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Abstract

This paper presents a vision for supporting the growth and development of innovative digital services in research libraries. While libraries have been undergoing digital transformation for decades, we have seen a flowering of new digital services in recent years, from research support services related to data and digital publishing to learning support services that seek to make our pedagogy more accessible, engaging, and suited to the needs of 21st-century learners. The question of how best to support these services structurally within an organization remains an open one, however, and there is little consistency in how this is accomplished across different institutions. Our model seeks to foreground the importance of people and relationships, uniting the people in these new roles in a single division in order to cultivate an organizational culture that supports innovation and risk-taking. These qualities are not always present in more traditional library divisions, but they are essential to the goal of developing new, future-facing library services in a way that enables library employees to feel supported and empowered in their work. Our model also embraces co-leadership as a boon for inclusivity, creativity, and innovation. Co-leadership provides a platform for a larger number of individuals to assume leadership roles and an opportunity to reimagine how our library organizations could operate more equitably and inclusively, in line with anti-racist practices.

Keywords: academic libraries, digital services, innovation, transformation, reorganization, co-leadership

Introduction

This paper presents a vision for supporting the growth and development of innovative digital services in research libraries through creative and unconventional organizational structure. While libraries have been undergoing digital transformation for decades, we have seen a flowering of new digital services in recent years, from research support services related to data and digital publishing to agile learning support services that seek to make our pedagogy more accessible, engaging, and better suited to the needs of 21st-century learners. The question of how best to support these services structurally within an organization remains an open one, however, and there is little consistency in how this is accomplished across different institutions.

Our model seeks to foreground the importance of people and relationships, uniting the library employees in these new roles in a single division to cultivate an organizational culture that supports innovation and risk-taking. These qualities are not always present or valued in more traditional library divisions, but they are essential to the goal of developing new, future-facing library services in a way that enables library employees to feel supported and empowered in their work. In addition to creating a supportive environment, this structure also generates new opportunities for collaboration among positions and teams that share a common purpose, enabling employees with

complementary skill sets to mutually reinforce each other in their work on digital projects, services, and strategy.

Our model also embraces a model of shared leadership as a boon for inclusivity, creativity, and innovation. Co-leadership can take many forms, including the creation of co-director or co-department head roles as well as horizontal leadership structures that intrinsically value authenticity, trust, and teamwork, and they have the potential to transform how we work together both within specific divisions and across our organizations. Co-leadership also provides a platform for a larger number of individuals to assume leadership roles and an opportunity to reimagine how our library organizations could operate more equitably and inclusively, in line with anti-racist practices.

Local Context

The idea for this paper emerged from an organizational review process at Florida State University (FSU) Libraries that sought to reorganize a large Research and Learning Services (RLS) division into a more focused and manageable portfolio and review the organizational structure to support the Libraries' strategic initiatives. This process involved hiring external consultants and soliciting detailed feedback and ideas from library employees about what was and was not working in the organization and ways that we could change our organizational structure to improve services for and partnerships with our campus community. The authors jointly proposed a new organizational structure that this paper seeks to explore in more detail with respect to the reasons for change and the opportunities and challenges that it might bring.

FSU Libraries serves a campus community of over 40,000 students and XX academic staff. Our parent institution has long prided itself on its "efficiency," and specifically its success in finding savings in areas that do not directly improve the student experience ([Irby 2017](#)). This focus on efficiency is reflected in the budget of FSU Libraries, which ranks in the third quartile of ARL libraries alongside many organizations that serve significantly smaller campus populations.

In terms of current organizational structure and distribution of roles focused on providing innovative services, FSU Libraries have a blended model, with some small units of functional specialists focusing on areas such as digital scholarship and distance and online learning, some hybrid units that focus both on academic liaison work and newer services (namely research data services), and other units that are comprised entirely of more traditional roles (e.g., academic liaisons) that have no formal responsibility for engaging in the provision of new services. With the exception of digital scholarship, all of these units and roles are situated in our RLS division, which has primarily focused on traditional public services functions such as access services, reference, collections, instruction, outreach, and engagement.

