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Notes from Langlois — Thoughts on Sustainability

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In my last column I provided an overview of the circumstances surrounding the **Langlois Public Library** and my first year of service here. These circumstances are hardly unusual; I suspect more than a few readers will have thought to themselves, “well, what’s so notable about *that*?” My point in describing some of the day-to-day aspects of managing a small rural public library was to set the stage for a more encompassing discussion of the sustainability of such libraries, and libraries in general.

One of the first things I did upon arrival here was to join the **Association for Rural and Small Libraries (ARSL)**. The organization consists of people involved in such institutions and has proven to be an invaluable resource for fielding questions ranging from board relations, programming, security systems, recommendations for equipment, policies and procedures, insurance, and on and on. Many small libraries operate with limited staff; directors in such libraries perform most if not all of the work necessary to operate a library, from staffing the circulation and reference desks and other traditional library functions, to ordering supplies, processing payroll, and changing the light bulbs.

One fundamental question confronting many of us is the basic issue: *how do we keep this going?*

The **Langlois Public Library** is a tax-supported public institution. We get \$.7707 in property tax for every \$1,000 of assessed value of all property owners in our district (which is an enviable millage for a district; unfortunately our district is the size of a postage stamp). We benefit from grants, donations, Friends’ group fundraisers (book sales, craft fairs, silent auctions, etc.), and other supplemental funding. We partner whenever possible with our sister libraries in Agness, Gold Beach, and Port Orford.

We provide outreach through area schools, support community events, and open our space to local and regional groups seeking meeting rooms, facilities suitable for presentations, and the convenience of a local venue. We deliver educational and entertainment programming to a village otherwise unserved by such resources. We are the only community commons accessible to our patrons.

The Library enjoys broad support; many of our patrons are deeply committed to the Library and want very much to see it thrive and flourish far into the future. The Friends group devotes long hours to fundraising events throughout the year, and provides welcome additional money to purchase materials for the collection and new equipment, and to underwrite expanded programming opportunities. Dedicated volunteers help sustain longer opening hours and perform essential maintenance and upkeep on the facility.

Our service experience mirrors that of national trends: during economic downturns library use surges. We have many patrons who cannot afford internet access, cable television, or books, and who need basic services such as faxing, scanning, and photocopying. Many visit us daily; we are usually busy.

Regrettably, our current foundations may not be enough to guarantee our long-term sustainability. Much of our budget consists of fixed costs: utilities, supplies, systems fees, and the like. These costs generally increase annually, whereas tax receipts do not. The local economy, long dependent on two moribund industries — fishing and timber — promises little likelihood of recovery. As the gap between costs and taxes collected widens, the strain of offsetting the difference with donations, grants, and other sources of funding becomes increasingly challenging. Unless we can craft an effective solution to address the fiscal realities facing us this library district will

not survive, nor will the others in the county.

This scenario plays out across the state; indeed, throughout the nation. Oregon has already suffered entire county library systems forced to close (e.g., Hood River County; Jackson County). Although these counties have succeeded in re-opening their libraries, it has come at great cost — to taxpayers, to patrons, and to staff. Some, like Jackson County, must again put a ballot measure before taxpayers this year; failure to pass may mean closing once again.

Curry County, Oregon, does not have a unified county library system; each library is an independent tax district. Although most libraries in the county share an integrated library system and seek to pool resources for programming and collections, each of us performs a whole range of administrative tasks separately. This independence is a point of pride for many of our residents, but ultimately such a view is simply too naïve and insular. Our ongoing collective health will rely upon coming to understand such independence as a critical liability.

For one thing, such redundancy consumes too many scant resources, diverting scarce budget dollars and staffing that could be more effectively deployed if we had a centralized county system. In practice our separate districts offer little real benefit. Invariably inconsistencies arise in service policies, cataloging, donor relations, grant writing, and general operational philosophies. At the end of the day, such independence is a luxury we can no longer afford.

