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Organizational Learning in Libraries at For-Profit Colleges and Universities: A Mixed-Methods Analysis

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Abstract

Despite successful application of organizational learning to enhance services in academic libraries, little is known about organizational learning in libraries of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs). A quantitative online survey, followed by qualitative interviews, served to assess and explore the use of organizational learning in libraries at FPCUs. Data reflected medium to high levels of organizational learning in the libraries studied, as well as a negative relationship between organizational learning and number of students enrolled. Common themes in the interview responses included external pressures from the FPCUs making it more difficult to implement organizational learning, and the importance of communication.

Introduction

As higher education as a whole shifts to data-driven, outcome-based decisions (Tam, 2014), leaders of academic libraries also recognize the importance of using available knowledge to achieve maximum performance for their patrons (Kloda, Koufogiannakis, & Brettle, 2014). To this end, leaders of some academic libraries have drawn upon principles from other disciplines, particularly those of organizational learning. Though Law and Chuah (2015) maintained that there is no single framework for studying organizational learning, the theoretical framework grounding this study is Argyris and Schön's (1978) theory. Argyris and Schön described organizational learning as "a metaphor" for the end result of "members of the organization act[ing] as learning agents for the organization, responding to changes in the internal and

external environments of the organization by detecting and correcting errors . . . and embedding the results of their inquiry” (pp. 28-29) into the larger organizational culture. Simply put, organizational learning is “a process of detecting and correcting error” (Argyris, 1977, p. 116) in organizations.

Despite the successful application of organizational learning in the arenas of higher education and libraries, there is a dearth of published research on organizational learning in the libraries of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) in the United States. In recent years, FPCUs have surged in popularity in the American higher education landscape, with a 166% increase in enrollment between 2000 and 2015 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). Though for-profit institutions are educating an increasing number of American students, few research studies have focused on the libraries in FPCUs. Understanding how the libraries in FPCUs work and how they can be more effective is critical for improving educational services for students at these institutions.

Literature Review

As Argote, McEvily, and Reagans (2003), Edmondson and Moingeon (1998), and others have found, the organizational learning literature is fragmented and spread across global disciplines as varied as human resources (Camps, Oltra, Aldás-Manzano, Buenaventura-Vera, & Torres-Carballo, 2015), higher education (Dee & Leišytė, 2016), engineering (Jain & Moreno, 2015), psychology (Kump, Moskaliuk, Cress, & Kimmerle, 2015), manufacturing (Yu, Jacobs, Salisbury, & Enns, 2013), healthcare (Nembhard & Tucker, 2016), and of course, libraries (Al-Harrasi, 2014; Baughman & Kaske, 2002; Crawley-Low, 2013; Limwichitr, Broady-Preston, & Ellis, 2015; Yu & Chen, 2012). This literature review will discuss definitions of organizational

learning and what it entails, organizational learning applied to academic libraries, and FPCUs and their libraries.

Researchers have defined organizational learning differently, and the concept has evolved through the years (Popova-Nowak & Cseh, 2015). However, the definitions have common themes (Dixon, 1999). For one, inherent in the idea of organizational learning is the expectation that more learning will help an organization be more effective (Argote, 2012; Argyris & Schön, 1978; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Senge, 1990). Second, an organization's learning is dependent upon its environment (Cangelosi & Dill, 1965; Daft & Weick, 1984). Next, most understandings of organizational learning take into account that members of an organization have common assumptions or mental models that may inhibit learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; De Geus, 1988; Senge, 1990). Finally, a common theme in definitions of organizational learning is that an organization can change and adapt for future success through learning (Argote, 2012; Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Senge, 1990).

When learning takes place, it is either through single-loop learning or double-loop learning. Single-loop learning is correcting an error without significant changes to the way things are normally done. Argyris and Schön's (1978) classic example is of a thermostat that detects when a room is getting too cold and turns the heat on to correct the temperature of the room. Double-loop learning occurs when correcting an error involves significant changes to the normal way of doing things. For example, if the thermostat began questioning whether it should be set to 75 degrees, it would not only be "detecting error but questioning the underlying policies and goals as well as its own program" (Argyris, 1977, p. 116). Single-loop learning results in maintaining the status quo, while double-loop learning leads to progress. While both single-loop and double-loop learning are essential and comprise organizational learning (Van Grinsven &

