



ACADEMIC LIBRARY AS SOCIALLY RELEVANT INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT :

In the ever changing society, higher education scenario is experiencing the change in many forms. Along with the change in institutes of higher education, the libraries associated with them are also changing proactively. The change has come traditionally, technologically and socially. This paper analyze the changes in higher education, changes in academic libraries and finally put forward some practical suggestions to make academic libraries a proper socially responsible organ of the institution.



KEYWORDS : *Academic Library, Social responsibility, Third place, Knowledge generation.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Change is the most important thing in the life of any individual or an institution. Adaptability to change is the most important required criteria for survival. Libraries, being a social institution, need the quality most, as it deals with the society directly. If libraries cannot change with the need of the society, then it will not survive or be relevant with the changing need of the society. If we scan through the library and information science literature, we can see that there were mainly four types of libraries namely: National, Public, Academic and Special. But with the passage of time, we can see the emergence of other types of libraries like community library, public-academic joint library, talking library etc. Now, the most valuable question can be asked –“WHY?” Why do we need community libraries, when we have public libraries? Why do we need joint libraries when we have both the libraries separately? The answer of these questions is simple – we need them badly to cope up with the changing need of the society and to remain socially relevant. ‘Socially relevant’ is an important term. Anything, which is not relevant to the majority of the society, is first overlooked and gradually superseded by something new. Libraries cater to the information needs of the members of the society. Presently, being the era of information and communication technology, members of the society have many electronic options to retrieve the required information. Libraries have many problems like shrinking budget, increasing – better to say exponentially increasing price of information product and above all increased avenues of information access for society. All of these factors force libraries to search for or explore different options for their survival. In the present paper, we will try to find out the present day need of the libraries to be the heart of the institution or to be a relevant actor rather than an ornamental organ of the institution.

2. ACADEMIC ACTIVITY – PAST AND PRESENT:

Let us start with the social changes. Human civilization had passed through the food gatherer and hunter society, agricultural based society and industrial society. We are now in the information society. It is

also branded as knowledge intensive society, learning economy, learning society etc. In terms of sociologists, the society of present is leveled as post-modern, post-structural, disorganized capitalist, post-industrial and post-Fordist society. With these changes in the society, higher education scenario in all over the world had undergone a paradigmatic shift from past to present and still to be born future. Now, let us see what major changes are happening in higher education scenario.

Criteria	Old system	New or tense to be
Course content	University / college have these pre settled courses. An applicant has to choose from these courses, irrespective of what he or she wants to learn.	As a candidate, I have these requirements, please arrange for the custom designed course for me.
Course Schedule	University / college have their own schedule or session. If a candidate wants to join any course, he has to follow the schedule pre-determined by the authorities.	The study schedule is flexible. If a learner wishes to learn any new thing, she/he does not have to wait for the new session. He may join the course in his own time and continue in his own pace.
University / college as place	The candidate had to go to the institution for getting admission, attending courses, giving examination, getting marks / grades. So it is a place concept with physical existence to the candidate.	It is a physical place (may be) as well as an idea (must be). A candidate may do anything what he can do in any university / college traditionally without being physically present there.
Achievements	Here the achievement of a candidate is reflected by successfully completing a course and getting a degree. It is a terminal thing. The main aim was to get a certificate.	Learning is accepted as a life-long process, where learning itself is much more important than getting a formal degree.
Institutions of higher education in society	Institutions of higher education were like the ivory towers in the society, where only few, very few get the chance to study and research out of tax payer's money.	Institutions of higher education are like partners of society in moving forward. Not only they are partners, but also they are the part of the society. Every person belonging to every sphere of society has the right to ask "what are you doing with public money?"
Clientele group	Students are the main clients of the higher educational institutions and that is also belonging to 18 to 30 years age group.	Any one, practically everyone from cradle to grave can be the student as institutions cannot exclude anyone due to his age.
Medium of learning	Printed books and journals were the primary medium of learning.	Information on demand is the medium of learning.
Central theme	Institution centric or traditionally oriented course structure.	Market driven course structure.

Location centric	Delivery of learning is classroom based.	Delivery of learning is possible virtually in everywhere through the extensive use of Information and Communication Technology.
Funding	Government funded.	Market or learner funded.
Role of technology	Technology was seen as an expense.	Technology was seen as a differentiator between advanced and moderate merit.

