



Evidence Summary

Lack of Annual Reports Make it Difficult to Analyze Library Strategic Credibility

A Review of:

Staines, G. (2009). Towards an assessment of strategic credibility in academic libraries. *Library Management*, 30(3), 148-162.

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate whether libraries achieve strategic credibility by assessing if strategic planning goals match the achievements described in annual reports.

Design – Content analysis of annual reports and strategic plans from a sample of Association of Research Libraries (ARL).

Setting – Academic libraries in Canada and the United States of America.

Subjects – A random sample of 12 Canadian and 16 American academic libraries. All libraries were members of ARL.

Methods – The researcher contacted the directors of 28 ARL libraries and asked for

copies of their strategic plans and annual reports. She also visited the websites of libraries to obtain the reports. The contents of the strategic plans and annual reports were analyzed, and trends in the Canadian and American strategic plans were identified.

Main Results – This study found that only 39% of ARL libraries produce annual reports, making it difficult to assess if libraries have strategic credibility, as their strategic plans cannot be assessed against annual reports. The strategic plans gathered in this study were analyzed and emerging themes were identified. These included physical library space (renovations, expansions or new buildings); offsite storage; assessment (both of the libraries' services, and of information literacy training); development activities such as fundraising and marketing; and personnel

issues. Cultural differences also were found in the strategic plans, with American libraries being more focused on trends such as digitization and institutional repositories, and Canadian libraries' plans being more focused on users' needs. Trends in annual reports were not reported due to the small number of annual reports in the sample.

Conclusion – This study gives a snapshot of the trends in strategic plans of ARL members. It shows that many ARL members do not produce an annual report, and that it is therefore difficult to assess if their strategic plans are implemented successfully. The article hypothesizes that the communication of achievements may now be part of development and marketing efforts, rather than traditional annual reports.

Commentary

This study set out to investigate the connection between library strategic plans and annual reports, and to use this comparison to assess strategic credibility. No information is provided about the methods used for selecting the random sample of libraries, but the author should be commended for locating information about the availability of strategic plans and annual reports for all of her selection.

The study does not include matched pair comparisons of strategic plans and annual reports from the same library, which would have helped address the key research question of "whether strategic planning goals align with annual reports" (p. 148). The lack of annual reports from her sample libraries, and

therefore the lack of comparisons, means that this research question is not fully addressed; perhaps the study would have been better reframed as a content analysis of strategic plans, rather than tackling the strategic credibility of libraries.

The results section of this study gives information about how many libraries produce strategic plans and annual reports. Some of the figures given are problematic. Table I (p. 155) shows a total of 11 libraries publishing annual reports, but produces this total from the sum of seven for Canada and five for the United States. The text states that "only 11 libraries ... publish annual reports" (p. 155), but Table III also gives the total as 12 (p. 157). The article does not contain any obvious explanations for these discrepancies, and this does cast a shadow on some of the quantitative analysis.

The researcher used Association of College and Research Libraries criteria to carry out content analysis of the strategic plans and identified widespread trends, but the low number of annual reports meant trends could not be identified in the annual reports and little comparative work could be carried out.

Although the sample size is small, this exploratory study gives an insight into the themes found in the strategic plans of ARL libraries, and highlights the difficulty in assessing strategic credibility in the absence of library annual reports. There is scope for further research into other methods for assessing strategic credibility, especially as this study suggests alternative communication routes may be being used.