Visser, 2011), double-loop learning is more effective for long-lasting organizational learning that can lead to innovation and growth (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Experts in the field also agree that individual learning is important to organizational learning (Antonacopoulou, 2006; Hayes & Allinson, 1998; Kim, 1993; Senge, 1990; Simon, 1991). Argote et al. (2003) listed the knowledge of individual workers as one of three factors that affect the rate of learning in organizations. The other two factors were sharing knowledge among individuals within the organization and coordinating knowledge across the organization (Argote et al., 2003). Individual learning within organizations comprises training and professional development. Researchers throughout the organizational learning literature have posited that while individual learning is important, “organizational learning is not simply the sum of each member’s learning” (Fiol & Lyles, 1985, p. 804). When individuals leave the organization, their knowledge resulting from individual learning can leave the organization as well (Carley, 1992). Individual knowledge can become organizational knowledge only if it is communicated and managed properly within the organization, becoming part of institutional customs and memory and persisting even as individuals leave the organization.

As organizational learning theory has been applied to a wide range of disciplines, it is no surprise that researchers have studied academic libraries through the lens of organizational learning. As early as 1993, researchers explored the implications of organizational learning on academic libraries (Fowler, 1998; Phipps, 1993; Riggs, 1997). More recently, research surrounding organizational learning concepts in academic libraries has focused on individual learning as a pathway to organizational learning (Leong, Phillips, Giddens, & Dickson, 2014; T. Yu, 2013; Yu & Chen, 2015), knowledge management (Agarwal & Islam, 2014, 2015; Chidambaranathan & Rani, 2015b, 2015a; Islam, Agarwal, & Ikeda, 2014, 2015), the application

of organizational learning principles to special projects (Al-Harrasi, 2014; Beagle, 2012; Crawley-Low, 2013; Loo & Dupuis, 2015), and predictors of organizational learning (Bertram-Elliott, 2015; Chidambaranathan & Rani, 2015b; Huang, 2014).

In a literature review, Limwichitr et al. (2015) identified key challenges in building a learning organization within a university library context. One point to note is that some librarians may become confused by the distinction between their role in helping students and faculty learn, and their own individual learning to contribute to the organizational knowledge of the library (Limwichitr et al., 2015). The authors urged a clarification of the concepts relating to organizational learning for academic libraries so library leaders can better implement these concepts. They cited a lack of current literature where these concepts are clearly outlined for effective application in academic libraries.

FPCUs are colleges and universities in the United States that are not tax-exempt, but rather pay taxes like a business. Milton Friedman, a widely known economist, suggested in an interview with Spencer (1991) that the terms taxable and nontaxable fit better with the realities of higher education than non-profit and for-profit. Kinser (2006) identified three categories of FPCUs: enterprise colleges, super systems, and Internet institutions. Enterprise colleges are small and privately owned and operated. Super systems are the FPCU corporations that own multiple institutions with multiple campuses nationally and even worldwide. Finally Internet institutions have no physical campuses and offer all their degree programs and courses online. Some schools could fit into more than one category.

Ruch (2001), focusing specifically on regionally accredited, publicly traded FPCUs, outlined 10 distinctions between FPCUs and traditional colleges and universities:

- tax-paying versus tax-exempt,

- receive funding from investors versus donors,
- accumulate money as private investment capital versus endowments,
- serve stockholders versus stakeholders,
- traditional management model versus shared governance,
- motivated by profit versus motivated by prestige,
- focus on the “application of learning” versus the “cultivation of knowledge,”
- market-driven versus discipline-driven,
- emphasize the quality of outcomes versus the quality of inputs, and
- power is centralized in the customer versus in the faculty.

The final point means that FPCUs are focused on customer service, identifying the student as the customer (Iloh, 2016).

One aspect of FPCUs that is rarely mentioned in the literature, and even more rarely studied empirically, is their libraries. Davis, Adams, and Hardesty (2011) reported that they “were unable to find any published research on academic libraries in proprietary schools” (p. 570) while writing the literature review for their study on that topic. A literature search reveals little else published in this area since Davis et al.’s study. Only one researcher, in a doctoral dissertation, has investigated organizational learning in the libraries at FPCUs. Bertram-Elliott (2015) measured levels of organizational learning in academic libraries, including 15 libraries in FPCUs. While the researcher’s findings provided useful information, the FPCU libraries made up only 4% of the study participants. Evidence more specific to and focused on organizational learning at FPCUs is needed. Such was the purpose of this study—to assess and explore organizational learning in libraries at FPCUs, through the following three research questions:

RQ1–Quantitative: What capacity for organizational learning is present in libraries at FPCUs?