After going through all these paradigmatic shifts, the major question that haunts us – why? One readymade answer is available with us. The extensive use of information and communication technology in every segment of life is the major change driver. Along with this major change agent, there are some more change factors like changing demands in the workplace, changes in the student types and last but not the least, the changing economic scenario. Employers now prefer candidates with some knowledge of ICT with an emphasis on analytic skills. Student demography shows the increasing number of older students who prefer to study outside the normal school timings and the need is to be considered in current academic delivery system. Economic conditions are also a vital agent of change in higher education segment. With higher operating cost due to higher number of student enrollment and gradually decreasing government budget, higher education institutions are facing real challenge in getting the operating cost from the market. Apart from these, there are some more change factors as mentioned by Corral (2002), like political (through the enactment of various laws like intellectual property right, right to information act, data protection act etc.); social (which includes ageing population, cultural diversity, geographical diversity, globalization, digital divide etc.); economic (includes global business opportunities, electronic business and commerce, information cost, knowledge assets.) and technological (high end connectivity, virtual environments, web portals etc.). So, all these factors bring the change in the higher education segment.

3. ACADEMIC LIBRARY – THE CHANGE

Along with all these changes, libraries associated with these higher educational institutions are changing themselves or at least trying to change. The change can be summarized in three ways as traditionally, technologically and socially.

Changing traditionally stands for the collection development more aggressively to be based on more client oriented to meet the needs of majority of the clients, human resource development etc.

Changing technologically stands for the increased application of information and communication technologies in day to day library operation along with introduction of new ICT driven services towards the clients. We may cite the examples of digital library, institutional repositories etc.

Last but not the least one is changing socially. Mixing with society, joining with the major stakeholders of the society, providing importance to the socially vulnerable groups, reaching out the boundaries of the higher educational institutions and catering to the needs of the local community can make an academic library socially relevant.

“As we talk about connectivity, we need to talk about not only connectivity electronically, but connecting people and providing programs that reflect and meet the needs of the communities we serve.” The quotation reflects the present day need of the libraries in a proper way. Now let us check major reasons of societal changes in the academic libraries.

Previously, academic library services were communal in nature. What is ‘communal’ in a library? Communal activity in a library is a solitary activity, studious, contemplative and quiet in nature. ‘Conversation dampens the spirit of the academic library activity’ was the thought of most of the academic libraries and still in most of the cases, it continues.

4. THE TRANSFORMED LIBRARY

Presently, we can see a shift from this age old communal model of library activity towards a more social model. Allowing conversation in the library, creating group study space, developing information commons, installing recreation points like cafeteria etc are examples of these social activities. All these are done to register a good or healthier gate count – better to say to attract a number of students or faculties to the library. Apart from internal members of the institutions, the library should welcome community people for betterment of themselves. Libraries should not only change for getting more customers but also for creation of knowledge. The concept of collaborative group study is emphasized by the major works in sociology of knowledge. It suggests that knowledge is not created or produced by a singular researcher working in a solitary study carrel in a library. Knowledge creation is a social process. Knowledge itself is seen as socially constructed. It is very true that students armed with lots of library books or resources, interacting with each other, exchanging ideas with each other, making required correction from the reference documents are better placed in knowledge creation than any solitary reader conversing with only library resources.

The social vs. communal debate can go on but gradually libraries are moving towards social model for their own existence.

Apart from being more social and conducive for knowledge creation, libraries are gradually trying to meet the need of the 'third place' in the institution and society. What is third place? In the 'great good place' Ray Oldenburg defines the significance of the third place. Third place is the place – not home or not work place but a neutral community place where people come together voluntarily and informally in ways that level the social inequalities and promote community engagement and social connection among them. Now an academic library should promote the socialization opportunity to the students, other staff members as well as to the local community members. The library can act as a secular third place where information and idea can be exchanged and transferred across individuals with the unique feature in terms of the resources. Easily accessible resources and rich in content and low cost information barrier are ideal for the consultation purpose. Sometimes, libraries can act not only as a neutral third place but also act as a catalytic agent for creating a third social force.

There is another issue that is coming up is the issue of social responsibility of the academic library. Whenever the term responsibility is used, a sense of 'must do' comes along with it. Performing the social responsibility is no more regarded as an extension activity of the library rather it has become a regular activity of the academic libraries.

Now, after going through these reasons of socialization of the academic libraries, the most important part that is coming up is – How. How to integrate or involve society in general with the academic library?

Let us examine some practical academic library service oriented modifications can be done to integrate the society with the community members.

