

2015

# ATG Interviews Don Beagle, Library Director, Belmont Abbey College

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### Recommended Citation

Tierney, Barbara (2015) "ATG Interviews Don Beagle, Library Director, Belmont Abbey College," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 27: Iss. 6, Article 18.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.7231>

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## Library Director, Belmont Abbey College, Belmont, NC

by **Barbara Tierney** (Head Research and Information Services Dept., University of Central Florida Libraries)  
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**BT:** *Of your predictions ten years ago, where do you think you hit the mark?*

**DB:** Ten years ago I saved my highest predictive praise for the RENCi Display Wall, which, at the time, was the most high-profile interactive display wall on the market. Now, LC's and leading-edge libraries everywhere (like NCSU's **Hunt Library**) are replete with multiple display walls, and vendors still seem to be multiplying. So, I think that my display wall prediction was right on-target. And then, of course, I immediately contrasted that with the opposite extreme of predicting ever-increasing power and capabilities for handheld devices, and we all know where *that* trend has taken us. (That sounds passe today, but remember we did that interview a couple months before **Apple** introduced the first iPhone.) At this moment, for me, the most exciting point of innovation lies at the interaction point of small mobile devices on the one hand and large displaywalls on the other. We see this intersection in the new ThinkHub app for group collaboration from Charlotte's own firm, T1V. To see it in action, check out their YouTube clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUZyoYZo89M>. Even though displaywalls may not currently enjoy quite the cache or prestige of 3-D printers, I personally suspect over the long haul that interactive displaywalls will impact the learning experiences of at least as many students as will 3-D printers, and probably more. I expect by now we've all heard those quiet cautionary comments from librarians whose 3-D printer Makerspaces have seen less demand than anticipated. Don't get me wrong — 3-D printing is firmly ensconced in our collective future, but is hardly the only library innovation we should be following closely.

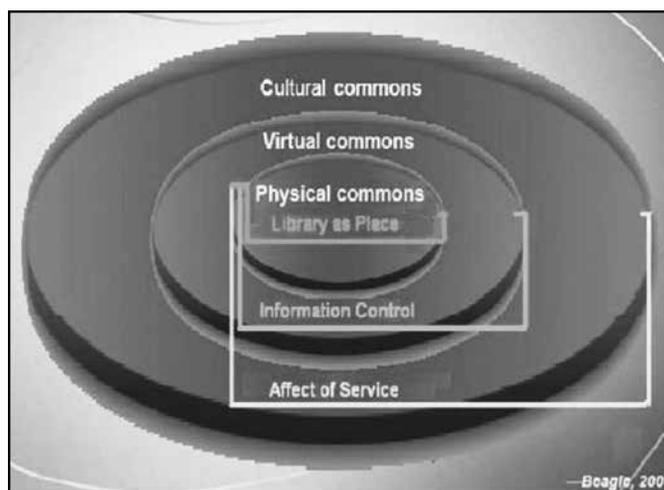
**BT:** *Did you have predictions from 2006 that did not pan out as expected?*

**DB:** In some of my articles and presentations, like my D-LIB paper in 2003, I thought we would see more practical impact from knowledge / data visualization than has thus far been the case. But of course, the consumer stampede to small mobile devices presents an inherent barrier to a more expansive exploration of knowledge visualization. The display wall, by contrast, will likely become the natural sandbox for visualization, for both knowledge discovery and big data apps. But that, in turn, means that the higher expense of display walls, and the logistical challenges of their installation, could hold visualization development to a somewhat slower adoption curve than I would have originally hoped. Still, we've seen some gradual progress. **CREDO Reference** is making good use of its MindMap feature, in my opinion. It is similar to what **Aquabrowser** attempted, but seems a more natural fit for **CREDO's** topical research arena. Also, **Gale/Cengage/Artemis** has incorporated a "Topic Finder Wheel" visualization in their Literature Criticism Online that I find promising.

