Building blocks for a shared vision: Creating a departmental long-term plan in an academic library

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Abstract:

Library long-term and strategic plans tend to employ top down approaches that can leave departmental staff feeling disconnected an unrepresented in the plan. In 2019, the Access Services Department at the University of Denver engaged in a long-term planning process. This process puts Access Services staff members at the center of the process. This article examines the planning process for the long-term plan including how the themes of the plan were developed, how goals were determined and set, and the path toward administrative approval. This article will focus on helping readers understand how they can undergo a similar process to develop their own plan, as opposed to the specific results at the University of Denver.

Keywords: access services | long-term planning | planning | strategic plan

Article:

Addressing patron concerns such as "I need to print an essay for a class that starts in five minutes across campus, the printer is out of paper, and I forgot my print money" (even during a global pandemic) are generally the primary function of staff in Access Services. While many Access staff provide specialized services, from locating items across the globe via Interlibrary loan to helping patrons with disabilities use assistive technology, being a successful employee in Access Services generally requires one to focus on the now rather than the five years from now. Wagner (2004) identifies three types of skills required of different types of library staff. Task or frontline skills, management skills, and leadership skills. Access staff employ task or frontline skills and "focus on the present moment" (p. 20). Leadership skills include long-term planning, looking at the "big-picture," and risk taking, while management skills involve communication and balancing between leadership and frontline staff.

At the University of Denver Libraries, staff in Access Services attributed feelings of burnout to the need to focus on the present moment and a lack of a vested interest in the departmental

mission, vision, and goals. Staff didn't see how their task-oriented work played a role in the bigger picture library services for the university community or fit in with the strategic plan. They also expressed not feeling like they had a say in the direction the department was moving, or that they could see progress being made as policies in the department were updated and implemented. During the 2019 academic year, the Access Services Department in University Libraries at the University of Denver engaged in a series of conversations, the goal of which was to develop a long-term plan that would guide the strategic efforts and allocation of resources within the department for the coming years. That long-term plan was approved by Library Administration in June of 2019 and successfully deployed in the department in August 2019.

This was a unique opportunity for the Access Services Department. There had not been a department level long-term plan in at least six years. While the department was doing well regarding day-to-day operations, responding to concerns and addressing issues as they came up, there was an overall feeling that the department was reactive as opposed to being proactive. This resulted in a feeling of always trying to catch up with what was going on around the department. After a period of staff turnover, the department experienced a prolonged period of full-staffing. During this time the Access Services Librarian (ASL) and the Access Services Manager (ASM) decided it would be a good time to develop a long-term plan for the department that would focus and direct our efforts over the coming years to make the department more proactive. This would effectively put the future of the department in our own hands!

This article will explore the development of the long-term plan in the Access Services Department. First, we will examine the methodology and framework that guided the thinking and approach used in creating the plan. Next, we will explain the planning process for the long-term plan. This will include how we structured the meetings and questions to identify themes around which to structure the goals. After that, we will examine the goal setting process and how ideas and thoughts in the focus groups were turned into tangible goals. Finally, we will reflect on what worked well and what did not during this planning process. It is important to note that we will not be analyzing the results of the long-term planning process. The themes that were developed and the corresponding goals are not the purposes of this article. Rather, we are focusing on the process and employed and the methodology behind it so that other departments may use this approach to develop a working long-term plan for themselves.

Literature review

A literature review revealed that the majority of planning in libraries takes place at the institutional level or is completed by library administrators without incorporating staff input. Perrin (2017) writes "leadership… gives us strategic plans that become mission statements by just stating that the library will do what it has always done, only now it will be done 'excellently'" (p. 713). Casey (2015) argues strategic planning without staff involvement wastes resources and will likely need to be redone, with staff buy-in. "The director was passionate about involving staff in the process because she had seen strategic plans, developed solely by management, do little but gather dust after they were unveiled" (p. 332). Perrin (2017) notes that "Strategic planning from the bottom up can help support institutional level strategic plans by giving individuals motivation, goals, and a purpose" (p. 721), and argues in favor of library units

completing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) analysis to see how their work can contribute to the greater good of the institution.

Unfortunately, those librarians participating in assessment and planning at the unit level are not incorporating staff feedback. Chakraborty, English, and Payne (2013) describe the process of restructuring their Access Services department and never once reference feedback provided by people working in the library, in the Access Services department, or in the roles they are restructuring. According to Perrin (2017), "Individual library departments and units should develop their own long-term strategic plans, and those plans should be bold and maybe a little risky" (p. 713). Combining course reserves and circulation into access services, as described by Chakraborty, English, and Payne (2013), isn't a new idea.