Although we have had some cross-divisional functional teams, they have mostly formed spontaneously and informally without a clear mandate or structural support from leadership. While some of these teams have been very successful, others have faltered or disbanded over time due to a lack of a clear mandate, decision-making authority, or commitment from all team members to participate in the work. This lack of formality has led to a consistent challenge for launching and maintaining innovative services as well as an overall insufficiency of resources to respond to emergent needs on campus.

Imperative for Digital Innovation in Libraries

Academic libraries are under intense pressure to change due to massive technological changes in broader society and concomitant changes to information production and dissemination processes and the nature, scope, and methods of modern academic research (Hickerson et al., 2022; Horstmann, 2018; Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013; Knight, 2017). As libraries actively shift to further embed in emerging research landscapes (Mamtora, 2013; Hickerson et al., 2022), key areas

such as data services, distance learning... (Breitkopf, 2018...) are also identified as emerging core services, requiring growing resources and capacity in terms of personnel and labor. At the same time, academic libraries can be resistant to change both structurally and with respect to the preferences of library employees (Duran, 2017; Knight, 2017).

The literature on change management suggests that, in contexts where change is ubiquitous and organizations are unable to adapt quickly enough through traditional, top-down, planned change approaches, it can be valuable to instead embrace emergent change approaches that create a flexible environment and prepare employees for the process of change itself instead of for specific, targeted changes (Phillips, 2021). Scholars of change management also suggest that emergent change approaches are more likely to succeed within organizational structures that are flatter and less hierarchical in order to encourage employees to freely identify new possibilities and engage leadership in a dialogue about them (Phillips, 2021).

The view that flatter organizational structures are more conducive to change and innovation is also echoed in the library literature. Brundy (2013) and Knight (2017) both conclude that flatter organizational structures, open decision making, and a reduction of operational stratification and differentiation contributes to fostering change and innovation in academic libraries. Furthermore, the role academic librarians maintain in managing organizational change is multi-faceted, as demonstrated by Knight's (2017) change principles of alignment, accessibility, agility, accountability, and assessment. It is in this context of rapid, ongoing change that our model seeks to unify positions that are charged with providing innovative services within a single library unit, and by so doing to create a vehicle for flexible, responsive innovation that will adapt to the changing needs of our community and also gradually influence the orientation and service portfolio of the library as a whole. Before we elucidate this model in detail, however, let us first highlight some of the problems that we have noticed with more traditional organizational structures and roles within academic libraries.

Problems with Traditional & Hybrid Structures

In our experience at FSU libraries, we have noticed several problems related to our organizational structure and the definition and distribution of roles therein. One faulty aspect of our structure is the placement of positions with newer functional specialties within units that otherwise consist of more traditional roles. Often, these functional specialists are asked to take on part-time subject liaison duties in addition to their other work, and, while we do have some exceptional professionals who have flourished in these hybrid roles, it is more common for the opposite to be true. Indeed, we have spoken to many colleagues in these roles who have expressed feelings of isolation and a lack of support for their work, in addition to complaints about the unreasonable workload. Some of these individuals have become so dissatisfied that they have left our organization; others have ultimately ended up neglecting one aspect of their work in favor of the other because they are unable to succeed in both. In addition, situating these roles within more traditional units and divisions has led to several structural challenges. For example, staff occupying functional and hybrid roles can sometimes experience feelings of isolation when they feel that their goals do not align well with those of their team or division. Similarly, these staff can also struggle to successfully advocate for the resources that they need to build innovative new services when the majority of their immediate colleagues may not understand or value these new services and actively advocate for resources to be allocated to more traditional services. And, as noted above, this latter issue can also play itself out at the level of functional teams, particularly when they are composed in part of staff in traditional roles who don't feel responsible for or engaged in the development of new services.

For example, our Teaching, Learning, and Engagement (TLE) unit leads the more traditional public services library services of instruction, outreach, front-facing reference services, and broad undergraduate support. While this functional model worked well when departments were

focused on user groups (undergraduate, graduate, faculty, etc.), the nature of our organizational structure proved a barrier to unit goals, with the aim of developing programmatic services without any of the cross-divisional support to do so. As the division has changed in time, the TLE had proven to be more of a burden to the functional specialists than a support, as we are all working on vastly different programs, managing full- and part-time staff, and irresolute of the nature and purpose of our department, resulting in apprehension, frustration, and personnel turnover.

