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Reports of Meetings — Entrepreneurial Conference for Librarians

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Inspiration, Innovation, Celebration: An Entrepreneurial Conference for Librarians
— Elliott University Center at UNCG, Greensboro, NC, June 3-4, 2009 — Hosted by
University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Wake Forest University

Reported by: **Kimberly Lutz** (Assistant Director for Communications and
External Relations, University of North Carolina at Greensboro)

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.

Joyce Ogburn, the Director of the **J. Willard Marriott Library** at the **University of Utah**, who gave the conference’s opening address, can name many entrepreneurial librarians — she grows them! **Ogburn** believes in the importance of entrepreneurial leadership and her library encourages staff to think creatively. **Ogburn** has initiated a program to award library staff members innovation grants of up to \$5,000. Award winners are given time and means to develop their ideas, and, through the application process, learn about writing grant proposals. At the end of the year, the awardees give presentations on their projects. **Ogburn** also believes that librarians are well-positioned to be entrepreneurial as the library so naturally sits in between experts in many fields. The library has expertise in conservation, technology, design, grant getting, and a deep commitment to preservation and providing access. Coupled with strong relationships with academic departments who rely on subject-librarian expertise, the **Marriott Library** was able to develop the innovative **Western Soundscape Archive**, a freely available resource that has captured over 1,000 animal and bird sounds of the Western United States. **Ogburn** and the **University of Utah** are seizing opportunities to use the collective expertise within the library in new and unexpected ways.

Finally, **Ogburn** argues that we must celebrate the entrepreneurs in our midst. The **Entrepreneurial Conference for Librarians** did just that. Presentations on everything from “Horses and Hoops: New Approaches to Oral History in a Digital Environment” to “Money, Money, Money: New Sources of Income for Academic Libraries,” showed what is possible and attendees came away inspired to innovate. As **Anita Norton** of **John Hopkins** remarked, “There was a great mix of speakers who shared their innovations and experiences to make the event memorable and exciting. I learned so much from the presentations I was able to attend.” 🐾