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# Transparency Means Greater Payoff in a Planning Process

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# Transparency Means Greater Payoff in a Planning Process

A recent proactive strategic planning process at Clemson University Libraries (CUL) not only resulted in a positive outcome, but also offers lessons learned for other academic libraries to apply at their own institutions. More often than not, a planning process comes as a response to some sort of major change imposed from within or from outside the organization. A reactive approach to planning might be the result of budget cuts or mandates for staff re-organization. Major change often forces strategic planning. A proactive approach to strategic planning allows more time for the organization to grapple with its vision of the future, to benchmark other organizations for quality of service, and to seek feedback from all levels of staff. It was in this environment that CUL undertook an eight-month planning process that resulted in 35 recommendations to make organizational changes, augment staff, and tighten decision-making and accountability to move the library forward.

## Getting Started

Initial planning for the process began in late fall of 2011, as the dean of libraries looked at the library's progress in aligning itself with the university's strategic goals. These were developed internally as part of the university's 2020 plan but did not address the future vision for libraries with the degree of specificity desired. Of particular note was her concern for the continued viability of the

library's role in the teaching, learning and research vision of Clemson University. Working closely with the associate dean (AD), a planning process was envisioned that would be unlike any previous at CUL. Specifically, this process would be open and transparent, would be designed to receive input from library personnel, would make information about the process freely available to everyone, and would promote and encourage system-wide thinking among task force members and all library employees.

By mid-January 2012, members for a task force were selected and the charge drafted. To emphasize the sense of urgency for the work, the task force was called "The Future is Now" (FIN) and the charge noted that the continued viability of the library's role in the teaching, learning and research vision of CUL could be in jeopardy unless steps to radically transform the library were taken. It was determined that the AD would lead the task force and that an experienced organizational development specialist on the Clemson University staff would serve as group facilitator. Identifying a facilitator was an important step as it brought to the process someone with significant experience in the guidance and support of a group process, and marked the first time that such an approach had been taken in the library. The facilitator was briefed on the process and agreed to serve in the role for the eight-month period that was planned

for this group work. The dean, in her announcement of task force membership, alerted supervisors to the time commitment and her decision to make this work a priority for task force members.

## The Future is Now Task Force

The task force held its initial meeting at the end of January 2012, and agreed on action items for the process as well as ground rules for their work. In addition to an expected final report of recommendations, the group would also facilitate the revision of the library's mission statement, document practices at peer institution libraries, survey the library literature for trends and implications of technological change, and review best practices among current academic libraries as they respond to changes. A regular two-hour weekly meeting time was established and administrative support from a graduate student was provided for better tracking of group work, meeting notes, and assignments. From the beginning, the AD insisted that the planning process be open and inclusive, with complete transparency, and that information should flow easily in terms of news about the process and feedback from library personnel. Input from library personnel about previous planning efforts and decision-making processes showed many were unconvinced of the legitimacy of TF work. To ensure openness and access to the process, a website was set up

using the Libguide format with complete documentation of the process. Linked web pages were created for:

- Charge to the task force, member roster and contact information.
- Resources used by the task force, including readings from the library literature, as well as other sources, and all available full-text.
- Reports generated by support groups and task force members.
- Presentations by invited speakers and other notable presentations about the future of libraries that are available online.
- A listing of frequently asked questions and their answers.
- Feedback opportunities for library employees.

## **Communication and Feedback**

Communication is an important element in any endeavor, and especially where broad input is solicited. From the beginning, the TF created many avenues to communicate with library personnel about the process, about the resources uncovered and developed, about trends and implications at peer institutions, and about best practices at academic libraries engaged in responding to the myriad changes in technology and other forces in the academy. Opportunities to communicate and provide feedback on the process took many forms. Among the pathways set up to provide specific input to TF members were:

- Email to individual TF members.
- Open office drop-in hours held weekly for consultation with TF members.
- Regular updates at Library Administrative Council meetings.
- Email to the TF as an entity.

- An anonymous input form.
- Meetings with all library units.
- An open forum on TF progress with invitations to all library employees.
- Updates in the weekly library newsletter.

## **Supporting Groups**

In order to involve other library personnel directly in the process, additional work groups were identified and charged. An Environmental Scan group looked at social, technological, economic, and political trends affecting the university and library. Their analysis proved crucial to the task force in understanding critical influences outside the control of the library that affect strategic planning. A library faculty member was identified to review data from three LibQual surveys completed over the previous nine years, and these results provided a fresh perspective on library user perceptions of space, services, and collections. To further engage library personnel, and to gain the most current input from university faculty and students, a Survey Group was created to gather data among library user groups and report findings. The results of all three groups are listed on the FIN website and the information therein was consulted closely by the TF in developing recommendations.

## **New Library Mission Statement**

Early in its work, it was apparent to the TF that the library's mission statement was outdated and would not be useful in its current form. Several group meetings were given over to developing a new articulation of the library's mission. There were many discussions in both small groups and

the larger task force, and many drafts and word-smithing of new mission statements that could be shared with the larger library workforce for input. Three drafts were developed in this manner and offered for feedback. Based on input received, a final mission statement was completed and was approved by the dean for immediate adoption. The new mission served as a guide for TF work and was a resource when discussing library responses to technological and organizational change.

