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Preparing for the Future: Strategic Planning and Leadership in Special Collections

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African-American collections at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), in spite of a longstanding history of limited and unequal funding, were birthed, survived, some might even say blossomed, in the adverse climate of nineteenth-century Jim Crow. Donations from prominent bibliophiles provided the core of these nascent African-American collections. Some special collections, including those at Howard Fisk, Tuskegee, and Hampton, stand as a tribute to the library leaders of the past and their dogged determination to chronicle the notable accomplishments of people of African descent. The work of Dr. Dorothy Porter Wesley (1905-1995) and her contemporaries (Waller, 2003, p.17) arc evidence of exemplary collection development. According to Charles L. Blockson, curator of the Charles L. Blockson Collection, "Dr. Wesley transformed Howard's collection of black culture into an internationally known treasure." Thanks to the effort of these early bibliophiles and library pioneers, African-American Collections at HBCUs remain a national, in some cases international, treasure.

In the twenty-first century, information professionals will be challenged to answer persistent questions regarding these special collections: 1) What role, if any, will the African-American collection play in advancing...
the teaching and learning mission of the HBCU? 2) How will these collections grow and be preserved during times of financial constraint? 3) What will be the significance of these collections in times of technological advancement? Library leaders will be required to implement strategic plans that address all of these issues. It is crucial to develop collection management policies that build upon the parent institution's strategic plan and overall mission, to address the vulnerable condition of pre-1900 material, and to use advanced technology that will ensure access to the legacy of Black history, literature and art to future generations of scholars.

Susan Jurrow (1990, p.59) has identified five competencies employed by acknowledged library leaders: 1) vision; 2) communication; 3) trust; 4) risk; and 5) empowerment. Basic skills required by middle-management librarians to address these serious issues will include leadership, an understanding of preservation and information technology, as well as participation in professional associations. Higher leadership roles will require comprehensive planning skills on the policy level, including decision-making and multi-leveled problem solving (Barksdale-Hall, 2002, p.48).

Review of the Literature
Norlin (2001, p. 190) has proposed that one strategy for leadership development is a record of involvement in national professional library organizations, such as the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), American Library Association (ALA), Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), and the African American Studies Librarians’ Section of ACRL (AFAS). The literature records that there is low involvement in national professional library associations and information technology by HBCU librarians and leadership development. Judy Reynolds (1996, p.208) provides 50 leadership development ideas which special collections librarians can adopt.

In recent times, Owens provided a historical context for understanding the development of library services and limited (unequal) resources which contributed to the growth of African-American collections at HBCUs. While the development of “outstanding collections” on Black literature, history and art of people of African descent at HBCUs was laudable, the circumstance of underlining racism, which produced the “separate but equal” library facilities, were not. (For more on library services during segregation, see John Mark Tucker, Untold Stories: Civil Rights, Librarians, and Black Librarianship. Champaign, IL: Publications Office, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, 1998).

Strategic Planning
According to G. Edward Evans et al., “The term strategic planning has a military origin, and that in organizational management its meaning relates to how an organization plans to respond to its environment... The environment is in a constant change; therefore, thinking ahead about how to respond to possible changes is prudent management...” (2000, p.179).

G. Edward Evans et al. (2000, p. 162) outlined three fundamental components of the planning process: 1) Planning is anticipatory in character. That is, it focuses on what needs to be done, not what was done. 2) Planning is a series of related decisions — if this happens, do “X”; if this does not happen, do “Y.” 3) Planning looks to the future and requires that one make some assumptions and predictions.

Forecasting
What are the implications for HBCU libraries and African-American collections in particular, if administrators focus more upon information literacy and leadership development in the future? The Black Caucus of the American Library Association Newsletter, October 2003, reports a collaborative initiative between the Southern Library Network (SOLINET) and the HBCU Library Alliance. Formed in October 2002, the Alliance strives to: 1) ensure excellence in HBCU libraries through the development, coordination, and promotion of programs and activities; 2) enhance members’ collections and services; 3) identify the leadership skill set required by HBCU librarians; and 4) integrate their libraries more effectively into their institutions’ teaching and learning missions (p.32). The partners are the recipients of a one-year planning grant, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, aimed at developing library leadership. According to SOLINET, the stated project goals include strengthening components of information literacy and developing “the leadership skills and activities of libraries on campus.”

The requirement for libraries to enhance the teaching and learning mission of the parent institution will not only build upon the traditional role of gatekeeper but place special collections librarians in an even more visible role as teachers of information literacy. What strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) will exist in this dynamic teaching and learning rich environment (Nelson, 2001, p.51)?

In the fall of 1980, Wendell L. Wray (1926-2003), then professor at the School of Library and Information Science, University of Pittsburgh, and Jeff Jackson, then head of the Afro-American Collection at Hillman Library, University of Pittsburgh, circulated a letter of interest in regard to the formation of a Discussion Group in ACRL to focus on Black Studies. The letter established their intent to organize a “formal group...in which librarians who are engaged in work in the field of Black Studies can meet and discuss the problems which [were] common to them in this area.” They initially identified a list of discussion topics that included: 1) status of collections; 2) resource sharing; 3) reference services; 4) bibliographic instruction; 5) management information; 6) retrieval; 7) integrated vs. separate collections; 8) interdisciplinary nature of collections; 9) archival materials; 10) retrospective collecting and purchasing; 11) selection policies and procedures; and 12) oral history. Many of these topics remain “as relevant today as they were [more than] twenty years ago,” according to Dr. Stanton F. Biddle in an address at the ALA ACRL AFAS Twentieth Anniversary Program, held at the Westin San Francisco Hotel, San Francisco, California, June 16, 2001.

However, because strategic planning requires one to make assumptions and predictions about the future, this author offers a personal list of future issues: 1) information technologies will be in high demand; 2) strong library leadership skill sets will be sought; 3) conservation and preservation will be required as African-American collections continue to age; 4) financial constraints will persist; 5) cooperative teaching and learning projects will be encouraged; and 6) resource sharing and new formats will be required to meet high demands for information.

Cooperative Learning
Special Collections librarians have assisted often from a distance, in enhancing the educational mission of the parent institution in past times. Administrators, faculty, staff, and students alike traditionally have looked to special collections as a “treasure chest of knowledge” when answers were needed about an historical consciousness and identity. However, given today’s changes in the market, where competency in information literacy and the ability to locate, evaluate and utilize information is a requirement, Special Collections librarians will be required to, in addition “provide instruction in information literacy skills” (Norlin, 2001, p.188). Basic information literacy skills will include: 1) problem solving; 2) designing the question; 3) formulating a search strategy; and 4) identifying, evaluating and utilizing both print and non-print resources.

One out of every four African-Americans who earned a bachelor’s degree in 1994 was a HBCU graduate (Norlin, 2001, p. 186). If current enrollment trends persist, Special Collections librarians will possess an opportunity to assist in providing the next generation of Americans with not only a historical identity but also marketable skills in a competitive economy.

Conclusion
Special collections librarians must accept the challenge to ensure that African-American collections grow and prosper into the future because these collections must be interpreted for a new generation. Cooperative teaching and learning programs on the campuses of HBCUs will need to be explored. Finally, participation in national professional library associations will advance the power and influence of librarians at HBCUs to help shape the landscape of librarianship.