

Editorial Board Thoughts: **Developing Relentless Collaborations and Powerful Partnerships**

Mark Dehmlow

With the end of the performance and fiscal year wrapping up, it seemed like a good time to reflect on what change initiatives we have engaged in over the past few years that have strengthened the organizational effectiveness of the IT department in our library. My thoughts almost immediately drifted to our focus on collaboration. Early in my career, it was the profession wide culture of cross-institutional collaboration that convinced me that becoming a librarian would be the right career move. I am certain that the impetus to collaborate stems from our professional service commitment - a values based system that at its core believes that the success of all helps the collective do their jobs better in the name of service to our patrons. And yet, over the years, I have heard stories of and observed first hand internal competitions for resources, vilification of library IT as siloed and opaque factions, and library IT departments that have had strained relationships with their institution's central IT organizations.

As a part of our senior leadership team for the Hesburgh Libraries, two of my core professional interests are organizational effectiveness and staff satisfaction, especially in the face of a rapidly changing technology landscape, competition for talent in the IT sector where it is hard to contend with commercial salaries, and the slow rate of attrition at the University. Retaining talented IT staff requires creating a work culture that is better than the commercial sector, a work culture that values work/life balance, innovation and experimentation, a culture of teamwork and camaraderie, and where there is a clear sense of strategic priority. To build these latter two qualities into our work culture, we have strategically emphasized durable internal and external coalitions with a tenacious sense of partnership. True collaboration reinforces a collective sense of goals, allows for maximal efficiency, discourages unnecessary or destructive competition, and opens the door to the coveted but seldom realized ability to "stop doing" through partnering with other units on campus that share a sense of priority around particular services.

Creating sustainable and significant internal collaboration requires etching it into the culture of the organization. Making it a part of the organization's DNA has to be prioritized and modeled by senior leadership and it begins with advancing shared goals over singular agendas. In our senior leadership team, we have committed to each other as our primary team. We may advocate for staff and initiatives in our own verticals, but our drive is to be holistic stewards for the Libraries, not just our functional departments. We give as much, if not more weight, to the objectives of collective senior leadership team which also helps in clarifying priorities. Our executive leadership

Mark Dehmlow (mdehmlow@nd.edu), a member of the ITAL Editorial Board, is Director of Library Information Technology, Hesburgh Libraries, University of Notre Dame, South Bend, IN.

models cooperation, cross-divisional problem solving, and collective strategic initiative planning. Using this model, decisions get made more quickly, enhancing our ability is to accomplish things on time with a high level of quality, and with a considerable level of satisfaction for our staff and faculty. The IT department is less viewed as a black box where decisions for what to work on are made behind the curtains and rather as a group of talented staff who help our organization accomplish their priorities. When our IT department needs to advocate for support and timely completion of work from individuals in other departments, the other senior managers help get their units mobilized. We see ourselves as part of the community and the community embraces us as part of them. Historically, it has been tempting to view IT as somewhat separate - a part of the production line, but in an age where every operation in the library is affected by technology, our workflows need to be more integrated and team based. The problems we are working on are more cross-disciplinary and require a plurality of expertise to solve. Libraries are increasingly becoming more and more of an interconnected and interdependent ecosystem that requires thinking holistically about problems and a relentless commitment to building coalitions to drive our services.

It may seem obvious that this would be a more effective way to work, yet I have spoken with many people at organizations where there is a clear culture of departmental objective separation and competition for resources. I have long appreciated the the work environment at Notre Dame, in part because we strive to be an organization whose culture has been guided by our core institutional values - accountability, integrity, excellence in leadership, excellence in mission, and teamwork. These values not only drive our internal collaborations, but also the way in which different departments on campus work with each other. We have had a long standing, positive relationship with our central Office of Information Technologies - one that has been tremendously cooperative, but for many years has lacked interconnections at a variety of levels and a clear collaborative and strategic focus. In the last 5 years, our organizations have shifted their focus - the OIT from emphasizing centralized, administrative, enterprise computing to decentralized, academic, enterprise computing and the Libraries from doing everything in house to leveraging services for standardized services and focusing our staff's time on initiatives where they can create the most value. In part, we developed an in-house IT department because we had service expectations that weren't a priority at the time for the OIT. But during our strategic transitions, we have extended our working relationships at every level throughout our organizations - from our staff in the trenches to our managers and senior leaders.

My focus as the Director for Library IT over the past few years has been to look at ways we can enhance our capacity through partnerships. To that end, there are several interrelated initiatives that we have begun to engage in with the OIT:

1. embedding an OIT presence in the Libraries
2. shifting support for common IT services to the OIT, and
3. consolidating our customer communication through their service portal ServiceNow.

The first step in this new collaboration with the OIT was letting go of the past and revisiting where the OIT and the Libraries have strategic overlaps that may not have been aligned before. As two service organizations on campus with a deep concern for supporting the academic endeavor, it was easy to find strategic alignment with each other. For the Libraries, we often get questions at our service points about how to change passwords or install printer drivers, needs that are part of the central IT service portfolio. For the OIT, the Libraries are a major campus hub where hordes of students and faculty conduct research and work on assignments, particularly after classes when many of the business unit leave the University for the day. Working closely with the Libraries' Director for Teaching, Research, and User Services and the OIT's Senior Director for User Services, we began developing a collaboration grounded in our common desire to support end users which resulted in creating an OIT outpost in the Libraries. While there are many libraries who have this kind of collaboration, this was a revolutionary step for us.

This collaboration opened the door for us to begin a discussion about common technology services that we have been supporting internally - printing and general lab computing. For us, these services are important to function well for our end users, but they are not services that require library expertise to accomplish. The OIT supports these services for much of campus and as long as we have aligned expectations around service level - expectations that are practical and committed to excellence - the OIT can handle that function much more efficiently and we can use our staff expertise to support other, emerging services that are core to the Libraries. We are also working closely with the OIT to leverage their IT service portal ServiceNow as the Libraries' service portal. Given that our service portfolio is much broader than strictly IT services, moving in this direction for us required a willingness from the OIT to think outside of the box and allow us to customize the system to meet our service needs. It has required some reciprocation from the Libraries as well. The ServiceNow platform is more expensive than others we could license, its functionality will require effort from our staff to customize, and it is requiring us to change workflows, especially in the public services areas. Integrating our customer communication into this platform, though, will create a better user experience for our patrons through supporting a common interface they are experienced with and it will allow for us to more easily transfer both staff and patron general IT questions to the OIT.

Beginning to work in truly collaborative ways requires shifting the narrative around our relationships from a client/provider model to one of a coalition. Redefining these relationships as partnerships puts both parties on equal footing around the planning table where everyone has an equal stake in the objectives and outcomes. They don't come effortlessly, they require libraries to ardently become more visible on campus, to articulate the complementary value that we can contribute to campus initiatives, and to proactively request to join initiatives that we haven't participated in before. It also takes reaching out and helping campus partners see how we can collectively create value together using our unique talents to successfully support the campus community. And lastly, it takes engaging a more holistic view of the University and the way we steward its resources; sometimes that will mean allocating more resources for the common good



versus taking the narrower view that we should only consider our own context when adopting solutions. But in the end, if we are willing to think about our role at the University in that broader context and build powerful partnerships, we will collectively be able to serve our end users better.