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And They Were There: Reports of Meetings -- Entrepreneurial Conference for Librarians

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In the middle of delivering his keynote address, “Stacking the Odds for Success: A Six-Stage Process to Articulate and Promote Your Entrepreneurial Idea,” entrepreneur and Director of External Education and Outreach at Wake Forest’s Institute for Regenerative Medicine Jon Obermeyer asked “what does any of this have to do with librarians or libraries?” “Plenty,” “answered the attendees of Inspiration, Innovation, Celebration: An Entrepreneurial Conference for Librarians. The two-day conference hosted by the libraries of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Wake Forest University (held at UNCG on June 3-4) offered 23 sessions on entrepreneurial initiatives in libraries across the US and UK. Librarians may not be looking to make a personal fortune, but in many cases the life cycles of their entrepreneurial projects do follow the six steps Obermeyer outlined: 1) identifying a large problem; 2) finding a solution; 3) creating a “product”; 4) assembling a team; 5) finding funding; 6) finding an exit.

Take Camilla Baker and Michelle DeLoach. Their university, Augusta State, struggles with student retention. A campus survey revealed that 30% of their students are responsible for dependent children, and Baker and DeLoach hypothesized that coping with the dual responsibilities of studying and childcare put their students at risk of dropping out. The university’s solution to the retention problem was to develop a strategic initiative entitled “Meeting Students Where They Stand,” and Baker and DeLoach’s “product” was a study space for students with young children within the library. They assembled a team of furniture contractors, librarians, and lawyers to create an inviting, safe, and manageable space within the library. Because the room met an overarching strategic objective of the university, funding was made available. Two and a half years later, the room has been used 467 times and by 1,313 occupants. Anecdotally, students have told the library that the study space enabled them to complete their studies. With policies for using the room clearly in place, a system for monitoring its use, and donations to replenish the supplies, Baker and DeLoach’s initial time investment in the room is at an end, and they are able to focus their efforts on new solutions for their library and students.

After cataloging, preserving, and digitizing the extensive archives of Johnson C. Smith University (a historically black college in Charlotte, North Carolina), Monika Rhue became aware of the pressing need to document the history of other African American institutions. Her solution is to catalog and index the papers and artifacts of African American churches and her product is Preserve Pro Inc, a professional archival consulting business. Rhue has developed workshops to train church staff and volunteers on the basics of organizing the collections they have amassed over the years. When conducting the workshops became too time intensive, Rhue wrote a handbook and created an online training session as alternatives.

Alan Bearman (who joined the conference through a pre-taped video) and Kelley Weber of Washburn University’s Mabee Library never assume that library funding is secure and are therefore always looking for ways to bring in money. Caddystacks is perhaps their most unorthodox idea — they built an 18-hole miniature golf course in the library. As librarians, they knew to do their research, and they actually found plans for building an air raid bunker golf course in a 1950 issue of Popular Mechanics. The golf course has contributed to the library’s bottom line as students and faculty pay to play in tournaments and community businesses sponsor the events. The campus bookstore collaborates by selling golf-related items and the Physical Education Department offers golf lessons. The library also teamed up with the Media Department to create a promotional video that casts Bearman as the Michael Scott of the library “Office.” Because miniature golf might prove distracting on a daily basis, the library rolls it out three times a year, during exam week, orientation, and for student recruitment. Most remarkably, the Mabee Library was able to develop their unorthodox idea in just six weeks.

Stephen Bell of Temple University delivered the conference’s final keynote address, “Librarian Entrepreneurs: Demystifying a Professional Oxymoron.” In preparation for the conference, Bell asked a number of librarians on video to name a librarian entrepreneur. Ninety-nine percent of the librarians interviewed could not name a single one. When asked to name any entrepreneur, the great majority of librarians answered, “Bill Gates.” Bell concluded that librarians don’t recognize the entrepreneurs in their midst because the word itself connotes wealth and huge innovation. If we focus instead on the attributes of the entrepreneur — they take risks, are full of energy, work hard, and have good ideas — we may see more in our midst. A true entrepreneur has, as Bell described, an innate ability to see things that others do not, to see disconnected things and spot the trend connecting them. Entrepreneurs are creative in the very way they view the world.