**BT:** *Do you still think the Learning Commons is a valid model for the library of the future?*

**DB:** Real-world assessments are certainly proving it is a valid model for the present, and I'm not seeing any persuasive evidence that its advantages will be less compelling for the foreseeable future. It may no longer be the glamorous new kid on the block, but that pales in significance next to the ever-mounting stack of proven positive assessment results. In my research bulletin for the EDUCAUSE Center for Analysis & Research, I examined multiple assessments that cumulatively send a message of prevailing success that is hard to ignore. Still, I'm not sure our colleagues universally recognize the degree to which the LC, when properly managed, gives you an organizational model that positions your library to not only adapt to, but to *assertively leverage* the unique fluidity and malleability of digital media. I refer to the LC sometimes as the Library's potential "Swiss army knife" of digital tools and services. We see that potential coming closest to full actualization in the Weigle Information Commons at Penn, for example, and visualized in LC planning statements even from mid-sized campuses like **Marywood University** in Scranton. See **Marywood's** recent excellent LC vision

statement at <http://100.marywood.edu/priorities/commons/>, including the clickable bullet-points on that site's right sidebar. This goes beyond practicality to organizational theory. In 2005, I'd come up with what is now called the "three-domain diagram," to depict the physical, virtual, and cultural dimensions of an LC. **Paul Hagner** picked up on that when he was VP of EDUCAUSE and **Paul** immediately began using my diagram in his own EDUCAUSE presentations. But it was five more years before **Buffalo State College** issued the glowing LibQual+ assessments of its own IC, and I suddenly realized how elegantly LibQual+'s three assessment scales (Library as Place, Information Control, and Affect of Service) fit the dimensions of the three-domain diagram. That type of serendipity is a strong indicator that an organizational theory has internal coherence and validity. And I've been especially gratified that this theoretical convergence was recognized in the new edition of the *Encyclopedia of Information Science & Technology* (IGI Global; 2014). Its article, "Academic Libraries in the Digital Age" (not authored by me) features a very insightful overview of my EDUCAUSE discussion of "Information Control" and "Affect of Service" in the specific LC context.



**Figure:** *Convergence between the Learning Commons' three conceptual domains and the three assessment scales of LibQUAL+*

**BT:** *In your 3-part blog for ACRL's dh+lib webcenter, you related the LC to digital humanities initiatives. How different or how similar is that part of the LC vision to the Digital Scholarship Center movement?*

**DB:** Just because LC organizational theory has attained this interesting congruence with LibQUAL+ assessment scales, does not mean that theory can override organizational culture. Each institution has a unique culture, and some cultures will simply dictate alternative models to the LC. But frankly, I have not yet seen an alternative model that offers greater "Swiss-army knife" potential. I understand the growing interest in the Digital Scholarship Center model. It has real promise, and I'm following it with interest. Yet I think that model also presents a hidden risk: the risk of eventually morphing into a **Digital Scholarship Silo**, creating yet another insular buffer between research and learning, or yet another high-prestige escape hatch for star academics fleeing the messy challenges of teaching. When you're working on a campus that has a well-managed multifaceted Learning Commons (or Research Commons, if you prefer) leveraged to the upper potential of what a LC / RC can become, then you should have all the tools needed to do top-drawer digital scholarship within that space, without compromising its equal importance as a *learning* space. I wonder if that duality (or multiplicity) of service dimensions will remain true of the Digital Scholarship Center.

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**BT:** You mentioned the *James Hunt Library at NCSU in Raleigh*; what do you think of it?

**DB:** I've only visited it three times, one of which was a scheduled half-day tour. Two other times I discreetly drifted around inside, observing for 2-3 hour periods each. I would say all its floors exhibit striking design, but from a functionality standpoint, I like the upper floors the best. Those upper floors contain some of the best library spaces I've seen anywhere. I'm a bit less enthused by the West Entry on level 1 and the functionality of some spaces on level 2. For instance, the Emerging Issues Commons is a cool idea that just doesn't quite come together for me, at least in what I've encountered there thus far. Also, during my visits, the Apple Technology Showcase area was pretty barren and inactive, although it may get busier for scheduled demonstrations or at peak periods I didn't happen to witness. And I haven't personally found the iPearl Immersion Theater to be very engaging, perhaps because of its positioning on the floor. Beyond those minor lower floor reservations, however, all the other areas on the upper floor levels are (to me) uniformly first-rate. I do know of one university library director who joked about the whole place feeling like "an IKEA for library furniture." But I personally like how the building playfully engages and interacts with users through a wide variety of furnishings.

