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Back Talk-When Your New Best Friend is a Rattlesnake

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Back Talk — When Your New Best Friend is a Rattlesnake



Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>

It looks like we're the dog who caught the car. When that happens it makes you wonder if you have dental insurance.

What's happened is that we've been given the provisional go-ahead to do a major renovation of our signature 1966 **Hayden Library** tower at **ASU** over the next two years. There's still process to go through to make sure all the dollars are in place, but the preparations have been ramping up, at first gradually, and now dramatically.

The stages are all predictable enough: vision/strategy, meetings with senior leaders, preliminary approval to hire architects, then hire architects, do the work to prepare to work with them, work with them in endless iterations, and get — about now, after almost two years work — to where serious drawings are being prepared for actual construction. Meanwhile, start planning swing space, logistics, and any associated small construction projects.

And then there comes the day when things start moving. In our case, the first move was the overlarge admin suite, now downsized and housed quite comfortably three blocks away in our large science library. (This means I go back and forth on hot days through our life science buildings — to get a quick air conditioning bath — between the two and always stop to see

Hector, the five-foot long albino diamondback rattlesnake, his daughter Lucy, and their fellow reptiles in ASU's famous hall of snakes.) Then moving the books: at first a dribble, and then suddenly there were moving trucks pulling up to the loading dock and book carts rolling, rolling, rolling, like the wagons in the theme song of Rawhide. (A small lesson we learned from that move: if ever a domestic move made you furious at the quality of the movers and the work they did, it's interesting to see what happens when the big moving company sends a team to work for its largest customer. It turns out they really do employ an A team of movers who are very smart, very careful, and *very* hard working. These folks have been just a pleasure to watch. Why, they were as careful with *my* books as I would be.)

When architects are in the vicinity, it's easy to get caught up in the pleasures of design and to lose track of what's most important. There's an old joke that the sign a major corporation is about to be in trouble is that it's just opened a new headquarters building, one with an atrium. The CEO's been spending too much time, the argument goes, looking at floor plans, paint samples, and fabric swatches. We knew we had to spend at least as much time working with our staff on their temporary and permanent locations spread out across a fifty-mile long swath of Arizona cityscape, and then work with campus officials to find alternative working space for our students — often more than 10,000 a day — who depend on us for their academic success.

How does the CEO — in this case the University Librarian — keep focused on what's really important? I have three suggestions.

1. The first and last most important thing about

any organization is its people. My first library as a little kid was a Quonset hut on an army post in the desert, and it did the job just fine because the staff were good— and behind them were leaders who thought that a good little library was an important way of offering lonely soldiers a mix of recreation and ambition that didn't require a lot of cleaning crews on Monday morning or produce a casualty list. With the best people in a tumbledown old building, one can do great things. A shining temple of librarianship staffed by bored and discouraged people scarcely deserves the name of library.

That means that leaders have to stay focused on using the renovation moment as an opportunity for staff development. Why spend the money on a building without also remaking service models, focusing ambitions, and giving people reason to believe that the new building won't be just shinier, but it will be a place where staff have better, more interesting jobs and more opportunity to make a difference for the users.

2. The building isn't for the staff, though, it's for the users. I've acquired a fairly well-justified reputation on our project as the guy who's obsessed about bathrooms. A university library building succeeds when it's the *de facto* office and home away from home for all the students who pass through it. (Faculty have other spaces and other relationships with the library building. It's students who really *need* the space.) The student user should always feel comfortable, welcome, and safe in a library building, able to stay there as long as they need to in order to focus on their tasks and get them done well. Shabby bathrooms with unemptied trash cans and liquids of any kind where they shouldn't be certainly make me think there's someplace else I'd rather be. Getting the bathrooms right is hard (it's too easy to value engineer that part of the project to save money), but if you get them right, you'll probably also have been thinking about all the rest of the user facilities: the furniture, the lighting, the visual buildingscape, and even the microwave in which students can zap a cup of ramen noodles at 2 a.m. and refuel themselves cheaply and easily.

3. What are the hardest things to do well in your library? Everyone will have different answers to that question, but it should be easy enough to make a list of three or four long-term headaches. A big facilities project is an opportunity to solve some of those problems and to improve others appreciably. That means focus on what staff and users *do* in the building, making the doing easier and more pleasant by creating spaces that are more conducive to the best work all can do.

continued on page 93



ADVERTISERS' INDEX

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43	AMERICAN PHARMACISTS ASSOCIATION	3	GOBI LIBRARY SOLUTIONS	11	PROJECT MUSE
5	ATG	13	IGI GLOBAL	31	SPIE DIGITAL LIBRARY
73	THE CHARLESTON ADVISOR	55	McFARLAND	95	SPRINGER
8	THE CHARLESTON REPORT	96	MIDWEST LIBRARY SERVICE	9	TAYLOR & FRANCIS GROUP

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LIBRARY PROFILES ENCOURAGED



Wayne State University Library System (WSULS)

Detroit, MI 48202
Information and Reference Desks:
David Adamany Undergraduate Library
(313) 577-8852
Purdy/Kresge Library (313) 577-6423

Vera P. Shiffman Medical Library (313) 577-1094
Arthur Neef Law Library (313) 577-6180
All Libraries Text Message Number (313) 228-3978
library.wayne.edu

BACKGROUND/HISTORY: The WSULS includes the David Adamany Undergraduate Library, the Purdy/Kresge Library, the Vera P. Shiffman Medical Library, the Arthur Neef Law Library, and the Walter P. Reuther Library of Labor and Urban Affairs.

