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Organizational Learning in Libraries at For-Profit Colleges and Universities

Julie Evener, MLIS, EdD

PROBLEM AND PURPOSE

There is a gap in knowledge about organizational learning in the libraries of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCUs) in the United States. Though for-profit institutions are educating an increasing number of American students, few research studies have focused on the libraries in FPCUs. Academic libraries contribute to student engagement, student learning, and retention; therefore, the effects of improved library services for students at FPCUs may be positive and long lasting.

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed-methods study was to assess and explore the use of organizational learning in libraries at FPCUs.

RELEVANT SCHOLARSHIP

Double-loop learning is more effective for organizational learning than is single-loop learning (Argyris & Schon, 1978).

Individual learning (training/professional development) is important for organizational learning (Antonacopoulou, 2006), but must be communicated to the larger organization (Fiol & Lyles, 1985).

Academic libraries contribute to student **achievement** (Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud, 2017), **retention** (Murray, Ireland, & Hackathorn, 2016), **learning** (Squibb & Mikkelsen, 2016), and **engagement** (Soria et al., 2017).

Predictors of organizational learning in academic libraries include **library size** (number of employees and number of students) and **librarian experience and education** (Bertram-Elliott, 2015; Huang, 2014).

Though organizational learning has been applied to academic libraries, the current literature lacks clear outlines for effective application (Limwichtir, Broady-Preston, & Ellis, 2015).

The libraries at FPCUs are rarely studied or mentioned in the literature (Davis et al., 2011).

FRAMEWORK

The theory of organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978) provided the framework for this study.

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?

FINDINGS

RQ1: Organizational learning score (M = 2.3) indicated medium level of organizational learning based on Bertram-Elliott's (2015) scale

RQ2: Number of FTE students had a statistically significant relationship with organizational learning score.

RQ3 Primary Themes:

- External pressures made organizational learning more difficult
- Communication was key to promote organizational learning
- Decision making processes contributed to organizational learning
- Library staff used a variety of organizational learning strategies, including:

Webinars

Funds for professional development

Conferences

Local archive of information
Conference calls/regular team meetings

“Challenges tend to be within the context of what challenges the institution is facing.”

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

“Communication is always a challenge and that’s part of this knowledge transfer.”

PARTICIPANTS

38 library staff members from FPCUs in the U.S. participated in the quantitative survey. The survey was administered through the Librarianship in For-Profit Educational Institutions (LFPEI) interest group electronic mailing list sponsored by the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL).

6 survey respondents participated in the qualitative interviews. These individuals all indicated their willingness to participate in the interviews via a question on the survey.

INTERPRETATION

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To increase organizational learning:

- Proactive efforts toward communication;
- Develop and regularly update onboarding processes;
- Provide support, including monetary, for library employees to attend trainings, conferences, and other learning opportunities;
- Develop processes and resources for sharing and storing learning.

Future research:

- Broader study of FPCU libraries with more participants;
- Study of libraries at traditional colleges and universities, comparing to FPCUs.

REFERENCES AND SUPPLEMENTS



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