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The promise of academic libraries

Turning outward to transform campus communities

What would it look like if an academic library turned outward and helped transform its campus community? This is the question that several librarians at Rutgers University Libraries asked when we began deploying tools created by the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to conduct community conversations with the aim of recalibrating our interactions on campus. The conversations have brought together people from across the university to discuss their aspirations and concerns. These conversations serve as a springboard for unleashing new possibilities as academic libraries span boundaries and occupy a more visible, catalytic role on campus.

Last fall, ALA launched a national partnership with the Harwood Institute. The Harwood Institute helps organizations “turn outward” toward their communities through the use of conversations where they gain the “public knowledge” they need to align their work more closely with their community’s aspirations. ALA’s joint initiative, “The Promise of Libraries Transforming Communities,” is developing a national plan to advance community engagement and innovation and transform the role of libraries in their communities. Although a few public libraries have previously used the Harwood framework, Rutgers has pioneered applying this approach in an academic library.

Reimagining the liaison role of librarians at Rutgers

Academic librarians have begun reimagining

their liaison roles as they change the way they deliver resources and services on campuses.¹ Propelled by a 2009 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) report articulating new liaison roles, Rutgers began mapping new routes toward engaging faculty and students and embedding services in the teaching, learning, and research processes.² In 2010, we launched a multiyear conversation around these issues, beginning with a dialogue that asked: What is the future role for library liaisons at Rutgers? The deliberative dialogue engaged librarians in a conversation where they weighed possibilities and found common ground for future action.

A liaison action team formed to follow up on recommendations. First, though, we found it essential to identify our own as well as shared aspirations for these evolving roles. To strengthen our relationships with the Rutgers community, we identified engagement-centered themes—“getting in the flow of users”—as vital to shaping our work. Through collaborative teamwork, we were able to embed liaisons more directly into campus life. Yet, though we hoped to leverage opportunities for greater impact and engage more authentically, we struggled to identify ways to begin. After one of us participated in a 2011 Harwood Institute Public Innovator’s

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Lab, we found the tools we needed to open a series of conversations on campus.

Community conversations about the undergraduate experience

In January 2012, we assembled a core team to begin conversations with the Rutgers community, building upon the recently completed university-wide transformation of undergraduate education. Participants who worked on that transition were among the 92 people invited to our conversations; more than 50 responded and 38 attended the three conversations held in May 2012. Among those who chose to participate were three vice presidents, three deans, numerous faculty members, directors from the honors program, disabled student services, and freshmen seminars. We held a similar series of conversations with library colleagues later that fall.

An experienced moderator led the conversations; others observed and took notes. In a safe, comfortable space, participants felt free to express their aspirations for the Rutgers community, concerns, strategies for change, and whom they trusted to take action. Afterwards, we themed the responses to determine shared aspirations and concerns, and then communicated our findings back to participants, who were eager to let us know they really enjoyed and appreciated the conversations. They relished the opportunity to share ideas and build community; some continued their conversations for hours afterward. One said he found it eye opening. Another said, “I enjoyed the discussion today—or, better, enjoyed hearing the people you assembled to talk.” A third commented, “I heard so many good things about the undergraduate education forum. I only came one day, but it seems to have been quite a cast of luminaries over the entire ‘series.’ Many of my colleagues were speaking about it. Plot away. . . .”

The community conversations gave the core team a rich sense of the aspirations of the Rutgers community. Participants wanted to engage more actively with student life through new undergraduate initiatives, such as freshman seminars and research programs.

They considered out-of-classroom experiences essential to community building and a valuable opportunity for faculty to engage. Emphasized were the centrality of diversity to the identity of Rutgers and the importance of engagement across differences. Participants saw engagement as essential to critical thinking—those transliteracy skills that ensure workplace success and responsible citizenship. This authentic dialogue opened new possibilities for librarians to engage more actively with colleagues across the campus.

Similar conversations held within the library found librarians eager to engage but uncertain how. They said they wanted to focus their liaison work more on specific communities. They also indicated an eagerness to work through teams and build partnerships, beginning with undergraduate education. Using library space to build community and provide a student comfort zone was another shared aspiration. And, finally, librarians indicated they were eager to “get in the flow of users.”

Moving from talk to action

The Harwood framework begins with conversations that help us listen to our community then act on what we hear. This “public knowledge,” enables us to envision a greater sense of possibility as we move forward to align our strategies with the work of our colleagues on campus. Listening to the community roots our work in what matters to people, allowing us to identify key issues and connections in their own language. Through these conversations, we have uncovered a sense of common purpose that enables us to set realistic goals.³ This public knowledge surfaces the issues and concerns around which people are willing to rally and propels us forward in concert with others.