NUMBER OF STAFF AND RESPONSIBILITIES: Total Library Staff FTEs 219; Professional Staff 73; Support Staff 68; Student Assistants 78.

OVERALL LIBRARY BUDGET: Total Library Expenditures \$19.6 million; Total Library Materials \$10.0 million; Total Salaries and Wages \$7.9 million; Other Operating Expenditures \$1.7 million.

TYPES OF MATERIALS YOU BUY: We acquire in various formats but make every attempt to acquire content in digital format. In most cases this allows for both greater access and assessment. However, depending on the discipline we will purchase material in tangible format, most notably print books for our Course Reserves service.

WHAT TECHNOLOGIES DOES YOUR LIBRARY USE TO SERVE MOBILE USERS? Our websites and discovery layers utilize responsive design, meaning our website shrinks or expands to adapt to any screen size; mobile, tablet, or otherwise.

DOES YOUR LIBRARY HAVE AN ILS OR ARE YOU PART OF A COLLABORATIVE ILS? As of December 12th, we will be using Ill's Sierra ILS and we host this as an individual library system.

DO YOU HAVE A DISCOVERY SYSTEM? We have developed a system we call QuickSearch, a tool that organizes search results into easily nav-

igable categories so users can easily find what they need. QuickSearch combines the search power of Summon, the library catalog, research guides, DigitalCommons@WayneState, digital collections and the Wayne State University website into a single search interface.

DOES YOUR LIBRARY HAVE A COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT OR SIMILAR DEPARTMENT? Our library system has four primary units with individual foci of General Education, Labor History, Law, and Health Sciences; each unit has a dedicated collection development librarian.

IF SO, WHAT IS YOUR BUDGET AND WHAT TYPES OF MATERIALS ARE YOU PURCHASING? PRINT OR ELECTRONIC OR BOTH? Our overall annual acquisitions budget is ~\$10 million. Although we aim to purchase in electronic format whenever possible, we purchase print when print is deemed appropriate but we focus our purchasing on electronic format.

WHAT DO YOU THINK YOUR LIBRARY WILL BE LIKE IN FIVE YEARS? I'm imagining that – right now – the Wayne State University Library System is five years into our transformation. Our Library is a model for a 21st Century Library and leads library education. Our Library has a distinguished track record of achievements in student success and retention, digital publishing, community engagement, and – most important – is powered by a commitment to organizational development. Our library is an exciting, fun place to work and the exceptional work of our people attracts worldwide attention and recognition.

WHAT EXCITES OR FRIGHTENS YOU ABOUT THE NEXT FIVE YEARS? I'm excited about the unlimited potential of research libraries working together. I'm frightened by what will come if research libraries continue working in siloes. Higher education is at a strategic inflection point; it is essential that library leaders become more creative, entrepreneurial, and strategic. Over the next five years, leaders of the best research libraries will step forward and work together to boldly lead our respective institutions, higher education, and the evolving information industry.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU THINK OUR READERS SHOULD KNOW? If you're looking for a great place to work – and thrive – within our industry, please consider the Wayne State University Library System! I'd love to begin a dialog with *Against The Grain* readers about everything we're doing here in Detroit!

Back Talk from page 94

And one more observation. For a lot of people, for a lot of the time a project lasts, the time of renovation is going to be a huge pain in the neck and other spinal regions. Recognize that and even take advantage of it. There are things one can do — experiment, perhaps, with new ways of setting up service points — at a time when one can't really break anything, when all the space is a *de facto* experimental laboratory.

And it's probably a good idea to spend a little extra money on food and parties. A good ugly sweater contest helps this season of the year! Everybody's going to need those moments of taking their eye *off* the ball, cherishing colleagues, laughing about the headaches, and reminding themselves why it's all worth it. 🍷

Rumors from page 92

Talk about an old and revered friend! **John** began coming to the **Charleston Conference** in the 1980s and attends most of the subsequent conferences. He worked for **Elsevier** for 30 years. I remember. He rolled up his sleeves in the 80s and helped us to craft several group case studies. What a guy!

And don't miss **Myer Kutz' Scholarly Publishing Scene** (this issue, p 56) about the **AAP's PROSE** awards.

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Okay, that's all we have room for this time, watch for more next time. Yr. Ed. 🍷