

Theological Library in the New Normal Environment: New Dynamics of Institutional Relationship

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THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC HAS CHANGED THE COURSE OF HOW LIBRARIES function, transforming the service delivery, collection, space, and facilities of theological libraries. While there are discussions on faculty-librarians' relationship, the value of the library committee and the need for cohesive library relationships with academic departments and other support offices are not fully engaged. This is much less in the conversations of theological librarians.

Hence, this empirical perspective from Henry Luce III Library (HLL) of the Central Philippine University hopes to provide insights on the role of faculty as members of the library committee and other stakeholders inside and outside the university.

To give a clearer view, we begin with the background of the institution. Central Philippine University is one of the leading

universities in the central part of the Philippine archipelago and was founded in 1905. The university started as a mission institution in the 1900s (Central Philippine University, 2019) and has been strongly supported by the American Baptist Church. Hence, theological education has always been an important part of the institution. It is hoped that this empirical case of the University will illuminate a new paradigm of collaboration between librarians and faculty.

The library is under the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs as part of academic support. The library director supervises the total operation of the library and takes overall responsibility for the administration of library resources and services. There is a library committee composed of representatives from different academic departments who review policies and procedures in the library. The committee also plays an active role in collection development and promotion of library resources and services.

The minimum requirement for librarians is a bachelor's degree and professional licensure from the Philippines to practice librarianship. In academic libraries, they hold faculty status. Under the Philippine Association of Academic and Research Libraries's standards, a ratio of one librarian per department is practiced. Liaison librarianship has been strengthened recently, during the pandemic, as students and most of the faculty cannot go to the library.

As to collection development, the main goal is to support the mission, vision, goals, and objectives of the university, college, department, and programs. The members of the library committee are very important in this process as they liaise with the department on what new resources must be added. However, with the new normal, patterns of communication have changed. Faculty members directly request materials through chat and other online platforms.

With the shift to the online mode, the library services have also transformed, introducing virtual reference services (VRS) and providing online document delivery services. Social media platforms are also used to engage with users. Moreover, in terms of space and facilities, the library occupies a separate building. At present, the space is also used by faculty who conduct synchronous classes.

Linkages and collaboration in the library have existed for more than two decades. HLL is a member of Iloilo interlibrary loan consortium. This local library cooperation facilitates resource sharing and access to member libraries in the city. For international linkages, HLL is part of the World Bank Knowledge for Development Center in the region. HLL is also part of the dynamic network of American Corners—a resource center for reliable information about the United States. The network, which has an established section in the library called American Corner, allows the usage of databases that the American Spaces made available.

Discussion

The library aligns its services and functions with the university's mission, vision, goals, and core values. How it deals with internal relations, particularly with the theology department, is always guided by the core values of the university. With the onslaught of the pandemic, academic institutions need to address the demand of the changing times to be resilient and sustainable. Likewise, demands for changes dictate theological library services in the new work environment. In an essay on “Ecologies of Space in the Paradoxes of Technology and Community: Adaptability and Resilience in Libraries, Churches, and Theological Schools in a COVID-19 World,” the author posed some of the relevant questions: “What, then, are the ways forward for churches, theological schools, and libraries in the current environment? What does it mean to have services of reference, circulation, and research in a theological library, but done completely through technological means, where patrons cannot do their work in the physical library?” (Elia 2020, 25–6). Libraries cannot stop performing their functions. Only the channels of communication might change. There is a need for a stronger, more cohesive relationship with faculty and the department in order for library services to be relevant. It is more than just a matter of technological concern—it is an issue of relationship, and this is where faculty-library connection must be strengthened.

The Library Committee as One of the Pillars of the Library

Beyond compliance to standards, the value of the library committee has always been realized at Central Philippine University Henry Luce III Library. The “Charter of Library Committee” is a binding document that signifies the importance of faculty relations. In terms of organizational structure, the library committee is, in the same way as the entire library system, under the supervision of the vice president for academic affairs and is tasked to act in an advisory capacity to the university president and the director of libraries in library matters. A faculty representative from each college or department is appointed and the Theology Department has one representative.

The committee is responsible for informing the library about new education policies, new courses, and new members of the faculty, as well as staffing plans of the college. Moreover, the representative serves as an adviser and advocate to bridge the gap in communication between students and other faculty members. As the Charter of Library Committee describes, the committee is a “sounding board” of complaints. Having someone from the outside (of the library) to give their perspective on the position of the library builds more credibility in how the library endeavors to address the needs of the academic community.

Through effective and direct communication to the librarians, the library committee shares the sentiments of the library users to improve the services of the library. This committee also recommends development for the physical aspects of the library and the allocation of acquisition funds for the college. The members help determine priorities in acquisition and review and amend library policies to provide flexible, fair and equitable services underpinning inclusivity. The faculty representative’s role in assisting in the review of policies on acquisition, including administration and control of special materials, is indispensable. Acquisition of resources, the majority of which have shifted from print to online, can be supported by the faculty liaisons.

The library committee also has a binding opinion on library participation in regional cooperative proposals or engagement in consortia. Decisions on acceptance of gifts and donations may also be referred to the committee. As to instruction, a key role of

the library committee is to shape plans and programs to implement development of resources for instruction and research.