Curry County also has the unfortunate distinction of being one of the poorest counties in the state. In 2013 we failed to pass a ballot measure to sustain funding of 911 and other emergency services, and the fate of law enforcement in the county after July 1, 2014 remains in jeopardy. How likely are future library initiatives to fare in such a climate?

I am convinced our future depends upon nurturing a new model for this county, and

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e-journals are part of state-wide packages, and many are access-only titles. We have access to thousands of e-journals with no itemized prices. Our most used databases are, similarly, grouped into packages with no itemized pricing. Such cases make it impossible to calculate price-per-use.

In addition, much of our full-text usage is from aggregator databases. To calculate the cost-per-use for a journal available through

both a direct subscription and through aggregators requires summing the use wherever the journal is hosted, but determining the full price for access to the journal becomes too complicated and is not feasible.

I’d like to conclude by stating that I am a fan of **COUNTER** and do think that libraries should use **COUNTER** data for many purposes, including year-to-year and library-to-library comparisons. I hope that I’ve provided some basis for making such comparison with some care, and with plenty of salt. More details, including descriptions of the reports I did not cover, are available in the full *The COUNTER*

Code of Practice for e-Resources: Release 4 on **COUNTER** Code of Practice site: http://www.projectcounter.org/code_practice.html

The COUNTER Code of Practice for e-Resources: Release 4. Published April 2012. <http://www.projectcounter.org/r4/COPR4.pdf>

Appendix A (Glossary of Terms). Updated November 2012. <http://www.projectcounter.org/r4/APPA.pdf>

COUNTER Compliance. A step by step Guide for Vendors. Published May 2012. http://www.projectcounter.org/documents/COUNTER_compliance_stepwise_guide.pdf

<<http://www.against-the-grain.com>>

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indeed upon moving beyond the already established foundations of regional library support to something more grounded, more stable, and ultimately more unassailable than what has gone before. If we cannot fashion a measured solution to the basic question of *how do we keep this thing going*, the citizens of Curry County will be without library services.

That libraries need to do a better job of marketing is not news. That we need to incorporate advocacy as an ongoing, daily facet of our service delivery is not news. How we accomplish this is a more opaque question.

For us, the first steps will be to disband the independent districts and form a single county system. Far easier said than done. The political canyon that exists just between Langlois and Port Orford, thirteen miles apart, is enormous. In recent years the two schools in Langlois were closed and merged with Port Orford; this has left a bitter taste in the mouths of Langlois residents, and that toxic legacy will make it very difficult to accept the idea of combining

just these two districts. Port Orford's tax rate is lower; persuading their voters to approve a new district with a higher rate may prove impossible. Add to this the idea that north county, already convinced that the officials in the county seat of Gold Beach ignore or conveniently forget this neck of the woods, might ever be persuaded to join forces with the rest of the county, and — well, you get the picture.

This will require a ballot measure. Voters will have to approve it. Talk with many here, and they'll tell you it's impossible. The challenge for the likes of me is to demonstrate that if they don't, everyone suffers.

As noted earlier, simply forming a county system isn't a guarantee of success. Just because Hood River and Jackson Counties reopened doesn't assure survivability. We need to grow beyond being a unified system, and beyond understanding ourselves to be libraries in the traditional, historical sense. We need to re-invent ourselves yet again.

Do not misunderstand me. I remain committed to the core values of librarianship. I spent thirty years as a book vendor and serials agent before becoming a librarian, and I still

have to pause when someone asks me what I do for a living without answering, "I'm a bookman." To change into what we must re-shape ourselves to be is not to abandon what we have been or where we come from, but to reaffirm those values while embracing new ones.

Cynics might also read personal ambition into this, but they are mistaken. My goal is not to build a fiefdom within this obscure little corner of the state — the country — the world — with Langlois as its center. My goal is to ensure that Langlois continues to have a library at all; one that reflects the interests, concerns, and virtues of its odd, quirky, and fundamentally wonderful little constituency.

My job is to secure this Library's funding and support. My job is to steer this district to its future. Ultimately, my job may be to put myself out of a job. Sustainability is about the institution, not the individual — and besides, getting there is a journey unlikely to be achieved in my lifetime. In my next column I'll talk more about what I think the coming versions of the **Langlois Public Library** might just look like. 🌲

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online to NYU's Digital Studio for specialized teaching support.

