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Library Program Review

University Libraries

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4-24-2019

## **University Libraries Program Review: External Reviewer's Report**

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# University Libraries Program Review: External Reviewer's Report

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Site visit: April 2-3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019

Report received: April 24, 2019

## **General Observations**

In the coming year the catalyst of a new president could offer singular opportunities for the Libraries. To the extent possible, the libraries should align their Strategic Planning Process with the agenda of the new president, although that might mean adjusting the timing and/or building in a good bit of flexibility.

Most staff seemed to have a overall good attitude about working at the library, and felt the same way about Seton Hall in general. Overall the culture was positive, and virtually everyone was competent and ready to do what it takes to have the libraries achieve more. However, with only a few outliers, the Libraries seem to be have an overall healthy organizational culture, as evinced as well in the findings of the Deans one-on-one meetings.

*The Digital Turn and the Library as Incubator of Ideas.* It seems like much of the important infrastructure work around technology has begun, although the deeper connection and integration to core services remains. That said, the staff are eager to delve more deeply into data services and digital scholarship, and with the strong instruction program, coupled with the willingness to look at instruction services anew, the library is well-positioned to build out an integrated suite of services that combines technological tools, digital content and the unwavering commitment to information literacy and student achievement. (Consider rebranding information literacy to something like competencies and navigation strategies in a digital world)

Besides the info commons space, which is exceptional and lively, I found the building layout to be somewhat confusing. Lots of student study spaces are a positive (perhaps a few could serve as maker-spaces or sandboxes for student projects?). The Walsh Gallery and special collections area (especially the teaching room) are compelling spaces and could be explored as natural partner areas (and staff) for the further development of a digital scholarship program. Perhaps a fresh look at the overall building layout could be in order as new services are introduced and integrative to the academic programs. The library building works, it's just not optimal (like almost all libraries). Again, addressed more fully below.

## **Culture and Communication**

Despite the fact that some staff indicated that decision-making tended to be too top-down, the recent meetings of the Dean with all staff indicated a much more inclusive environment than indicated by a vocal few. For example, the quality of recent hires has been seen as a net positive, and a vast majority of staff recognized that changes continue on a trajectory that indicates a commitment to continuous improvement. The fact that the Dean had these meetings is indicative of open communication, and that staff gave both positive and constructive feedback says a lot about both the process and the community.

As always, communication was raised as a concern in my meetings and in the Deans report. There's an adage that states that the time to worry about communication is when no one is taking (concerned/complaining) about it. I think that holds true at SHU Libraries. People are engaged and they care about what's happening and want to be included as much as possible in charting the course, within reason. Still, it might be useful to have some frank discussions in the

manager's group about these findings, as well as the challenges of what essentially amounts to a two-tiered system of personnel (faculty and staff). I almost always answer questions with another question, especially at the AUL level, and I suggest to managers that the biggest mistake is to over-manage. With people in a hierarchical system, less is often more the higher one goes.

The Dean may want to consider an inclusive process that builds on the good will engendered by his one on one meetings, to develop a theme by which the staff can share in its formation, that will also serve as a unifying principle (or set of principles). Such a process can map to initiatives of the incoming SHU President in August, and clarify, validate and refine the role of the Library within the larger university, as well as serve a way to re-energize staff.

The newish managers group, convened by the Dean that meets regularly to discuss strategic issues is a palpable commitment to inclusive strategic conversations. Certainly all administrative meetings have some element of information sharing, but the key pivot for developing a collaborative leadership model recognizes information sharing as a point of departure for open conversation. Similarly, the Dean can further facilitate this process by intentionally having the senior leadership comment on and engage in issues and concerns outside of their areas of jurisdiction. The expectation and hope is that both trust and a better sense of shared commitment will develop, which was modeling in many respects in the recent one-on-one meetings with the Dean.

The manager's group can only succeed if the Assistant Deans can model the behavior for them by accepting responsibility for operations and initiatives outside their respective areas of responsibility. A few staff expressed concern about a propensity of some managers to over-manage.. This is mentioned not as a major problem, but one to be aware of and monitor as needed.

