

Introduction:

The following summarizes the observations taken from one-on-one library staff interviews conducted by Andrew White, Interim Dean and Director of Libraries, between the dates of February 16 and March 12, 2010. The interviews were observed by the following representatives of the newly formulated Melville Library Faculty Advisory Committee:

- Peter Manning (English) -- Faculty Advisory Committee Chair
- Christine Pitocco (Clinical Laboratory Sciences)
- Raiford Guins (Comparative Studies)
- Nancy Tomes (History)

The interview process included all library staff, with the exception of some individuals from the Southampton campus library. Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes and began with the basic request from the Director to have each staff person talk about their job responsibilities. Some staff provided documents of their work, either via CVs or bulleted lists of duties and accomplishments. Others preferred to speak extemporaneously or from notes.

We had an expectation that staff interviews might be very negative in tone and content. There was an anticipation of hearing many complaints and finger pointing amongst the staff, perhaps in light of the perceived criticism found in the external review. On the contrary, we generally felt that with the right leadership and renewed funding, our library can improve dramatically in a relatively short period of time. In fact, with few exceptions, library staff had positive things to say about their fellow team members, expressed pride in their work, and seemed determined to help the library survive and prosper in years to come.

Collections:

The interviews underlined the urgency for a new collection development policy: not only has the library lacked a guiding plan for some years, but it has made the transition from a traditional library (print based) to a modern library (both texts and online sources) without updating any previous collection plans previously in place. Furthermore, Stony Brook's historic strengths in science combined with budget pressures have created a lopsided library collection. Not only are there significant collection gaps in the subject areas of social sciences and humanities, but there are also imbalances in the collections supporting the sciences. We wonder if the collections of those former departmental libraries that have been consolidated into the Melville building are at a disadvantage because academic faculty cannot readily identify and support a specific collection. Does the departmental library system unfairly advantage some fields over others? In addition, it appears as though the library has not appropriately adjusted to the multi-disciplinary nature of large database and electronic subscriptions created during the shift from print to digital collections. As a result, certain collections continue to accumulate and store print materials that would be more widely accessible and comprehensive in collection scope if they were moved to digital formats.

The day when one might collect everything that might someday be of use, if it ever existed, is surely over: neither money nor space is available to house everything. Furthermore, the old mechanisms of building and retaining a collection for "just in case" holdings must be replaced by "just in time" delivery. If campus faculty – particularly in the hard sciences – has indicated that they still want access to print journals, could this be because the library has made it too difficult to locate electronic versions of the same material? Analogously, what depository items that have shifted from print to freely available formats continue to occupy staff time and library space?

As a consequence of the shift from print to digital collections and their associated annually recurring costs, the collection development policy and acquisitions procedures will need to be guided by ongoing discussions between the library and stakeholders. The policy should not determine merely how to decide between electronic and print resources, but should provide a framework for figuring out how the

library collections can serve established and developing units on campus, and vice versa. An associated policy on gifts should be formulated as part of a new collection development policy: what enriches the collection, the intellectual life of *this* community, and what encumbers our space and staff?

The collection policy needs to be rewritten to reflect the new “mixed” media of the 21st century academic library. In developing a collections and acquisition policy, the issue of balance needs to be addressed. The allocation formula for distributing library investments among the humanities, social sciences, and sciences needs to be reviewed. But since even electronic access has a cost, the library needs to monitor continuously the actual usage of its resources, so as to be able to adjust to need. Departments will need to work more closely with subject selectors, and as the funding promised by the Provost and President comes through there will be strong incentive to do so.

Technology:

Frequently, the staff expressed concerns regarding the Library’s relationship with the Division of Information Technology (DoIT). More specifically, the library staff desire more control over the library website and other digital initiatives in support of an improved online presence. Current DoIT policies and server infrastructure have so far limited the library’s ability to innovate and investigate new services and applications for information access. The staff involved with a myriad of disconnected digital projects voiced their concerns with the lack of an overarching digital library vision and DoIT policies that too often dictate what can and cannot be technologically in order to fit within DoIT’s existing service models. Some remedies seem simple and not exorbitantly expensive to accomplish. Many of those we interviewed mentioned the lack of equipment needed for their work, particularly scanners. As the library moves toward cyberspace, digitizing its own collections will need to advance under a common vision of services and collections more in concert with information needs and less bound by campus-wide technology policies. Staff also indicated that they frequently felt unprepared for important and necessary technological changes, whether they be planned upgrades and innovations or unscheduled repairs. It appears that an improved infrastructure of communication and staff training is required in a much larger technological vision of a modern academic research library. Turf wars and duplication of services are to be avoided, but if the library is not to have its own IT structure the co-ordination with DoIT is evidently a matter of delicate but critical importance.