The core team meets regularly with the associate university librarian for research and instructional services in a Harwood “Innovation Space”—a place where we think together about what we are learning and its implications. The interactions reveal possibilities for moving forward and help inform our work

with intentionality. They also help shift our thinking as we turn outward and recognize new opportunities, act on what we hear, uncover where we fit, and surface new trusted partners. Frank conversations help clarify our value within the academy as we develop a sense of common purpose and set realistic goals. Next, we plan to host conversations that go deeper to explore some of our findings, then start another round of discussions focusing on graduate education.⁴ Ultimately, our intent is to increase our relevance, significance, and impact.

Pockets of change

By uncovering public knowledge, we have begun to identify and take intentional steps toward a more engaged approach to library programs and services. These small steps, or pockets of change, are already rippling outward. Some examples include:

- reimagining more engaged celebrations to build community, such as Banned Books Week, Scarlet Knight Days, final exam stress-busters, holiday card maker spaces, caricature drawing, and Open Mic Night;
- engaging more actively with the honors program, study abroad, distance learning, and other programs;
- partnering to promote civic engagement activities through voter registration, a Constitutional Café, and a political awareness learning community;
- collaborating on a career development course design;
- strengthening partnerships with other units;
- launching more outward-looking team structures; and
- redesigning positions to respond more effectively to campus initiatives.

The creation of an undergraduate experience team illustrates in greater detail how one of these pockets is accelerating change. The team emerged from the knowledge we gained through the community conversations and includes two new librarians whose jobs were redesigned accordingly. Now identifying opportunities to engage with students,

build connections, maximize effectiveness, and develop a sandbox for new ideas, the team is charged with turning outward to make intentional choices that:

- identify and define the community;
- learn about and assess the needs of the community through research, as well as community conversations;
- build relationships and develop partnerships;
- develop and participate in programs that bring people together within the community, and;
- share findings and insight with other teams and throughout the libraries.⁵

Measuring impact

To turn outward, we need to consider new ways to gauge our progress. Our innovation space meetings prompted a redesign of our assessment measures. We now go beyond reporting on what we have done, adding explanations why and what difference it makes in the broader university context. For example, if we are engaged with the undergraduate community, we might talk about how we support and enhance the student experience, not just sponsor activities like free coffee, shoulder massages, and visits from puppies during finals week.

What kind of indicators will measure the success of community engagement? In addition to counting transactions, we demonstrate progress when we are: invited to participate in faculty/campus undertakings, considered a credible partner in campus and scholarly endeavors, engaged with the academic life of students and faculty, and referenced in communications across the campus.

Internally, we will value deeper understanding of faculty interests, culture, aspirations, and struggles; alignment of individual with collective tasks; innovative relationship building; recruitment and retention of engagement-oriented librarians; and broader consultation with the university community. If we are to transform our traditional role and boundaries, we need to recognize our broader responsibilities, sharpen our skills

and competencies, reward innovation and collective actions, support the goal of turning outward so we can increase our impact, and become more relevant and significant on campus in a sustained and ubiquitous way.⁶

Conclusion

At Rutgers University Libraries, the Harwood approach is helping us turn outward and, in so doing, occupy a different space within the campus community. That space is where we are convening conversations across boundaries, providing community members an opportunity to listen to each other in a trusted, safe place. We began this effort not to create new programs but to ground our work with the shared aspirations and concerns of our community. By turning outward, we have found common purpose with colleagues and students across the university.

Convening community conversations has helped us shift our focus from outreach, which entailed “selling” our services, to engagement, where we learn about our community’s aspirations and concerns. It has helped us gain a sense of agency, empowering us to feel comfortable as we step forward, embrace, and strengthen the campus community. Moreover, it has opened the minds of our library colleagues, encouraging more involvement in innovative initiatives that transcend traditional boundaries.

According to Richard Harwood, “the very act of turning outward drives internal change.”⁷ And this is precisely what is beginning to happen at Rutgers. By listening to our community and setting aside a space to reflect upon our learning, we are creating the conditions for change. With support from the top of our organization, we are realigning the way we do our work, rethinking our priorities, changing our job descriptions, and reevaluating our contributions based on deepening knowledge of our community. This process has helped us discover our value, clarify our purpose, and work together toward common goals. By facilitating authentic conversations, we have unleashed our unique power to bring people together, build community and reposition the

library as a more relevant and significant partner on campus, demonstrating how academic libraries can turn outward and fulfill their promise to transform campus communities.