**BT:** Did the *Hunt Library* give you any ideas for your own upcoming LC expansion project at *Belmont Abbey College*?

**DB:** No, because we are designing from a different institutional history and leaning forward toward a different conceptual and visionary paradigm. NCSU is a STEM-intensive environment, whose Millenium Campus has a relatively brief history, compared to *Belmont Abbey's* organic emergence in 1876 from the contiguous Benedictine monastic tradition of an unbroken learning community spanning 1,500 years — to put it another way, a full millennium before the invention of printing itself. Students, faculty, and visiting scholars here need a library where they can equally engage thinkers from *Erasmus* to *T. S. Eliot*; poets from *Sappho* to *Sylvia Plath*, while using a technology-based Commons designed to leverage Charlotte's designation as a Google Fiber City. I think we were one of the first college libraries in our region to jump aboard the *Lyrasis* license for the *Loeb Classics Online* from *Harvard University Press*, while also being one of perhaps only a hundred nationwide to have licensed every *Netlibrary* eBook collection from its birth to its acquisition by *EBSCO* a decade later. While I do enjoy the *Hunt Library's* playful variety of furnishings, that variety will never make all those furnishings inherently equally successful. Over time, some will trend toward being essential while others will trend toward being marginal. After my three visits, I think I'm already getting a sense about which are likely to drift toward marginalization. In

shopping for things as basic as tables and chairs for our own current renovation, and our later 45,000 sq ft LC expansion, for example, I firmly believed that somewhere out there I would find a chair that offers the best possible blend of aesthetics, ergonomics, durability, and value. That turned out, in my view, to be the Focus chair from *SitOnIt Co.*, especially the version with full armrests, firm back and seat cushions, and leg casters. It offers the best ergonomics for laptop keyboarding I've yet found; it is affordable and has a lifetime warranty. Having found that optimal choice, it becomes simple to maximize economies of scale by ordering as many as we may need. But that doesn't mean we feel constrained by conservative traditionalism. We will also have variety, and I am looking very closely at new *ThinkPod* designs, for example. And even in our current \$1.3M renovation, we have already installed and are now testing out the innovative *Haven* by *Allermuir*, which replaced our former couches. *Havens* have high bolster surrounds that create a remarkably effective acoustic enclosure for conversation. Students love them even more than I expected.

**BT:** When you were at *UNCC*, you chaired the *Online System Selection Committee* that chose their new *ILS*, and you've also purchased a new *ILS* during your 15 years at *Belmont Abbey College*. What do you see as key questions in *ILS* selection today?

**DB:** I think *Roger Schoenfeld* asked some interesting questions in the Ithaca S+R study "Does Discovery Still Happen in the Library?" *Joan Lippincott* paraphrased it thusly in her *C&RL* article "Libraries & the Digital University:"

"*Roger Schoenfeld* challenges librarians to consider that relying on a service like *Google*, instead of a library-purchased discovery layer for the local integrated library system, might be 'effective enough' to keep the library from making an expensive investment."

As I read it, *Lippincott's* interpretation of *Schoenfeld's* paper seems to be that maybe we should focus our spending on the *ILS*, and just let *Google* handle all other aspects of discovery from here on out. But while I greatly respect both *Joan* and *Roger*, I think they may have this precisely backwards. I see the ideal *ILS* as the most efficient possible investment in baseline functionality: a database with an inventory layer (cataloging), a transaction layer (circulation), and typically an extra layer or three for satellite and support functions like acquisition. These layers constitute "automation 101," grown out of 1990s-level technologies. I see no valid reason in 2015 for a 4-yr liberal arts college library to have to spend upwards of \$100K on any or all baseline *ILS* functions (though *ILS* vendors will surely try to persuade us otherwise). By spending relatively less on the most cost-effective possible *ILS* functional layers, I then wish to free up maximum dollars to spend on a richly-featured discovery layer that does not attempt to mimic or replicate *Google*, but endeavors to differentiate library discovery from *Google* discovery as sharply and distinctively as possible.

The *Schoenfeld-Lippincott* argument seems to suggest that because libraries can never likely again become users' first point of discovery, we should therefore abandon discovery. But I honestly don't care if my library ever becomes the user's first point of discovery. *Google*, to me, is a great "square one" in the search and discovery game. Instead, I will invest in discovery (when the optimal product appears) because I want to position my library at the opposite extreme — not to be the first discovery option, but the final discovery option — where my library becomes the highest-possible value-added point of discovery — the point after which further discovery options are no longer needed. This differentiation is based on the very simple premise that *Google's* profit motive will always push its algorithm R&D investments toward maximizing quantity — they are in the business of selling eyeballs, or page views. Our non-profit motive should free us up to push our own discovery R&D investments toward quality, and finding better ways to contextualize the interconnectedness and interrelatedness of knowledge.

