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Suddenly Directing!

An Interview with Florence Doksansky

Eric C. Shoaf

When your library director of twenty-two years suddenly leaves to take another position and you are elevated to acting director, what do you do? According to Florence Doksansky, interim university librarian at Brown University, you take a deep breath, assess the situation, and try your best to guide the library forward. Doksansky served as associate university librarian (AUL) at Brown for twenty-one years until early 2004 when her supervisor resigned. The library was in the middle of a multi-year reorganization and into the second year of contract talks with unionized nonprofessional support employees who were working without a contract. In addition, budgets weren't keeping pace with inflation, the physical condition of the libraries was deteriorating, and a new offsite storage facility was about to be brought online.

Fortunately, years of training and experience had prepared Doksansky to make decisions and lead the staff during a period of upheaval. Now, twelve months into the job, the library has reorganized, a union contract has been signed, the storage facility has opened, and plans for major facility changes are ongoing. Doksansky spoke about the challenges of being an interim director at a medium-size Association of Research Libraries (ARL) library.

Q. What is the single biggest difference between being a director and an AUL?

A. Of course, the single thing that is different is that you are the final authority in the library for decisions, and that means that expectations of your ability to control or change things have been raised. No matter how close I was to the director prior to this new position, it was amazing to me how much work there is on a daily basis that comes from many different areas and demands many different talents. Learning as you go is, of course, a challenge, but then I was fortunate to have been at Brown a long time. While I knew many of the players on campus, many of the senior university administrators had changed in very recent years, including the president and provost, who did not know me at all. The fact that we were in the midst of long and difficult contract negotiations and that I was on

the management team meant that I had to quickly learn to organize my time so that I was not pulled in different directions to the point of being ineffective. Also, I no longer had the option of dealing with some difficult problems over time. There were often pressing new deadlines that needed to be met immediately.

Q. How did your work experience as an AUL prepare you to be a director?

A. Not only the length of time that I had been at Brown but also my former position as AUL for both public services and collection development gave me a broad perspective and enabled me to work on many different things at the same time. In that job I was responsible for reference, circulation, shared resources, branch libraries, collection development, and media services, which supported all university classrooms. Some of the goals that I wanted to achieve during this interim period were manageable not only because of my background but also because there are truly great staff at the Brown library who were willing to assist me during my tenure.

I also want to say that while the former director, Merrily Taylor, was at Brown, she often placed me in situations where I stood in for her, and hence I had experience with preparing the entire library's complex budget and meeting with senior university officers and key faculty groups as well as handling consortial partnerships. It offered me an opportunity to grow before taking on the interim role and gave me confidence that I could handle the job. My thanks go out to her for her longtime support and mentoring.

Q. Have the people you interact with on a regular basis changed?

A. Yes, reporting to the deputy provost (which is a temporary reporting line as the previous director and the future one report directly to the provost) has been interesting and at times fun. It gave me an opportunity to educate a member of the senior administration on many of the library's issues, concerns, and opportunities. This has come in handy as he is now the chair of the Library Director Search Committee. I feel he has learned a great deal about the library that will help him bring in a new leader to meet our challenges. I have learned a great deal from him in turn.

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I have also been regularly in touch with many other administrators on campus who have equally been supportive of my role. The library director is the chief person responsible for the faculty library committee, the corporation visiting committee, as well as our very active Friends of the Library, which has one thousand members. All of these require a great deal of diplomacy that is necessary to have if one is going to be successful, especially in the interim position where your authority could be compromised. There is a fine line between saying yes and saying no sometimes, and one has to be very adroit at being positive without overdoing it.

Contacts with the community outside of the campus have increased many fold. Being Brown's representative at various organizations takes time and, of course, a commitment to learn quickly as much as possible about each group, whether it be a local consortium going through its own organizational changes or a group that expects support from the Brown library.

Q. *You faced several major issues immediately upon becoming the interim director. How did you approach solving stalled union contract negotiations, the library reorganization, budget issues, and facility changes?*

A. There were several intervening events that changed some of what I might have done. One of those was a direction from the senior university administration that the planned reorganization the library had been working on for several years was to be changed by me and that I had a few days to do that. While I did my best working with one colleague to save the main tenets of the original organization, there were things that had to change. This was mostly in the naming of departments with more traditional titles; for example, Materials Access was changed back to Technical Services. However, we did manage to keep the new departments for technology, which are very important to the new work all libraries have before them. It took time to settle into the revised organization. Some staff liked it, and others did not. However, after the revision there could be no additional tinkering until a new director was to be on board. Most agreed that making additional major changes would not be good for the library. Rather we needed to achieve stability and give the future university librarian the opportunity to consider additional changes.

The stalled union negotiations required the assistance of a federal mediator. And at the union's request, the university's vice president for administration, who is a labor lawyer, also came to the table. These additional points of view and advice assisted both teams to see where we had common ground and where we would continue to disagree. The end came after some very late-night talks when the university was willing to put aside its insistence on changing staff hours, and the union accepted some new job descriptions. In fact, I believe this contract is a win-win for both sides. Management was able to negotiate significant changes to

forty-eight jobs (more than half the support staff) to allow flexibility in the work, and these union members received appropriate pay raises for that new work.