Notes

1. Extensive academic library literature is available around collaboration and outreach, particularly related to teaching and learning. The literature is now shifting its focus more toward engagement. See, for example, Karen Brown and Kara Malenfant, *Connect, Collaborate, and Communicate: A Report from the Value of Academic Libraries Summit* (Chicago: ACRL, 2012), accessed August 28, 2013, www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org/acrl/files/content/issues/value/val_summit.pdf; Alice Crawford, *New Directions for Academic Liaison Librarians* (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012); Barbara Dewey, “The Embedded Librarian: Strategic Campus Collaborations,” *Resource Sharing & Information Networks* 17 (2004): 5-17; Wendy Lougee, *Diffuse Libraries: Emergent Roles for the Research Library in the Digital Age* (Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2002), accessed August 28, 2013, www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub108/contents.html; David Shumaker, *The Embedded Librarian: Innovative Strategies for Taking Knowledge Where It's Needed* (Medford, NJ: Information Today, 2012); Cassandra Kvenild and Kaijsa Calkins, *Embedded Librarians: Moving Beyond One-Shot Instruction* (Chicago: ACRL, 2011); and William Welburn, Janice Welburn, and Beth McNeil, *Advocacy, Outreach, and the Nation's Academic Libraries: A Call for Action* (Chicago, IL: ALA, 2010).

2. Karla Hahn, *Research Library Issues, Special Issue on Liaison Librarian Roles*, no. 265 (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, August 2009), accessed August 28, 2013, <http://publications.arl.org/rli265/> and Karen Williams, “A Framework for Articulating New Library Roles” in (see above), accessed August 28, 2013, <http://publications.arl.org/rli265/4>.

3. A number of librarians have also focused on the importance of conversations to engage

communities, including: R. David Lankes, *The Atlas of New Librarianship* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); R. David Lankes, et. al., "Participatory Networks: The Library as Conversation," *Information Research* 12 (October, 2007), accessed August 28, 2013, <http://InformationR.net/ir/12-4/colis05.html>; David Carr, *Open Conversations: Public Learning in Libraries and Museums*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited/ABC-CLIO, 2011); and Nancy Kranich and Carlton Sears, "The Conversation Continues @ your library," *American Libraries* 43 (March/April 2012): 22, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/columns/my-mind/conversation-continues-your-library>.

4. A framework for considering the graduate experience is: Lucinda Covert-Vail and Scott Collard, *New Roles for New Times: Research Library Services for Graduate Students* (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, December 2012), accessed August 28, 2013, www.arl.org/storage/documents/publications/nrnt-grad-roles-20dec12.pdf.

5. The Harwood Institute "Turn Outward" tool is one of many available on ALA's website "Libraries Transforming Communities," under the heading: Tools for Community Engagement and Innovation at www.ala.org/transforminglibraries/sites/ala.org.transforminglibraries/files/content/HarwoodHalfHour_TurnOutward_FINAL.pdf. For additional resources, see also, the Harwood Institute website: www.theharwoodinstitute.org/how-to-turn-outward/.

6. For a useful review about measuring academic library engagement, see Craig Gibson and Christopher Dixon, "New Metrics for Academic Library Engagement," Proceedings of the Association of College and Research Libraries, 2011: 340-351, accessed August 28, 2013, www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/national/2011/papers/new_metrics.pdf.

7. Richard Harwood and Aaron Leavy, *Why We're Here: The Powerful Impact of Public Broadcasters When They Turn Outward* (Dayton, OH: The Kettering Foundation, 2011), 116. *RL*

("Analyzing the library's Twitter network" *cont. from page 180*)

Concluding remarks

The potential impact of a library's social media account extends beyond its direct followers. This potential can be realized by exploiting the network of connections. Here, we describe a simple method of extending a Twitter account's impact by developing relationships with other influential players in addition to increasing the number of followers. This can be accomplished in a few easy steps,

- Install NodeXL. Use it to obtain the network of Twitter users following your institution's account.
- Examine the resulting picture of the network. Identify potentially influential accounts, such as those with many connections.
- Develop relationships with those accounts by agreeing to retweet relevant information. These relationships are mutually beneficial. We showed that forwarding a tweet from Service Learning would reach 81 more people. One can expect a similar benefit to the library, although an analysis of

Service Learning's network is necessary to quantify the effect. This is possible with a little interdepartmental collaboration, to the benefit of all.

Notes

1. RSC Library Twitter Feed, https://twitter.com/RSC_Library.
2. In 2012 and 2013, for the International Games Day @ your library, an international group of libraries participated in a global game of Telephone (also called Gossip), <http://globalgossipgame.wordpress.com/>.
3. NodeXL: Network Overview, Discovery and Exploration for Excel, Microsoft, last modified December 6, 2013, <http://nodexl.codeplex.com>.
4. NodeXL: Network Overview, Discovery and Exploration for Exel, Microsoft Research, accessed December 12, 2013, <http://research.microsoft.com/en-us/projects/nodexl/>.
5. NodeXL Graph Gallery, www.nodexlgraphgallery.org/Pages/Default.aspx. *RL*