**BT:** So can you give us a sense of how you feel library discovery R&D might achieve this?

**DB:** Back in 2001, a new LIS journal was started in India, and their publisher invited me to do an article for Vol. 1 No. 1. My article actually came out in Vol. 1 No. 2, and I titled it "Digital Libraries & Dialogic Classrooms." That 2001 article was one of the very first to discuss discovery systems, and it frankly leapfrogged many discovery products we've seen over the years since. It made the case that a promising path toward a uniquely innovative library-based discovery system would be to yoke it to a dialogic interface, or to update that parlance to what are now often called adaptive or personalized learning systems. But sending that article to a unknown new journal in India was a tactical error on my part. That new journal soon sank without a trace, and took my article into the void with it — though that paper is finally now getting some belated attention via posting on portal sites like *Academia.edu* and *Researchgate.com*.

But I would add the key point that effective R&D will require LIS theorists and practitioners to take our own literature far more seriously and comprehensively than we may have in the past. Based on my own personal experience, too many LIS articles are still being published that do not adequately build on (or even cite) preceding research. I can give an example from my own experience of how this goes beyond professional courtesy to negatively impact research. In 2000, I published "Web-Based Learning Environments: Do Libraries Matter?" in *C&RL*. That article appeared even before "course management system" (CMS) had become standard nomenclature, and if you look my article up in *EBSCO's* LISTA database, you'll find it tagged with year 2001-timeframe subject tracings that today seem outdated, improvisatory, and tangential. That's the penalty one sometimes pays for authoring an article one colleague called "well before its time." To express this as collegially as possible, those odd subject tracings may explain why two years later (2002), *David*

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Cohen failed to cite my paper when he published a much shorter piece with a suggestively similar title: “Course-Management Software: Where’s the Library?” for **EDUCAUSE**. Cohen’s failure to reference my earlier research in his text, or acknowledge its existence with a citation, even if not a deliberate omission, had a greater consequence than one might suspect. It had the more serious (if temporary) effect of splitting this subfield of inquiry into contrasting wide and narrow frames of reference. Subsequent authors citing only Cohen seem to have followed the narrow path; e.g., if you want to do a blog post about how to embed a library tutorial link in the Canvas LMS, for example, Cohen’s paper is your logical citation, while authors citing my article seem to be exploring far broader implications and issues. My article had carefully cast its net as widely as possible by using a title that could encompass not only learning management systems, but everything from digital humanities projects, online cultural heritage exhibits, big data analytical sites, and visualization interfaces. I was making the key points that a) ALL of these (and more) qualify as *Web-based learning environments*; and b) ALL mark territories where Libraries and LIS professionals should indeed “matter.” Cohen, by contrast, circumscribed the topic narrowly, and (to my view) a bit rigidly. **Google Scholar** now shows my article as having been cited more often than Cohen’s in total, and through 2014, it continues to be cited at a faster rate than Cohen’s — in part, I suspect, because CMS has already worn thin as standard nomenclature, and because more LIS researchers are finally coming to the realization that Libraries really do need to “matter” in a far wider variety of “Web-based learning environments” than Cohen’s article ever envisioned.

So my concluding point is that LIS R&D will likely remain short-circuited, and never reach its full potential, until all of us, as both theorists and practitioners, do a better job of absorbing, interpreting, and appreciating our own professional and research literature.

**BT:** *One thing that has always struck me is the lack of any R&D arm/think tank for the library profession as a group. If some company or group would invest in this, libraries would be and could be more prominent in the research landscape. Why has this not happened? Have we been too service oriented? I am not against service, but it seems to me that we should be thinking more toward the future landscape.*

**DB:** Great question, and I totally agree. I think we need to recognize a bit of the history here. Looking back, I think the LIS community missed a golden opportunity for a quick lead out the starting gate when the Web first appeared. But I don’t personally think it was our service orientation. I think our R&D got delayed and detoured in the late 80s and 90s for two reasons: the delay, I think, was related to OCLC’s early visionary leadership in machine-readable cataloging to support ILL. When the Web appeared, I think many of us assumed that there must be some “skunk

works” R&D department at OCLC covertly developing a leading-edge search engine. But Google’s explosion into the market revealed that whatever R&D OCLC might have been doing, it wasn’t sufficiently agile, opportunistic, or visionary. And that delay relates to my second point about the detour — our decade-long collective detour into the blind alley / dead-end street named MS-DOS. Of course, we weren’t alone in this agonizingly protracted detour. I recall sitting in on a class for County Planners and IT managers when I did my grad certification in public administration at UNC’s Institute of Government in 85. I had just bought a Mac for my library, and my comments about that brought the scornful and condescending reaction from a speaker that “mice, GUI’s, and pull-down menus are merely toys. They’ll disappear within a couple years.” I replied: “In my opinion, everyone in this room will be using mice and GUI’s within a decade.” I was nearly laughed out of the room. (Too bad I didn’t offer a wager on that prediction.) But I stubbornly pressed on and even learned Hypertalk, the scripting language for Mac’s HyperCard. Few people today appreciate how much of Hypertalk’s legacy went into HTML. For me, learning the first release of HTML was like brushing up on HyperTalk 2.5.

