

Report of the McMaster University Library Review Team To President Patrick Deane and Provost Ilene J. Busch-Vishniac

Introduction: academic engagement, strengths and challenges

A university library is only as strong as its engagement with its academic communities, so one of the key questions for the McMaster Library review team relates to the library's position within the university's curriculum and research programs and its engagement with students and faculty: what are the library's current strengths in this regard, and what is the optimal way forward?

Mission and goals of the university and the library

McMaster's mission statement says, "At McMaster our purpose is the discovery, communication and preservation of knowledge. In our teaching, research, and scholarship, we are committed to creativity, innovation and excellence. We value integrity, quality, inclusiveness and teamwork in everything we do. We inspire critical thinking, personal growth, and a passion for lifelong learning. We serve the social, cultural, and economic needs of our community and our society."

Building on this mission statement, and a broad consultation process, President Deane issued an open letter in September 2011 entitled [Forward with Integrity: A Letter to the McMaster Community](#). This document outlines the university's key priorities for the next decade: the development of a distinct, effective and sustainable undergraduate experience, the enhancement of the connections between McMaster and the community, and the support of continuing excellence in research that informs and integrates with a reconceived educational mission.

At the formal level of strategic planning, the library's 'Strategy Map' for 2010/2013 clearly complements the university's directions. It articulates a focus on faculty, students and university staff, with goals relating to service, teaching and learning spaces, scholarly resources and integration into the university's teaching, learning and research mission.

With regard to the development and delivery of particular initiatives and ongoing services, the review team identified a number of strengths and a number of challenges in the ways in which the library is working with its academic communities.

Strengths

The review team was impressed with the high regard that library users feel for library services, resources, space and staff. The library was described as one of the most nimble parts of the university and a great asset. There were many comments about helpful staff. Equally impressive was the focus that library staff placed on students and faculty in their comments about the library's services.

In the views of the review team, the library is excelling in a number of specific areas, such as:

- A strong and appropriate focus on students and learning.
- An effective partnership with iSci (the Honours Integrated Science program), including the Sciences Fluencies Librarian and program facilities in Thode Library.

- Librarians embedded in Commerce and the MBA Program (Ron Joyce Centre).
- Strong relationships with the Centre for Leadership in Learning, including emerging initiatives in blended learning.
- Successful experiences with postdoctoral fellows in areas of strategic priority, through the Council on Library and Information Resources Postdoctoral Fellowship in Academic Libraries.
- The innovative Lyons New Media Centre and its support for faculty and student media projects.
- Vibrant student learning spaces in renovated areas of Mills Library and Thode Library.
- In general, satisfaction with access to information resources, with some concerns about specific subject areas and about the integrity of digital versions of printed texts.
- Strategic development of digital collections.

Challenges

As impressive as the initiatives above are, many of them are also areas of concern and the review team noted a variety of significant issues:

- The library's goal of integration into the university's teaching, learning and research mission is being addressed in selected areas, but not systematically; for example, the iSci program relates to a small fraction of Science students, and while Business faculty lauded their business librarian, History faculty lamented the loss of a librarian available to them.
- The blended service model lacks the resources needed for the final stage of triage - librarians available for complex research questions.
- The postdoctoral fellows program involves a large number of individuals (currently 7) and their roles are not fully understood within the organization; in some cases they appear to be fulfilling long-term responsibilities rather than short-term assignments.
- To many staff delivering services, priorities seem "random" rather than strategic, and many feel that McMaster's values of "integrity, quality, inclusiveness and teamwork" are lacking in administrative decision-making and approaches to services.
- Costs of services, and ongoing sustainability plans, are not fully known by the senior administrators responsible for them.
- There are significant issues relating to space for library services and staff that need consideration.
- The University Librarian is not a member of the Dean's council, limiting opportunities for ensuring strong administrative connections with academic programs.
- Faculty consultation with the library about the development of new academic programs is often an afterthought, and the library's input regarding resource needs may have little impact.
- Relationship-building between the library and academic programs usually seems to rely on the University Librarian, and there are few 'on the ground' systemic connections.
- Although the emphasis on students and learning is laudable and appropriate, there seems to be a lack of focus on research support beyond collection development, despite continuing excellence in research being one of the university's three key priorities.

In considering all the aspects of academic engagement noted above, several themes emerged: leadership and administration, governance, resource allocation and funding, staffing and space. The review team's recommendations fall within those themes, with the intention of building on current strengths, addressing challenges and providing a sound path forward.

Leadership and Administration

It is without question that in recent years the library has moved from a stable, traditional organization into a progressive, innovative and experimental one. The University Librarian's vision, energy and enthusiasm have been key drivers for this change: the library is now recognized as a central resource, a customer focused entity, a "nimble" organization, a willing collaborator, an agent of change, a major campus presence and a highly visible one. These are no small achievements given the short period of time (6 years) in which they have occurred. The review team acknowledges and commends the University Librarian and the library staff for these achievements.

