Journal of eScience Librarianship

Volume 5 | Issue 1 Article 7

10-19-2016

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Recommended Citation
Plutchak, T. Scott. 2016. "A Librarian Out of the Library." *Journal of eScience Librarianship* 5(1): e1106. http://dx.doi.org/10.7191/jeslib.2016.1106

ISSN 2161-3974
JeSLIB 2016; 5(1): e1106
doi:10.7191/jeslib.2016.1106

Journal of eScience Librarianship
putting the pieces together: theory and practice

Commentary

A Librarian Out Of The Library

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Focus

As librarians move into new roles, such as research data management, they sometimes find themselves moving, both organizationally and physically, out of the library. While this dislocation can be professionally unsettling, the shift in perspective that it brings can heighten their and their colleagues' appreciation for the particular skills and talents that librarians can bring to the research enterprise.

Once a librarian, always a …

Nonetheless, when one is no longer working in a library, one's perspective shifts in interesting ways.

In September of 2014, after 19 years as Director of the Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences (LHL) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), I moved into a newly created position in the office of the Senior Vice Provost, ambiguously titled "Director of Digital Data Curation Strategies." It was as if we took a handful of words related to my interests, threw them in the air, and watched to see what order they landed in.

We were reorganizing the UAB libraries. Since the institution's founding, there'd been two library organizations (one serving the health sciences schools and the health system — the

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Keywords: RDM, librarians, data management, organizational culture

JeSLIB 2016; 5(1): e1106
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larger part of the institution — and one serving the other academic programs), each headed by an individual with the title of Director, but the authority and responsibility of a Dean. Now there would be a single Dean of Libraries, tasked with the challenge of melding two organizations of roughly the same size, but profoundly different organizational cultures, into a single, vibrant organization that could deliver library services to the entire university. The Director of the Sterne Library retired, and I began discussions with the Senior Vice Provost, to whom the library directors reported, about what I might find interesting and useful to occupy my time.

I'd been involved in the Open Access 'wars' for many years. I considered myself an 'OA heretic' – that is, I supported the concept of the elimination of subscription barriers, but I opposed the SPARC orthodoxy of confrontational advocacy that demonized publishers and sought a legislative solution. Far from viewing publishers as the enemy, I saw them as potential allies in the development of open access solutions and spent much of my time trying to build bridges among the various stakeholders in the scholarly communication ecosystem.

In 2009 I was asked to participate in the Scholarly Publishing Roundtable, a small group organized at the behest of the White House and the U.S. Congress to attempt to develop consensus recommendations for making the scholarly products of federally funded research available to the general public (Scholarly Publishing Roundtable 2010). Our recommendations were incorporated into the America COMPETES Act Reauthorization[1] of 2010 and heavily influenced the "Holdren memo"[2] which was issued in February 2013, directing the federal funding agencies to develop public access policies for publications and data.

The Roundtable was focused on publications, but discussions of data inevitably intruded. I had become convinced that the greatest opportunities for dramatically advancing science and knowledge would not come from merely making peer-reviewed articles freely available, but from sharing and widely distributing the well-structured and curated data sets on which those articles were based.

The more I considered the issues involved, and the challenges they presented, the more I realized that there was no single entity, no organizational unit, in the typical research university that could "own" the problem. This was not, of course, a unique insight (Erway 2013). Solutions could only be achieved through collaborative efforts involving many stakeholders throughout the institution. The problems that were most interesting to me were not the technical ones, but those involving human factors — how to align the various interests of people and organizational units across the university to act in a way that would achieve the goals of a robust, well-managed suite of services, infrastructure, and policy to support research data management.

The Senior Vice Provost and I discussed potential roles and agreed to have me spend my time trying to help the institution figure this out. In consultation with the newly appointed Dean of Libraries, we settled on that delightfully ambiguous title. We discussed the organizational placement of the position, and after initially considering keeping it within the library organization, decided to have the position report directly to the Senior Vice Provost. It was a fortuitous decision.

1 https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/111/hr5116
2 https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/microsites/ostp/ostp_public_access_memo_2013.pdf

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I've been at UAB a long time. In my role as Director of the Lister Hill Library I'd built relationships and alliances throughout the institution. I knew many of the key players and understood some of their priorities and challenges. I had always attempted to focus on developing programs and services that were in the best interests of the students and faculty. I'd repeated to the library staff many times, "Our job is not to build a better library, but to figure out how we can best use our tools and talents to advance the mission of the university. Sometimes that'll mean continuing to do the things that people have always associated with libraries, sometimes it will mean no longer doing some of those things. And sometimes it will mean taking on things that no one ever associated with a library before."

Nonetheless, I was still surprised, in those first few months, to see how markedly my perspective shifted, now that I was no longer focused on the role of the libraries. Positioning the library was no longer my problem. This was quite liberating.

Initially, I started by scheduling one-on-one meetings with people that I knew had an interest in managing data. The Director of the Big Data lab, the Dean of the School of Engineering, a biostatistician in the School of Public Health, a researcher in Health Professions who works on decision support systems, the Associate Director of University Compliance, the Assistant VP of Research, and others. At each meeting we discussed how they used data, what they worried about, what they felt was lacking in terms of institutional support. I asked each of them who else I should talk to. My circle widened.

