Identifying Positions among Tel Aviv University's Sourasky Central Library Employees with respect to the Library's' Mission and Objectives / Idit Rosen

Abstract

The Sourasky Central Library at Tel Aviv University (henceforth SCL), like other academic libraries in Israel and elsewhere in the world, operates in an ever-changing environment, characterized by financial and academic uncertainty and instability. This kind of environment tends to engender and fortify various mythical discourse patterns, ideas, perceptions, beliefs and statements, such as the "paperless library" myth, "digital library" myth and "librarian-free library" myth.

Based on SCL's operating conditions and on current professional literature that discusses, both directly and indirectly, the question of the mission and objectives of academic libraries, the present research sets out to answer the following two questions: What positions are articulated by SCL staff with respect to the mission and objectives of this library? What are the similarities and differences between the positions regarding an academic library's mission as presented in the professional literature reviewed herein, and those espoused by SCL staff?

Defining the research goal as "identifying or mapping SCL staff positions regarding the library's mission" presupposes that these positions are meaningful, not only insofar as they establish discourse patterns relating to the library's mission, objectives and role, but also in establishing organizational and professional practices that largely determine the academic library's, status position and future, both in local context of SCL and in more general context of academic libraries in Israel and beyond. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that the present research is primarily concerned with the question of SCL's, or, indeed, any academic library's mission and objectives, as articulated by its employees and researchers, rather than with questions relating to strategies, actions and practices employed by the organization as a means of achieving these objectives.

In addressing the research question and purposes, the present work employs the qualitative research method offered by Grounded Theory. Within this framework, the following was performed: current professional literature discussing the academic library's mission and objectives was researched, the characteristics of SCL's operating environment were mapped, live interviews were conducted with 28 SCL employees and 31 more replied by email to the question "what are, in your opinion, SCL's mission and objectives?"

Through content analysis applied to the live interviews and emails, as well as to the literature reviewed for the purpose of the research, the following seven core categories, referred to herein as mission categories, were identified:

1. Supporting study and research programs and goals. This category is concerned with one or more of the following issues: Support of study and research programs and goals of the faculty serviced by the library, support of academic study and research programs and goals (not exclusively reserved for any particular faculty), support of the library's parent establishment, cooperation between the library and academic faculty (and others).

2. Maintaining library collections. This category is concerned with one or more of the following functions, either in traditional or digital contexts: purchase, classification, catalog entry, collection development and pruning.

3. Providing services: This category is concerned with one or more of the following functions: Loan services, reference services, information literacy (teaching information skills) and advanced loan services. In addition, this category covers issues pertaining to service recipients and quality of service.

4. Library human factors: This category is concerned with library human factors (as opposed to technological factors), including,: properties and characteristics of library human factors, human factors pertaining to library users, or any other human factors related to library environment, as well as human aspects of culture and society.

5. Provision of infrastructure and technological means: This category is concerned with providing infrastructure and technological means to library users.

6. The library as a place: This category is concerned with one or more of the following aspects: the library as a physical place, the library as storage space for books and collections, the library as an information/study venue, the library as a social-cultural venue.

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7. Granting access to sources of information. This category deals with the questions of "who?", that is, who is eligible for access? "what to?" What should be accessible, and "how?" the means and quality of access.

Analysis of the findings reveals that most SCL employee positions express support of the study and research programs at the faculties of humanities and of arts, as an integral part of SCL's mission. This finding is in line with the results of Bangert (1997), according to which most university libraries under scrutiny expressed support of study and research programs in their mission statements.

As for library-faculty cooperation, analysis of the email responses reveals that this aspect is not mentioned very frequently, and that in most cases it is not defined as an objective leading to fulfillment of the mission of the category under discussion, or any other mission category. This finding stands in striking contrast to the literature, which views said cooperation as an objective and an important factor leading to the fulfillment of an academic library's mission. Somewhat contrary to the finding arising from the analysis of email responses, analysis of the interviews revealed that the subject of cooperation with faculty is a sensitive one, and that it bothers most interviewees at the professional (and sometimes also emotional) level. This finding supports the studies and discussion found in professional literature, that tackle the complex relationship (status differences, conflict situations and competition factors) between library staff and academic faculty. In the present research most interviewees ascribed importance to faculty-library staff cooperation, alongside dissatisfaction with its current level and quality.