RQ2–Quantitative: Which FPCU library demographic variables are most strongly related to organizational learning capacity?

RQ3–Qualitative: How do library staff members in FPCUs experience organizational learning in their libraries?

Methods

This study employed a sequential explanatory mixed-method design using a quantitative survey followed by qualitative interviews. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) maintained that mixed-methods research “provides a better understanding of research problems than either [the quantitative or qualitative] approach alone” (p. 5), while Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, and Turner (2007) believed that the data collected from this combined approach have “breadth and depth” that lead to better “understanding and corroboration” (p. 123). Because the topic of organizational learning in the libraries of FPCUs is not well represented in the literature, approaching the problem in two different but mutually-substantiating ways may set a better precedent for future researchers who explore the same issue.

Quantitative Phase

First, a quantitative survey was administered to academic library staff members at FPCUs in the United States to measure the capacity for organizational learning in these libraries using Chen’s (2006) Processes and Phases of Organizational Learning Questionnaire (PPOLQ). The survey also included questions to collect library demographic information such as number of full-time equivalent (FTE) library employees and number of FTE students enrolled at the institution in order to collect data for the independent variables corresponding to RQ2.

Participants were recruited via convenience sampling, with the survey administered online via the Librarianship in For-Profit Educational Institutions (LFPEI) interest group electronic mailing list sponsored by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL). Any subscriber to that list could have opted to participate in the survey. Subscribers to the electronic mailing list need not be official members of the interest group. Thirty-nine people responded, but one was eliminated from the data because the respondent did not work in a FPCU and therefore did not meet the selection criteria for the study.

The survey included the first 20 items of the PPOLQ to measure organizational learning capacity. These items are statements, and the respondent marked how often each statement was true for them or their library: *frequently*, *sometimes*, *seldom/never*, or *uncertain*. The statements were designed to gauge perceptions of communication and learning within libraries. Bertram-Elliott (2015), who also administered the PPOLQ online through an electronic mailing list, calculated the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for Chen's (2006) PPOLQ to be 0.87. For this study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the PPOLQ was 0.76.

Though Chen (2006) did not develop numerical ranges to determine a library's organizational learning capacity based on a respondent's answers to items 1-20 of the PPOLQ, Bertram-Elliott (2015) did so in a later study. This study followed the scoring procedure set by Bertram-Elliott: each answer choice is assigned a numerical value: 3 for *frequently*, 2 for *sometimes*, 1 for *seldom/never*, and 0 for *uncertain*, and a mean score is calculated for each respondent. The following scale helps to interpret organizational learning scores:

- 0.0-0.4: Little to no organizational learning;
- 0.5-1.4: Low organizational learning;
- 1.5-2.4: Medium organizational learning;

- 2.5-3.0: High organizational learning (Bertram-Elliott, 2015, p. 151).

Items 1 and 14 in the PPOLQ were worded in such a way that an answer of *frequently* would denote low organizational learning, not high organizational learning. For those two items, therefore, the scoring was reversed as follows: 1 for *frequently*, 2 for *sometimes*, 3 for *seldom/never*, and 0 for *uncertain*. These calculated scores helped answer RQ1.

Qualitative Phase

Following the quantitative phase, the qualitative phase consisted of interviews with six library staff member volunteers who returned the survey and expressed interest in participating in the interview phase of the study. The interviews, which were based on a standard interview protocol, focused on organizational learning processes and habits in their libraries. The information from these interviews strengthened understanding of the quantitative results, and served to answer the third research question of how library staff members in FPCUs experience organizational learning in their libraries. Interview participants represented both uncommon and typical examples from the overall survey respondents, based on standard deviation of organizational learning scores. The sample of interview participants provided a comprehensive view of how most library employees at FPCUs approach organizational learning and how some library employees may approach organizational learning differently.

Because the interview participants were geographically scattered, the interviews were conducted using online telephone software. Seitz (2015) suggested that participants may feel more at ease with this type of interview because they are in their own space for the interview instead of somewhere unfamiliar. Each interview was scheduled to last approximately 1 hour, though most were completed in a shorter time frame. The audio from the interviews was recorded, with transcripts completed based on the recordings.

