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How to Turn Around a Battleship...Before the Budget-Cut Missile is Lodged in the Hull: A Case Study

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Abstract:

This paper will address how one ARL library is attempting to change the internal conversation around collection management in light of the largest state deficit in history, the onset of a library-wide strategic planning initiative, and the departure of several key administrators. It will address the successes and challenges of the strategic planning process, necessary conversations about acquisitions streams, workflows and philosophies, protecting the library's budget from external forces and balancing executive decisions with collaborative input.

Setting the Scene

The University of Texas Libraries is comprised of 13 specialized branches plus relationships with four independent archives and libraries on campus, including the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center and Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. We are currently the 6th largest publically funded ARL in the U.S. with over 9 million volumes and over 69,000 journal subscriptions, a staff of over 300 employees led by 5 associate directors and a Vice Provost.ⁱ Effective September 2011, two of the five associate directors took retirement: the Executive Associate Director, who managed a portfolio of crucial relationships with the UT Board of Regents, and led consortial licensing efforts on behalf of the 15 UT System campuses, and the Associate Director for Research Services, who both directed all collection-associated activity for UT Austin and played a significant role in the strategy and implementation of building shared collections among the system campuses. In addition the Head of Acquisitions left earlier in the year, and all of these positions remain unfilled.

In addition to the leadership changes in the Libraries, UT Austin has been swept up in a challenge for accountability and demonstration of the real costs and value of research vs. teaching. The Texas Public Policy Foundation, a 501(c)3 non-profit, non-partisan research institute, whose stated mission is "to promote and defend liberty, personal responsibility, and free enterprise in Texas by educating and affecting policymakers and the Texas public policy debate with academically sound research and outreachⁱⁱ has driven the discussion on higher education reform in the state since at least 2008. Questioning whether academic research is a good

investment for Texasⁱⁱⁱ and calling for the introduction of faculty productivity analysis and other related reforms known as the seven "breakthrough solutions,"^{iv} the ongoing debate has presented a real threat to the perceived value of research and by extension the Libraries. Thus far the UT Austin administration has proven highly committed to defending the value of research and countered the TPPF with its own report on faculty productivity and accountability^v, with UT President Bill Powers steadfastly maintaining an unwavering stance on the synergistic role of teaching and research in making a world class institution^{vi} and calls for a "tone more respectful of faculty."^{vii}

Unavoidably, the \$27 billion Texas state deficit for FY 2012-13^{viii} resulted in the legislature passing \$15 billion in budget cuts during the last session, which translated into mandatory "give-backs" for all state funded universities and in turn, all units on campus. As the UT Libraries' budget is comprised primarily of people and collections, there was nowhere to turn but these critical components. As the university hadn't designated a budget line for accommodating the inflationary costs of scholarly communication, the Library reduced personnel expenses by \$1 million and returned these funds to the University. It also reallocated an additional \$1 million from operations, personnel, and one-time savings, to the collections budget in order to cover the cost of journal and database inflation in fiscal year 2011. In Fall 2010 when the Libraries were first required to give back a portion of the already approved budget, having already begun relinquishing all vacant professional positions with few exceptions, while consolidating benefits-bearing paraprofessional positions and replacing them with non-benefits eligible

Graduate Research Assistant positions, and little staffing “fat” left to cut, the Libraries strategically modeled a \$1.2 million serials cut both in an effort to plan for the worst but also to get the needed attention of the effect of diminishing research collections on research and teaching. The project was guided by standard metrics including cost and use, as well as an internal study of approximately 800,000 citations by UT authors since 2005.

As the picture emerged of the effects that such a cut could have on the scholarly production of the university, incensed faculty helped drive the Provost’s financial commitment to cover a portion of journal inflation for specific alternating fiscal years. While this financial commitment to the library is dependent on the university’s ability to maintain a flat budget over the next two biennia, the core message of the library’s importance to scholarly production has been fully assimilated by university administrators. But a major consequence of the imperative to maintain the collections at status quo is that a substantially reduced personnel and physical footprint is required. The Libraries must undertake a series of workflow changes to realize maximum efficiency and eliminate redundancies while also addressing any service issues resulting from uneven attrition.

Strategic Planning

The establishment of a strategic planning team is one of the ways the UT Libraries has chosen to proactively address our future role on campus and to secure ongoing support from the university administration.

The strategic planning team was convened in the fall of 2010 and is comprised of 12 individuals representing all professional and paraprofessional staff representative of all library units, plus the associate directors.

Early in the team’s tenure it was agreed to approach strategic planning using the Balanced Scorecard^{ix} methodology, an established planning and performance assessment approach used by all types of private and public organizations, including other ARL libraries such as Johns Hopkins University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Washington.

The purpose of the Balanced Scorecard methodology is to align business activities to the vision and strategy of the organization, improve internal and external communications, and monitor organization performance against strategic goals. By measuring the effectiveness of day-to-day operations in four areas: customer, financial, process, and learning and growth, we can develop a narrative which places the library at the heart of the university’s mission. After four months of intensive review, the team developed 21 strategic initiatives, covering everything from collections to public services to facilities to staffing and professional development. These 21 initiatives will be individually addressed by investigational working groups comprised of volunteers from across the library staff in all departments and branches, both professional and support staff. The library director was keen to earn buy-in from all levels of staff to create a culture of accountability for our collective success.