Analysis of research findings also revealed that maintenance of library collections is still viewed as part of SCL's main missions, even in the present era. It also shows that the most frequent position regarding the library's purchase policy primarily advocates purchase that supports the study and research needs of the population directly serviced by the library: the students and staff of the faculties of humanities and of arts at Tel Aviv University. The category of collection maintenance had the highest frequency of appearance in the email responses, a position which corresponds to the findings of Ducas & Michaud-Oystryk (2003). In that work, collection maintenance and service provision were rated first among the librarian's roles in the university community.

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As for the library collection purchase, the need was expressed in both interviews and email responses for purchase of digital format resources, alongside the continued purchase of print resources. This finding supports positions found in professional literature, that conceive of academic libraries as hybrid libraries, part of whose mission consists of the collection and maintenance of material appearing in various formats, among them the traditional print format, that even in the digital era remains indispensable for academic study and research. The importance of continued purchase of print resources expressed in SCL staff positions stems primarily from the fact that this library mostly services researchers and students in the areas of humanities and arts – areas in which most resources are still published in print format only, and in which sometimes the source itself carries scientific importance (primary sources such as manuscripts and archive materials). This finding supports the position expressed by various researchers who articulate the importance of continued purchase of print resources in the digital era, especially in the areas of humanities and arts (e.g. Graham, 1998). In addition, SCL staff's support of continued purchase of printed materials appears to add strength to the traditional position appearing in professional literature, which views the physical collections owned by the library as a source of prestige and authority even in the present era (e.g. Liu, 2003), and which ascribes importance to the continued presence of special collections in academic libraries, especially in the electronic environment context in which it is situated (Graham, 1998).

Analysis of the findings in the collection maintenance category reveals a striking absence – or feeble presence – of two sub-categories that figure prominently in professional literature: preservation of library information resources (mostly I digital format) and collection digitization.

Like the previous mission category, the category of service provision also figured very frequently in SCL staff email responses. Analysis of the findings reveals that the position espoused by most SCL employees focuses mostly on providing traditional services: reference service, bibliographic guidance, loan services, inter-library loan services and help in finding material on the shelves. These findings support, to some extent, the position expressed by Duckett(2004), who promotes the traditional orientation of service provision, even in an advanced technological environment. Conversely, the same findings stand in some contrast to the positions of various researchers who wish to extend library services beyond those provided within

the library building itself or through the library homepage. Those researchers aim to break through the traditional bounds of library services and bring those services to a potential audience's "natural" environment. Another noteworthy finding of the present research pertains to the limited attention given in both interviews and email responses to the sub-category of information literacy. The present finding stands in striking contrast to this sub-category's status in information literacy and technological skill instruction professional literature, as a central part of the information era library mission (Hollisater, 2005; Jayne & Meer, 1997). The findings also reveal that SCL staff's conceptualization of the services provided by the library runs along traditional lines: loan services, inter-library loan, providing assistance, database guidance. This finding g is somewhat contrary to current professional literature, that tends to employ "new" or "expansive" terms in describing the role of present day librarians and academic library services.

The findings show that SCL staff's attitude towards the question of library personnel is mostly limited to a narrow aspect of the necessary and desirable properties of an academic librarian. In general, it can be said that the findings of the present research reveal a position similar to that found in current professional literature, which tends not to deal with library human factors as a self-contained mission category that requires separate discussion, as it is often appears to be considered an obvious aspect of the library's existence.

The findings of this research show that only a minority among SCL employees directly address the provision of infrastructure and technological means to library users as an integral part of the library mission. In some sense, this finding is in line with attitudes expressed in professional literature, which depict technology as a means to an end, rather than as a goal in itself. In addition to infrastructure and technological means being indeed necessary to the existence and operability of an academic library (Neal, 2005), I would like to raise the point that against the background of increasing financial inequity in Israel, as well as elsewhere in the world, part of the mission of an academic library at the present point in history is to provide users of the library's physical environment (assuming that this environment persists) with infrastructure and technological means. This, needless to say, necessitates the allocation of monetary resources which, apparently, many academic libraries do not currently possess, but the expectation that they strive to fulfill this need, if only in a partial manner, is nevertheless a matter of principle.