It is always interesting to work at a relatively rich institution where the budget is still inadequate. No matter how much the library director says there is very little flexibility in the budget, staff and users feel that you are not doing enough, and they want more. Expectations are that a director—even temporary—will somehow deliver the funds. I was very fortunate to receive some extra money to accomplish specific, user-centered goals I set for my tenure. For the longer term, it is of course a bit tricky for an interim director to know exactly what to plan and request. We make our budget requests in November for the following July's fiscal year, at which time I assume the new director will be onboard. So, in fact, I have established some of the financial environment the new person will have to deal with. Hopefully the successful candidate will also be a very good negotiator and be able to get improvements to the budget.

The state of the physical plant of the libraries at Brown needs much improvement. During my interim tenure, a new storage facility had been completed in March 2005. This highly visible project was supported by the president of the university and had been planned over the previous three years. It allows the library over time to store 1.7 million volumes and to renovate its space for other programmatic needs such as student study space, electronic classrooms, cafés, and all the things a twenty-first-century library is expected by its users to have. Currently Brown's library buildings are overcrowded with books and are not conducive to the collaborative working habits of students and other library users today. The storage facility will help us greatly to improve that. Recently, a proposal to turn several floors in our Sciences Library into a twenty-four-hour information commons has been approved and funded. I will be heavily invested in making that a success as well, since it a very exciting opportunity to do something wonderful for our students.

Q. *How does your interim status affect decision making? Are there things you can't do that you might like to do?*

A. I guess the main thing I would say about all of these topics is that life as an interim director is not a caretaker's job. University officials, corporation and faculty committees, library users of all stripes, and, of course, the library staff continue to have expectations and needs that must be met. One is continually challenged to have accomplishments that keep the library moving forward without setting any long-term agenda. I am sensitive to that because, while I think the library needs a new long-range plan, it does not seem appropriate for me to set that in motion. However, I believe in setting reachable goals throughout the year, and each department in the library has done that. We have made an effort to set goals that are

measurable, timely, actionable, and, most importantly, that meet user needs.

Q: *You moved up to your current position. Have other staff in your library moved up as well to fill administrative gaps?*

A: No. Actually this is an interesting question, since a development of our new organization is that we no longer have associate university librarians. Hence, in a way, I have organized myself out of a job. However, we have in place department leaders who have stepped up to the plate to help in all that I do. And, fortunately, considering all we have been through this year, we have a collegial atmosphere where administrative staff assist each other to make the library successful in its goal of meeting campus priorities.

Q: *What sort of support group do you have as a director?*

A: I have a wonderful set of friends who are not librarians and a truly supportive family; these people can listen and empathize. But fortunately I also have a large support group of Rhode Island librarians from all types of libraries who I have known for many years. This group has helped me learn the territory when dealing with new statewide issues as well as giving me support when I need it. I also have a close relationship with the past director who can give me advice and information as necessary.

I do not feel it is appropriate to blow off steam within the library, but that does happen occasionally with the staff who report to me. I do not believe it is a good thing to complain about things that are going on often or with many staff, as the role of the director is to keep on the positive side of issues and concentrate on getting the work done while moving the library forward. During this period I have also relied heavily on our organizational and staff development librarian.

Q: *In your current role, what have you found to be the biggest challenge in being a library director today?*

A: Certainly when I graduated from library school in 1969, my library administration course did not tell me I'd need to be a labor lawyer, a facilities planner, a quick study in technical areas, a financial planner, a marketing specialist—I could go on and on. The message here is that a library director in a major research library needs many diverse skills in order to run a very complex organization. While the director cannot and should not be an expert in all these areas, one has to be able to represent the library on all fronts and manage people who are responsible for varied operations. The special collections staff need attention and support just as do the digital initiatives staff and all in between. Educating the university administration as

to the complexities of the current library environment is not an easy task, and possibly the hardest for an interim director. It is the job of all staff, especially the director, to make the library a vibrant, relevant campus resource.

Q: *What are some of the attributes that make for a good interim director in your experience?*

A: Well, a sense of humor is essential, and I do not mean that as a joke or a pun! One can't take oneself too seriously. I think being willing to talk with staff about things they are interested in is important whether it is the death of a parent, a child getting married, or even the Red Sox winning the World Series. Having a good sense of self—not trying to do too much or be something or someone you are not—is important. I could never be a technical expert, so it is important that the staff responsible for that area know that I depend on them and expect that they will tell me honestly what I need to know. I feel it is the interim director's role to support and respect all staff so that they can manage their work in a productive manner.

An interim director must be a good communicator beyond the internal library operations. As I mentioned previously, the library environment is changing and demanding. I believe we librarians have an important role to make the most of this time and give our best so that our legacy is one of flexibility and responsiveness. It is an exciting time but one where we are challenged every day to be the best librarians we can for today and for the future.

Q: *Which part of being a library director gives you the most satisfaction?*

A: I have been very fortunate over my career to work in some very good institutions: the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and now Brown. Finishing my career at Brown in this role gives me great personal satisfaction. It's been rewarding to work with the people I've had an opportunity to work with during this period. For me work has always been about the people we work for and the people we work with. I guess I always wondered if I could be a director, and now I know that, yes, I could and indeed have been one. Hopefully I have made a difference to a place that is important to me and so many others.

Q: *What happens to you when the new director arrives? Do you have a sense of the sort of work you will do when the new director comes on board?*

A: Actually, I do not know. I just know that I'm willing to do whatever a new director thinks is most important for the library as a whole. If I keep my sense of humor, just maybe I can continue to have as much fun as I'm having now!

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