## **Uncovering Trends and Implications**

Early meetings of the task force focused mostly on readings from library literature about current trends in organization and response to technological changes. In total there were six required readings for discussion and fifteen optional readings. These were all made available to TF members and library personnel on the TF webpage. Typically the discussions would involve small 3-4 person subgroups that would react and respond to questions such as "What is CUL already doing?" and "What is CUL not doing that needs to be done?" as well as "What can CUL try to do?" and "Challenges and actions to try." The small groups would report back to the larger group for further discussion. In this way, recommendations were fleshed out and shaped during the discussion process, and brought forward to be considered for the final report recommendations.

Another element of reviewing the current landscape of academic library work was looking at peer institutions and their libraries. Using a list of the peers developed by the Clemson Office of Institutional Effectiveness, seven administrators of peer

institution libraries were contacted and telephone interviews arranged to discuss a range of topics related to library practice and the challenges of the future. TF members paired to interview the library administrators and offered reports of these interviews to fellow TF members. These were also posted on the TF website. In addition, an all-staff meeting was

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held to update the library workforce on the FIN process, and the peer reports were discussed as well.

In addition to peers, the TF also looked at best practices. Instead of using the peer or benchmark approach, however, the group used a functional approach in considering five specific areas for analysis: technology, public services, collections, service points, and administrative services. Information was gathered from a variety of sources including literature reviews, surveys, data analysis, internet research, and more. The final reports on best practices were discussed in terms of incorporation into workflows and procedures at CUL, and these were posted on the TF website.

### External Views

One of the ideas developed for a kick-off to the process featured a provocative and forward-thinking leader. This was later expanded and two speakers were identified that were available to share experiences at their own libraries: Lynn Sutton, Dean of the Library at Wake Forest University and whose library was winner of a recent ACRL Excellence

in Academic Libraries Award, arrived in early February with a lively presentation to library personnel that raised a number of key points about major changes in provision of library services and programs on the academic campus. Pat Hawthorne, Director for Library Organizational Development and Human Resources at Emory University Libraries spoke to the TF

and also to the Environmental Scan and Survey Groups during a visit in March. She was able to offer a unique perspective as she serves as incoming president of the Library Leadership & Management Association (LLAMA), one of the divisions of the American Library Association. In her remarks to the TF, Hawthorne discussed the SOAR Process (strengths, opportunities, aspirations, results) and about how they can be applied in the academic library environment.

A more challenging learning experience unfolded in May 2012. The TF traveled to meet with the editors and publisher of the local newspaper, *The Greenville News*. In a lively discussion on the changes and adjustments made by the newspaper due to severe changes in its business model, several topics were pursued that have relevance for academic library work. The results of the discussion helped inform the TF members about information and content delivery in a different environment and piqued thinking about the library's growing role as a repository and content creator in the institutional repository function, as well as how to deal with fears and apprehensions that radical

change can sometimes cause among employees.

### Valuable Input

As noted above, input was solicited at all points of the process and feedback was received in a variety of ways. Ideas and comments regarding library trends, group process, dissatisfaction with present operating procedures, suggestions for change, and other topics were delivered to TF members and discussed at length throughout the process. Of particular note, the anonymous input form proved to be most-used and this provided a great quantity of information for the TF, but also created some frustration. While much productive information was provided, there were at times comments that appeared to be based on erroneous assumptions, rumor, or innuendo. Given the anonymous nature of the comments, it was not possible for the TF to respond to clarify or follow-up. One response to this concern was creation of an FAQ on the TF website that addressed some of the more common subjects that brought comment. Regardless of any frustration, the TF took seriously all input received and this valuable information was discussed at length and informed the development of the recommendations in this report. It was clear to the TF that library personnel were both engaged and involved in the process and were informed and interested in the future of the library.

### Steps To The Future

The process of developing the final recommendations meant distilling information uncovered and considered over eight months. Through a number of TF meetings, the slow work of identifying and developing

the final recommendations proceeded methodically. The TF worked to be intentional about the recommendations as well as realistic about possible outcomes. What emerged is a specific list of action items that will be handed off to an Implementation Team, led by the dean, that will now work quickly to put them in place. The key lessons in the process include:

- the importance of transparency and inclusion of all library staff in the process.
- the creation of multiple information pathways: web-based information flow, face to face meetings, speakers and

presentations, email, and regular updates.

- the availability of planning resources for everyone to review, outside speakers offering new ideas, open discussions of change, analysis and sharing of best-practices all led to greater involvement and consideration of the issues faced by academic libraries.
- the need for interactive opportunities, working groups to provide resources to the task force, responses to surveys and focus group meetings, and other opportunities to provide feedback throughout the process.

### **Update February 2013**

The Implementation Team completed its work and addressed all of the recommendations in some form or fashion. A number of new positions have been created and filled and several new faculty hired. Library staff have had opportunities to apply internally for promotional opportunities. The library is being reconfigured along the lines as envisioned and recommended by the TF. All of the material, reports, and analysis remain available for review at <http://clemson.libguides.com/futureisnow>.

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