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) offers a creative approach to long-term planning in libraries. Openo (2016) describes the process and notes "Appreciative Inquiry is unapologetic in its focus on the positive, believing communities can be strengthened through collaborative inquiry as a method to turn problems into transformative change" (p. 39). Kelly (2010) writes "by seeking to identify what works with individuals, teams or whole organisations and then build on those elements, AI represents a digression from the common change management approach of looking for a problem that needs to be fixed" (p. 175). Available literature illustrates the positive impact AI has had on academic libraries, but there is no evidence of AI or another process that incorporates staff feedback into long-term planning within Access Services Departments available.

Methodology

The framework of the intentionality of rhetoric, and the focus on how individuals talk about themselves, set the stage for the methodological approach of the long-term planning process. With this in mind we decided to utilize a qualitative approach to our data collection. We structured a series of focus groups over a period of three months that would tease out the themes under which the goals would be structured.

The framework used for the planning process was to apply a critical lens to the long-term planning process. This was accomplished by examining how the structure through which strategic and long-term plans were traditionally developed. Generally, the planning process applies a top-down approach. The ASL and ASM wanted to disrupt the hierarchical approach to long-term planning and frame the future of the department around the vision of the staff in the department. By applying this framework to the long-term planning process we believed that the themes and goals could come directly from staff members in the Access Services Department.

With this frame around the intentionality of the language we use to describe ourselves, the ASL and ASM decided to use focus groups to engage the Access Services Department staff in conversations around topics regarding what they enjoy about their position, what they enjoy about working at the University of Denver, what is important to them in their position, and related topics. The application of this frame to the long-term planning process ensured that the themes around which the goals would be developed would be in areas that were mutually agreed upon to hold importance to the Access Services staff.

The series of focus groups were held over a three-month period, one set per month. Each set contained three to four separate sessions to have small groups in which every voice would have the opportunity to be heard. The ASL and ASM focused on having two to four participants per session. The focus groups were structured to elicit the most constructive dialog at each stage in the series. The intention was to have different groupings of individuals from within the department to produce the greatest amount of conversation at each stage. The hope was that groups would change from stage to stage during the process.

The questions for each stage of the process were predetermined by the ASL and ASM. A planning meeting at a local coffee establishment allowed for the duo to evaluate previous conversations and feedback on the topic. This evaluation lead to the questions that were presented at each level of the process. Once the first level of the process was completed, the previous meetings responses were discussed, and questions for the next set of meetings were structured to build off the responses from the previous meetings. This approach allowed the ASL and ASM to get more information around the thoughts and feelings of Access Services staff members when necessary. It also allowed them to follow up with interesting points that were made and to explore tangential comments that were found to be interesting when the ASL and ASM followed up after each meeting.

Planning process

It was very important to the department heads that there was broad agreement and buy-in from Access Services Department staff to the long-term plan. This meant transparency in the process would be a key component of how the long-term plan was formulated, and how the specific goals were determined. Additionally, while the ASL had participated in the creation of the library's strategic plan, most members of the department had not engaged in this type of activity before. It was important to identify an approach that would diminish anxiety around participating in the process and encourage participation and active engagement.

The ASL and ASM settled on using focus groups for all Access Services Department staff to engage in the process. The focus groups would provide a safer space for honest conversation where staff members would not feel like they were in the spotlight when responding to the focus group questions. The ASL and ASM decided to structure the data collection in a way that would allow the responses from the staff members to develop over time. As such, a tiered approach to data collection over a period of three months was decided to be the best approach. This would allow the ASL and ASM to start with broad questions that would become more pointed and specific over time.

The ASL and ASM agreed that transparency would be an important component of long-term planning process. Given the importance place on transparency, the ASL and ASM agreed that all notes from the focus groups would be made available through the shared departmental drive. This was discussed with the Access Services staff before any focus groups took place and agreed to by all staff members. While the notes were made public, efforts were taken by the ASL and ASM to maintain anonymity for Access Services Staff members. Feedback from the different focus groups, within the same step of the focus groups, was combined by answer to shield which focus group session the response came from. Certainly, individuals who participated in that

particular focus group would know who had made the comment, but the larger department would remain unaware. This approach was important to the ASL and ASM, as it allowed the staff members to see how others in the department replied to questions, and to help staff members understand how the themes developed over the course of the focus groups.

