

Investigation and Reflection on the Organizational Structure of “985” University Libraries: Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] By investigating the current status of organizational structure configuration in domestic university libraries, and reviewing and analyzing reform practices, this study provides references for university libraries to rationally design organizational structures and better achieve organizational goals. [Method/Process] This research investigates and studies the organizational structure configuration and reform status of libraries in 39 domestic “985 Project” universities, statistically analyzes department configurations and newly added departments, classifies the current organizational structures of domestic university libraries into four types, and focuses on analyzing the reform characteristics and trends of university libraries that have undergone organizational structure reform practices. [Results/Conclusion] Several recommendations are proposed for the future development direction and priorities of organizational structure transformation in university libraries, including: seeking theoretical framework construction, considering both internal and external factors to rationally design organizational structures; conducting timely evaluation and feedback surveys; and identifying external elements to constitute new organizational structures.

Full Text

Preamble

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Investigation and Reflection on the Organizational Structure of “985 Project” University Libraries in China

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] This study investigates the current status of organizational structure in domestic university libraries and analyzes reform practices to provide reference for rational organizational design and improved achievement of institutional objectives. **[Method/Process]** Through survey research on organizational structures and reforms at 39 “985 Project” university libraries in China, we statistically analyzed departmental configurations and newly established departments, categorized current university library organizational structures into four types, and focused on analyzing reform characteristics and trends in libraries that have implemented organizational restructuring. **[Result/Conclusion]** The paper proposes several recommendations for future organizational reform in university libraries: seeking theoretical frameworks while balancing internal and external factors to design rational structures; conducting timely evaluation and feedback surveys; and incorporating external elements to form new organizational units.

Keywords: university library; organizational structure; organizational reform; library operations

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University libraries serve as institutional centers for information resource sharing and as information support hubs for teaching and research, providing comprehensive information services to users. Faced with rapid information technology development and evolving scholarly communication patterns, user information needs are constantly changing while library functions continue to expand. As organic entities, university libraries require rational organizational structures to cover all operations and services, enabling efficient functioning. They must also timely adjust these structures to adapt to new developments and ultimately achieve organizational goals.

University library organizational structures continuously evolve alongside technological updates and functional expansion. In the early 20th century, Chinese university libraries were small-scale with limited staff, focusing primarily on collection preservation, resulting in simple organizational structures centered on acquisition, cataloging, and binding processes. By the 1940s, influenced by computer technology applications, literature volume grew, organizational scale expanded, and functions shifted to balancing collection and use, leading to structures primarily based on paper document processing workflows. From the 1980s to 1990s, as computer and automation technologies were applied to library operations and reader information service needs diversified, libraries integrated the front-end of paper document processing and added departments for reader services, training, reference consultation, and automation technology. Since the 21st century, particularly after 2010, digital and multimedia resources have surged, internet 普及 has broadened knowledge dissemination channels, and university libraries have diversified services and operations while initiating digital

resource construction, prompting reconsideration of business reorganization and more rational organizational structures.

Regarding literature research, from the 1980s to 1990s, the profession began discussing principles for university library organizational design under new circumstances and technologies. In the early 21st century, accompanying China's higher education reforms and university mergers, research focused on coordinating main-branch library arrangements and organizational reforms in network environments. Since 2005, relevant literature has addressed four main aspects: (1) exploring organizational change models through business process reengineering in new environments, with library work shifting from "document collection" to "user services," necessitating flat, flexible, and networked structures; (2) research on establishing organizations for specific new technologies, services, and functions (such as RFID technology, subject services, reading promotion, and library consortia); (3) introductions and analyses of foreign university library restructuring practices, which have undergone repeated experimentation and adjustment with diminished traces of department-setting based purely on business functions; and (4) studies on organizational structure, model construction, and reform trends, showing that university library organizations evolve alongside functional changes and information technology development. In practice, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology Library established a working group for organizational restructuring in 2012, while Peking University Library proposed a five-year action plan and restructured its operations and organization in 2014.

Currently, theoretical research on university library organizational structure has seen some exploratory work, and some libraries have implemented reform practices. However, comprehensive analysis of current organizational structures in Chinese university libraries is needed, with particular focus on design concepts from reformed libraries to identify future trends and propose recommendations.

1 Current Status of Organizational Structure in Chinese University Libraries

This study examined libraries at 39 "985 Project" universities. While limited in scope, these libraries represent the forefront of Chinese university libraries in collection scale, staffing, operational level, and development degree, providing strong representativeness. The research employed online investigation and literature review methods to survey organizational structures.