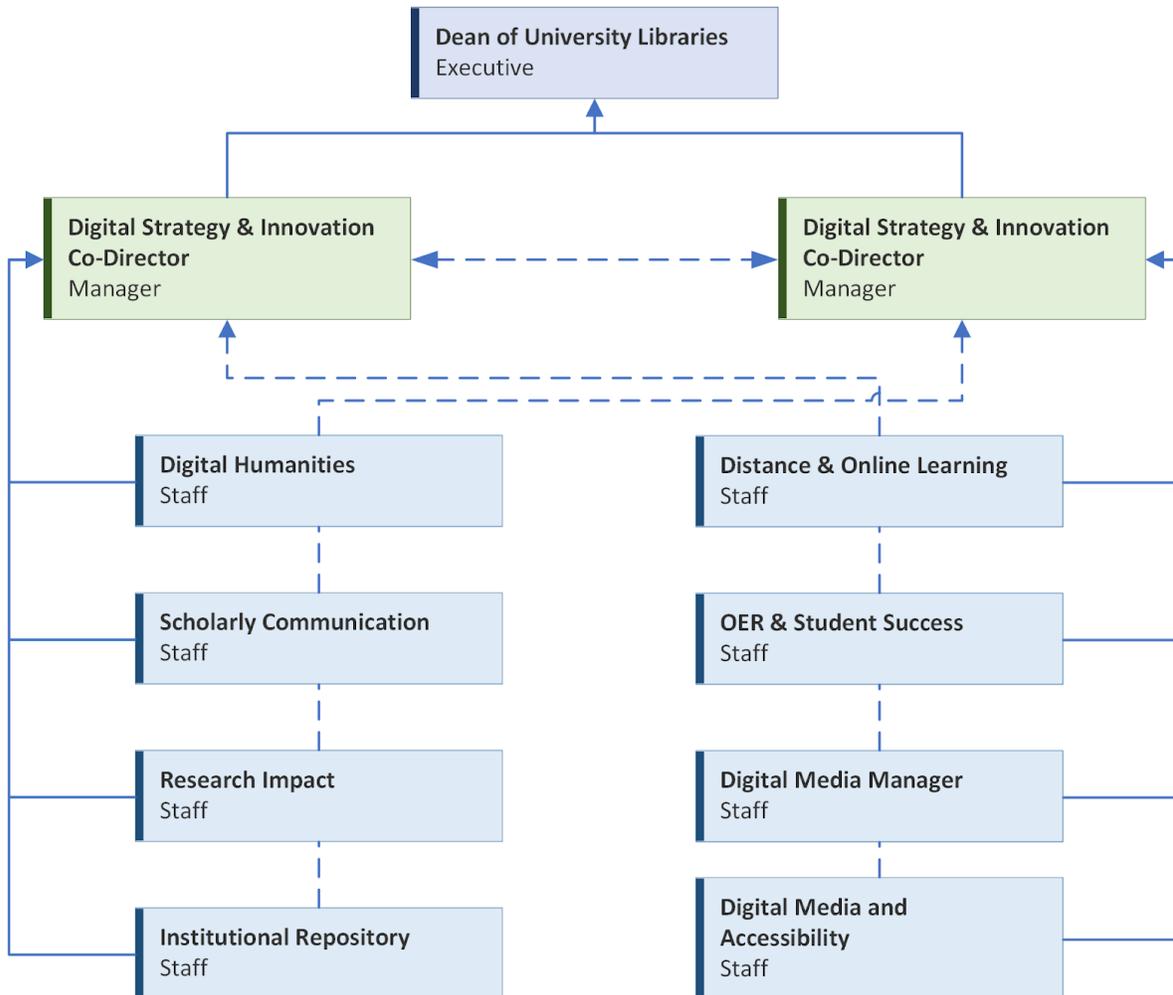
Taken together, this combination of alienation and structural barriers can have the effect of decreasing the morale of staff in newer roles and, ultimately, stifling the progress of innovation at the organizational level. While there are many arguments for placing these functional and hybrid positions within more traditional units, we believe that the success of this model has been mixed at our institution. One notable counter-example that has largely avoided these issues is our Office of Digital Research and Scholarship (DRS), comprised entirely of functional specialists and situated within our Technology and Digital Scholarship division in addition to our Systems and Web Development units. Although there are many factors that have enabled DRS to thrive in the development of innovative research support services since its inception in 2015, we believe that two of the main structural factors are the grouping of functional specialists with shared goals into a single team and the separation of this team from divisions such as RLS that disproportionately include more traditional library roles. Because the new functional roles in DRS have been grouped into a single team, the people in these roles have experienced a sense of alignment and empowerment that stems from a close alignment of goals and a shared vision of developing new, future-facing library services. In addition, because DRS is situated in a division that does not include more traditional roles, the team has been able to develop new programs and initiatives in a way (and with a freedom) that would have been considerably more difficult if they needed to contend with the structural challenges mentioned above.