While the current MOU between DoIT and the library indicates that library staff is solely responsible for library web services, the staff often indicated that desktop and networking support provided by DoIT restricted the staff’s ability to incorporate newer applications and services that might improve access to information sources. Campus faculty note that from the outside it appears as if DoIT has been given the attention and resources that in recent years have been denied to the library – and yet many of the functions of DoIT, such as Blackboard or training workshops, might as well be handled by the library, or even more properly be handled by it. The campus currently operates with a conceptual separation between information, as specified by “Division of Information Technology,” and the library. Such conceptual distinctions have led to administrative friction, and since DoIT manages the library’s computers it was not surprising, but nonetheless dismaying, to hear at least one instance of maintenance and upgrade work scheduled by DoIT entirely disabling the work of one librarian.

In a related item, staff involved in the library’s bibliographic instruction services expressed the need for improved computer classroom training facilities. The current spaces in the Melville building are no longer adequate in size or in availability to support the growing instructional aspect of library services. It has been observed that Teaching Learning and Technology (TLT), as a DoIT division supporting the classrooms, not only controls the maintenance schedule of these rooms, but frequently competes for student computing space schedules with the library’s instructional services in the building. If the library is to demonstrate its value in services and collections via increased bibliographic instruction, larger and readily available computing classroom spaces will be required.

Inventory and Access:

It became clear over the course of the interviews that there is a need to greatly improve the way in which the library makes what it does own more accessible, findable, and known to the campus community. We learned from staff that there are numerous inconsistencies in the way in which the collection in general has been processed over time. While it is known that there have been a few significant data conversion and migration events in the past that have negatively affected the data integrity of the library's inventory, it appeared to us as though current procedures and workflows attempted to remedy these inconsistencies while creating new problems.

Staff informed us of certain collections that were designated as unique with notes in the cataloging records, yet were shelved accordingly by their unique item call numbers throughout the stacks. The assumption in this process would be that a library user would know ahead of time to search with the parameters found in that local note. We also learned that other collections were cataloged with adjacent call numbers and were shelved in contiguous space within the stacks. Furthermore, some staff indicated that other materials were processed as unique collections, but then were physically located in library space that would seem counter intuitive to a non-librarian as a place to begin searching for these items.

The mechanisms associated with the current off-site storage policy have also added to the complexities of collection inventory and access. While the process of moving items off-site has assisted the staff in identifying items which were historically "missing" from the catalog as a result of prior data migrations, the current evaluative data used to make decisions for moving items between the campus and off-site appeared to be understood differently by different staff. Further contributing factors to inventory issues were observed in inconsistent policies for addressing the shift from print to digital subscriptions for journals and periodicals. Even if the procedures were consistent and inventory of the periodicals were accurate, we heard that some periodical collections throughout the branches are shelved alphabetically by title, while others are shelved alphabetically by call number.

We learned from staff that some components of the preservation processes were intertwined with the off-site storage process. However, we heard nothing that indicated there was a comprehensive preservation policy in place that could be applied consistently across the physical collection. In addition, we learned that some of the branches were investing staff time in shifting collections to improve space conditions for print journals, while others had greatly reduced the number of print issues appearing on their current periodical shelving. One more example of non-standard policies was noted as part of the completed renovations of the Chemistry Library, where a sizable collection of print journals and books currently resides in a basement location with 24x7 unstaffed access for graduate students and Chemistry faculty.

Space:

The interviews confirmed that usage of the library is moving from visits to the library to electronic access of resources reached through the library's virtual services. As that pattern continues the question of how to allocate resources for collection development – electronic or print – will further sharpen in close association with the use of space in the library itself. The outside reviewers commented that space seems adequate, but it must be reconfigured. Do government documents need to occupy the particular space they do, and the amount of space they do, if many or most of them are already available on-line? Should staff time be spent organizing them and even cataloging them, if students and the general public can access them from home or local library computers? What does the library now gain from its status as a depository library? What else might we do with the space?

Students, we heard, continue to visit the library even when not to access its holdings. We heard from several staff members that attendance is up while physical collection usage is down. These in-house usage trends suggests that students may come to the library in order to put themselves into the frame of mind for working – or perhaps they are simply driven to the library from the lack of convenient quiet space on campus. Stony Brook continues to support a large commuter student population, and students need a setting appropriate to study. As such not only is more student work space desirable, but modernized and adaptable spaces need to exist within the library. The library needs to re-evaluate desks, tables, and carrels, with consideration for small classrooms that students might reserve to work in groups. Power sockets and wired or wireless access should be increased as well.

