

Engaging Faculty in a Discussion about the Future of Libraries

By Brenda L. Johnson

In this era of libraries needing to demonstrate return on investment and to justify their value to the institution, we all know it's more important than ever to include faculty in discussions about the library. In this article I want to share a recent example at Indiana University Bloomington of a forum intended to serve as the foundation for deep and ongoing engagement with faculty about the future of the libraries.

The impetus for the forum came from discussions with the provost about a report produced for a group of provosts around the country, authored by the Education Advisory Board, a consulting group based in Washington, D.C. Sometimes referred to as the Advisory Board, the group is essentially a think tank that works for both health care organizations and academia. This past year the provosts put the matter of the future of libraries on the agenda to be studied by the board. After learning more about their report, the provost and I agreed that it was important to begin an all-campus discussion of the issues summarized by the Advisory Board. Before continuing in my description of the forum, let me tell you a bit about what lead up to the forum and briefly describe the report.

I had known about the work being done by the Education Advisory Board for many months, since I had several long and thought-provoking phone calls with them, during which we discussed many topics. Their questions covered topics such as:

1. Assuming technology has displaced much of what has been traditional academic library turf, what do you think the academic library will look like in 5 to 10 years? What will be outsourced, eliminated, centralized, or moved to third party "cloud" services?
2. How has your library's budget changed in the last ten years and how will it change in the next ten years? How are decisions made about use of library resources?
3. How is your library assessed, and what are the key metrics for measuring "performance"? Which metrics are becoming irrelevant and which are emerging as central or what new metrics are needed? How is this data used?
4. Talk about managing change and what obstacles are the most challenging as you move forward with strategic plans and initiatives.
5. What does the future hold for librarianship? Do you need more specialists or more generalists, and where will they come from? What is the right balance of staff, full- and part-time librarians, and library faculty (with or without tenure)?
6. How have you managed to cut costs or improve quality without increasing costs? What are the most troubling expenses in your budget?
7. What do provosts need to know about the future of the library? Where could they be most helpful?

The Education Advisory Board (hereafter referred to as the "Board") interviewed university administrators and librarians from a range of universities (George Mason University, University of Utah, Prince George Community College, Gustavus Adolphus College, University of Michigan, Babson College, and others). In addition they spoke to representatives from publishers such as the American Chemical Society and Elsevier.

The Board consulted reports and publications from many organizations such as Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the Taiga Forum, and Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). Armed with what they learned, they produced a report which was presented to the provosts and subsequently published as "Redefining the Academic Library: Managing the Migration to Digital Information Services." Without a doubt, they did a lot of research in order to write this report – both from interviews and published documents.

By now many of you have seen the report. The report has been described in many ways – as excellent, provocative, and startling in some cases. There are parts of the report that are spot on and, conversely, sections where the conclusions they drew were lacking a complete understanding of the issues. Or, the conclusions they drew might be true for some libraries (often depending on whether the library was a research library or a library serving an undergraduate or community college) but not true for others. The goals and missions of our libraries should and usually do reflect the goals and missions of our college or university. And, those can vary greatly.

The report begins with a look at the transformational changes in scholarly communication, information and technology. The main issues covered include the escalating and unsustainable costs of publications, alternatives to libraries such as Google and Wikipedia, the decline in circulation and reference requests, and the new and competing demands from our users.

The next section of the report covers the issue of "managing the migration to digital information services." It begins with a discussion of leveraging digital collections, covering e-books, patron-driven acquisition, and print-on-demand. The section on "changing the scholarly publishing model" addresses licensing, acquiring articles on demand, and open access publishing.

Indiana Libraries, Vol. 31, Number 1

The following lengthy section addresses repurposing library space, taking on topics such as moving collections to off-campus remote storage facilities, collective collections, and trends in future library space planning. The final section explores redeploying library staff, touching on roles such as those in data management, embedded subject specialists, and information literacy instruction.

This report neatly brings together the issues we, as librarians, have been facing for years and, to some extent, pushes us to take those issues even more seriously. The facts and figures and predictions are familiar to us. But, think if you were reading this report from the perspective of a provost. For the most part, a provost has not seen these topics brought together in one dramatic package. The provost knew that print circulation was declining – but to that extent? She might have known that use of reference services was dwindling or that publishing costs were escalating or that students and faculty turn first to Google rather than the library. But, again, did she know just how dramatically some of these user behaviors and business practices have shifted? The answer, I can tell you, is "no."