Additionally, the library is supported by an exceptionally talented, dedicated and experienced "leadership team" of Associate University Librarians (AULs). The extent to which the AULs have been included in the decision-making processes is not entirely clear to the review team. It was clear, however, that in terms of campus leadership and exposure, the AULs are not visible enough. This is unfortunate given the enthusiasm and talent that lies within the group. Beyond the campus, the AULs represent the library and the university in consortial discussions and initiatives. It is apparent to the review team that the under-exposure of the AULs on campus is to the detriment of the library and the university, given their obvious abilities to contribute to campus-wide strategic discussions and initiatives. Furthermore, the underutilization of these AULs places an inordinate amount of pressure upon the University Librarian as the single point of contact and therefore the single point of failure.

The above mentioned successes have not been realized without a cost. Change, indeed dramatic, persistent change, does not come easily. The pace of change under this visionary leadership has been constant. One could argue that this has not allowed a reasonable period of consolidation, while others might applaud the continuing innovation. In and of themselves, these changes have been in the interests of the development of the library for the purpose of achieving the fundamental goals of the university. It was obvious to the review team that the staff are not averse to change.

The rapid and unpredictable nature of this period of change has been compounded by concerns about communication, consultation, and engagement. It is apparent to the review team that these issues may largely be due to the University Librarian's enormous energy, vision and desire to get things done in the most expeditious manner. It is also apparent that inadequate attention has been paid to the development and communication of a clear strategic plan with opportunities for comments from the entire campus community. As a result, to many staff delivering services, priorities seem "random" rather than strategic, and many feel that McMaster's values of "integrity, quality, inclusiveness and teamwork" are not fully realized in administrative decision-making and approaches to services. Closely tied to perceptions of incomplete communication and consultation are those of transparency, particularly on budgetary matters. Even at the leadership team level such transparency is not obvious.

The review team recognizes that the University Librarian is soon to vacate the post and that an interim University Librarian will be appointed until a suitable candidate is in place. The review team is of the view that one of the current AULs should fill this interim position, enabling a period of stability and consolidation prior to the appointment of a new University Librarian. On this point it should also be noted that many of those appearing before the review team stressed that the new University Librarian must be a visionary but must also, first and foremost, be an outstanding communicator. The review team understands that the university already agrees with these characteristics in the next appointee.

Recommendations

- The new University Librarian should be an individual with outstanding communication skills as well as visionary leadership.
- The new University Librarian should build a strong leadership team, delegate to the AULs as much as possible and decentralize authority throughout the organization as much as possible.
- The new library leadership team should focus on stabilization, change management and an organizational culture of consultation, engagement and transparency.
- During the interim period between the University Librarian's departure and a new appointment being in place, and for the purposes of stability and consolidation, an AUL should be assigned as interim University Librarian.

Governance

There are several areas of library governance that appear to the review team to merit attention. The first is the role and nature of an advisory council to the University Librarian. The review team understands that the advisory council itself has been engaged in considering these matters in a recent facilitated exercise. Without knowing the details of those discussions, the review team observes that the committee should remain advisory, it should include students as well as faculty, and it should have a clear mandate that spells out its responsibilities in relation to the university community; for example, the role that the faculty members have in relation to their faculties or the ways in which the council reports out to the university community. As well, it should involve other key individuals in the library, such as the AULs or others responsible for particular services. It should be recognized, however, that an advisory council is a formal complement to and not a replacement for ongoing consultation and communication between library staff and students and faculty.

The second area of concern is the University Librarian's position in relation to other academic units. Although the position reports to the Provost and relates to the academic mission of the university, it is not a member of the Dean's council. Regular and informal contact with that group is essential to ensure that the University Librarian is apprised of academic matters and that the Deans share an understanding of their library. The team strongly recommends that the University Librarian become a standing member of the Dean's council or at least have regular contact with that group.

The review team recommends no expansion at the present time of the University Librarian's scope of responsibility. The proposed budget model indicates that there could be a new relationship with the Health Sciences Library, but the review team sees this as a major change that would be very disruptive at this time. The two systems should continue to collaborate as closely as possible.

Recommendations

- A new advisory council that includes faculty and students and reports back to appropriate governing bodies of the university, that is formulated along the lines of those at peer institutions.
- The University Librarian be made a full member of the Dean's Council.
- The Health Sciences Library retain its independent reporting line at the present time.

