Looking professional field

The title of this essay was carefully chosen to avoid some of the definitional quagmires that could be associated with an alternative approach. First, I was careful not to define a particular field, instead opting for the one that any reader may assume if he or she desires to be part of a collective, part of “our” field. At this time, the use of the first-person plural pronoun (be it our, us, or we) allows for the broadest-possible umbrella, covering information technologists, librarians, instructional design specialists, institutional researchers, media specialists, administrators in a myriad of different offices, faculty in all disciplines, and all others interested in using the technology to enhance the teaching, learning, research, and administrative functions of higher education. We are a group of information resource (IR) professionals, focusing our attention on the information, the technology, and the associated services that support all facets of work in the college or university. The phrase “information resource professionals” will be used throughout this article to refer to this broader definition and scope. If you are one of “us,” pursuing “our” dreams of technology, then you are welcome to join us under this ambiguous, albeit exhilarating umbrella.

By Brian L. Hawkins

Another point that should be noted in this carefully worded sidestep is that I deliberately avoided using the noun “profession,” since a purist’s definition of the word conjures up a whole set of issues that are largely irrelevant to our work and the way we are perceived. A number of years ago, Peter Lyman wrote eloquently about the question “Is academic computing a profession?” While he noted a variety of factors that have historically characterized professions, he concluded that these are not inherently useful. Instead he defined this subset of “our community” as a network of colleagues who crossed occupational lines and who were mutually engaged in a social movement. This loose definition would well serve the community that the broader “we” belong to as well. Even if we did decide to try to delineate the parameters of authenticating a group of skills as the core of the “profession,” these parameters would be obsolete in a matter of months (if not sooner). Furthermore, such parameters would probably exclude many of the vibrant contributors who make our field so exciting. The focus of our “professional field” should be on the modifier—professional, characterized by having considerable training and specialized skills, using methods that are conducted with character and under certain standards, pursuing one’s craft, and responding to a calling or a greater mission.

The Past and Present

There is neither the time nor the space here to do justice to an actual history of information technology (IT) on campus (much less in other communities). As already stated, if we look at the umbrella under which we stand, we find a tremendous diversity of skill sets and backgrounds. The members of the current “us” were brought together in anything but a linear fashion. Instead, the role of technology has swept over us, as both individuals and occupations, like a fast-moving body of water, and we all have been caught up in the eddies, tides, and currents. It is not particularly important to trace the specific origins, but it is important to understand some of the key trends that have affected us, thus allowing for a better appreciation of who we are and where we need to be going. The speed of technological change is dazzling to even the most technically sophisticated, but this speed is compounded by the level of change that is being experienced within higher education. Higher education is being completely transformed by the combination of new market pressures, competition, and the opportunities afforded by technology, thus making this a truly remarkable time in the history of the academy. To understand the challenges before us, we need to appreciate two important trends.

THE PROFESSION

Carefully Defined Terms

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The current demands for leadership in information technology call for a richly skilled and knowledgeable user to fully tap the resources provided. In computing, this was the period of the mainframe controlled by the "microprocessor," which allowed access to formerly distinct organizational responsibilities. Over the past decade, digital information and communications technologies have created an urgent need for new skills and perspectives. These four phases characterized by the functional responsibilities of all information resource functions. In recent years, we have acknowledged an ever-increasing interdependency between computing and the library, as well as interdependencies among other information service providers—those who support media services, instructional design, telecommunications, the physical campus, and the classroom needs of the institution.

Information resource professionals today must have an appreciation of the historical, cultural, and technical roles of all information resource functions. In recent years, we have acknowledged an ever-increasing interdependency between computing and the library, as well as interdependencies among other information service providers—those who support media services, instructional design, telecommunications, the physical campus, and the classroom needs of the institution.

Shifting in Requisite Skills
The changing role of the IR professional can be seen in a brief review of the metamorphosis of the roles and responsibilities of library specialists and librarians. This metamorphosis has occurred in four phases, each characterized by the functional responsibilities of information service providers:

- Service providers: "What Do You Need?"
- Resource managers: "What Are We Doing?"
- Overseers of integrated resources: "What Should We Be Doing?"

Although the history of information technology dates back only a few decades and that of the library goes back for thousands of years to Alexandria, these four phases are similar for all technologies and librarians. Technical Do-ers: "Here's What I Have." This phase was characterized by having a facility available for use but requiring a highly skilled and knowledgeable user to fully develop, with a focus on sustaining a consistent set of services and developing a systems orientation beyond those controlled by the service providers, for example, "my library." Librarians recognized the need for universal schemes beyond the local collection for the organization of knowledge and began to require bibliographic and disciplinary specializations as part of the professional training. Likewise, the demands of computer users matured and equipment capabilities expanded, computer specialists also developed a "systems" orientation. The four "phases" aligned with new "jobs." In both cases, those with increasing administrative responsibility realized that the growing complexity made it impossible to be an expert on all issues. The individual manager needed to know the key issues, have a generalized working knowledge of all relevant areas, and depend on a community of expertise beyond their own.