Studies have been done about faculty-librarian collaboration and the important role of the library committee. One of the local studies conducted a decade ago was the master's thesis of Candel (2010) on the awareness and extent of participation of library committee members in the performance of their roles and functions. Roles highlighted included the assessment of collection strength, marketing, promotion, and coordination of the college/department needs. Faculty are aware of these roles but they often have other duties that prevent them from full participation in all of their potential functions. Moreover, aside from the library committee functions, other faculty-librarian dynamics were suggested by the researcher to be explored that can further realize the value of the library.

The current situation calls for reflection on new roles to be explored. As librarians reskill to become instructors teaching how students will find reliable resources, the pedagogical insights of faculty who are well-versed on the needs of the students can be very helpful. In some libraries, training on reskilling librarians to be instructional librarians is conducted by faculty as concepts of instructional design and learning assessment are not the forte of most librarians, particularly those who have little experience beyond their library and information science degrees. In the Philippines, such vertical alignment is highly regarded, but there can be some pitfalls when there are modifications in functions and integration of new roles.

Faculty Relations: Juxtaposing and Transcending

In the Philippines, discussion of faculty collaboration is mainly associated with compliance to standards. As mentioned above, one key area of program accreditation requires the creation of a library committee with representatives from each college or department. Hence, collaboration with the faculty and other stakeholders in theology departments is essential. Although the inception of the faculty committee came out of compliance to accreditation, the relationship that has evolved between the library and the stakeholders of the Theology Department is part of the organizational dynamics—brought about by the necessity

to grow and with the same goal of providing for the needs of faculty and students. Faculty collaboration went beyond the faculty being representatives for their respective departments. Recently, a partnership between HLL and the Association of Theological Education in Southeast Asia (ATESEA) created the interaction of a networked paradigm where the library director, faculty, and ATESEA are mutually involved.

New Dynamics of Collaboration

Faculty and librarian relationships, in general, have a wide range of literature; however, faculty-librarian collaboration in theological libraries is very minimal and not as recent.

One interesting discussion about faculty-librarian relationship is McMahon's (2004, 75) essay on how faculty/librarian partnerships have changed at the University of Manitoba, where five areas for improved collaboration are identified: 1) teaching/instruction, 2) information services, 3) information technology, 4) research, and 5) collections.

New directions on teaching and learning call for reinvented faculty-librarian relationships. One significant initiative that has evolved in the promotion of theological education is a creative collaboration that goes beyond engagement with theology faculty and theological librarians/staff. Recently, HLL worked with Graduate School faculty in the Master in Library and Information Science-Theological Librarianship (MLIS-TL) program to expand its services—i.e., enhancing research and ensuring that the competence of theological librarians in Southeast Asia is responsive to the needs of theology departments. Having ATESEA spearhead and sponsor the program, avenues for discussion are amplified on how to address the challenges in online learning support.

While there is a faculty representative on the library committee, in most cases, the faculty go to the library director to request books to be purchased and to make sure that their information needs will be addressed. However, the need to have a point of contact at the department is essential as theology is a discipline that has distinct resources and research needs. An additional channel for coordination has not affected the role of the library

committee representative but rather amplified what can be offered by the library.

On instructions, Paul Schrodt, in his speech at Atla's fiftieth anniversary, highlighted the function of the theological librarian as an educator and declared that the library is a "parallel educational arena" with the classroom (McMahon 2004, 74). As early as 1996, the role of theological librarians in educational support had been dubbed as "empowerers." Indeed, it is happening nowadays! With the transformation to online learning, the role of theological librarians as curators and educators is very much a necessity. Librarians are now at the forefront of research and instructions with their skills to retrieve and organize tools and resources. In a world where emerging technology is a primary commodity, a librarian's role goes beyond handling directional queries—which is giving exactly the resources sought for or pointing out where the resources can be found. The information environment becomes highly scalable and librarians need to teach the concept of searching and evaluating resources so that, with changes brought by new technology or an upgrade in the platform, the library users have the base knowledge to work independently.

Rhetoric of the New Normal

One of the fundamental questions to be addressed is how internal relationships are changing. With the new normal environment, will the old rules and governing standards still apply?

In the perspective of HLL, faculty-librarian relationships only changed from face-to-face to virtual communication. Similarly, as resources are converted to digital to avoid physical contact, more resources are delivered online. In fact, with the need to incorporate online resources, faculty need to engage more with librarians not only in request for resources but also in consultation about issues on copyright in the digital platform. Librarians can go beyond resource-sharing. Librarians in most academic institutions need to be curators and educators. Online resources need to be organized to cater to the needs of the faculty, which is providing services before they ask for it.

As to application of standards, the organizational structure has not changed. Only resources and service delivery need to be revisited.

Conclusion

The value of the library committee and the cohesiveness of the library's relationship with academic departments and other support offices is essential in order for the library to fully function. In order for the library to be responsive to the needs of the faculty, committee representatives must serve as a credible voice to share about the role of the library and to lead engagement with faculty. Likewise, it is an important assessment mechanism wherein faculty representatives can relate the needs of the department.

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