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Little Red Herrings--DC + SEUG

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On 5 June this past summer, my university hosted the first ever digital commons southeastern users group. The cryptic header to this column is thus immediately revealed. While other such groups have appeared across the U.S., some of them in place for a half a dozen years, a handful of us with institutional repositories decided last fall that now might be the time for a southeastern omnium gatherum. Winthrop, by virtue of being centrally located, hosted the event.

While a small group (35-40), we made up for that in enthusiasm and innovation. I have written before about IRs/digital commons and the whole open access calculus. This was the time actually to do something, and it turned out to be nothing short of spectacular. I can say that because I had very little to do with the conference, other than to welcome our guests. We had two representatives from BePress in California, and users from Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Mississippi, and, of course, from South Carolina.

If you want to get a sense of what we did, take a look at BePress. Several things struck me about this process, but one thing stands out as you look over our day-long conference — a lot of folks are doing some very wonderful things. Whether you have a digital commons or not, now is the time to get on the bandwagon. It’s a great way to create your university’s digital footprint by capturing its intellectual capital. But it is also more than that. It’s a way to showcase your library, your faculty, your institution, and your students. In short, it’s a win-win, no matter how you look at it.

We began building our IR in October. Several events occurred at once and allowed us to redefine positions last summer. Out of this came the creation of a digital commons librarian role. We have hit the ground running and only recently saw our 2,000th download. We are basically a one-person operation, a point that troubled me in the beginning. But what I learned at the conference is that this is hardly unusual. Most IRs have one person with several others who contribute when they can. The same is true for us. We have individuals in our Pettus Archives who help out with posting. Later on this past summer we reassigned catalogers to the metadata end of our work. For the first time ever, some of our archival materials will be accessible online.

As I said above, I participated mostly as a spectator, but several things have emerged since we took on this new role. I am certain these are obvious kinds of things, but I share them because what is known is not always obvious, and what is obvious, isn’t always known. Librarians need to take more risks. We live in tumultuous times in librarianship. There are days when it looks to me like librarianship won’t make it to the next month, much less the next decade. Then there are days when conferences like this one occur and renew my faith that our profession may be somewhat weakened but we are hardly terminal. With some creative risk-taking, we can recapture and redefine what we mean by the word library. I don’t mean taking risks just to take them, but to look at the landscape and see what might work. Librarianship needs more of that, not less.

Librarians should not be afraid of failure. Having said that, know that some things will not work and that’s okay. I’m not going to bore you (more) by trotting out the tired adage that you learn more from failure than success. While that is true, it doesn’t help a whole lot when you’re in one of those fallow fields of failure. But we do need to realize that we are going to have to try a lot of different things in order to continue to flourish. Many of those things will not work. That’s okay. Try them; and if they fail, move on and try something else.

You don’t have to know code to be inventive. Many of the IRs I looked at are astonishing in their appearance and their complexity, but one doesn’t have to know coding to do this. Of course, knowing how to code is always going to be a plus, but you don’t have to know how to do it in order to begin. I am under no obligation to BePress to say this, but we chose them because our coding abilities are elementary and our access to sophisticated coding severely limited. The folks at BePress won’t do it for you, but they come pretty close!