The final process decided by the ASL and ASM would begin with a series of focus groups to solicit feedback and identify themes around the values of the Access Services Department staff members. The ASL and ASM would use those themes to identify the common core values. Finally, department staff members would create specific goals aligned with the mutually agreed upon core values (Figure 1).
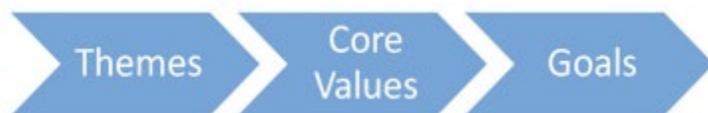

Figure 1. Visual representation of long-term planning process.

Goal setting

From February 2019 through April 2019 the staff in the Access Services Department participated in the series of focus groups that would form the foundational themes of the Access Services long-term plan. The key themes were developed over time in these focus groups. Those key themes were; Professional Enrichment, Training and Crosstraining, Documentation and Policies, and Community. Once the department voted on accepting the key themes, it was time to set the specific goals for the long-term plan. Staff in the Access Services Department participated in a goal setting meeting. Multiple meetings were held to accommodate the wide range of schedules in the Access Services Department. Staff members in the department were encouraged to bring specific goals that fit within the key themes they had identified. They were also encouraged to bring any goals that may have fit outside the specific strictures of the key themes. The themes were used to provide direction and scope to the specific goals, whereby staff knew they would be bringing forward a goal in an area that they had mutually agreed was important to the department. The belief of the ASL and ASM was that this would encourage more staff members to bring forward goals, as there was already a mutually established agreement around the overarching themes of the goals.

As goals were brought forward, the ASL and ASM met together to discuss the merits of each goal, as well as to condense and consolidate similar goals. This process took time, as the way that individuals may approach the same topic will differ from person to person. This difference in approach between different individuals required the ASL and ASM to negotiate the differences in individual goals to ensure that that the resulting goal was true to what was brought forward by the individual staff members, while also consolidating for clarity and brevity. After the goals were combined and adjusted as necessary, the ASL and ASM put each goal into the most appropriate corresponding theme. Each goal was presented by the Access Service staff member under a specific theme. However, some goals under different themes were very common and could be combined. In these cases, the ASL and ASM discussed what theme to classify the goals under and placed the goals as appropriate.

Once the goals were consolidated and codified, the ASL and ASM looked to identify the timeframe for each specific goal. The goals that did not contain any prerequisites, did not have any preexisting conditions and did not require the allocation of resources to complete, where given consideration for being short-term goals (<6 months). The estimated time to completion pushed some of these goals into the medium-term timeframe (6–18 months). Goals that required other steps to be completed before the goal could be completed, or required specific resources were split between medium-term and long-term (19–36 months) based upon the needs and scope of the specific goal.

After the timeframes for each goal were considered, it was important to relate each goal back to the Library's Strategic Plan, and the University's overall Strategic Plan. The ASL went through both strategic plans to identify the specific institutional and organizational goals that each Access Service goal most closely aligned with. This was an important step as it demonstrated how the future direction of the Access Services Department was in line with the strategic direction of the library and the university. While many of the goals developed would not require a financial commitment from Library Administration, by mapping the goals to the Library's and University's Strategic Plans, we could demonstrate the value of the department's long-term plan to the overall strategic direction of the University should we need to seek funding for any goal in the future. This increases the likelihood of future funding being approved should it be necessary.

The final step in the goal setting process was acceptance of the goals by the Access Services staff members. An initial long-term plan was distributed to the Access Services staff members for their feedback. The long-term plan was adjusted based upon the feedback received. Once we followed up with staff members to ensure that they saw their feedback implemented in the long-term plan, the plan was approved by the staff in the department.

Approval and deployment of plan

Once the plan was approved by the staff members in the Access Services Department, the next step was to receive Library Administration approval for the plan. The ASL and ASM presented the plan to the Dean and Associate Deans. The overall approach to the development of the plan was discussed to provide the framework used to elicit participation from the Access Services staff members. The ASL and ASM then went through all the identified themes, and the corresponding goals and timeframes. There were two specific points that Library Administration wanted us to consider before approval of the long-term plan.

The first point was when goals were appropriate to move to the organizational level, as opposed to keeping it at the department level. In these cases, goals were removed from the Access Services Long-term Plan so that those goals could be used more broadly for the entire library. The other point for consideration was what we would do if other departments were engaged in a similar process at the same time. In these instances, the ASL and ASM agreed to work collaboratively with other departments should we be found to working on a similar project as another department. Once these points were taken under consideration and discussed Library Administrators granted formal approval for the Access Services Long-term Plan.