After being interviewed by the Board, I was in contact with them to track the progress of their report and they were kind enough to share a draft of the slide set they shared with the provosts. Later, I was given a copy of the full report. It was extremely helpful to have a copy of the report before meeting with the provost about it. As mentioned earlier, we decided together there were some big and often surprising (at least from the perspective of a provost and presumably from a faculty perspective) issues raised in the report. For example, the preface to the report states, "While predictions of radical change in library and information services are by no means new, a confluence of shifts in technology, changing user demands, and increasing budget pressures are now forcing academic libraries to either adapt or risk obsolescence. The library's traditional role as a repository for physical books and periodicals is quickly fading, with important implications for space utilization,

resource acquisition, and staffing” (Education Advisory Board, viii).

For better or worse, the provost learned a great deal from the report and she felt strongly she needed to share information from the report that she found interesting, surprising, and even worrisome with the faculty. We began to talk about how best to do that. We decided the provost and dean of libraries would co-host a forum on the future of university research libraries. In our invitation to faculty we stated that a number of converging trends made it essential that faculty engage with their libraries to define the research library of the future. Together, the provost and dean would contextualize changes to libraries nationally and discuss ways in which the IU Libraries have responded to constraints and opportunities at both local and national levels.

We thought it was imperative to include faculty speakers in the forum. We invited a panel of eight faculty members to provide diverse perspectives on the changing expectations for and use of libraries’ collections and services. They were also to discuss ways in which libraries and librarians can best meet the needs of today’s faculty and students.

In my invitation to the faculty panelists I described the panel’s purpose as to spark lively discussion among the faculty present. We tried very hard to compose the panel with faculty from a mix of disciplines, at various career stages, and with various views of the library. Each panelist had five minutes (they all took longer than five minutes, as we expected) to share his/her perspective and were encouraged to provide honest and open comments to help begin this important dialogue among the faculty.

After a great deal of planning and preparation, the forum took place on November 2, 2011. Over 160 faculty attended, a number which far exceeded my expectations. And, the number of faculty attending was only exceeded by the quality of the program. The provost’s comments, the panelists’ remarks, and the discussion with the audience were

all substantive, thought-provoking, and almost certainly a solid precursor to future discussions.

The program began with the provost describing the key points from the Board report that captured her attention. She picked up on the provocative forecasts made by a group of Associate Library Deans (the Taiga Forum), who predicted by the year 2015, 90% of user information needs would come from sources not directly connected to the library; that there would be no need for traditional librarians; and that library space would be taken over by activities that are not related in any way to library services or collections. The remainder of her comments focused heavily on what the Board, in their presentation to the provost, called the “Four Horsemen of the Library Apocalypse” – those being “unsustainable costs, viable alternatives, declining usage, and new patron demands.”

My presentation was not intended to be a reaction to the Provost’s talk and the key points made by the Board report. As difficult as it was, I did not dispute some parts of the report that I thought were misguided. Instead, I acknowledged that we are living in a dramatically changed environment, citing the shift from print to electronic sources, movement from local to shared collections, the changing scholarly communication patterns, changing student behaviors, and new technologies and scholarly tools. I emphasized how IU has leveraged digital collections, both licensed e-resources and collections digitized through our participation in the Google Book Project and Hathi Trust. Of course, I talked about the very large use made of electronic resources, the statistics more than making up for the declining print collection use. Mentioning IU ScholarWorks, Open Folklore, and our support for digital humanities projects, I described new scholarly publishing modes. I encouraged them to think of libraries as “services” – teaching and learning, support for research (data curation, copyright advising, etc.), web services (mobile access, chat reference, etc.), and the changing nature of collections (“collective collections,”

preservation imperatives, etc.). On the topic of repurposing library space, I detailed the many partners we have welcomed into the library with complementary or integrated services – partnerships that have helped us to provide a range of services that support research, learning, and teaching or that enable students and faculty to be productive. I gave a long list of new roles for librarians – from intellectual property librarian to digital user experience librarian. My concluding remarks were that, yes, we have made strides to position ourselves for this drastically changed and changing environment. But, we cannot invest in every strategic possibility. And, most importantly, we need input and advice from the faculty as we move forward.

