Media Managers Column

Developing a Survival Strategy: Supporting a College or University Learning Resources Center

Marvin E. Duncan

Financial pressures are forcing many colleges and universities to cut back on certain programs. In some instances, service areas such as learning resources centers are substantially affected by these cuts. Academic areas are also affected by cutbacks but not necessarily to the same extent as service areas. Programs which have obtained funds from governmental sources and private agencies many times fail to receive funding at previous levels. As a result, these programs depend more and more on institutional funding even though at reduced levels for survival. This means that learning resources centers became one of numerous hands reaching for and depending on institutional funding for their survival. Thus, both academic areas and academic support areas are competing for the dollar. It may well be that this situation may result in academic support areas receiving inadequate funding.

Robert M. Diamond (1984) appears to be in agreement with the above interpretation and recently wrote:

> The years ahead will not be easy ones for colleges and universities. Inflation will continue, and energy and legal costs will continue to consume a large proportion of total operational budgets. For many, there will be a decline in overall enrollment. As a result, support agencies such as instructional development centers will find themselves constantly fighting for their share of scarce resources and, in some instances, for survival.
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> Offices of this type are particularly vulnerable in times of fiscal stress for several reasons. First, they are not a traditional part of the university. They do not have the historical base associated with the various academic departments, the library and computing center. Second, since units may not have direct contact with the total academic community, they are often not perceived by the faculty and by administrators as vital to the institution and its survival; and, third, as easily-identified units with discrete budgets, they are extremely accessible to a budget committee's axe, or an administrator's trade-off. (Diamond, P. 71)

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Although this article by Diamond is one of a few which addresses itself to survival, a few other voices have been heard on this subject. Much of the literature on the subject discusses ways of either improving existing services or expanding services. For example, Barson, Haney and Lange give strategies for improving and/or expanding services in their article, *The Heuristic Dimensions of Instructional Development* (1968). Other writers have since added heuristics. The point is that little and certainly not enough attention has been focussed on the survival of the instructional development centers or learning resources centers in times of financial stringency in higher education. Still further, in this literature, survival has not been related directly to financial support.

Jacquelyn B. Hill (1983, 32) quoted from Alvin Kent's address in which he remarked, "I think media professionals should have a chance to hear from someone who doesn't have a horror story to tell." Kent listed four factors which he feels created a successful media resources center at Iowa State University: money, management, media resources and an interactive environment i.e., one that interacts with people to produce either success or failure. Kent believes, however, that money is the key to a successful media operation and that more dollars result in stronger programs. For example, from 1975 through 1982, the center at Iowa State University showed a 50 percent increase in support after adjusting for inflation. It is hoped and assumed that services were improved as a result of increased financing and that they were expanded in both quantity and quality.

J. Andrew Walcott stated, "as a media specialist you have to go to Muhammad's mountain and establish yourself as a presence" (1984, p. 23). Once the center becomes known for quality services, there are recommended techniques (but no guarantees) which the director and staff can employ that may result in greater financial support.

Obtaining Financial Support

David Berlo once wrote, "we are in the people business." Thus, a warm smile, a courteous hello, may I help you? will be helpful in attracting people to the center. The staff of the center must make people feel welcome if they expect them to use the services of the center. The latest and most sophisticated materials and equipment may become no more than showcase displays if they are not used. Many faculty, staff and administrators do not know either what the center does or what it is capable of doing. By surveying the needs and expectations of the campus community and making sure that these needs are met to the extent of the center's responsibilities and capabilities, the director and the staff will be performing a supply and demand role. If the center has an academic program and offers a course in photography, filming or production, faculty and staff of the institution may be invited to enroll in one or more of these courses. Specifically, photography is a good selling point. People take vacations and like to record these experiences on film for *show and tell sessions* when they return home. The same is true with regard to filming. Those who do not take the course(s) can be invited (small numbers each semester) to *sit in* one or more of these courses. By initiating activities such as these, the director and the staff are advertising their knowledge and skills.