To this end the student lounge at the front of the building should be rethought; the location for a mere lounge is too prominent and the space too noisy for purposes appropriate to the library. Lockers could be provided elsewhere for those needing to store things for a few hours, and the space might be converted to different sorts of work environments. The need for a mere lounge could be satisfied, perhaps, in the now largely disused old Student Union building. The Galleria could be brought back to its state a few years ago: display cases for Stony Brook gear have no place in a library (the Seawolves Market Place is just across the street; the Bookstore is just in the basement) and a coffee and sandwich cart could reappear, so library users could take a brief break without leaving the building. Vivid signage might publicize the day's events in the library: public readings, workshops, special interest gatherings. The library should consider itself the natural location for extra-curricular intellectual events on campus.

Staff:

The staff generally expressed a sense of loyalty to their fellow workers, at least in their immediate units, and to the library enterprise as a whole. In common with the campus, however, there appears to be a divergence between respect and even affection for most co-workers and the attitude to the general, structural entity of the library. Many workers have accrued years of service, which bespeaks commitment; almost no one seems to regard what they do as "just a job." On the other hand there also appears to have been very little concern for the professional development of the staff; even those who have moved through different units and acquired substantial, diverse experience narrated their careers as haphazard. Additional duties or job changes have occurred mostly according to functional and operational needs rather than because a superior had suggested staff were ready to move on or up, or because a staff member had found a particular area of library work that interested them that they wanted to pursue themselves. Overall it appears that there has not been adequate counseling for promotion.

In comparison to library faculty the staff seem to have had little opportunity for professional development outside the building itself. It is not clear what actual support for research and conference travel has been available historically, but based on the infrequency of mention there has been little. And those individuals who did go to conferences and felt themselves rejuvenated by news of new modes and technologies too often found on their return that the library did not have the resources to follow through on what they had learned. Frustration with the disconnection between new training and opportunities for application did lead some to express their sense that there was no career path at the library and that their professional sense of themselves had reached a dead end.

We were somewhat troubled by the evident gap between those staff with faculty status and those without, and analogously, between part-time and full-time librarians. Some of the part-timers have remained part-timers, though the percentage of time actually worked has become virtually full-time due to added duties. One observer questioned what the norm is for the ratio of part- to full-time employees in RLG libraries, and also whether the distinction between faculty and staff applies generally elsewhere.

A few staff spoke of the difficulty in advancing from one category to a higher level generated by the HR/Civil Service structure: the next higher category might not exist, and having to stand formally to compete for a civil service ranking that matched the work actually already being done brought with it the risk of losing the position entirely to an outsider. This problem is by no means unique to the library, and troubles staff positions all over the campus, but its severity requires offsetting attention by senior administrators if morale is not to suffer, and such attention appears to have been lacking.

A recurrent narrative is that of employees having begun in a unit of four or five persons and now finding themselves alone. There are several possible routes to this outcome, one of which is that the work the unit did has become less important to the mission of the library and has accordingly received fewer resources. But because much of professional library work is learned through on-the-job experience, rather than simply arriving from library school with academic credit, units need a mechanism of succession, in which incumbents can pass on their accumulated practical knowledge to their successors. The reduction of staff that has afflicted the campus in general and the evident aging of the remaining library staff repeatedly raised the prospect that units imminently face the problem of a gap in knowledge: retirements are freely spoken of as approaching, and the next generation of staffing is missing.

Work flows have been redirected in a piecemeal fashion. Some people have inherited jobs once performed by others who have since left. Sometimes the staff has found they could get the work done without replacing the person. In other cases, individual staff workloads have grown to the point that it has become hard to manage. In still other cases, the work has continued to be done in the same way without thinking about its overall efficiency. As one individual put it, there has not been a "stop doing" list. Historically, most staff have accumulated tasks without reprioritizing responsibilities.

In a related matter, we were concerned with the current involvement of library staff to do some of the processing for library materials at Fulton-Montgomery Community College, a smaller SUNY institution. Although the service is remunerated, we wondered when, and who, last considered whether such a use of our staff is a wise use of time and resources. The current process should make it possible for the library to define its mission so as to make its local choices in the light of its overall priorities.

In the absence of a coherent plan for the library's future, staff losses due to retirements and budget cuts have not been managed with a big picture in mind. The top priority would seem to be reviewing the library's mission and then reviewing work processes to see if the right number of staff members with the right kinds of skills is available. Until this is done, it's hard to say whether the staff needs to grow or shrink more.