Without exception, the remarks of the eight faculty panelists were remarkable. We had faculty from Astronomy, Folklore, Informatics, English, French & Italian, American Studies, Biology, and Communication & Culture. Each had a very unique perspective and very different things they wanted to talk about. Several talked passionately about the libraries' role in open access and other ways libraries should and do contribute to publishing and/or new forms of scholarly communication. Another panelist reminded us of the profound task libraries have of building collections that will be used centuries from now, reminding us of how the New York Public Library had been criticized for collecting phone books from around the world. By 1946/47, those very phone books were all that was left to reconstruct information about thousands of people who were lost during the Holocaust. A computer scientist spoke to the libraries' role in the HathiTrust Research Center and its importance as a repository for scientific data. Another panelist spoke about her work at the National Science Foundation on a project called the Virtual Astronomical Observatory. She expounded upon the importance of librarians in the development of protocols, standards, and metadata for that particular project. One panelist cautioned us to not give in to any nostalgia about libraries, remembering historic and beautiful buildings, the smell of glue, paper, and ink, etc. Rather, we should imagine

all that the future might present – where even the poorest person in the world has access to books, video interviews, original manuscripts and more via a push of a button.

The comments from the provost and the panelists were so rich and deep, that our time for questions and discussion with the audience was less than we had planned. However, in that short time there were many excellent questions and comments. Some spoke strongly to why it's still important for some researchers to use print collections. Others spoke to the incentive structure (or lack thereof) for young scholars to publish in open access publications. There were comments about the importance of university presses and how they relate to libraries. But, this was not meant to be the only opportunity for discussion and debate of these important topics.

We hope this forum will provide a platform from which librarians can begin discussions with faculty within their own discipline, department, or program. Most of these issues vary tremendously by discipline, and the libraries and the campus need to understand those differing faculty perspectives as we craft changes to the library. In the coming months, subject librarians will reach out to departments and programs in order to further engage faculty in this important conversation about the future of the libraries. The library will construct a website containing a summary of the forum, the Power Point slides, the Board report, related readings, reports from the department meetings, and opportunities for ongoing discussions.

What lessons have we learned from this forum?

- 1) The faculty care about the library and want to be involved in discussions and decisions about its future.
- 2) Individual faculty have very different needs/expectations from the library.
- 3) The library, itself, can benefit greatly from these discussions; as said, we can't invest in every strategic opportunity; we need help and input from the faculty.

- 4) An event such as this is profile-raising for the library; as one faculty panelist wrote to me later, "I cannot think of a previous moment where faculty from across the campus were invited to offer their thoughts and reflections on such a weighty topic! And I loved that you had such a great divergence of views. I hope it was helpful as you plot the road to the future."
- 5) As much as librarians may have hated hearing certain topics in the Board report, some are very accurate and relevant.
- 6) The Board report, as mentioned earlier, said academic libraries either need to adapt or risk obsolescence. One of our biology panelists, not aware of that point made by the report, mentioned a quote often attributed to Charles Darwin. It is believed that Darwin stated, "It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives, it's the one that is the most adaptable to change." And, the faculty member was pleased that this forum represented the library trying to discover how to be adaptable.

It is our fervent hope this forum is but the beginning of even more meaningful dialogue with our faculty. Our librarians are already engaged in many ways with faculty, but this should help fuel discussions about some difficult and challenging issues – the real issues facing academic libraries and most certainly facing ours.

Note: For additional information and photos from the forum, please see: <http://homepages.indiana.edu/web/page/normal/20267.html>.

References

Education Advisory Board. (2011). *Redefining the academic library: Managing the migration to digital information services*. (23634). The Advisory Board Company. Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://educationadvisoryboard.com/>

Bio

Brenda L. Johnson currently serves as the Ruth Lilly Dean of University Libraries at Indiana University Bloomington. Prior to her arrival at Indiana University in 2010, she was the University Librarian at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Before joining the UCSB libraries, she served as Interim Co-University Librarian of the University of Michigan Libraries. She served the University of Michigan Libraries in various roles for more than 20 years, where she distinguished herself as Associate University Librarian for Public Services with responsibility for their 19 libraries. At Michigan, Johnson pioneered innovative services to integrate librarians into the academic process and created programs to recognize innovation in librarians. She received her MLS from Rutgers University and then worked there for the first five years of her career.

Johnson's representation within the national and international library community includes her membership on the Executive Committee of HathiTrust, the Controlled Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe (CLOCKSS) Board of Directors, and the Quali Object Linking and Embedding (OLE) Board of Directors. She currently serves on the ARL *Steering Committee for Transforming Research Libraries* and recently authored an article for ARL's *Research Library Issues* on transforming roles for academic librarians. Johnson is convening a Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) Steering Committee to plan for a CIC shared print repository, with the first host site for the repository to be located at Indiana University.