Advertise the center in the campus newspaper. Schedule a tour for new students, new faculty, staff, and administrators. Make a concerted effort to make the center visible in the community. A media presentation or a workshop can work wonders in advertising the center to this larger population. There may be businesses and other organizations in the community which may be looking for resource services such as those available in the center. For example, a community-based agency had a need for visuals in explaining its

program to a group of business executives in the community. After several meetings with the agency head and his staff, it was decided that the program could be visualized via slide-tape. A graduate student in educational technology (under the writers supervision) was assigned to work with the agency head and produce the slide-tape. Credit slides for the presentation included, among other things, the name of the university and the learning resources center. This program is now being shown to business personnel in the community. Similar programs have been developed by the center for other community businesses and agencies. The cost of these projects was minimal and was absorbed by the business or agency for which the presentation was produced.

No matter what system of reporting is used or how accurate are the annual reports on the operation of the center, funding is not always based on these factors. The writer's experience of twenty-three years has led to the belief that knowing who controls what and finding ways to be on a friendly yet professional basis with these individuals can promote substantial fund allocation. One suggestion is that directors should not become a part of the circle of campus gossip but should get close enough to the circle so as to know who makes decisions which affect the centers which they manage. In a way, this is an abbreviated form of Force-Field analysis in that the director studies the organization very carefully and identifies the forces as being positive, neutral, or negative forces. Positive forces can assist in goal attainment, neutral forces neither assist nor hinder progress, negative or restraining forces work against the goals of the center. Classify individuals, particularly administrators, into one of these force categories [Rather than providing a lengthy discussion of Force-Field Analysis at this point, for additional information the reader is referred to Gordon Lippett's discussion (1969) on the subject.]

Any service provided by the staff of a center relates directly to budget allocations. Therefore, the director should seek every possible means of obtaining financial support. The following suggestions, some of which were discussed in previous sections, may prove useful.

a) Cultivate a warm working relationship with those who control funds including the secretary. Although the secretary does not control funds *per se,* the secretary knows what funds are available and may have some influence on allocations.

b) Visit those who control funds, especially when you are not asking for additional funding. Stop by (call first) even if you give a false reason for the visit. This will help you get to know those who control funds.

c) Although there may not be a request, there are occasions when an administrator needs office signs. Check with the secretary to find out what information should appear on the sign(s). Make the sign(s) and present it/them to the secretary.

d) When funds are allocated, begin committing these funds immediately. Avoid waiting until the deadline for committing or expending funds.

e) Never be satisfied with what you get. Rarely will you get all that is request%. Have requisitions prepared for things you need but could not purchase due to inadequate funding. These requisitions should be typed and dated   day after departments and schools should have committed funds. Since uncommitted funds are returned to the Office of Financial Affairs (or a similar office), take these requisitions to the person in charge. Rather than approve many requisitions from many different departments, the financial officer may approve three or four from your center. Three or four requisitions from your center may equal or exceed the amount of funds returned to the Office of Financial Affairs.

We in the media profession need to publish articles similar to this one in journals whose primary audience is administrators. As a result of reading articles of this sort, perhaps administrators who control funds would become more sensitive to the needs of a center. We continue to publish largely in *our* journals; we know our problems, but do administrators know our problems?

Summary

Programs which depend on institutional allocations to absorb operational costs are facing difficult times trying to survive. Less money is available than ever before with more *hands* reaching for these funds. This shortage of funds is affecting all university programs and particularly academic support programs which traditionally receive less financial support than their academic counterpart. Academic support areas are likely to continue to receive inadequate financial support. Therefore, it is extremely important for directors of these support areas to develop survival strategies. Many survival techniques have been tried. Some are suggested in this paper. However, there are no guarantees.

There is a scarcity of information in the literature which pertains to survival. Much of the literature deals with ways of expanding services in terms of quantity. Some of the literature suggests ways of improving existing services rather than expansion. What is needed, I feel, is to: 1) create a body of literature on the subject of survival strategies, and 2) publish as much of this information as possible in journals whose primary audience are those who make allocations to academic support areas such as learning resources centers. Otherwise, support areas will continue to struggle for survival.

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