1.1 Survey Overview

Through visits to the homepages of 39 "985 Project" university libraries, we obtained information on library profiles, organizational structures, and departmental responsibilities. Twenty libraries (51.28%) posted organizational charts; 22 (56.41%) provided clear departmental duty descriptions; and 10 (25.64%)

provided both. Nearly half of the libraries only listed department names without showing structural frameworks or detailed duty divisions.

Regarding departmental quantity, we counted business departments and administrative offices together, treating subject branch libraries or reading rooms with identical circulation/reading functions as single departments, while excluding affiliated institutions and academic committees. The distribution of departmental quantities across the 39 libraries is shown in Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]. Five to eight departments represent the mainstream configuration.

1.2 Departmental Setup

1.2.1 Department Naming Conventions Thirty-four libraries follow traditional “department”-based naming, with names reflecting the relatively stable document processing workflows established since the late 20th century. The “four departments plus one office” model—comprising Acquisition & Cataloging, Circulation & Reading, Information Consultation, Systems, and Administrative Office—constitutes a foundational, concise structure and remains highly prevalent. Based on organizational structures from 39 libraries and departmental duty descriptions on their websites, we analyzed and statistically categorized traditional business departments. For 17 libraries without detailed departmental function descriptions, we made judgments based solely on names. See Table 1 .

Table 1 shows that: (1) Literature acquisition and circulation/reading operations have stabilized without detailed subdivision. Separate Acquisition and Cataloging Departments are decreasing, with integrated acquisition-cataloging and unified construction of all literature types becoming the majority choice. Previously separate circulation and reading services, including newspaper/multimedia reading rooms, have merged into single “Reader Services Departments” or “Circulation & Reading Departments” under the influence of RFID technology and integrated borrowing-reading trends. (2) Information Consultation and Technology/Systems Departments show rich naming diversity without standardization. Information Consultation Departments typically encompass multiple functions: reader inquiries, training, resource utilization feedback and evaluation, retrieval services, and subject services. Libraries tend to choose names reflecting primary functions, with some specialized services (such as novelty search stations, information retrieval teaching and research offices, and intelligence analysis departments) becoming independent. Technology/Systems Departments emerged from widespread computer and network technology applications, differing from traditional paper document processing businesses. Academia and the profession have not yet standardized naming conventions for these functions. As libraries require increasingly diverse computer network technologies, these departments’ operations are further subdivided, spawning independent units like Digital Resources Department, Digital Library Research and Construction Center, and Multimedia Resources Center.

1.2.2 Newly Established Departments New departments have emerged alongside new functions and services, with further specialization deepening library services. Table 2 shows newly established departments across the 39 libraries. Investigation of specific functions revealed that some services listed in Table 2 are handled by existing basic business departments in certain libraries: reading promotion and marketing activities are typically managed by Reader Services or Circulation Departments; decision support services belong to Information Consultation or Subject Services; institutional repository construction is handled by Systems Department staff. Establishing these as independent departments with dedicated personnel improves efficiency and enhances service capacity.

1.3 Organizational Structure Analysis

Analyzing the 20 libraries with organizational charts and combining this with department setups from the remaining 19 libraries, we categorized current Chinese university library organizational structures into four types.

1.3.1 Linear Organizational Structure Most Chinese university libraries currently adopt linear structures, which clearly reflect basic library operations through traditional, stable business departments. This flat management model features direct command transmission and clear departmental boundaries. See Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper].

1.3.2 Main-Branch Library Structure University mergers and library expansions necessitate managing main-branch relationships. Typically, the main library handles resource construction, information services, and system support, while branch libraries establish their own offices and reader service departments for basic services (e.g., Shandong University Library, Sichuan University Library) or leverage 资源优势 to provide specialized subject services (e.g., Lanzhou University Library, Zhejiang University Library), coordinating with the main library's overall operations (see Figure 3 [Figure 3: see original paper]). Rational main-branch structures enable coordinated resource construction and planning while leveraging branch libraries' subject strengths for more comprehensive services.

1.3.3 Functional Division Structure This structure categorizes departments by work nature into functional, business, and affiliated institutions (see Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]). By grouping similar departments, this structure facilitates categorized management. Renmin University of China Library and Beijing Normal University Library employ this approach, with Fudan University Library using internal service, external service, and teaching/research institutions as departmental divisions for more targeted management and task allocation.

1.3.4 “Center + Work Group” Structure Rich information resources and diverse reader needs require multi-personnel, multi-department participation for successful activities, projects, or systematic information services. Breaking departmental barriers through cross-departmental teams is therefore viable. The “Center + Work Group” structure (see Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper]) establishes physical business centers that expand original departmental scopes to include more related operations and services, with shared virtual work groups under each center for flexible organization and deployment. This structure breaks administrative barriers between departments, highlights the “reader service” focus, and represents a widely explored reform model.