In kind, facilitate a culture of shared responsibility within the managers group. As different managers their viewpoints on areas outside their departments. Once they get that this creates a stronger organization, built on shared values and trust. It's not easy, but worth it.

Keep specific budget and personnel conversations within the AUL Group. (I think the AUL Group needs to meet weekly with the Dean). I also sense the AULs see their roles as administrative, which is true, but to my mind the best indicator of effective managers is having them ask better questions. Likewise, for the Dean, the perhaps a minor pivot to a little more leading with ideas (and questions) and less involvement with operations.

### **Collections and Budget (Institutional Support)**

All university and college libraries associated with top tier institutions have difficulty maintaining adequate collections and staff to meet all the needs of the faculty and students. SHU is no exception. In fact, comparative data and associated metrics suggest that SHU has fallen behind peer and aspirant intuitions in financial support for both collections and staff. Current data bears this shortfall:

<https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=Deal-or-No-Deal-Periodicals-Price-Survey-2019>

Projected increases are:

Arts & Humanities: 6.3%

Social Sciences: 6.8%

Sciences: 5.8%

Interdisciplinary: 6.1%

There are no easy answers to maintaining appropriate levels of collection funds. At SHU the NEH grant has mitigated the ongoing problem (which ALL libraries have), but like most places the pace of inflation, the preponderance of digital information, and the heightened expectations of students, faculty and researchers cannot possibly ever be enough. While additional funding for content is sorely needed, so too is the need for adequate staffing for a robust document delivery (ILL) service. It's not an either/or. Rather it's a both.

All that said, the Library does get the most of from its services due to the evident work ethic and leadership from all areas. Not a single person was pessimistic about the call to provide the highest levels of service, and it seemed that everyone did whatever it took to deliver. Similarly, the collections appear to be holding their own, although the budget shortfall should still be emphasized. It is also clear that an increase in the collections budget would be handled with intelligence and committed stewardship.

## **Public Services**

The info commons was busy and full of energy, indicating that the Library was an important destination. Within that space, some things stuck me as possibilities for improvement:

- Consider creating some zones or pods for specialized services such as data and/or GIS
- The print reference footprint seemed larger than necessary
- The IT Help desk seemed expedient and did not match the care and commitment evinced by library service points
- The desks facing the outer walls around the perimeter of the space could be replaced with diner booth-like seating (these are popular and facilitate small group work)
- Intersperse some rolling white boards throughout the areas
- Drop in, public instruction/information sessions could work well

The staff is clearly dedicated and talented, in all areas, including public services. Some aspirational themes emerged in the areas of digital humanities and data services. Most of these initiatives and aspirations fit nicely into the overall goals, although implementing them may challenge existing (albeit fading) practices and library-centric assumptions about the needs of the campus.

## **Observations and Ideas around the Library Goals**

Goal 1) Provide expert assistance, instruction, and an innovative suite of user services which are responsive to the needs of our community and changing circumstances.

- Change is the operative word; as a whole the strong services program can consider an intentional digital turn, to integrate emerging technologies more fully into teaching and learning, perhaps under the rubric of digital literacy. Expecting students to conform to the library version of research and information literacy is less likely to have the desired impact. Instead, smaller more focused sessions that may feel expedient, but that may be what the students actually need. Moreover, drop-in topical instruction can also go a long way towards engaging upper level undergraduates.
- The above seems to reflect where the instruction program was, appropriate to the context, although I was overall encouraged by a plethora of new models and approaches to the instruction program that were exceeding user-centered and forward-looking. The energy and risk-tolerance exhibited by these conversations creates a meaningful path forward, building on earlier lessons and successes, but departing from dated models.

Goal 2) Build up and preserve print, digital, and other materials using selection criteria that reflect the academic priorities of the University, current collection strengths and significant research in all areas of study pursued at the University.