Results and Discussion

The quantitative data collection processes resulted in the following data: an organizational learning score for each respondent and responses to library demographic questions. The organizational learning scores, which represented organizational learning capacity, helped answer the first quantitative research question: What capacity for organizational learning is present in libraries at FPCUs? Along with the organizational learning scores, the library demographic variables contributed to the second quantitative research question: Which FPCU library demographic variables are most strongly related to organizational learning capacity? The qualitative data collection processes resulted in interview recordings, transcripts, and notes. These data helped address the qualitative research question: How do library staff in FPCUs experience organizational learning in their libraries?

Characteristics of Survey Respondents and Libraries

The survey respondents reported various levels of experience, education, and positions within FPCU libraries. Table 1 lists the self-reported characteristics of survey respondents in this study.

The survey respondents were employed at FPCUs of various sizes and types. Table 2 lists the self-reported characteristics of the institutions for the survey respondents in this study.

Organizational Learning Scores

The mean organizational learning score for the 38 survey respondents was 2.34, which falls into the medium organizational learning range. Of all the respondents, 68% (n = 26) earned organizational learning scores in the medium range, while 32% (n = 12) earned organizational

learning scores in the high range. Descriptive statistics for organizational learning scores are displayed in Table 3.

In general, the answer to the first research question is that a medium capacity for organizational learning is present in libraries at FPCUs. According to Chen (2006) and Bertram-Elliott (2015), scores in the high category are necessary for optimizing operations because high organizational learning capacity indicates consistent double-loop learning.

Bertram-Elliott's (2015) study used the same ranges and method of calculating organizational learning scores as did this study, though the focus was on academic libraries in general, not only libraries at FPCUs. Bertram-Elliott's study included 15 FPCU library respondents, 4% of the total sample, with an average organizational learning score of 2.17. Though the score is within the medium range, it is lower than the mean score of 2.34 for the 38 respondents in this study, all from FPCUs.

Table 1 *Characteristics of Survey Respondents*

Respondent characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Position/rank	Student worker	0	0
	Staff/paraprofessional	1	3
	Professional librarian	13	34
	Professional other	0	0
	Department/area supervisor	9	24
	Head of the library	15	39
Highest degree attained	No college degree	0	0
	Associates degree	0	0
	Bachelor's degree	1	3
	Master's degree	36	95
	Doctorate degree	1	3
Do you have a MLS?	Yes	36	95
	No	2	5
Total years of experience	0-5 years	5	13
	6-10 years	10	26
	11-15 years	5	13
	16-20 years	5	13
	More than 20 years	13	34
Years at current institution	0-5 years	22	58
	6-10 years	13	34
	11-15 years	0	0
	16-20 years	1	3
	More than 20 years	2	5

Note: N = 38.

Organizational Learning Scores Related to Library Demographic Variables

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to see what, if any, relationships existed between the dependent variable (organizational learning score) and each of the seven independent variables. The seven independent variables were:

- number of FTE students enrolled at the institution,
- Carnegie classification of the institution,
- number of FTE librarians employed at the institution,

- whether the head of the library (director, dean, and so on) had an MLIS or equivalent degree,
- number of years the respondent had worked at the institution,
- whether the respondent had an MLIS or equivalent degree, and
- the respondent's position.

Table 2 *Characteristics of Survey Respondents' Institutions*

Institution characteristics		Frequency	Percent
Student enrollment FTE	Fewer than 500	9	24
	500-999	4	11
	1,000-2,999	6	16
	3,000-4,999	1	3
	5,000-6,999	3	8
	7,000-8,999	2	5
	9,000-10,999	0	0
	11,000 or more	13	34
Institutional type	Associate's college	5	13
	Baccalaureate college	15	39
	Master's college or university	7	18
	Doctoral university	7	18
	Special focus institutions	4	11
Does the head of the library have a MLS?	Yes	34	89
	No	4	11
Number of library employees FTE	Fewer than 1	0	0
	1-5	15	39
	6-10	7	18
	11-15	8	21
	16-20	3	8
	21-25	0	0
	26 or more	5	13
Number of librarians FTE	Fewer than 1	2	5
	1-5	15	39
	6-10	11	29
	11-15	4	11
	16-20	2	5
	21-25	1	3

26 or more 3 8

Note: N = 38.