The Model We Proposed: Digital Strategy & Innovation Unit

In order to best meet the changing needs of our university and community, our proposal for Digital Innovation & Strategy unit would provide a successful culture and environment for a collaborative and creative team to focus on digital projects, programs, and services without the constraints of long-established organizational structures. This new unit would include positions focused on the provision of new services in the areas of digital scholarship, scholarly communication, distance and online learning, accessibility, and digital media, all reporting to two co-directors

Figure 1

Digital Strategy & Innovation Unit Organizational Chart



This model also incorporates elements of a flat or horizontal reporting structure, with all of the positions in the division reporting directly to one of the two co-directors to foster diversity of thought and shared ownership and accountability across the team. Bringing together the work of the roles focusing on these newer library services would allow for a team of complementary skill sets and expertise to efficiently and effectively collaborate to support fluid academic environments. This new unit would focus on fostering a culture of collaboration, trust, and creativity, provide opportunities for taking initiative, and develop a model for digital innovation at FSU Libraries. The ever-present pressure to innovate and deliver in academic libraries causes ongoing tension, with resources scarce and burnout prevalent, while a unit devoted to collaboration and engagement with new services provides a more effective library organization overall. As academic librarians leave the profession in what some have coined the great resignation, it is imperative to analyze how our organizational structures result in unmanageable expectations, lack of resources, and burnout. This is a plague across higher education and to a greater degree at libraries, systematically underfunded and as the faculty status of librarians becomes increasingly precarious. Coupling with the longstanding need to transform, this distressing trend in libraries requires a strategic shift in organizational management and an opportunity to rethink how libraries can better support employees and teams in an under-resourced environment. Our model is far from traditional, yet a call to consider radical reorganization and transformative teams that foster creativity, agility, and enthusiasm.

This model would provide a more conducive environment for achieving our library's goals and actively contributing to organizational vision and an organizationally supported structure to explore how the library can integrate into campus-wide digital initiatives, allowing for a new era of transformation and innovation in library organizations.

Foregrounding People and Relationships

While the model proposed above is predominantly structural, pertaining to specific changes to our Libraries' organizational structure, the arguments in favor of it rely in part on the importance of people and relationships - specifically, the people who currently occupy the relevant positions in our Libraries and the relationships that they have developed with one another, with library staff in other divisions, and with campus partners. Because organizations and the services that they provide are, in practice, totally dependent on people and relationships, we believe that it is important to consider this frame when undertaking significant changes to organizational structure.

This frame attempts to build upon the current research on library administration, and the relationships between leadership styles, employee engagement, and organizational culture. Authentic leadership and trust are key in developing successful working relationships (MacAuliffe, Bostain, & Mitchel, 2019) yet our goal is to examine the overall impact of relationships, amongst leaders, employees, and teams, in regard to a culture of innovation. Martin (2017) touched on personal relationships as integral to transformative leadership in academic libraries as well as how these relationships contribute to building shared vision. Social capital has also recently been examined in relation to managerial effectiveness and the importance of relationships within communities for library managers (Wojciechowska, 2021).

Accordingly, we believe that both of these frames - structure and services, on the one hand, and people and relationships, on the other - need to be considered in order to enact effective organizational change. Disregarding one frame in favor of the other will necessarily lead to challenges: if structure and services are privileged over people and relationships, for example, an organization may run the risk of demoralizing people who are thriving in their current roles and compromising the valuable relationships that they have developed; similarly, if people and relationships are privileged over structure and services, then an organization may compromise its ability to evolve to meet new needs and advance its mission and strategic directions.