- The new institutional repository will go a long way to achieving this goal. Consider the ETDs content as low hanging fruit. But along with the digital turn implied throughout this report, the student products that emerge from digital scholarship can also reside in the repository.
- Another program to leverage the digital content is around course materials. SHU Libraries spends a sizable amount on content, and faculty could better integrate digitally accessible content into course syllabi in lieu of expensive texts. Here is the grass roots example at BC: <https://libguides.bc.edu/affordable>. This fall will be our largest cohort.

Goal 3) Provide effective organization and presentation of information and collections and access to information located elsewhere.

- The digital revolution has certainly diminished the expectations around ownership of printed materials. On the other hand, the expectations for discovery, access and delivery have increased significantly. Access services departments, especially the interlibrary loan functions have seen unprecedented rises in activity. At SHU there certainly seems to be a need for a position or two in support of the change in user behavior and expectations for getting content not owned by SHU. The metric of ownership has been eclipsed by access, and library clearly needs to be better resourced via a position to keep up.

Goal 4) Create and maintain a physical environment that fosters learning and research and encourages use and interaction.

- Along with earlier comments about the information commons, the IHS and the Walsh Gallery/Special Collections offer some compelling possibilities. I get the sense that they could be better integrated into the overall fabric of the service culture. I found the archives and special collections staff to be especially engaged and eager to explore

collaborations, leveraging both the content and the spaces. As to the IHS, I did not see the space, but the staff I met were similarly open to exploring new ideas and partnerships. In both cases some examples for integration are given below.

- The Libraries have a clear commitment to information literacy efforts, and have success with the “core competencies with information literacy” with freshmen. The issue of upper level instruction remains a challenge, not unique to SHU. However, building of the instruction program, and realizing the content of the special collections, a partnership with some selected faculty in using special collections content for courses can serve two functions by bringing upper classmen into to library in a meaningful way, as well as experimenting with new forms of digital scholarship. See for example <https://library.bc.edu/exhibits/stokes/> where the special collections team and the digital scholarship team collaborate with the history department in a series of course under a rubric “making history public”. It started as an idea and evolved into some sustainable. We are now trying to model in several other academic departments, and the students love it.
- As it the IHS, they seem to have a little different approach to services, for obvious reasons. But what’s interesting is that the service evinces a much more engaged, embedded approach. The possibility then, might be to use the IHS as something of as a service sandbox for the main campus. The scale between the libraries is clearly distinct, but the potential synergies are compelling.

Goal 5) Communicate the library’s services and resources effectively, expand outreach and develop opportunities for our users to communicate about and shape those services and resources.

- The instruction program certainly provides the foundation for building out a robust marketing plan for the libraries. Look for additional opportunities to embed a librarian and associated services into coursework. The students of today tend to gravitate to digital content and tools, so any chances for integrating and/or showcasing library digital initiatives is likely impactful. The information commons gets loads of eyeballs, so leverage that accordingly.

Goal 6) Develop strategic alliances and cooperate with other organizations for the advancement of scholarship, efficiency, and University goals and objectives.

- Partnership are critical, and the two most obvious ones are central IT and the teaching center. Unfortunately like more universities, these relationships appear to be currently strained. No knowing the nuances, the overlap of jurisdiction and expertise are gray areas that occasionally collide. Again, not knowing enough, it might be interesting to explore a small advisory group from each of these areas to explore the proverbial challenges and opportunities from the perspective of the faculty and students. Tin fact, including faculty and students on the committee could lead to better collaboration and assessment. The pivot to looking outward (user-centered) could be where library leadership has the most

to offer the dialogue, as well as the spaces and service expertise. Developing a relatively seamless suite of services could be an important optic for the users as well as for the new president.

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Goal 7) Contribute to the academic, ethical, and cultural growth of the University community.

- I noticed the mission statement of the university is dated June 6, 1996. It includes all the buzzwords commensurate with its Catholic roots. The new president may want to revisit this mission (the wording at least) and it seems the archives might have an opportunity to explore the history of the mission statement see if there is any evidence on how the mission has been fulfilled.
- Separately the instruction program, active library and deep service commitment of the library staff should all advocate and market for the library whenever and wherever possible. Every interaction and every staff member is an ambassador at any given time. To this end, as the library begins its new strategic planning process, the importance of brand development and the shared elevator talk seems imperative.