Table 3 *Descriptive Statistics for Organizational Learning Scores*

Measure	Organizational learning score range		All scores
	Medium	High	
Mean	2.21	2.62	2.34
Median	2.25	2.58	2.35
Standard deviation	0.24	0.12	0.28
Range	0.90	0.30	1.25
N	26	12	38

Table 4 *Variables Significantly Related to Organizational Learning Score*

Independent variable	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Students: 500-999	-.64	.25	-.70	-2.52	.024
Students: 1000-2999	-.49	.12	-.64	-3.93	.001
Students: 5000-6999	-.33	.15	-.31	-2.17	.046
Carnegie: Doctoral university	-.49	.15	-.67	-3.31	.005
Librarians: 26 or more	-.85	.22	-.82	-3.88	.001
Position: Head of the library	.20	.09	.35	2.14	.050

Table 4 shows the coefficients for each of the significant independent variables, including significance results for those coefficients.

The independent variable that had the most statistically significant relationship with organizational learning score was the number of FTE students. All three of the statistically significant groups (500-999 students, 1000-2999 students, and 5000-6999 students) showed a negative relationship with organizational learning score; the pattern that emerged is that the more students enrolled at an institution, the lower the organizational learning score for the library.

Combined with the statistically significant finding that libraries who employed 26 or more librarians also had a negative relationship with organizational learning score, the conclusion is that larger libraries serving larger institutions were more likely to have lower organizational learning scores. The finding that libraries at institutions classified as Doctoral Universities in the Carnegie classification also had a negative relationship with organizational learning score further supports this idea because institutions with that classification tend to be larger research universities. Bertram-Elliott (2015) similarly found that libraries serving fewer students and with fewer students per librarian had higher organizational learning scores.

The inverse relationship between size and organizational learning score could be due to increased difficulty communicating within the library when there are a larger number of employees. Another possibility is that library employees with fewer colleagues or at smaller schools must be more resourceful, and therefore compensate for fewer human resources with better organizational learning strategies, especially due to the importance of retaining institutional knowledge when a member of a small staff leaves the institution.

Another finding that neared significance ($p = .05$) and should be mentioned was that survey respondents who were the head of the library were more likely to have higher organizational learning scores. A possible explanation for this finding is that library directors and deans may have a broader view of all the processes and connections at work in the library and therefore be more likely to respond to the survey questions with full information about their library. A professional librarian from the same library may rate their library lower on some of the PPOLQ statements simply because the librarian is not aware of all the strategies in place. Additionally, some of the PPOLQ statements focused on individual practices related to organizational learning, for example, "I give feedback to my library colleagues when they

explain their ideas to me” and “the library gives me substantial supports (e.g., finance, time off) to professional development I undertake.” Library directors and deans may engage in these activities more often because of the nature of their jobs, or have greater support for professional development because of the high profile of their role in the library versus a librarian.

Experiencing Organizational Learning

Several themes emerged early in the interview process, including a common theme of external pressures from the larger institution making organizational learning more difficult for the library. Other themes included communication and decision making. Interview participants also mentioned various organizational learning strategies they used in their libraries.

External pressures. Four of the six interview participants described institutional problems or pressures that externally affected the organizational learning capabilities of the library. One interview participant described an unstable and “chaotic” institutional environment that contributed to high turnover in library staff and inconsistent expectations for the library as a department. The participant blamed “the external pressures of just the craziness, utterly ridiculousness that is our culture” for an average of 100% turnover every year in library employees, with the exception of the participant, who had been with the institution for about 6 years.

Another participant talked about a large organizational change that completely shifted the way the library was staffed and the work the library staff members did almost overnight. The participant said that the administration of the institution did not consult staff in the library, or other affected departments, before making the change, or even warn them it was coming: “that was definitely a top of the college down decision. That was pushed on to everybody It was this is how it’s going to be done.” The change necessitated the library staff members to develop

new procedures and organizational structures, including a large reduction in the number of library staff, as well as new strategies for communicating with one another and external departments.

A third participant commented that their “challenges tend to be within the context of what challenges the institution is facing.” That institution grew quickly, expanding to multiple campuses within just a few years and causing changes to the library’s staffing models and other procedures.

Several participants mentioned pressures due to accreditation or licensing requirements, and challenges with budgets set by the overall institutional leadership. One participant discussed the budget issue in regard to employment at a different FPCU previous to the current position saying that the institution’s administration would respond “no, we can’t afford to do that because they needed to funnel budget into admissions and recruitment” when approached to approve library initiatives.