Conclusion

NYU's libraries have the overall goal of providing excellent equivalent library services to its students and teachers, irrespective of their location on the globe. Since there are now branch campuses in Abu Dhabi and Shanghai, in addition to the main campus in NYC, this is both a wonderful aspiration and a source of great challenge. It is a wonderful goal because it says to the students and staff that their library experiences should be equal and familiar on whichever campus they might find themselves in the future. But it also says to the parents and government officials paying for the educations

of local students that their investment is well spent, that their sons and daughters are being treated equally.

But this goal also poses great challenges. Culturally these three locations, beyond the shared academic functions they pursue, have little in common. Linguistically, they are different. Their histories are different. Their core values come from radically different sets of experience. The students in Shanghai come from near 30 different countries. They eat and dress differently. Although all bureaucracies have much in common, the specifics of how things are supposed to get done differ. So, those who work in places like Shanghai have to be flexible when finding the right balance between how things are done in Manhattan and how the local people expect things to be done. For me, it has been exhausting at times but overall a lot of fun. Besides, the food is better in Shanghai.

The Final Question

As I have gone through this experience, time and again the same question has come to my mind, since we can meet so many of the needs of students without all the bricks and mortar or the arm's length access to the millions of volumes that I enjoyed at the seven other universities where I worked or studied: how much of all that is needed? In the print world, I have always stuck to the dictum that ownership is the fastest form of access, and therefore I loved huge libraries with as many bound books and journals as could be purchased. But now, I wonder if quite modest physical surroundings (but cooled in the summer and heated in the winter) with immediate access to millions of electronic resources and the sort of delayed access enjoyed by NYUSH students to the huge printed archives of the world wouldn't be just as good. 🌲

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And returning to **Oscar Wilde** and London, be sure and notice the picture in this issue, p.1 of **Mike** the incredible **Markwith**. I know for sure that **Mike** was at the very first **Charleston Conference** with twenty other people! What a guy!

Speaking of another what a guy, we told y'all about **Bill Potter's** retirement on the **ATG NewsChannel** a few weeks ago. Did you see it? The incomparable **Bill Potter** is retiring as **University Librarian and Associate Provost** at the **University of Georgia Libraries** this August. What a career **Bill** has had! **Dr. William Gray Potter** is a former editor of **College and Research Libraries**, has served on the boards of

the **Association of Research Libraries**, **OCLC**, and **Solinet** and is a past-president of the **Library & Information Technology Association**. **Bill** holds a doctorate in Library Science and Information Technology, as well as Master's degrees in English and in Library Science, from the **University of Illinois**. He earned a bachelor's degree in English from **Southern Illinois University** at Edwardsville. He has been head of the Libraries at **UGA** since 1989. **Bill** was an early adopter of technologies and digitization and was one of the main architects of **GALILEO**. He spoke at the **Charleston Conference** many years ago. I can't find exactly when right now but it must have been 1990 or 1991 that **Bill** was a keynote speaker. I remember that he stayed at the **Charleston Place Hotel** which had just opened in November 1986 amid many lawsuits and hoopla! I also remember

discussing the germ of an idea, a publication for **Charleston Conference** regulars, the idea was to become — ta da — **Against the Grain**! "I'm retiring because I want to," **Bill** says. "I've been doing the same thing for 25 years. I'd like to think about doing something different." Have fun in retirement, **Bill**! <http://www.against-the-grain.com/2014/02/rumors-from-the-atg-newschannel-22414/>

Against the Grain just keeps on truckin'! This is our 26th year! And the **Conference's** 34th! And we have plenty of new columnists and initiatives happening! Coming up — **Tim Devenport** (EDItEUR and ICEDIS) are going to keep us updated on events in the UK. **Tim** is planning a meeting in conjunction with the **2014 Charleston Conference**. And I believe that **SSP** and perhaps **ITHAKA** are considering sessions as well. When it rains, it pours! 🌲