As my email list grew, I started hosting informal monthly discussion sessions. I referred to the group as the "Data Wranglers." We met late in the day, in a space devoted to interdisciplinary innovation that is officially called, "The Edge of Chaos." We continue to meet, usually 8 to 12 people, always a few regulars and a mix of one-timers. There's a loose agenda, but mostly we let the discussion flow. We've talked about best practices, training, NIH policies, data storage, metadata, and a host of similar topics.

These conversations spawned a more formal working group (which I co-chair with the Assistant VP for Technology Services in IT) charged with developing recommendations for services, infrastructure, and policy to assist investigators in complying with the developing guidelines from federal funding agencies for making the results of funded research publicly available. The group includes representatives from the office of the VP for Research, the Libraries, University Compliance, and the Center for Clinical and Translational Sciences. Its recommendations go to the Senior Vice Provost and the VP for IT. We recently completed a short survey to get a snapshot of research data management practices across the institution. We'll be following up with a number of the respondents to do in-depth interviews to develop use cases.

Throughout these discussions, my focus remains: what is it that investigators need to be more successful? What is it that the university needs to provide in order to meet its various responsibilities? What do we need from IT, the Office of Sponsored Programs, the Graduate School? And, yes, from the Libraries. But looking at the issues with a focus on what the investigators need turns out to be quite different from focusing on "what can the library provide."

Paradoxically, perhaps, along with the shift in perspective, I have also become very aware of

JeSLIB 2016; 5(1): e1106
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how my background and training and experience as a librarian informs my ability to be effective. For example:

- I understand how to talk through an issue with someone and learn how to see it from their perspective. The fundamentals of the reference interview, which seem second nature to a trained librarian, are relatively rare among people in other disciplines.

- I understand how different the outlooks and perspectives of different disciplines are. Most academics don't. They've been trained and mentored by people within their own discipline. They understand their practices and their particular culture and assume that, with only slight variations, this is how others operate as well. Thus, when the PhD geneticist is confronted with the practice of the PhD in early childhood education they are confounded. As a generalist librarian it is far easier for me to move across these gaps and see both commonalities and differences.

- I can speak the language of the IT people as well as understand the concerns and perspectives of the faculty. My knowledge isn't as deep, but it is sufficient for me to act as an effective translator and develop trust.

- I understand the fundamental purposes of metadata and the challenges of putting information in context so that it can make sense to other people. While the specific skills of applying effective metadata to datasets requires training, librarians have a theoretical understanding of the problem in a way that no other profession does — including the scientists and scholars who are generating the data.

As the roles of librarians continue to evolve, more of us are finding ourselves outside of the library, both physically and organizationally. Informationists, data-librarians, embedded librarians – these terms reflect a more intimate relationship with members of the research community than has been common in the past. When these new roles threaten to disconnect us from the people and places we've identified with our professional homes, it can be psychologically dislocating as well. I see colleagues asking the question on personal and professional blogs, "Am I still a librarian? What does that mean?"

Librarians play a unique role in the life of an academic institution. We may have our own research and practice interests, and library leaders must concern themselves with being effective in negotiating for a sufficient share of institutional resources, competing with other academic and administrative units. But library organizations and the people who work in them exist primarily to advance the successes of the students and faculty. Understanding their needs and effectively using our resources to address them has to be foremost in our planning at all times. So I am sometimes dismayed at how often it seems that librarians lack this focus, getting absorbed in "what's best for the library."

This is a temptation I've always tried to resist. My experience of the past two years has emphasized how essential this point of view is, difficult though it may be. Now, when I advocate for a role for a librarian, I can do so fully focused on the notion that this particular role needs the particular skills of a librarian, not just that I'm trying to be sure "the library" is included. Worrying about that is someone else's job.

JeSLIB 2016; 5(1): e1106
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I understand the angst that many in the profession feel about making sure the library stays "relevant." But frankly, it sets my teeth on edge when I hear someone argue that we need to develop RDM services or institutional repositories in order to stay "relevant!" It's an entirely backward way of looking at the issue.

The more time I spend with the Data Wranglers, and others outside the library, the more it becomes clear how much institutions need librarians — creative, curious, engaged, optimistic, energetic librarians whose professional identity isn't determined by a particular place or a particular organizational structure. We need to nurture and support and find places for these librarians, developing nimble organizations that make it easier for them to do their work. We need to provide training in research skills, software engineering, data visualization, and other areas that librarians often lack, but that will be an essential complement to the talents they already possess. These librarians will help with data management plans and data inventories; they'll be key to developing best practices and training investigators in their use; they'll build data repositories and be metadata specialists.

They won't have time to worry about being relevant. They'll be too busy developing services, infrastructure, and policies that their institutions need. They'll be instrumental in the success of their colleagues throughout the institution, and justifiably proud of their unique excellence as librarians.

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