In the first example from the library with the high turnover, the interview participant directly attributed some of their organizational learning practices to combatting that challenge, specifically a robust onboarding system that incorporated a formal 6-week process with daily tasks and assessment points:

I started [designing the onboarding process] when I first came on board and after the past year, I guess it was a year and 3 months, I realized that I have a whole new staff and I thought this is crazy. So that’s when I started building everything as best as I could. And with the new turnover of staff, I would say those training materials probably get updated or touched about every 3 months.

Of the three interview participants whose libraries had organizational learning scores in the high range, two reported significant external pressures from the larger institutional environment that made organizational learning more challenging. Conversely, two of the three interview participants whose libraries had organizational learning scores in the medium range reported little pressure of that kind, with one stating “we’re just kind of left to our own devices.” One possibility based on these data is that the external pressures may have helped foster organizational learning. Knowing the challenges they faced, the library staff members were proactively taking steps to keep their libraries as stable as possible despite the external conditions.

Communication. All six interview participants talked about communication in their libraries, including the difficulties surrounding communication, the benefits of it, and the strategies they used to communicate better. One participant commented: “communication is always a challenge and that’s part of this knowledge transfer.” Participants approached this challenge in various ways.

The staffing structures at the participants’ libraries were all unique, with many instances of team members who worked in different physical locations. Some had library teams that were all completely remote and online. Others had some campus-based library staff members and some remote library staff members: “And there’s a team of online librarians and then there’s the on-ground librarians and there’s not always good communication between them.” Another situation was library staff working at campuses that are geographically scattered. One of the participants was a solo librarian working to build the campus-based library at a brand new college. Even the one participant who described a more traditional structure, with library

colleagues working down the hall from one another, also mentioned a part-time team member who worked from home.

Again, the challenge of making a team work when the team members were in different physical locations forced the library staff members to proactively find ways to communicate better. One participant explained:

We found that one meeting in a week wasn't enough so we were also finding that every other week we would do—we call it a wake up with the library team meeting. People are just supposed to like have their cup of coffee at their computer while we meet. It's as informal as our meetings get. There's no agenda; it's just an opportunity every other week for us to talk about things that maybe never made it on an agenda or that kind of thing.

Two participants used almost the exact same phrase to express the “constant communication” between members of their library teams. Another expressed that “communication is very key.” A third participant discussed the importance of informal communication:

I would say [communication is] pretty high, like I said, the supervisor's office is just down from my cube. I'm in there, oh, probably four or five times a day just discussing you know an interesting article I saw or a little side project I've been working on and you know progress of that, whether he's heard of anything we need to work on, you know, to pass on to me, things of that nature. Like I said, I'm in there like probably four or five times a day.

While this participant's library team was able to achieve informal communication through face-to-face interactions, other library teams whose members participated in interviews could achieve it through instant messaging and other technological strategies

One participant talked about the communication that happens with colleagues outside of the library, saying “most of the activities that I perform to get my job done, to move library services forward and be successful, involve my relationships and interactions with people that are not within my reporting line.” This statement spoke to the interconnectivity of the library and other departments within the institution.

Whether within a library team or with others outside of the library, communication played a significant role in organizational learning at the libraries whose librarians took part in the interviews. Because of the obvious link between communication and transferring knowledge, it is a critical organizational learning process.

Decision making. Within each interview, and based on the interview protocol, each participant talked through the process their library undertook recently to solve a problem or challenge. Their answers highlighted the various decision making strategies within their libraries. Overall, four of the participants described extremely collaborative approaches to decision making. One described a more fragmented, fend-for-yourself type of environment. The final participant described a top-down approach to decision making.

One participant described meeting with the library leaders about a concern with the workload the librarians were expected to take on. The participant presented potential solutions: “I certainly made sure that I brought a list of suggestions when I initially had that conversation with managers.” The managers were “receptive to the feedback and they immediately started making changes as much as they could.” Ultimately, however, the details of those changes would “definitely be mostly collaborative,” though, “some of it has to be top-down when bigger decisions are made” that might affect other departments.

Another participant described the library's collaborative process to work on creating online subject guides: "So the lead librarian and I sat together and we kind of hashed out the first, what we wanted the first 10 topics to be." Another participant talked about the process of designing the physical library space with a stakeholder who was very involved in the process. The participant proposed a library layout based on the parameters of the room and the goals of the space. When the stakeholder had a certain vision these recommendations did not meet, the stakeholder "proposed changes" but also relied heavily on the participant's expertise with libraries. The participant explained that the stakeholder "wanted to know what I thought." The end result was a consensus that made everyone happy.