Resource allocation and funding

Many university libraries have faced financial constraint in recent years, and McMaster has been no exception to this trend: noted elsewhere in this report is a shortage of staff, and difficulty in meeting the information resource needs of some parts of the academic community. The university does not have unlimited funds to apply to the library, and alternative sources of funding have been sought to allow the library to develop services and initiatives which otherwise would not be possible. The review team commends the library's, and particularly the University Librarian's, achievements in advancement and fundraising. These endeavors have brought considerable gains to the university, both financially and reputationally, and we hope that these can be leveraged to good effect in the near future.

This fundraising has supported bringing in to the library ventures new to it that are key to the innovation that we have seen and that are becoming central features of the work of university libraries. But concerns were expressed about the library's ability to meet the information needs of new avenues of research, particularly where these required access to substantial collections in areas not core to the library's current holdings. The review team recognizes that the university does not have unlimited resources at its disposal, and is reluctant to offer any recommendation that simply urges an allocation of additional funds to the library, although any additional investment would allow the library greatly to enhance scholarship at the university.

The review team therefore recommends that the university ensure that appropriate funding be made available to allow the library adequately to provide the level of service and access to information resources required to meet the university's strategic needs. It may be desirable to benchmark funding against a group of peer universities, nationally and internationally, to monitor the adequacy of the university's investment. Nevertheless, it is vital that the university arrive at a coherent view of the role of its library in the future, and work to ensure the allocation of resources needed to realize this vision.

To this end, the university could consider, as part of its new budget allocation model, an adequate baseline for library funding, taking advantage of the opportunity to recalibrate current funding in line with academic needs. While the demand for library services must be balanced against other demands elsewhere in the university, careful consideration should be paid to the likely benefits that will accrue from further investment.

The library should be consulted at the earliest opportunity about any new areas of research or teaching in order that the resource implications be understood by all concerned. It is understandably frustrating for a new research project to be impeded by a lack of adequate library collections, but this could easily be prevented through early discussion. The consultation process should involve the library indicating the adequacy of its staffing levels and information resources to meet new activity, the availability locally of other collections, and an indication of the level of additional funding required to provide acceptable support.

The nature and limited time of the review meant that the review team was unable to review budget allocations. As in other areas, the library budget has been a responsibility that has been assumed largely by the University Librarian with limited sharing of information with other members of the leadership team. At a time of transition, greater transparency is required as a matter of some urgency. A review of allocations and expenditures should be conducted to provide assurance that the library's and the university's strategic priorities are being met to best effect.

Recommendations

- A budget audit that identifies how allocations are currently being made.
- A benchmarking study with a group of peer institutions to develop a budgeting model to which the university might aspire.
- An early alert system that informs the University Librarian when new programs are being considered that might call for library support.
- Collaboration with regional partners whenever possible to share the burden of supporting research activities.

Staffing

Successful research libraries require non-traditional skill sets, for example, capability in multiple foreign languages, applications programming, and ability to acquire, access, and manage geospatial data. McMaster University is fortunate in its dedicated library staff. It is a workforce with a variety of skills, in part developed as a result of the fast-paced change of the last few years. There appear to be gaps in the available skills, however, and the interim University Librarian should lead a review to ensure that there are adequate numbers of staff with key capabilities and that the most critical functions in the library are covered by qualified staff or librarians as fully as possible. Based on comparisons with peer institutions, it appears possible to make a case that the library needs additional positions.

The sense of lacking skill sets may also be based on some disorganization. It appears that there may be staff members deployed to areas outside their expertise, or that there are gaps in some departments that could be filled by reallocation from other areas. Some staff have changed functions multiple times in the last few years and seem confused about what their job descriptions do entail. Again these problems can be at least partially addressed by an inventory of staffing requirements against the skills of existing employees.

Many staff have found the era of rapid change stimulating and satisfying. Others have experienced significant stress but the review team did not find that a large contingent wishes to stop change altogether. The most noticeably affected group is the librarians whose numbers have dipped too low. Interestingly both library support staff and university faculty strongly recommend that librarians be appointed to help with research and instructional services and liaison with faculty. One staff member commented that when there are few librarians instructing students in online research methods or handling research consultations for faculty and graduate students, the flow of information about the needs of library users is greatly restricted.

The review team learned that on the whole the librarians have useful assignments and are working on them. There may be cases in which the jobs assigned are not aligned with the librarian's qualifications, leading to frustration and low morale. Additionally the lack of communication between the library administration and the staff seems to have affected librarians almost more than other groups.

There have been misunderstandings about the funding sources and roles of the postdoctoral fellows. Funding and goals for the program should be clarified and communicated to all. If and when a postdoctoral fellow is deemed qualified to move into a permanent position in the library, that should be done openly and transparently.