1. Extending the reading cum reference section facilities to the passed out students of the institute.

Expected Outcomes:

- Academic: After completion of the three years graduate level study in institute, in normal course, students have to leave the institute. This creates an academic gap in them. To bridge the gap institute libraries may open up their services towards these ex-students of the institute.
- Psychological: After graduation, a small percentage of student get chances to pursue the higher education like post graduation level. Other 'not so meritorious' students suddenly get disengaged from everything. This disengagement creates a psychological vacuum in them. Institute libraries may open up their doors to these students to fill up the vacuum.
- Interaction: Students in a degree institute usually comes from various backgrounds, various localities. They meet and exchange their ideas in the institute only. After completion of the institute, they get scattered in their various locations thereby stopping the fruitful interaction. Libraries, by opening up

their services to these students allow them a space for interaction not only between themselves but also between veteran students and present students. The interaction part is important, as they can share information, experiences etc with others.

2. Extending the reading cum reference section facilities to the students of various distant education study centers situated in the institute.

Expected Outcomes:

- Academic: Distance education is mainly intended for those who cannot access regular education for various reasons like distance, job responsibilities etc. They usually keep contact with the university through the study centers situated in various institutes. The institute libraries may provide them the scope to study using the library resources which can benefit them academically.
- Sharing: As these study center students are coming from various locations, varying backgrounds, varying ages and various professions, present students can interact and learn from them. And it is the nature of experience and information that if shared it increases. It would be mutually beneficial for both outsiders and insiders.
- Interaction: It is the most important thing. Students would be exposed to different types of people in an academic setting. Debate, discussions can increase the understanding of different cultures. It would increase the social inclusiveness.

3. Extending the reading cum reference section facilities to the community members not associated with the institute.

Expected outcome:

- Spreading academic environment and information awareness: It will be a true approach towards "reaching the unreached". Whenever, a library opens her door to the community members then they will come for, say, newspaper reading or serious reading, the academic environment and academic inquisitiveness will grow within them. They spread the academic environment outside. In this respect, we can quote Malala Yousufzai "One child, one book, one teacher and one pen can be the solution. Education is the only solution. Education first." Through reading of various newspapers, a neutral concept can grow among them regarding any incident and form their own judgment regarding that incident.
- Exchange of ideas and information: The library can act as a center of exchange as well as repository of various types of information. Local people bring with them the local history heritage and their own indigenous knowledge and most importantly the oral tradition of the locality. Library can be a place (if it wish) of interchange or exchange of the ideas and information. It can store the local heritage as well as the oral tradition for outside world and generations to come. Library may organize discussions where people belonging to the institute family as well as outsiders would participate and discuss any issue. But it is worth mentioning here that informal chats are more lasting and influential than any formal discussion.

4. Establishment of a local history collection center in the library:

Expected outcome:

- Preservation of local heritage: The library may start a new initiative in establishing a local history collection center, which will collect, preserve and display the local heritage for the inquisitive people and the generations to come. The local heritage will include manuscripts, coins, old relics, even photographs of various local monuments etc.
- Community involvement: In collecting the local heritage, at first institute library may take the initiatives through the volunteering act of the regular users of the library. It may seem that only these people are doing their job, but overall community is looking into their activities. When the members of the local

communities get convinced regarding the library's good intention they would also come forward for to make it a success. It is the duty of the library staff members and also library patrons to convince the local community members about the initiative and its long term usefulness in society.

- Interaction with the community: The initiative will include two types of interaction like interaction with the members of the community who actively participate in the collection development process of the local history collection museum and second are the interaction with the members who get in the library to visit the museum.

5. Establishment of cultural center in the library:

Expected outcome:

- Literary circle: Institute library may organize a monthly literary meet comprising of students and some interested community members. There they can discuss any recent topic of interest. Through the discussion, conception regarding many events may get cleared. Moreover an exchange of ideas will happen between academic community and local community.
- Establishing an arts and craft center: Library may create a center for arts and craft for the students as well as community members. This will surely provide a place for good creative interaction.

6. Organizing informative seminar, talk on regular basis:

Expected Outcome:

- Information sharing: If the institute organizes informative seminars with key resource persons and makes the seminar open to all, then people inside and outside the institute will be benefitted. As example, a seminar on cancer or HIV can be organized. People need these types of awareness programs as well as the technical knowhow of prevention. People will come and get informed.
- Interaction: More knowledge or information can be generated through sharing of experiences and questions regarding the topic of the talk.

We can sum up the paper with the conclusion that, academic libraries should come out from their age old traditional functions and integrate with the society. It will increase the importance of the library in the institute as well as in the society. It will increase the relevancy of the library in community as a whole. Changing socially is also important as changing technologically to justify the concept that – libraries are the heart of the institutions.

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