A fourth participant explained a collaborative process, but with layers of approvals:

So, for example, if we're working on an initiative that will impact [some of the] campuses, my direct authority with regards to the provost, so the provost supervises the conversations, but I only really include him if there's a problem. But my main goal is to get buy-in from the executive directors of the . . . campuses that are impacted, as well as the academic dean buy-in, as well as the buy-in from the individual librarians making sure that initiative is carried out. And then it goes through an academic council as well which is comprised of basically all program directors and then also academic department leaders.

By the time the decision is approved in this scenario, many people have signed off on it, which likely means a more successful implementation, but with a lot of initial work to get to that point.

The fifth participant described an environment in which there was not much support from other library colleagues. The only librarian on the campus, the participant was connected to librarians on other campuses through email and a corporate library group that oversaw the

libraries as a whole. The participant needed to weed the physical library collection on campus because the library space was decreasing in size. The participant related the process used to reach out to colleagues for help, with little success: “I contacted the corporate people to see if they had any recommendations. And they didn’t really.” The participant then reached out to librarians on other campuses, but none had experience with a massive weeding project, “so I didn’t get much help from them.” The participant finally researched to make a plan that involved incorporating the opinions of faculty members on the campus. The process described was one of isolation and fragmentation between the campuses and the corporate library employees.

Finally, one of the participants spoke about the top-down process used for making decisions for the library and team, emphasizing the participant’s own role as the person who ultimately must take responsibility for the decision: “If it’s a library-related issue, then I have to determine the most appropriate response to meet the expectations.” This strategy may come from the heavy business environment described at the institution:

It’s all based on the business case that I make for what I want to do, how do I want to approach a resolution of the problem. And that’s, that’s pretty much the answer to any question in my organization is what, what do you provide for the business, the business argument for proceeding in the way you wish to proceed, and so that’s what I really had to be very conscious of in every decision making situation and it does not usually that [pause] that it’s a [pause and laughs] how to put this, um, among my team members it’s not a democratic consensus decision. It’s, it’s generally I’m meeting the expectations of stakeholders at a higher level and so when, sometimes when I’m presenting the solution that has to do with business needs that are outside the realm of libraries. It’s, so I have a

bigger picture of what, what arguments are going to hold water, so to speak, with the powers that be.

However, the participant clarified that if the decision was “internal-facing” with no “visible impact on students or on the institution itself,” then “nobody else cares how we do it.” In those cases, the decision-making process is more collaborative: “We talk about it as a team, I do some assigning, I also allow a lot of flexibility with who feels that they really want to tackle something while someone else doesn’t.” Circumstances played a role in decision-making at this participant’s institution.

Collaborative decision making in which the library leader acted more as a facilitator for a team decision may have contributed to higher organizational learning because members of the team were able to share their knowledge to help move the organization forward.

Organizational learning strategies. Interview participants mentioned a variety of organizational learning strategies, largely related to communication (transferring knowledge) and professional development (creating knowledge). Two strategies mentioned by each of the six participants were webinars and funds from their institution for professional development. Five out of the six interview participants mentioned conferences, a local archive, and conference calls or regular team meetings.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data and Findings

This study used the sequential explanatory method; the qualitative phase of research followed the quantitative phase and helped to explain the quantitative results in more depth. In this type of study, integration of the quantitative and qualitative data and findings happens only in a discussion of the ways the results of each phase are connected. Following is a discussion of

how the qualitative results helped explain the quantitative results. Both sets of findings were integrated to reach conclusions about organizational learning in the libraries at FPCUs.

Organizational learning strategies. As indicated, interview participants mentioned a variety of organizational learning strategies in use at their libraries. Table 5 details the number of organizational learning strategies mentioned compared with the organizational learning score of the participant’s library.

Table 5 Organizational Learning Scores and Strategies Mentioned by Participant

Organizational learning score	Organizational learning score range	No. of organizational learning strategies mentioned
2.10	Medium	11
2.25	Medium	10
2.45	Medium	16
2.50	High	14
2.50	High	7
2.80	High	8

The number of organizational learning strategies mentioned does not have a linear relationship with the organizational learning score. This could be due to the nature of the interviews. The participants were not asked to name all the organizational learning strategies their institutions employed, the researcher simply counted each time a participant happened to mention a specific strategy. Therefore, the strategies the participants named cannot be assumed to be an exhaustive list of all organizational learning strategies the institution used.