Resource Managers: "What Are We Doing?" A significant change began to occur in the 1990s as more choices and options became available. The information professional in both areas became much more aware of the need to manage people, technology, services, and information itself, all encompassed under the broad umbrella of information resources. As financial demands grew and budgets became ever tighter, strong fiscal and budgetary skills became necessary. With knowledge now widely available in a variety of forms, the formerly clear demarcations of responsibilities blurred, and the need for internal and external collaboration markedly increased. The characteristics of digital technology demanded an ability to deal with capital planning and staff development, as well as with the identification and forecasting of academic needs and priorities. An enormous new resource infrastructure emerged on campus, requiring prudent and sophisticated management skills from the leaders of both the IT organization and the library. But perhaps most important, this phase witnessed a dawning recognition that the role of the library and IT professional evolves not solely on technology or books, but it is about the use of these resources in the support of learning, instruction, and research.

Service Providers: "What Do You Need?" The movement into the second phase occurred much earlier, in the realm of library services, the process of change is remarkably similar in both circumstances. As the demands of governance became more sophisticated, a customer-service orientation emerged as a necessary component of the operation, and began to require bibliographic and disciplinary specializations as part of the professional training. Then:

- the ability to work collaboratively and effectively, both with one’s staff and with one’s peers;
- the ability to make and stick to hard decisions that are in the institution’s best interests, combined with the agility to stay flexible and open at all times;
- the ability to manage resources in an environment where the demand is far greater than the supply; and
- deep expertise in at least one aspect of the technology itself.

Implications for the Future
It is interesting to note that by and large, these are managerial and leadership skills, not technical skills. Although the last item was certainly more than an afterthought—information technology has become far more prominent than it was even just a few years ago. In the leadership role, or in any other aspect or organizational level of our profession, there is a demand that we increasingly assume the roles of teacher, facilitator, coach, and partner. If we are to help in the exciting transformation of higher education, we must help others achieve their goals, and that will require all of us to assume more generalized roles, rather than the historical, narrow, technical roles.

The Future
The following suggestions illustrate the kinds of changes that IR professionals need to undergo in order to be both effective and successful in the twenty-first century.

Develop a New Mindset
IR professionals in the twenty-first century will need a new technology for approaching problems in their areas of responsibility. The IR professional needs to be able to define and demonstrate how information resources are integrated into the institutional mission. Just being able to add...
The new IR professional must understand that the various professional cultures in our ‘professional field’ have both legitimate and valid points of view and that these different perspectives need to be brought together. Professionals in one area must learn the ‘business’ of professionals in the other area. Whether through concentrated study, internships, cross appointments, or joint committee work, efforts need to be made to value the differences, the strengths, and the perspectives that the other professional group brings to the table. New IR professionals should understand what other groups contribute, what is valuable in the information resource fields to accept this reality. Perhaps the most critical and only way for the new IR professional to become a significant part of the institution occurs. Only then will IR professionals be perceived as partners in the academic process rather than as administrators of some specialized support unit.

Appreciate the Differences

The role of the IR professional cannot be solely about technology—or books, or software, or systems! It is about supporting the entire academic enterprise. Only with this new mindset is fully adopted and understood by the rest of the institutional leadership will IR professionals be welcomed to the table where the “real” decision-making of the institution occurs. Only then will IR professionals be perceived as partners in the academic process rather than as administrators of the various support units.

The critical mindset is that the information resource units, rather than from within. The change means giving up exclusive control of these resources and more actively sharing control with other segments of the community. The critical mindset is that the information resource units need to be an active part of an organization and caught up in the turbulence of the external environment, and applies data to support one of these decisions inhibiting the possible realization of desired outcomes. The quality of such predictions will be a function of how well such figurations are understood by the entire community, how broadly they scan the external environment; how committed they are to self-improvement, lifelong learning, and personal growth; and how willing they are to explore the idea of abandoning historically cherished values and skills that have enabled them to adjust to the world around them.

Develop the Next Generation of Leadership

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forward and need to anticipate what skills and abilities will be demanded in the future, including the ability to think discontinuously; in order to give the younger generation an opportunity to identify and learn new skills and conceptual abilities for the twenty-first century.

Conclusion
The changing role of the IR professional requires more than just increasing one’s sensitivity to others, more than improving one’s set of management skills. It requires a broader orientation—a change in mindset. These concerns are not about turf but are about viewpoint, and that viewpoint must constantly refocus on a commitment to the mission of higher education and to the role that information, information services, and information technology can contribute to that crucial mission. Enlightened leadership on these issues is the responsibility of all information professionals. However, if IR professionals do not assume this role, presidents and provosts will—by default. The needs of the campus will be better served if those individuals most knowledgeable about information issues initiate, lead, and facilitate these critical discussions. The provision of information resources—through a print, electronic, or technical infrastructure—combined with the power of digital technology must enhance, not define, our educational mission. The professional obligation of information resource professionals is nothing less than to actively participate in the shaping of the twenty-first-century institution of higher education.

Notes