Successes of the strategic planning team and working groups include improved transparency and multi-directional communication, increased participation and investment from across the library and a sense of real progress on multiple fronts. The challenges we’ve faced have been building trust amongst staff who for many years felt disenfranchised, instigating simultaneous working groups on tight deadlines during the regular academic year and the enormous time and energy investment expected of these individuals. And of course, the question remaining to be answered is “Will it work?” Will the library administration implement the recommendations of the working groups and will we in fact be able to determine whether we’ve achieved both real and perceived success?

Strategic Initiative #8: Collections Priorities

The Collection Priorities Working Group was created from volunteers and appointed members comprising a cross-section of staff representing broad disciplinary areas as well as special collections, licensing and other essential collection program managers. The group met regularly from the spring intercession through late summer of 2011 as to study and respond to the challenge to “update collection priorities to be consistent with the

Libraries mission, campus priorities, and available resources”, broken into seven specific charges:

1. Periodically update and revise collection development policies for the libraries.
2. Review credit hour production, graduation rates, research funding and other measures of UT teaching and learning priorities to ensure alignment with libraries allocation policies and practices.
3. Assess area studies library programs and special collections to define their strategic importance and develop a plan for supporting them from recurring funds while establishing the expectation for successful external fund-raising.
4. Analyze faculty and student use patterns to identify user-preferred formats.
5. Review gifts-in-kind collecting policies and practices to ensure congruence with collecting priorities and available resources.
6. Establish collection policies for non-commercial resources.
7. Evaluate and recommend the efficacy of patron-driven acquisitions of materials.

Considerable time was spent on defining the meaning of the charges, analyzing the issues, and arriving at consensus to set forth a total 42 recommendations within a response white paper on which the implementation strategy would be based. While these charges may appear familiar and predictable, they also illuminate long standing issues and rifts.

With the commencement of the strategic planning process, an online “idea hopper”^x was established as an anonymous means for any staff member to contribute ideas, reactions, opinions, questions and proposed solutions, with the ability for others to comment, with all viewable to all staff. As intended, these inputs in some cases made their way into specific charges, an example of this was the 7th Collections Priorities charge: to “Evaluate and recommend the efficacy of patron-driven acquisitions.” A contentious slice of the budget pie for several years, the UT Libraries demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) programs comprised primarily of the EBL and inter-library loan buy-on-demand program, has been viewed by some staff as siphoning funds from a long tradition of building “quality collections” while

also devaluing subject specialists’ expertise and contribution to the intellectual enterprise on campus. The implications of steadily growing funding and expansion of the scope for DDA programs including doubling of funding for ILL buy on demand in the previous year and upward trending budgets for two demand driven acquisitions programs with EBL and ebrary is that the UT Libraries no longer will collect as we once could and has instead shifted resources to content students and faculty will actually read. Though the intent and function of the Libraries’ DDA programs is to complement a still very healthy core collecting program (including Area Studies and non-English materials as well as print approval plans and bibliographers’ discretionary budgets) the expansion of DDA programs has not assuaged the suspicion that the Libraries’ value of subject specialists is in question. To address this area of contention, the working group recommended the incorporation of bibliographer participation in crafting a more tailored pool of titles for discovery, and building shared responsibility for the programs’ success. The expectation is a more nuanced appreciation and support for demand driven acquisition and trust in the reader/researcher to choose what to read while we continue to build a tighter and smaller academic core and a shared vision of what we can accomplish with more agile and flexible content delivery.

The charges put to the Collection Priorities Working Group, also offered a long-sought opportunity and platform for making the argument and formally recommending that the UT Libraries begin a formal collection assessment program, hitherto done on an ad hoc basis with no funding, staff or analysis tools. The transition from a homegrown integrated library system to III Millennium in 2007 made a certain degree of data collection and analysis possible for the print collections, but this had not been scalable or sustainable for by existing staff to meet the charge for comprehensive ongoing analysis. In addition, the harvesting, archiving and analysis of usage data for e-resources has been done manually for years, an onerous, inefficient and unsustainable undertaking. While the UT Libraries Assessment Coordinator plays a core role in orchestrating and overseeing the formal strategic planning process, administering LibQUAL+[®] and ClimateQUAL[®], there had heretofore been no formal collection assess-

ment program, nor mandate to create one. The Collection Priorities Working Group's white paper describes appropriate assessment tools available for e-resources analysis, recommends purchase and implementation of a specific product, and also recommends formal training and consulting from Innovative Interfaces to improve our ability to assess print collections and skill in data collection and analysis. Most significantly, it recommends a permanent collection assessment program be created, stating that in order to be meaningful and worthwhile, collections data activities must be scientifically gathered, replicable, sustainable and consistent over time, inclusive of all disciplines and cognizant of their different use patterns and user behaviors. This requires an ongoing commitment and designated resources—human, software, training, and assessment of the program itself—if the goals outlined in the strategic plan's charges are to be met.