Regarding the mission category "the library as a place", it turns out to figure prominently in the positions of most SCL employees. This finding is in line with professional literature, which emphasizes this aspect of the library's mission, particularly against the background of the digital - virtual; era, and in some contrast with the idea of the virtual library (e.g. Lippincott, 2005; Lougee, 2002; Bell, 2005). In general, it can be said that in both the present field of research and the professional literature reviewed for the purpose of the present research, the dominance of the library as a place persists in a manner that largely affirms its traditional physical identity.

The current research findings reveal that the positions of SCL staff contain some reference to the mission category of providing access to information sources as part of SCL's mission, but not as one of the more significant mission categories. While in professional literature a discussion sometimes arises regarding the quality of means of access (see, e.g., Carlson, 2002; Lancaster, 1999b), this issue hardly receives any attention in the positions of SCL staff. In the few cases where it was addressed, it was with reference to the library's spatial organization, catalogs, and conversion and digitization of collections, much like the treatment of the same issues in professional literature (see, e.g., Lougee, 2002; Dempsey, 2005). Issues pertaining to access permission and cooperation with other libraries and institutions were not observed in the content analysis of the interview and email response findings. This stands in contrast to positions found in professional literature, that view this issue as part of an academic library's mission (e.g.Curran, 2001).

The discussion of the research findings, as well as that of other parts of the present work, employs ideas and concepts from the work of sociologist of culture Pierre Bourdieu. The use of these concepts, albeit with certain occasional modifications, conceptualizes the academic library as an institution, and the librarians employed therein as agents who are engaged in a struggle against other institutions and agents (academic faculty, online content providers, publishers), who operate in fields near or far from the institution's own field (the field of campus, the field of academia, the filed of higher education, the field of information and of knowledge, the field of technology) – a struggle over maintaining or increasing the value of one form of capital (e.g. print information resources) relative to that of another form of capital, that is controlled by competing institutions and agents (e.g. digital format information resources). One thing that occurs in institutions that are engaged in a struggle in a

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given field is the evolution of forms of discourse that strive to undermine the status of competing institutions or, alternatively, to preserve and sometimes even solidify their own status.

The present research aims, among other goals, to identify similarities and differences between the characteristics of the form of discourse found in the professional literature reviewed for the purpose of this work, and SCL staff positions with respect to that library's mission and objectives. The findings reveal that the positions presented by SCL staff when describing SCL's mission and objectives tend to reflect traditional-modern perceptions, that can be portrayed as traditional/modern –orthodox mission discourse. The professional literature reviewed in this work, on the other hand, tends to contain perceptions that employ ideas, concepts and a vocabulary that can be described as modern mission discourse, often cast within a postmodern framework, in defining the academic library's mission and objectives. Nevertheless, the difference between the positions regarding this issue expressed by SCL staff and those found in professional literature appears to be of a semantic-rhetorical nature, rather than a matter of essence or principle. In other words: Both the positions found in professional literature and those expressed by SCL staff with respect to the academic library's mission and objectives, tend to be confined or committed to the bounds of the same basic constitutive discourse of the academic library's mission in the traditional=modern era. SCL staff positions, as well as the majority of those figuring in professional literature, fail to establish an alternative, different basic discourse for the academic library's mission in the digital, postmodern era. The use of a form of discourse from "another" era to define the academic library's mission is not, in itself, inappropriate, and may, in certain circumstances, constitute and advantage and solidify the status and authority of the agent or institution employing it. Still, the rise of other, competing forms of discourse must be taken into account, as these may render parts of this traditional-modern form of discourse obsolete. In addition, the possible rise of other, competing forms of discourse that advance a principled, essential alternative to the traditional-modern discourse of the kind fund in SCL staff positions and frequently in the professional literature reviewed herein, might amplify the discrepancy between the current form of discourse and the time in history during which it appears. This, in turn, might undermine not only the academic library's status on campus, but its very existence in future.

I feel that the responsibility for developing a form of discourse pertinent to the academic library's mission in the present era, which naturally must incorporate relevant aspects of forms of discourse from both the traditional and the modern eras in the history of academic libraries, should not lie with library staff alone, but rather with all those for whom the academic library carries importance, primarily (in no particular order): heads of academia, academic faculty members, researchers and intellectuals, educators and government.

Finally, the present work will hopefully encourage the undertaking of more empirical research in the fields of information and academic knowledge, that will look into similar and different positions held by institutions and agents with respect to the academic library's present and future mission.

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