Services:

If the library is changing in nature faster than attrition is enabling a shifting of resources, then the reassignment of employees and the appropriate training of them for their new positions become necessary. Reassignments of staff and relocation of materials has been occurring for some time, but it appears that decisions have been made piecemeal, without – from the staff's point of view – adequate discussion with those affected or adequate consideration of the ramifying effects that even a desirable change have on the working conditions of the employees and on other units. More than anything else, then, the library needs a clear sense of its future, and that sense must be developed from consultation within the library and outside, and not simply imposed or evaded. We note that even a casual library "outsider" can see that the shift from print and holdings as primary concerns to electronic resources and access will require employees with different skill sets from those at the founding of the library. We were encouraged by both the interviews and reports of collection development meetings as signs that such self-study has already begun.

A new library vision cannot be developed without considering the place of the library within Stony Brook University as a whole. We heard that in the past the library was conceived as a service unit rather than a research one. While the opposition of these notions is appealing, it is specious because at a major research university the service the library provides must include research. Furthermore, if the librarians are themselves researchers, or knowledgeable about modes of research, then their knowledge should be shared with the campus community, faculty and students. We note that "bibliographical instruction" is too narrow a term for the links that might be developed with faculty and students. The library should be part of every orientation, and the connection between the library and the departments should be ongoing. Discussion of library resources either present or needed should be part of any administrative consideration of new academic initiatives, and programs might be developed that would bring faculty and library staff together in the design of courses, syllabi and assignments, at all levels, so that undergraduates would have continuing re-education in the resources the library offers. We were surprised to hear from several staff members that they teach formal courses at other institutions, but not at Stony Brook; for those interested and appropriately pedagogically skilled, involvement in instruction would offset the faculty shortage and raise the profile of the library.

That the library is less vivid in the imaginations of the campus faculty than it should be is surely a shortcoming of the campus faculty, who often take the library for granted, complain of its collection shortcomings, and do not know all that is actually available. It would be helpful if the library could both study its users and how its users make use of its resources. It is acknowledged that the collection of such data is not simple, but a consideration of how to allocate financial resources should proceed in tandem with a thorough study of usage, and impairments to usage. One theme that emerged in discussions was the difference between the cataloging and search mechanisms of the library and those to which students

and faculty are now accustomed; perhaps an interface needs to be developed along the lines of a Google search engine between the user and the library's electronic face, STARS and the listing of databases.

But the lack of library recognition, both in terms of services and collections, also represents a library responsibility. A certain level of service standardization needs to be established in order to avoid confusion between the campus' expectations and the library's service abilities. We note that the relation of Melville Library to the branch libraries, and the assignment of work to staff at each, appears unsettled. Staff detailed variations in operating hours, fines, circulation terms, and staff duties among the branches. Similarly, services for affiliated or associated groups, like the Friends of the Library, need to be codified so that there are clearly defined levels of service that both library staff and library users can understand. The lack of such clarity across the organization has led to some of the accumulated duties taken on by staff without reconsideration of appropriateness and resource allocations, whether financial or staffing.

Furthermore, the library needs to rethink its relationship with other campus "players." It has become clear to the observers, who themselves require information access and services from both libraries on campus, that new levels of collaboration in public services are required. The library should consider collaborative reference services with the Health Sciences Library as well as the libraries at Brookhaven National Labs and Cold Spring Harbor Labs. Examples of service shortcomings include the lack of coordination between the two campus libraries at the levels of online catalogs and interlibrary loan policies. While there has been an emphasis on public services in support of undergraduate education, new or alternative library services need to be investigated to support graduate and post-doctoral research activities. The improved partnership between campus faculty and the library could potentially yield greater accessibility and knowledge of the library's collections via updated course syllabi and tighter integration of library materials within Blackboard.

The need to strengthen ties between libraries on campus is paralleled by the need to strengthen relations between the Stony Brook libraries and the SUNY library system, particularly the libraries of the three other research institutions. The status of the SUNY common collection is not understood; the coordination of collection development is also not well-articulated. One recurring thread in the interviews was resistance to the development of our own off-site storage: that books had been sent without adequate consideration, that space could have/should have been found within the library building itself for less-used items, that the cost of maintaining the site was a drain (and presumably the same is true for the search for, transmission, and return of materials). We question why it is that the other research campuses also had off-site collections; could one off-site location serve us all, and could the dispatch of books to such facilities had been coordinated. Additional related questions: do we need to maintain a set of books in an off-site collection if multiple copies of those books are either active elsewhere in the system or already housed in their off-site facilities? How much do we know of what our sister research center institutions are doing?