Something’s Got to Give: What Can We Stop Doing in a Time of Reduced Resources?

Articles in our professional literature and conference presentations reporting on new initiatives are quite common. In presenting the brave and the new, however, librarians rarely discuss activities they have stopped doing. Since 2008, when libraries began to face budget cuts in the face of the recession, I have heard anecdotally about furloughs, hiring freezes, and layoffs, but not about attendant elimination of services or other existing functions. When reaching out to speakers for a seminar on “What to stop doing,” at the RBMS 2010 preconference in Philadelphia, I envisioned finding speakers who would report on the ways in which cessation of some activities had impacted the institution, whether positively or negatively. How did they decide what to stop? How hard was it to let go? When they did stop, did anyone notice?

I contacted more than ten potential speakers, but struck out each time. Everyone I reached had a similar reaction: “We should be stopping … something, but we’re not sure what.” “We’re not there yet. We haven’t even discussed it.” “I’m interested in the topic but will be in the audience, not at the podium.”

One particularly poignant e-mail nicely sums up my colleagues’ thoughts:

Any perspective tinged with an insinuation of negativity rarely elicits interest from our colleagues. That’s the cup half-empty philosophy and we all know, as George Carlin once observed, “It’s better to say ‘Thank you for not smoking,’ than to say ‘You’re gonna die of cancer, you moron.’”

Maybe it’s also a systemic problem of our profession, always trying to find ways to succeed as funding support continues to dwindle away. Psychiatrists would say we suffer from a martyr complex: success attempted at the expense of ourselves.

… We all have tales to tell about the effect of these cuts and how we have or have not reacted. Two problems arise: 1) getting people to
tell those tales; 2) articulating without cynicism what it means for the profession.

I can report that here at [Well-Known Special Collections Unit situated at Highly-Regarded ARL Institution] we have no strategic plan that addresses the inevitable future. Possibly the future is too hard to see, or more certainly too hard to face. I know we are not alone in that mire.

I have more to offer than simply anecdotal evidence or hallway chitchat. Budget cuts are real, and so too are increased demands—we have more collections and demands, but fewer resources, so something must give. Taking Our Pulse: The OCLC Research Survey of Special Collections and Archives reports the findings from a 2009 survey of archives and special collections in North America and supports my supposition concerning reduced resources in the face of new demands.1 The bottom line: many backlogs are growing, even after a decade of concentrated effort on the “hidden collections” problem; use of collections has increased, most likely due to broad exposure to information about collections on the open Web; staffing has not increased, even in the face of larger collections to manage and more users in our reading rooms; and 75 percent of respondents reported reduced budgets.2 It is important to note that the budgetary information reported for the survey is from the 2008–2009 fiscal year; it is fair to assume that budgets have by now been further reduced, creating an even more acute situation.3 Furthermore, the report acknowledges increased pressures to shape and implement new service areas, particularly digitization of existing collections and management of “born digital” materials, both of which require substantial resources.4 Without a shift in resource allocation, these will remain unfunded items on our list of desiderata.

Lack of evolution in the services we offer—particularly the final phase of evolution, the phase that involves extinction—may be endemic. A second report, Research Libraries, Risk and Systemic Change, helps explain why the library community has been slow to embrace change even when confronted with a shifting supply-and-demand equation.5 The report uses risk assessment techniques to identify “enterprise-wide” risks to the research library. Although risk assessment is fairly typical

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2. Dooley and Luce, Taking Our Pulse (Backlogs and collection growth: 48, 25–26; Use of collections: 36–37; Staffing: 64; Budgets: 23). For an overview of the ARL data, where longitudinal comparisons are possible, please see 73–82.
3. Dooley and Luce, Taking Our Pulse, 23.
in the commercial environment (think oil procurement or the financial sector), it is relatively rare in the cultural heritage sector. The report identifies “risk clusters” based on data obtained through structured interviews with library directors. It is notable that, of all the risk clusters that are likely to adversely impact the research library enterprise, the cluster that includes concerns about both current and future workforce issues rose nearly to the top. Relevant risks are characterized as “human resources are not allocated appropriately to manage change in the current environment,” “current human resources lack skill set for future needs,” and the “conservative nature of library inhibits timely adaptation to changed circumstances.”

Overlaying the data from these two reports, we see a picture of considerable pressures on existing resources, demands for new services, and a workforce ill-equipped for change. It is clear that we not only need to do more, but do differently, and that we need to cultivate a culture that is not only tolerant of change but one that embraces the opportunity for transformation.

Despite evidence pointing to the logic of culling low-value functions and services, in 2010 I could find few colleagues who were tackling the problem directly. That is why I am so pleased that Michael Fox and Mark Greene are contributing to this issue of RBM. Fox clearly delineates the territory, providing a framework for discussing change. Greene sets organizational priorities in the context of change management and gives examples of a changing service array at the American Heritage Center.

Special collections libraries face challenges similar to other sectors of the research library enterprise, and it is often argued that special collections play a central role in this context. Collectively, we face significant challenges but also significant opportunities. To move forward, we must jettison ballast so that we can catch the wind and take flight.

6. Michalko, Malpas, and Arcolio, Research Libraries, Risk and Systemic Change. The cited “risks” are noted throughout the report as 11, 12, and 14.