Peking University Library adopted a “Center + Cross-Institutional Team” structure to explore combining physical business departments with cross-departmental virtual teams. Based on future business development directions, it established seven major centers (six business centers and one functional department) and approximately ten cross-institutional teams. Shanghai Jiao Tong University Library used a “Department + Cross-Departmental Work Group” structure comprising six departments and multiple work groups, reorganizing departmental duties and 业务范围 while establishing virtual work groups to strengthen services. Both libraries conducted large-scale business modular integration, streamlining operations into six centers/departments. Shanghai Jiao Tong University Library merged literature resource acquisition, circulation, and reading services into a “Resources and Public Services Department,” boldly combining preliminary document processing and utilization businesses.

2 Organizational Structure Reform in Chinese University Libraries

Modern university libraries must meet not only research and teaching literature needs but also provide information support services. Users require not just individual books or document types but authoritative, accurate data collections with reference value. Librarians must process, refine, and integrate both internal and external information resources, analyze user needs, and proactively deliver information services. Organizational reforms should aggregate these integrated information services into centers or departments.

2.1 User-Oriented Organizational Design

Contemporary university libraries no longer organize solely by resource construction and utilization workflows but increasingly focus on “how to enable better resource use,” evolving from “document flow” to “information flow” to “people-centered” concepts. For the foreseeable future, all library work—including organizational design—will prioritize user needs, emphasizing service importance. “Users” encompass a broader scope than “readers,” including students, faculty, university administrators, government agencies, enterprises, other libraries, and

social organizations. Future organizational structures should accommodate diverse user needs.

Peking University Library's 2015 restructuring aimed to be "user-centered and service-oriented, with reader stratification and service differentiation, actively promoting the establishment of Peking University's literature information resource guarantee system." The new structure established Learning Support and Research Support Centers, integrating services by user level and need.

2.2 Modularized Business Reorganization

University library operations are increasingly complex, requiring reform to clarify relationships between various functions. Business processes should first be fragmented to identify relatively independent, technically specialized content with universal connections, which can be established as independent departments. For example, new departments like Marketing and Promotion or Research Cooperation departments play essential leading and supporting roles. Reorganization also requires modularization that blurs business boundaries and departmental barriers, grouping services with related content or similar user targets, or clustering operations with similar methods or document processing levels, forming flexible "physical center + virtual work group" structures.

2.3 Integrated Information as Organizational Service Goal

Investigation shows some libraries have implemented restructuring, innovation, and overall organizational reform, though all remain in exploratory stages. The Ministry of Education's revised *Regulations for Regular Higher Education Institution Libraries* (December 31, 2015) states in Article 6 that "higher education institutions should establish internal organizations and positions based on actual library work needs, clarifying responsibilities," without specifying concrete structures or duties. Libraries should comprehensively analyze external environmental changes and internal contradictions, designing rational structures from overall management and sustainable development perspectives while maintaining adaptability.

3 Recommendations for University Library Organizational Reform

3.1 Seek Theoretical Frameworks, Balance Internal and External Factors

Recent theoretical research on library organizational structure is limited, with few studies on Chinese university library reform models. Research can draw on systems theory and management principles, examining internal and external environmental change factors to clarify logical relationships between business functions and establish theoretical foundations for organizational design. Internal factors should be the research focus, as each library's history, staffing, and

conditions differ. Blind imitation of others' reforms may prove unsuitable. Theoretical frameworks should incorporate more internal considerations to build rational, personalized organizational systems.

3.2 Conduct Timely Evaluation and Feedback Surveys

Reform is never accomplished overnight. Whether organizational structures are rational and whether reforms have positive impacts requires time-based evaluation. Libraries should conduct regular, timely overall assessments and obtain feedback from staff and users post-reform. Prompt problem identification and solution adjustment are essential for finding appropriate organizational models.

3.3 Incorporate External Elements to Form New Organizations

University libraries are not isolated organizations. They maintain cooperative relationships with university departments, faculty and students, library consortia, government agencies, and enterprises, with services gradually extending beyond library walls. Libraries can deepen cooperation with these external elements to broaden business scope and jointly create new institutional departments. Examples include: collaborating with database vendors for deep processing and promotion of digital special collections; establishing research performance evaluation departments with university research and personnel offices; or creating information literacy training institutions with external enterprises. Chongqing University Library's "Cultural Education Center" comprises librarians, university student affairs staff, and library student management committees to organize cultural activities. Libraries should fully utilize external resources, strengthen various cooperation forms, and gradually develop fixed institutional departments to provide more branded products and services that expand library influence.

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Author Contributions

Chen Sitong: Designed research framework, investigated and analyzed data, wrote and revised the paper.

Na Chunguang: Proposed research ideas and guided topic selection.

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