Goal 8) Foster an organizational culture and work structures that are agile, communicative, transparent, resilient and flexible, embrace change and encourage teamwork.

- In some places people believe that technology work is cutting edge and deserving of a higher profile, and value. Obviously many newer services have strong visible digital aspects (like our students), and because these services are new they often require more attention and resources. But the point is that management needs to be especially mindful of the entire organization and redouble efforts to make sure all operations, and thereby employees, are recognized and valued. These issues were especially evident with traditional non-public facing areas.
- At BC we did a staff survey a few years ago as we were transitioning to integrating digital services into all we do. The findings disclosed a “digital divide” between staff engaged with these new models and those that felt disenfranchised. There might be some of that happening right now at SHU Libraries. No easy answers were evident from these findings, but we found that the disenfranchised really needed reassurance of their continued relevance. We did this by always and publicly acknowledging that new services could not be possible without a strong foundation of existing services, and that health of the library ecosystem was interdependent. Maybe try to find a way that fits SHU to address this issue.

Goal 9) Secure the resources to meet Seton Hall University Libraries’ goals and objectives.

- Addressed earlier, but the University is hurt by not maintaining adequate staffing and collections budgets for the library. The comparative data of other Catholic and aspirant universities shows an unambiguous disconnect of resources and ambitions. This is really a University issue, and hopefully with the new president the entire campus, and



especially the library can move from a culture of scarcity to one of empowerment and boldness.

## **Summary Thoughts**

The staff morale is in very good to pretty decent shape considering the exigencies of low budgets and the need for a few essential positions. Still the library desperately needs more funds for content, and if it is to develop new services in the areas of digital scholarship and data services then it must first ensure existing core services are full staffed. The two staff areas that seem immediately evident are both in Access Services, around Course Reserves and Interlibrary Loan. The position support critical areas of library operations in any college or university. Course reserves serve students and faculty by make content readily available and contextual. Interlibrary loan facilitates the acquisition of content beyond ownership, a must in today's digital world where the lines between discovery and access are increasingly blurred.

In terms of emerging services, almost all libraries are developing and/or exploring data and digital scholarship services. The librarians at SHU have done a commendable job establishing the needs and building the infrastructure for these initiatives, although at this point implementation is limited to discreet projects. The University should recognize the importance of these services and support them through librarian positions for data and digital humanities, as meaningful steps towards moving from project(s) to program. These areas of research and scholarship will enhance student digital literacy, create new and better avenues for interpretation of content as well as using tools for complex and more interesting presentation of findings. Similar benefits can also be found for faculty around teaching and learning and the willingness for use technology in the classroom. The library can and should be given the opportunity to participate and selectively lead in these endeavors.

Even though the library staff seem to be in a good spot, with high energy and an unwavering service commitment, I was struck by the fact that I could not quite get a sense of the "identity" of the place. Realizing that this assertion is entirely subjective, it still lingers. The suggestion for the next strategic planning process is to discover that personality. For example, at Duke I established an idea called "service as a way of being" that essentially turned all efforts in all areas to improve the user experience. At Boston College, the first iteration was "good to great" convincing staff that we were all good, but if we work more collaboratively, accepting risk and allowing for creativity, we could become great. The second iteration was "value beyond discovery", a collective effort to rebrand to library as more than a repository to discover content, and more of a full academic service center. These are just example, and I would not presuppose to tell SHU what works for them, but I think it's important, and the process must be inclusive. The new president and the forthcoming strategic planning process seem to present the perfect opportunity.

In my meetings and the findings of the Deans one-on-ones I think it's save to state that the future is bright. Most of the suggestions above are meant to expand an already rich dialogue, and should not be viewed as prescriptive. I am especially encouraged by the gesture of trust, and the "can-do" attitude and willingness of the library faculty to do their best work, always. The

challenges is keeping that momentum going, knowing that there's no finish line, and the rewards are in the work itself, and the community.