The final step was the deployment of the plan within the Access Services Department. As all goals had come from Access Services staff members, the ASL and ASM wanted all department employees to have the option to be a goal lead. A goal lead is the individual tasked with the planning and implementation of a specific goal. Access Services staff members were able to email the ASL and identify any goals that they would like to the goal lead on. There was no overlap in goal leads as identified by the Access Services staff members, so the ASL was able to assign goal leads. The remaining goals without an identified goal lead were divided between the ASL and ASM.

Reflections on process

As with any project, it is important to reflect on the process to determine what could have been improved. While the planning process for the long-term plan was successful, the ASL and ASM want to be cognizant of learning from the process and determining what we can do better the next time a project of this scope is undertaken.

How to bring out the best ideas

A primary focus of the long-term plan was for the staff in the Access Services Department to be the driver of identifying the themes for the plan, and the goals that would bring those themes to fruition. The ASL and ASM believed that the best way to bring out the best ideas was to engage Access Services staff members throughout the planning process. To accomplish this, a series of focus groups were designed to elicit ideas and feedback around what Access Services staff members felt strongly about in their jobs. Some questions were focused on what staff members liked about their jobs. Some questions focused on what the department could do better. Other questions examined how the library could better support the staff members in their careers.

While this approach did elicit some good responses, it is fair to question whether all staff members felt they could fully engage in the focus groups. While the ASL and ASM were intentional in creating as much opportunity for all staff members to participate in the long-term plan, some staff members may have felt uncomfortable sharing their experiences and insight. Other staff members did a great job insuring that those who weren't participating as much were given the time and place to make sure their voices were heard. One way to address this would have been to begin these types of focus group, question and answer sessions in advance of the long-term plan. Additionally, having someone outside of a leadership position leading the focus groups may have created a more relaxed atmosphere for participation. This approach would have normalized this type of sharing, thoughtful process for staff members and create a level of comfort for staff members to openly contribute to the conversations.

Staff buy-in, taking on goals

One of the main points of consideration for this long-term plan was ensuring staff buy-in. The hope was not just to implement a long-term plan, but to develop a plan that truly reflected the individual staff members of the Access Services Department. The ASL and ASM felt that the intentional approach of the project would result in a plan that Access Services staff would be

excited for and engaged with. We believed that this could be realized by the Access Services staff members taking ownership for some of the goals.

Overall, 6 members of the department took on responsibility for a goal in the long-term plan. This accounts for approximately 46% of the department as a whole. In addition to staff members taking on leadership roles, many staff members offered to help with different activities and goals. While it was reassuring to see the level of support from staff members to the long-term plan, the ASL and ASM ended up being the goal leads for approximately 80% of the total goals. Additional opportunities were offered to staff members to assist in completing different goals. Many staff members accepted these opportunities to continue participating in the long-term plan.

The final aspect to consider regarding staff buy-in is the success rate of goals in the plan. To date, only the deadline for the short-term goals has passed. All short-term goals were accomplished by the deadline. These early successes in the long-term plan point toward acceptance and buy-in by Access Services staff members to the plan.

Adaptability

As with any large project, adaptability was important both during and after the long-term planning process. During the planning process, the ASL and ASM needed to be adaptable to the changing needs and expectations of Access Services staff members during the series of focus groups. Adapting questions for the next series of focus groups based upon answers from the previous series was important in allowing the themes to develop over time.

After the conclusion of the planning process, the plan was delayed by the impacts of COVID-19 on both University Library and on the University of Denver in general. This was a very difficult time that was full of uncertainty. The purpose of the long-term plan was to provide guidance and support for the future of the department. There was concern that maintaining the schedule of the long-term plan goals during the global pandemic would add an additional level of stress to an already difficult time. With that in mind, the deadlines for the medium and long-term goals were extended by sixth months to provide flexibility and reduce stress.

Conclusion

In 2019, the members of the Access Services Department at the University of Denver engaged in a long-term planning project that set a series of goals for the department over a three-year period. The goal setting process employed a series of focus groups to illicit feedback from staff members on key themes around which the goals would be set. The approach of focusing on how people describe themselves was critical in defining a long-term plan that reflected the values and ideals of the individual staff members in the department. Those themes were based on the aspects of their work staff members felt were most important, provided them the most meaning in their work, and that they were most proud of.

The process of engaging in, and completing a long-term plan, was transformational for the staff members of the Access Services Department. It allowed for Access Services staff members to have a say in the future vision of the department that was based on their values and the aspects of

their jobs that they believe are most important. This resulted in a long-term plan that reflected the staff members of the Access Services Department and provided the opportunity for staff members to dictate future directions for the department.

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