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Redefinitions and the Growing Importance of Library Collaboration

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Co-General Editor

You may have heard of the big “kerfuffle” that unfolded in libraryland just before the holiday season late in 2014. It centered in the Columbia University district on the upper west side of New York City and concerned the departure of the Dean of Barnard Library and Information Services, Lisa Norbert. The *Columbia Spectator* reported that “A handful of faculty and staff told *Spectator* that they perceived that Norberg’s departure was prompted by a series of administrative decisions for the library that were in conflict with Norberg’s vision.” The explanation, “Administrators outlined the plan for the new Teaching and Learning Center, which includes removing 40,000 books from Barnard’s on-site collections and moving research librarians to cubicles rather than offices, at a Dec. 2 faculty meeting, according to faculty and library staff present at the meeting.” (*Columbia Spectator*, Dec. 8, 2014, p. 2) Ms Norbert seems to have been gracious and circumspect in all of this, and has transitioned to a new position at KN Consultants and the Open Access Network.

An article published in *Higher Education* on December 10th follows up on the story by way of interviews with various college librarians about the changing mission and vision of academic libraries. Terrence J. Metz, University Librarian at Hamline University states, “For the entire history of libraries as we know them – 2,000 or 3,000 years – we have lived in a world of information scarcity.... What’s happened in the last two decades is that’s been turned completely on its head. Now we are living in a world of superabundance.” Bryn I. Geffert, College Librarian at Amherst College, offers further perspective. “To my mind, all of this hubbub is probably exacerbated by the fact that libraries are trying to figure out what they are and what their future is and what their role is.... Every time you have a body of people going through this kind of existential crisis, conflict is inherent. As you’re trying to redefine an institution, you know there are going to be different opinions on

how that redefinition should happen.” (Carl Straumsheim reports this in *Higher Education*, Dec. 10, 2014).

It seems to me that all of this can be enflamed by the absence of genuine collaboration, as may be the case at Barnard. Today, institutions are considering the changing face of higher education, particularly the shift from print to digital resources, not only for libraries but also for the delivery of courses and programs, for campus communication, for administrative processes, and so forth. Presidents, chancellors and provosts commonly are charged with guiding the creation and promotion of a vision for an institution, and library deans and directors, in my view, are charged with interpreting that vision in terms of library services and resources that help form the educational experiences of students and underpin the scholarly pursuits of faculty. Collaboration in an environment of redefinition entails a great deal of good will, trust, back-and-forth communication, and in the process, with egos in check, misunderstandings can be corrected, consensus built, and affirmation of a new vision can be achieved.

The importance of institutional collaboration in a time of definition, for me, is not only theoretical but also practical and timely. Colorado College has embarked on a major building program not dissimilar to that of Barnard College, one of our “Oberlin Group” library partners. I have had the good fortune to lead the Tutt Library at Colorado College as its Director for the past two and a half years and have enjoyed a very collaborative process as the College conducted a strategic planning process through 2012 and 2013, and now within the library we revision how the library can best serve our local academic community in achieving the institutional vision for the future.

That vision will include transforming the Tutt Library building. The core of the existing facility



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consists of a sound structure designed and built in 1961 by Sidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) of Chicago. The College wishes to retain the “bones” of the building since SOM remains one of the most prominent architectural firms in the world today. (SOM was the principal firm in the construction of the Willis (Sears) Tower in Chicago, at 1,454 feet and 110 stories, the 9th tallest structure in the world; for the One World Trade Center in New York City, at 1,792 feet and 104 floors, the 3rd tallest (with the spire); and for Burj Khalifa, Dubai, at 2,717 feet and 160 stories, the tallest overall.) Our project will include rebuilding the SOM structure with a build-out on two or three sides. It has been an exciting and inspiring process working with MASS Design of Boston and *brightspot* of New York in developing the conceptual design. This coming year will be given to refining and developing further these concepts with Pfeiffer Partners Architects of Los Angeles and New York. Collaboration has been key for the project—from strategic planning to the creation and realization of this important building program initiative for Colorado College.

The vision for use of the new space will also transform the programs of the library and its partners. While the library currently shares the building with the Colket Learning Center (a writing center and tutoring services), the Quantitative Reasoning Center, an ITS Help Desk, a Computers and Advanced Technology (CAT) Lab, and the Crown Faculty Center, other units will join us in the new space. We are now strategizing how tenants of this new space can and should collaborate most effectively to fill out the human and service dimensions of this new vision.

While we are not perfect collaborators, we are certainly committed to a meaningful and deep partnership, and we are becoming better collaborators. And we see the experience at Barnard and other institutions as cautionary tales of what can happen when collaboration does not occur, or occurs ineffectually, for whatever reasons. Collaboration becomes that much more important as libraries reimagine roles for providing new types of resources and services, and as libraries ensure they are in step with the chang-

ing vision and mission of the institutions and communities they serve.

So, in this issue of *Collaborative Librarianship*, two articles are presented that again show the benefits of certain types of collaboration, the first on using social media more effectively, and the second on the importance of flexibility and creativity in forging partnerships with student groups, of participating in various campus meetings, and of being goal-focused. We are especially pleased to present perspectives on collaboration by the current President of the American Library Association, Courtney Young, in her article, “Collaboration as a Key Component of Library Service....” You will be inspired by her enthusiasm for collaboration and her reflection on how collaboration has formed and informed her impressive career. On a practical side, the article on the “blended desk” suggests that this mode of collaborative “blending” may not always be the wisest approach; we need to be smart about our collaborations. Rounding out this issue, the review by Alison Hicks provides a fitting addendum to the lead article on social media.

Again, your comments on these articles are welcomed and you are encouraged to consider submitting articles on the ever-important matter of library collaboration.

