to use the body of print materials collected by the Libraries. Indeed, as publishing on paper increases rather than declines, students and faculty will become increasingly dependent on the Libraries to acquire, preserve, and provide access to resources necessary to support research and teaching. The Libraries will also serve as a source of
information about new technologies and as an access point to non-print materials outside the immediate holdings of the Libraries.

The MIT Libraries, as subject libraries close to their user communities, will retain the advantages of that physical closeness while, through technology, providing access to collections elsewhere at MIT and in the outside world. New ‘libraries’ on campus, in academic departments and research centers, will be created as “electronic library modules,” with small collections of current journals complemented by electronic access to and delivery of materials housed elsewhere and by online communication with subject librarians.

All materials will be represented in the online catalogue, including specialized materials such as archival and manuscript collections, maps, slides, machine readable data files and software. Through national and international cooperative programs for preservation and access, MIT users will be guaranteed access to any research materials required.

The workstation as a ‘window’ on the library. At any time of day or night, the Libraries will be accessible through a ‘window’ on workstations on faculty desks and in student living quarters. MIT students, faculty, and researchers will have access to a package of information services, the Libraries’ catalogue, and information in the larger world. Members of the MIT community will have electronic mail access to subject specialists and online expert-system-based research assistance. Access to abstracts, indexes, and full-text databases suitable to MIT will be provided through the Libraries’ electronic services. MIT users will be able to download information to their workstations or request delivery of hard-copy items.

Similarly, through the workstation window, MIT users will be able to browse regional, national, and international collections and databases, identifying and obtaining material of interest. Much of the information in databases will be textual and visual, in finished or in working form, and users’ comments will become part of the text. Information about and access to unique and previously inaccessible collections will be routinely available.

By the turn of the century, hypermedia, simulation, expert systems and other emerging technologies will dramatically change the role of information in education and research. The Libraries, already the leaders in acquiring and organizing information, will become an even more significant resource for MIT faculty and students as they explore new information relationships made possible by technology.

The librarian as information guide. By the beginning of the 21st century, the librarian will have become a more essential guide through the increasingly complex maze of information. Librarians will combine their subject knowledge with their skills in developing databases, designing retrieval systems, and organizing services to find the particular book, data, or image that meets the MIT user’s need.

Librarians will have strengthened their working relationships with members of the MIT community and, through assistance in the identification and evaluation of information sources, contributed to the productivity of scholars and researchers. Librarians will assist the established scholar in keeping
abreast of the dynamic information world and in making forays into areas beyond the particular scholar's immediate focus. Through course-related and course-integrated instruction, librarians will assist in the education of students in the structure of information in their fields, in finding cost-effective strategies for retrieving that information, and in enhancing their ability to use information in life-long learning.

Faculty and researchers will be able to subscribe to services which provide them with relevant information in their fields in digitized form. Direct paper to disk copying will be available to augment this information with information from related fields. Librarians will play a strong role as intermediaries between the information user and the many potential information vendors.

The Libraries as an organization. Within the Libraries, internal operations will be automated and all staff will use computers in carrying out their responsibilities. Staff will work in teams based on subject-targeted services and collections and on central support functions. Non-librarian managers will work side by side with librarians in the teams. Teams will design and use expert systems for straightforward procedures and services. Most cataloguing information for published materials will be drawn from shared international databases. Librarians will apply their bibliographic expertise to providing access to materials created at MIT and unique materials in the collections, and to providing specialized access to materials important to the MIT community.

The pace of change in the information world will require flexibility in assigning staff and resources. Continuing educational opportunities will be essential to enable the staff to stay abreast of new technologies and evolving user needs. Measures of the quality of access to materials will replace number of volumes in the Libraries as a yardstick for excellence. Intellectual rewards for MIT librarians will be defined in terms of success rate in matching MIT users with relevant information.

4.2 Directions and strategies

Through the planning efforts, the Libraries identified seven major directions to take in order to make the strategic plan operational. We determined that we needed to take actions in services and collections, in technology, in staffing, in space, finances, streamlining of procedures, and in maintaining our sense of ourselves as a system. In these directions, 102 specific strategies were identified. They were assigned priorities, responsibility, and timing, and represent the specific plans for the coming years at MIT. They are necessarily more specific for the near years and less detailed for years three through five.

Many of the actions outlined require no additional funding; some require fund-raising from outside sources. There were two new initiatives for which the Libraries requested additional funding. They were retrospective conversion of the records for the Libraries' holdings not yet in machine-readable form and support for loading current tables of contents on the campus network.

4.3 Presentation to the MIT community

Upon completion of the plan, the document was presented to the Provost and shared with senior members of the MIT community. The Director of Libraries
is scheduling meetings with the dean of each school to discuss the plan and the effects of it on the services to that school. The reception from the Provost was very positive and funding for new initiatives was forthcoming.

4.4 Implementation within the Libraries

We have found that even before the period which the plan covers has actually begun, staff in some areas have begun tailoring their activities toward the priorities outlined in the plan. We are about to begin the process of translating the overall plan into departmental plans for the coming year. We have found that, having thought that the plan would take us through the decade, we now think that it will take us only through 1992. We have come to accept that we cannot see much farther than that with any certainty.

In the few short months since the completion of the plan, we have also been stimulated to take our thinking on several fronts further rather quickly. We have been talking about making our Libraries' unique resources available to the rest of the scholarly community. We have come to recognize that this means cataloguing in machine-readable form our manuscript collections, MIT reports, and some of our more ephemeral collections. We are beginning to think about trying to influence national cataloguing policy to maximize resources in this way.

As we have been thinking about mounting databases of recent tables of contents on our campus network, we have been thinking about how we will allow members of the community to request copies of articles they find of interest. While the technology of allowing a user to request a photocopy, a facsimile, or a digital transmission is simple, the decisions about funding such services are not. We are having to think carefully about whether we should begin to spend our library funds on the 'free' provision of copies to our own community. It is quite possible that many of our users will consider this a more relevant expense for us than few more journal subscriptions. Moving in this direction makes our statements about access rather than ownership real and gives library administrators real concerns about unpredictable costs.

5. Conclusion

These are critical times for libraries. Their futures are threatened by the burgeoning volume and cost of print publications, by the physical deterioration of our historical collections, and by the proliferation of information in electronic form. We at MIT feel that our strategic planning process has given us a mechanism to deal with the changes we face in these critical times.

References

2. loc. cit. pp. 1-3.