External pressures. Though interview participants described external pressures that affected their libraries, the PPOLQ results told a different story. Item 17 on the PPOLQ is “This library develops new routines because the library reflects on itself, not because of external pressures.” Overall, 42.1% of survey respondents answered *Frequently*, indicating that external pressures were not having a large effect on organizational learning; 55.3% answered *Sometimes*

and just one respondent answered *Seldom/Never*. The numbers are even more striking when only the interview participants are taken into account: 66.7% answered *Frequently* and 33.3% answered *Sometimes*. Contrasted with the findings in the interviews, this may indicate that survey respondents felt more in control of their library's progress than they actually were.

Funds for professional development. One of the PPOLQ items included in the survey was "The library gives me substantial supports (e.g., finance, time off) to professional development I undertake." Table 6 outlines the responses to that survey question. The average score for that item was low, 1.95, when all responses are taken into consideration; the mean for only the interview participants was slightly lower at 1.83.

Table 6 Responses for the Supports for Professional Development Survey Question

Group	Mean	Median	Frequently	Sometimes	Seldom/never	Uncertain
All survey respondents	1.95	2	36.8%	23.7%	29.0%	7.9%
Interview participants	1.83	2	50.0%	0.0%	33.3%	16.7%

However, the interview participants all described some form of financial support for professional development. The apparent dissonance between the survey results and the interviews may indicate that the library employees do not consider the support they receive to be substantial or sufficient.

Limitations

This study had some limitations that may affect the interpretation of the findings. For one, the number of respondents resulting from online surveys administered via electronic mailing list are typically lower than using other methods. A survey of a larger sample of library employees in FPCUs may result in additional significant findings related to relationships between organizational learning score and demographic variables. Second, all survey and

interview participants were recruited from an electronic mailing list sponsored by the ACRL. This indicates that all participants already had some understanding of the importance of continued learning and communication, and some desire for it. Surveys and interviews of library employees unaware of this mailing list or uninterested in it may have resulted in different findings. A recommendation for future research might be a similar study where participants are recruited via postal mail after the researcher identifies FPCUs with libraries throughout the United States.

Conclusions and Implications

Organizational learning is an important process for academic libraries, leading to creating lasting changes, and enhanced effectiveness and innovation for the library. These benefits are particularly impactful in the libraries of FPCUs, where more students in the United States are turning for their education than ever before. The results of this study suggested that, on average, the organizational learning capacity of libraries at FPCUs was at the medium level. However, organizational learning capacity at the high level is necessary for the flexibility and innovation required in today's environment. Library leaders, therefore, should be aware of the factors that contribute to organizational learning, as well as strategies to increase organizational learning in their libraries.

For one, larger libraries are more likely to have lower organizational learning capacity, indicating that larger staff sizes may increase the complexity of communication and transfer of knowledge. Organizations that emphasize teamwork as a part of their culture are also likely to have higher capacity for knowledge management, which is a key component of organizational learning. Teamwork facilitates sharing learning throughout an organization, which is a factor in transferring knowledge from an individual to the organization.

Proactive efforts toward communication, through regular team meetings, informal discussions between colleagues, and one-on-one meetings between leaders and library employees, is one strategy to increase organizational learning capacity in a library organization. Another is developing onboarding processes that include regularly updated manuals, and perhaps even a formal curriculum for new employees. Additionally, library leaders can support learning throughout their libraries by providing support for library employees to attend trainings, conferences, webinars, and other learning opportunities. This support should include monetary support when possible, but also through promoting learning opportunities, allowing time away from other tasks in order to pursue learning, and rewarding employees who prioritize learning through the performance review process. Finally, sharing and storing learning is crucial to translate individual learning to organizational learning. Library leaders can have employees report back about a learning experience, and even plan and teach colleagues based on a training they attended.

Organizational learning is a team effort. Leaders and managers who are committed to organizational learning strategies and processes can have a significant impact on the organizational learning capacity of their library environments. On an individual level, library workers can also do their parts to practice and encourage organizational learning strategies as a part of their work responsibilities. The result is libraries that are more prepared to innovate, adapt, and work effectively, better situating them to serve their students and other users.

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