Finally, the Collection Priorities Working Group deliberations surfaced a number of issues resulting from a long-entrenched *laissez-faire* approach to subject specialists/bibliographers and their collecting activities. While disparate reporting lines make consistent performance standards a challenge—some are branch heads, others catalogers, still others in public service units—a move toward a more professional, accountable and consistent performance of work and service dovetails with the recommendations of the strategic planning task force addressing personnel and career advancement. A substantial investment in consensus building in order to establish shared goals and expectations as well as methods of assessing staff involved in the work of building research collections is now taking place through peer teamwork.

In the initial months of the first fiscal year without an Associate Director for Research Services (Collections), as well as a vacant Head of Acquisitions, we have successfully produced the collections budget and established a monthly forum for all matters relevant to collection development, including acquisitions, user services and cataloging and metadata services staff. In targeting the concerns and issues relevant to subject specialists and fostering an ongoing review, we are now devising shared solutions, responsibility and accountability. One goal is achieving a cross-trained staff prepared to meet the chal-

lenges of rapid consolidation. The philosophical goal is to bring each subject specialists' frame of reference to encompass the scope of the collection as a whole. We realize these are ambitious changes, but by setting a tone that is mutually respectful, ultimately responsible and absolutely committed to accountability and transparency, we can devise a means of building a more cooperative, collaborative staff prepared for the inevitable shrinking of our human and structural footprint.

Finally, and most recently, a new strategic planning work group on the future model of collection development at the UT Libraries, specifically focused on personnel, has just been formed (since the presentation of this paper). The co-authors view this as a positive endorsement of the framework for change outlined above.

External Forces

Ultimately, the process of determining the library's annual budget is not a solely internal one. Through close consultation with the university provost and chief financial officer, the case must be made for the university to support the inflationary costs of scholarly communication, currently rising at approximately 7% annually. Through the serials cancellation modeling performed in 2010 we effectively secured the support of the university administration for funding the annual rise of scholarly communication, but this support could be easily eroded with any changes in personnel or external effects on the university budget.

Additionally, we must contend with the power of the state legislature and governor. This year, the legislature cancelled funding for the State Library's consortial database project, TexShare, a move which disproportionately affects small public libraries that could not otherwise afford research databases. The University of Texas' share of the consortia's bill went up 35% in this final fiscal year and we have yet to know what additional costs will be imposed once TexShare is completely eliminated.

The legislature also paved the way this session to establish additional Tier 1 research universities in the state, effectively diluting the stature and funding available to the two existing flagship institutions as well as siphoning potential students. These re-

gional pet projects may improve a local politician's popularity rating, but will do little to boost the educational success of students at those institutions.

Finally, public perception of the University of Texas as a liberal, elitist shelter is another external force which deeply affects support for the library but is virtually impossible for the library to manage alone.

Conclusions

The current economic and political climates have forced the UT libraries to perform a very thorough and serious analysis of all the contributing factors affecting our budget stability and projections. In light of the largest state deficit in history and the departure of several key administrators, it was im-

perative that we attempt to change the internal conversation around collection management. The strategic planning process allowed us to begin necessary conversations about acquisitions streams, workflows and philosophies, protecting the library's budget from external forces and balancing executive decisions with collaborative input.

By proactively raising difficult conversations and planning ahead, changes in internal conversations and attitudes are already beginning to occur. This slow but steady turning of the proverbial battleship will put us on course to accommodate the expectations of our constituents, meet the demands of our ever-shrinking budget and ease the integration of our future administrators.

ⁱ Association of Research Libraries 2008-09 Annual Statistical Survey: <http://www.arl.org/stats/annualsurveys/arlstats/arlstats09.shtml>

ⁱⁱ Texas Public Policy Foundation. About TPPF. http://www.texaspolicy.com/about_tppf.php

ⁱⁱⁱ O'Donnell, Rick. "Is academic research a good investment for Texas?" Texas Public Policy Foundation Policy Perspective, December 2008. <http://www.texaspolicy.com/pdf/2011-update-PP10-IsAcademicResearchGoodInvestment-ROdonnell.pdf>

^{iv} Texas Public Policy Foundation. 7 Solutions. <http://texashighered.com/7-solutions>

^v Musick, Marc A. "An analysis of faculty instructional and grant-based productivity at the University of Texas at Austin," November, 2011. http://www.utexas.edu/news/attach/2011/campus/32385_faculty_productivity.pdf

^{vi} Burka, Paul. "Old college try." *Texas Monthly*, April 2011. <http://www.texasmonthly.com/2011-04-01/btl.php>

^{vii} Hamilton, Reeve. "UT President Bill Powers: "We Are a House Divided." *Texas Tribune*, September 14, 2011. <http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/higher-education/ut-president-bill-powers-we-are-house-divided/>

^{viii} "Tribpedia: 2011 Budget Shortfall." *The Texas Tribune*, n.d. <http://www.texastribune.org/texas-taxes/2011-budget-shortfall/about/>

^{ix} Balanced Scorecard Institute: <http://www.balancedscorecard.org/>

^x Idea Informer: <http://idea.informer.com/>, a free feedback management service.