As noted above, our model strives to strike a balance between these frames. By changing our organizational structure to create a new division of functional specialists that are focused on the development of new services, it provides the people in these newer roles with a unified sense of purpose and empowerment that comes with a shared focus on innovation, in addition to giving them an opportunity to strengthen relationships with one another and benefit from the array of relationships that they have respectively developed both within the libraries and with external campus partners. In this way, our model not only promises to increase motivation and sense of fulfillment within the division but also creates space for the development and marketing of newer services in ways that might not be possible if each of these roles were situated in different units and divisions.

Fostering Collaboration Across the Organization

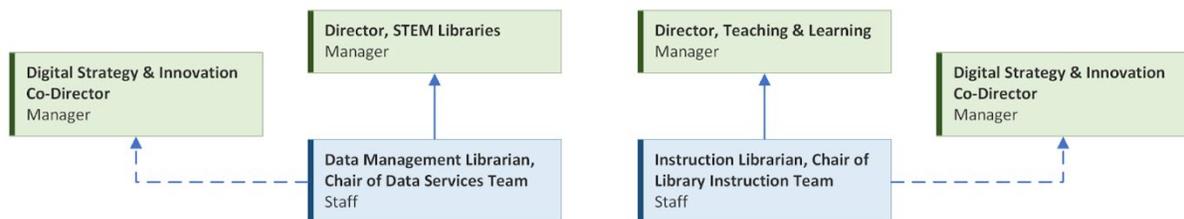
We also believe that the people in this new division would actually enjoy more freedom to foster collaborative partnerships with colleagues in other divisions, both because cross-divisional collaboration would be core to the mission of the new division and because the individuals in the new division would feel better supported to engage in collaborative work. This is in contrast to more traditional models, where, at least in our experience, functional specialists situated in more traditional divisions can feel too alienated and overwhelmed to initiate meaningful collaboration with colleagues in other divisions.

There are various strategies that could be employed to ensure that the personnel in DSI collaborate extensively with colleagues across the library. One strategy for fostering collaboration that has been employed by many ARL libraries involves the formation of cross-divisional functional teams that focus on both traditional and innovative service areas (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). This strategy would enable members of the DSI unit to collaborate closely with colleagues in other divisions who are involved in developing and providing similar services and who possess complementary expertise. For example, a functional team focused on library instruction could include both the Distance and Online Learning librarian situated in DSI as well as academic liaison librarians who are deeply engaged in discipline-specific instruction activities. Similarly, a functional team focused on research data services could include the Digital Humanities and Scholarly Communication librarians situated in DSI as well as academic liaisons who are engaged in the provision of discipline-specific data services.

To further strengthen collaboration, dotted reporting lines could be implemented to support communication and accountability between the leaders of these functional teams and the DSI co-directors, as shown in Figure X. In this way, collaboration between DSI and the other units and divisions of the library can be supported structurally and the culture of emergent change, innovation, and risk-taking, that will be cultivated in DSI can be seeded across the organization.

Figure 2

Digital Strategy & Innovation Unit Integration with Cross-Functional Teams



Exploring New Forms of Shared Leadership

Our model also seeks to implement shared leadership structures both through a horizontal reporting structure and through the creation of co-director positions to lead the DSI with the authors leading together in vertical positions and shared responsibilities. Shared leadership has an established connection with transformational leadership and improvements in creativity and connection amongst teams (Jackson, Pfeifer, & Vine; Holcomb & Kezar, 2017). The benefits of horizontal leadership structures have been demonstrated in varied organizations (Murawska, 2020) yet limited in implementation in regard to academic libraries. Collaborative forms of leadership promote equity and inclusivity as a shift from traditional hierarchical, top-down structures. It will improve decision-making through a diversity of thought and perspective. While this could entail less efficiency, it ensures accountability. As evidenced in the literature review, innovation thrives in flatter structures, providing support for research and development. Shared ideas are naturally more valued. Just as teams are able to accomplish more than employees on their own, the same can be said of co-leaders.