The interim University Librarian should make special efforts with both the librarians and the postdoctoral fellows. Positions need to be reviewed, again to match skills with assignments and to ensure that the mission critical work of the library is covered. The interim University Librarian should devote time to communicating with both the individuals and the two groups and to emphasize communication and collaboration with the librarians' union representatives.

Finally the interim University Librarian must begin a time of healing for all staff. Only the most necessary staffing changes should be made so that a sense of stability can be regained. Formal and articulated communication channels with the entire staff must be initiated. The interim library administration must be careful to say what it is going to do, and to follow through. It must administer the library demonstrating the highest integrity. With this kind of effort an inventive, committed and refreshed staff will be at the ready when the new University Librarian arrives to restart the era of visionary change.

Recommendations

- An audit of the staffing of the university library that benchmarks against a group of peer institutions with a view towards making available funding for a few key hires that would be part of a package to help a new University Librarian to get off to a good start.
- Regularly scheduled staff meetings and other regularly used forms of communication to make as transparent as possible how decisions are made and how resources are expended. This is especially critical in working with the librarians and the postdoctoral fellows.
- A cooling off period of stability, rich communication and transparent action under an internally-appointed interim University Librarian drawn from the current leadership team.

Space

Space is in short supply and high demand on the McMaster campus. The library is to be commended on its innovative and strategic partnerships that have brought into the Mills Library, the Lyons New Media Center, the Centre for Leadership in Learning, the Health Forum, the Wong Classroom, the Bertrand Russell Archive, the Digital Commons, and the Data Service. These new areas of growth and change have turned the building into a vibrant and colorful space overflowing with students and faculty alike and have positioned the library to leverage its central position on campus to attract to it the student body. Many of these partnerships have come as a result of opportunities that presented themselves. The review team does not want to suggest that opportunities should not be seized upon at an opportune time, but suggests that, at this point in the evolution of the university library, the use of space in the library be more deliberate and fit in with larger institutional goals.

As in all of the other areas reviewed in this report, consultation, planning and follow-through need to be part of all of the initiatives undertaken at the university library. In the case of space planning, there should be some overall sense of the amount of study space, space for book stacks, for innovative programs and for archives and special collections, and what the relationship should be among and between these areas. The limited use of the space occupied by the Health Forum could perhaps be somewhat liberalized to allow for further booking by other campus entities. The Centre for Leadership in Learning could be a place of even more intensive collaboration between librarians and the members of that staff.

The Thode Library, even more so than Mills, seems to have become a set of spaces clearly thought through and attractively realized to maximize their use by the current generation of students. The Innis Library is another space that could be refreshed in a reasonably inexpensive way and perhaps this could become a space where the remaining book collection, which seemed to us to be virtually untouched, could be merged with Mills or put into storage and selectively weeded.

The review team would like to see an audit of all of these spaces in conjunction with a university-wide audit of study space, keeping in mind that there is a possible Advancement opportunity in the rich holdings of Special Collections, especially the Bertrand Russell Archive, which could be used as a centrepiece around which needed new space could be conceived. At the same time, the rich history of the university could conceivably be gathered together in a formal university archives.

Recommendations

- An audit of the use of space in the university library and the availability of study space throughout the campus with a view of aligning the needs of the students with the space available.
- Consider the creation of a student-centered study space that might be anchored by the Special Collections of the library and a unified university archives.
- Consider refreshing the Innis Library space and increase the amount of space available for student study by reducing the size of the print collection.

Conclusion

Our visit to McMaster University, prepared well by the library's comprehensive self-study, was filled with meetings with many people who have a deep and abiding interest in the library and its role. It seemed to us that everyone, even those who inhabited opposing views, all shared the view that the library matters. It was heartening to us all how committed the staff, faculty and administration were to the increasingly visible and integrated place the library has on campus.

We did not meet any students in a formal way but we saw them everywhere we went in the libraries and we saw how much they were using the various facilities. McMaster is doing much that is right in providing the basis for a 21st century notion of the library as a place that students frequent for the variegated and specialized instruction, resources, and spaces conducive to the changing nature of research, teaching and learning.

McMaster could do more and do it even better. We saw the fine results of internal collaborations that led to the construction of handsome spaces and innovative programs -- we would like to see more collaborations with other libraries off campus. We saw innovation that has led to some cutting edge work, such as the creation of learning modules for large swaths of the student population. We would like to see more communication internally that explains what is happening and that involves more staff in the decision-making process. We saw the empowerment of some staff and the employment of postdoctoral fellows to enhance the ability of the library to develop in new areas, but we saw the impact of staff losses and significant concerns. We saw new areas develop but other important functions neglected. So our overall assessment is that the next University Librarian has a strong record of innovation on which to build, but s/he also has a series of improvements to undertake and the university

will need to provide a framework for the library, structurally and financially, that supports it as a strategic academic resource.

Respectfully submitted,

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