But enough of that backtracking. For now, I think we’re finally seeing some vendor-specific R&D that holds real promise. One example is the **SirsiDynix** partnership with **Zepheria**, now just reaching the market in the BlueCloud Visibility product. I’m not endorsing this over any competition; simply pointing out that at least this is a coherently-articulated strategy to transform Marc21 records into linked data so that public Google searches can redirect users to library-owned resources. So it is another way of responding to the **Schoenfeld / Lippincott** point about ceding discovery to Google by responding “OK, if we can’t beat ‘em, let’s join ‘em.” At first, this may sound like it contradicts my strategy of a library discovery layer highly differentiated from Google. But I don’t see it that way. BlueCloud Visibility currently enables a high-listed Google hit to redirect the searcher into the **SirsiDynix** OPAC. That’s probably sufficient for public libraries. But the same strategy could also be tweaked to redirect the searcher into an academic discovery engine yoked to a dialogic or personalized adaptive learning system. Over the long haul, I still see that as the single most promising R&D path for academic libraries. So for now, it looks to me like the best LIS R&D (such as it is) is happening via vendor partnerships like **SirsiDynix** with **Zepheria**, and then also in selected university-based LIS graduate schools. Chapel Hill is doing interesting R&D on digital curation, for example, and Michigan/Ann Arbor has some exciting R&D on a number of fronts, including a community engagement project with local government in nearby Jackson, MI (which just happens to be my hometown). I don’t mean to slight or overlook other R&D players here — either vendors or grad schools. We just don’t have time or space to fully explore them. The more R&D the better, so I would finish by saying that no matter how much we have, we probably need a lot more.

**BT:** *But, following up on your last sentence, what more can we do to really facilitate (too weak a word) jumpstart industry-wide, collaborative R&D? It’s only happening in small group initiatives.*

**DB:** Another great question. It might be politic for me to finesse my answer, but that would be a cop-out, so I’ll be direct and honest about this. A couple vendors have tried creating standalone “futurist/guru” positions, and have hired (at presumably good salaries) high-profile quasi-celebrity LIS speakers who are staples at LIS conference programs. That’s good PR, and raises the vendor’s brand identification, but while those folks have been good at image-projection (and that alone has benefits not to be dismissed), I’ve not seen much evidence that they have personally spearheaded much valuable R&D. So I have an alternate proposal: vendors (and/or LIS grad programs) could find a handful of practitioners with both years of strong management experience and a demonstrable track record of publication and/or consulting — yes, like me. Since these will be folks with stable nine to five management positions — again, like me — you don’t need to offer an executive-suite salary. Instead, extend a relatively modest annual retainer (\$12-15K a year) for a set period, perhaps three to five years. And then turn them loose; also underwrite some travel to conferences, but not just LIS conferences. Send them to **EDUCAUSE**, to consumer electronic shows, to STEM-oriented data conferences, etc. I think this is a low-risk but potentially high-reward idea. We’re talking about a retainer that’s half the salary of an entry-level clerical position (or less), so if not all these LIS R&D “apostles” produce results after three to five years, nobody’s broken the bank. Perhaps each major vendor could underwrite one such “R&D idea person,” and if some major foundation would underwrite each major grad program to do the same, we could have a total group of maybe 15-25 veteran in-the-field R&D resource people generating and proposing new ideas. After five years, optionally renew any who have produced really promising ideas, publications, and results. Say “thanks” to the rest and replace them with a fresh group of R&D candidates. That’s my “immodest proposal” — and I say “immodest” because I think I’d personally flourish with this sort of opportunity. 🌱

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## Rumors from page 29

Be sure and read **Mark Herring’s Little Red Herrings** about this case. **Mark** focuses on copyright and the importance of copyright (p.45).

And the incredibly awesome and tireless **Lolly Gasaway** who by no means is retired from writing copyright questions and answers (thank goodness) weighs in on the case as well (p.52).

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