It is clear that relationships are key to our proposed model, and this should be reflected in shared leadership of the unit. It requires connection, trust, and a true sense of partnership between the individuals. Furthermore, establishing this as a possible model for library organization expands leadership opportunities across the organization, formalizing the many successful examples of leading from the middle evidenced in academic libraries. Additionally, it prompts a critical yet necessary analysis of equity in organizations, from pay to incommensurate expectations.

The shared leadership model further allows for built-in flexibility and agility in organizational leadership. This not only allows for managers to build stronger networks of peer support but also embraces ever-present organizational changes such as professional leaves, sabbaticals, turnover, etc. This model speaks to the overarching lesson learned from Covid: higher education is a hybrid experience and there will be precariousness. Shared leadership supports organizational and library employee resilience. As higher institutions and libraries grapple with important questions of diversity and inclusion, co-leadership challenges an accepted hegemony of power. Authoritarian leadership negates our work towards equity while co-leadership aligns with a culture of empathy.

Challenges and Limitations

We anticipate that our model would pose many challenges in practice, and also attract some pointed criticism from library leaders, in part due to the prevalence and power of more conventional perspectives in academic libraries. The first criticism that we would like to address is the view that our model would starve other library divisions of funding and resources. This criticism ignores that the vast majority of funding and resources in most academic libraries is currently allocated to more traditional functions. This is evident in the relative dearth of newer roles supporting the functions identified above compared to the number of roles supporting programs related to subject librarianship, library instruction, resource management, and so on (CITE new role report - also ARL data services surveys that have shown that even now most ARL libraries don't have dedicated positions). With this in mind, the criticism that our model would starve other library functions of resources is essentially a conservative one - in order to put our libraries on a more progressive footing to support new services, these services need to be funded adequately, and the model that we are proposing would strengthen advocacy for this change to take place.

Similarly, a potential drawback of this model is the relinquishment of innovative personnel from other library departments at the expense of other research and learning services. But our proposed structure does not include every cutting-edge service or program at our Libraries. Namely, data services are not included as the team leading those services on campus have an established framework divergent from the model proposed. In addition, we believe that academic liaisons should be engaged in developing competencies related to data services, since needs in this area vary considerably from discipline to discipline.

Campus-wide relationships are integral to the success of the innovation in academic libraries, and our proposed model diverges from the traditional administrative titles of Associate Dean or Associate University Librarians. Achieving unit goals for Digital Innovation and Strategy without the prestige of a "dean" title could prove difficult as related to campus-wide relationships and a perceived lack of authority. Yet our vision relies on established connections and portfolios of work, limiting this possible barrier but leading to further questions of developing organizational structures dependent on personnel.

Another limitation to this model is the shift to people-focused organizational structures. As elucidated above, the personnel, and their skills and experiences, within this unit are not only part of its possible success, it's largely dependent on relationships. Many may question whether it is sound to base positions, units, and divisions on the people in those positions but, as argued above, this model adopts a frame of people and relationships at the center of the unit. This may mean that priorities, workflows, and services change as personnel change, but this is not uncommon in current library administration and leadership practices. Our model would proactively account for these changes through a foundation of collaboration, trust, and agility.

Conclusion

As the reorganization continues to unfold at our Libraries, we do not anticipate our model to be adopted into practice, at least for the time being, though the future possibility is still on the table. The final report on the reorganization echoed several of the concerns we elucidated in our proposal,

tension between functional specialists and academic liaisons, lack of authority and support for cross-divisional teams, and the importance of fostering innovation for staying relevant in academic research environments.

Emergent change in libraries can be accelerated through the creation of departments that are explicitly charged with innovation and the development of new services that meet emerging needs. This model is especially advantageous to the work of functional specialists who are hired to develop new services. These professionals can experience structural barriers and negative effects when placed in traditional departments. This model privileges people and relationships, encourages shared leadership, and can support (rather than inhibit) cross-divisional collaboration.

The need for this model is underlined by the pace of change in higher ed., libraries' inherent resistance to change, and the advent of the great resignation Rethinking library organizations to support innovation requires critical reflection and introspection into our successes as well as our failures. A unit grounded in innovation and focused on people & relationships will provide a new era of digital transformation in academic libraries.

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