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Countering Weaponized Tradition: An Editorial on an Idea

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tradition, change, status quo, practices

Cover Page Footnote

We had a lot of fun guest editing this issue! Thanks so much to editors Chris Robinson-Nkongola and Carrie Forbes for believing in this idea and guiding us through the process for this journal. And of course, thank you to our stellar authors who contributed their words and work to attacking difficult issues of tradition and change in these digital pages.

Countering Weaponized Tradition: An Editorial on an Idea

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Introduction

We have been on a journey recently to understand one aspect of change in libraries and archives. A lot has been written on the benefits of understanding the history and traditions of organizations when you join the team, but not a lot has been written on the ways history and tradition can be used to affect an organization negatively, or what actual tangible progress comes from understanding this history and using it to instigate positive change. With a long list of combined experience in the library and archives world, as well as hearing anecdotes from colleagues also experiences the difficulty of creating positive change in difficult situations, we proposed this guest-edited issue in order to explore how others were tackling these hard problems, and maybe gain a little insight into what could be incorporated in our own careers. This special issue seeks to consider a broader, honest perspective of progress informed by organizational history and traditions in libraries and archives.

This issue will explore how librarians or archivists have taken institutional history and tradition and pivoted the narrative towards progressive changes. A relevant topic even prior to 2020, the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic showed libraries and archives where their organizations were weakest and has left even the strongest organizations wondering how to leverage tradition for future diversification...and

who else to bring into the process. In addition, library and archives employees who were already taxed by the tough realities of work are now asking more serious questions about their work environments and wondering how to leverage traditions and collaborations to create a more progressive work environment. Focused on collaborative approaches to these challenges, this issue was an opportunity for us to explore what progress others have made in their own institutions and open our own minds to the possibilities that exist for building and utilizing partnerships.

When we originally discussed weaponized tradition, both of us were using the broadest possible definition of that term. When we wrote the submission call, we understood that many different definitions might be used by our writers, and we wanted to be open to the diverse ways in which people think and talk about this topic. We were open to exploring as many of these different frameworks for talking about taking traditions that had soured and collaborating with others (either inside the library, or outside of it) to shift or alter the tradition to a more progressive and transformative practice. The articles in this issue describe practices or systems that had long tenure at their organizations, but were not necessarily working with the same level of efficiency and effectiveness as before. When tradition becomes too entrenched, it can be ripe for change, or at least assessment.



Our authors indeed talked about weaponized tradition using different frameworks. As a result, you will see a variety of ways in which our authors will refer to tradition throughout their articles and the many behaviors that are often wrapped in an envelope of tradition as a defense against those who might challenge the status quo. Strategic incompetence, adherence to policy even when that policy no longer has any meaningful value to the institution, defense of arbitrary labor or organizational divisions, defense of legacy, all of these are behaviors that often do damage to the greater institution and keep us from building a collaborative working environment in which differences are acknowledged, celebrated, and in which we are open to learning from those who may not think exactly as we do.

In this Issue...

In the five articles that make up this issue, the authors provide a variety of perspectives and exhibit the amount of planning and thought that went into the creation of processes, policies, or projects intended to combat negative traditions and to build new, more positive opportunities for the future of their institutions. Most are works in progress and the articles are more of a status report than a finalized review: we don't know yet how well the changes will succeed over the long term. While some might question the value of an interim report, in the context of tradition it would be arrogant to assume that we'll ever reach a point where the change is done and the status quo can live forever: perhaps that is how many of our institutions became embedded in weaponized tradition that we now seek to dismantle.

Beezley and Scheele-Clark's "When Catalogers and Archivists Come Together" exemplifies what can be accomplished when librarians and archivists make an attempt to tear down the traditional firewalls separating their work. Initially an intra-library effort, the collaborative work

and acknowledgement of the importance of reparative description, the authors acknowledge the value of what has been accomplished so far and set up a framework to ensure the discussions around reparative description can continue across Oklahoma and possibly be adopted by other regions as well.

While Beezley and Scheele-Clark looked at the collaborative efforts of allied information professions, Pankl and Keith's article "Collaborating Across Academic Units" provides a review of what can occur when an organization chooses to look beyond professional boundaries and collaborate across historic disciplinary divisions to provide services to their student user community more effectively. While not yet a completed project, the discussion demonstrates the many opportunities that cross-disciplinary, cross-college collaborations can afford academic institutions and provides plenty of ideas for further conversation around strategic planning and user assessment, with student success the primary driver of the change.

In a different look at functional organizational change, Daines, Glenn, Nimer, and Wiederhold's "Upending Tradition through Strategic Change" assesses and evaluates the significant restructurings of an organization in response to function and hierarchically based firewalls that were perceived to no longer be sustainable for the institution. The authors review the long history of the organizational structure, and the history of past changes to that structure. While initially driven, the changes described by the authors acknowledge the role of individual employees in allowing collaborative change to happen and the importance of assessing our organizational structures.

In a different look at how weaponized tradition can affect individuals, Turner, Umana, and Solis's "Cliques or Collaborators," evaluates the successes and failures of a diversity initiative. The authors bring us a thoughtful assessment of



the difficulties in combating weaponized tradition when that combat is left solely to a few individuals at whom the weaponized tradition is aimed, leaving the collaborative countering of weaponized tradition to a very small group of individuals rather than it being a systemic collaborative change. The powerful and personal accounts of the authors, along with their practical suggestions for creating an environment in which weaponized tradition can be countered through more thoughtful planning, provide an important reminder to all of us of the damage weaponized tradition and superficial change can do not just to our institutions but to individuals in our profession and our profession as a whole.

In "Joy is a Strategy," Forzetting, Wilson, Cronk, and Morales provide a very practical approach to assessing and deliberately disrupting tradition in a situation in which tradition is not blatantly problematic. Their article reminds us that we are still human beings when professional cultures and workplaces have long ignored the value of building a positive environment in which to work. They carefully remind us that not only are we more engaged as professionals when working with colleagues who are actively seeking to support us, we're also more effective advocates for our work and often the work we produce is simply better.

As the authors acknowledge the ongoing change and need for flexibility to adapt to future

changes, what these articles ultimately represent, and why we think these articles are so important, is hope. Hope for a future in which we can keep useful traditions, learn from tradition, but jettison those that cause harm to our institutions, to our colleagues, to ourselves, and to our user communities.

Conclusion

We hope that as you read through this issue you consider the ways traditions and change intermingle in your own institutions. Consider both the positive and the negative; there is usually plenty of each. Resistance to change and clinging to traditions offer real chances at growth for the libraries/archives and librarians/archivists willing to do the hard work. The rewards, as you will see here, can be truly great. We encourage our library and archives colleagues to move forward into this weird post-pandemic, AI-assisted future with ears and minds open to curiosity and hope and vision for crafting new ways and new relationships together.

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