

PLANNING FOR SUCCESS

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The Backdrop

As first-year Smith students arrive on campus this fall, we can expect them to think about the library in fundamentally different ways than previous student generations did—that is, if they are thinking about the library at all. For most, the Internet is their library. According to a study by the Pew Internet & American Life Project last year, 94% of “online” teenagers used the Internet for school research and 75% used the Internet as the primary source for their major school projects or reports. For current Smith students, we can assume that the library as a physical place does not serve the same purpose that it did a mere decade ago. The Digital Library Foundation recently reported that about half of the time an undergraduate spends on course-related research is now done in residence houses, online. Going to the library is now increasingly unnecessary!

Of course, academic libraries have done much to make this possible by taking advantage of rapidly evolving networked environments and providing as many full-text resources and services as possible. In just one example, this year the Smith libraries added the entire back run of the New York Times from 1851 until the present in an online version. Since 1995, online access to scholarly journal articles has become the preferred mode of access, and publishers have been more than happy to sell libraries both paper and electronic access. During the same period, the likes of Amazon.com have defined for Americans what an online library catalog should do: provide easy, intuitive access to information on books, enhanced with reviews, dust jacket art, and simple ordering.

In this environment, libraries risk becoming marginalized unless they change and adapt. With this awareness, the library staff at Smith initiated an intense strategic planning effort during the first half of 2002. The whole effort has been exciting, exhausting and—ultimately—extremely rewarding. Throughout, the staff has remained committed to ensuring that the plan was not an end unto itself, but that our planning would lead to real change, and through this planning process we would ensure that the libraries remain central to the education of Smith women.

Planning 101

Pick up any primer on strategic planning and you will find the basic approach to strategic planning that the Smith libraries followed from December 2001 through July 2002. We began with an environmental scan in which we talked extensively with anyone who has a vested interest in the libraries. We listened to our “customers” to find out what they think we are doing well and what they think we should be doing better. We also sounded out the college administration and key partners in the college such as Information Technology Services. Through many wide and varied conversations, as well as a review of the literature, we created a picture of our strengths and weaknesses and we identified

opportunities for and threats to our continued success. This picture threw into relief a number of strategic issues that were essential for us to address. These issues provided a basis for our strategic plan, the formulation of our vision for the future, and the articulation of strategic directions for the libraries. Finally, we created goals and actions that will make it possible to realize our vision. Throughout this process, we regularly engaged the whole library staff to ensure that everyone was part of the process and invested in the results.

Issues

Among the strategic issues we identified, some are ubiquitous in academic libraries and some are unique to Smith. All college libraries face the challenge of expanding their electronic resources and services while maintaining an appropriate funding level for books and the provision of personal services. Our physical spaces need to accommodate both new technologies and new modes of study and research. We must constantly renew our technology infrastructures. At Smith in particular, we need to rethink how we do our work, provide more attractive physical spaces, programmatically address information literacy, and extend our role as information specialists beyond the traditional precincts of the library.

Vision and New Directions

Our vision statement, printed on page 6, distills the essence of our response to these issues. Interested readers may see this vision translated into strategic directions at our website <www.smith.edu/libraries/info/about/plan>. One common thread is the need to continuously assess our users' needs and translate these into action. Another theme is the transformation of the library from a warehouse of scholarly information to a service center for that information. We also need to find ways to re-conceive the library in the digital age: what new roles can we assume on campus that will assure our centrality to the mission of the college in the future?

We emerge from the strategic planning effort energized by a renewed sense of purpose and direction and deeply enriched and informed by the hopes, needs, and desires of our patrons. In the end, the key to realizing our vision will be our own ability to be flexible, to grow, and to work together toward the shared vision of the Libraries and the college.

How're we doin'?

Listening to our users

Taking a cue from former mayor Ed Koch, who used to call out “How’m I doin’?” to the fine citizens of New York, the Smith College Libraries called out “How are we doing?” last February as the first stage of the strategic planning process. A variety of online and in-person interviews, surveys, forums, focus groups, pizza lunches, and teas reached nearly 150 students and 88 faculty members, as well as key partners and administrators on campus. The good news—praise for our skilled and helpful staff, our large and excellent collections, our strong service orientation, and our special collections—buoyed our spirits, while the criticisms largely coincided with our own views about what needed change.

Students resoundingly described Neilson Library as aesthetically uninspiring. They noted poor lighting, uncomfortable furniture, and the lack of study tables, group study space, and laptop connections. They’d like to see open spaces, natural lighting, and a nice mix of comfortable seating and keep-you-awake seating. They wished for rich hues and comfortable fabrics, couches to curl up on with a good novel, tables with room to spread out, places for groups to work on projects, traditional quiet study space, a café . . . places where you can talk, drink and eat. One faculty member eloquently advised, “Bring the beauty of the third floor to the first floor.”

Faculty and students alike clamor for more electronic journals and full-text databases. They also want an easy, efficient way to find online resources and to link seamlessly to those resources from on or off campus. At the same time, some want to maintain print collections of journals onsite, not in storage. Striking the best balance between print and online resources is a substantial challenge. Earlier adoption and application of technology also emerged as a major need. Students want better computers, network connections for laptops, and a computer lab in the libraries. Faculty members want better integration with other electronic resources on campus, such as Blackboard and Insight, the college’s image database.

Many users want our services available online, any time from any place, through online forms, chat, and email. Others would like library hours extended for onsite use. And everyone wants better photocopiers! Students and faculty alike seek greater guidance in navigating the online world—through workshops, programs, class sessions, and one-on-one coaching. As one faculty member admits, “I am sometimes bewildered by the sheer volume of stuff on the web.” Finally, the libraries’ website received mixed reviews—love it or hate it!

While faculty and students generally view the collections as strong, several concerns arose. In some areas, collections are uneven, with gaps in basic texts and in interdisciplinary areas. Faculty are divided about whether to retain primary responsibility for selection or transfer responsibility to librarians. However selection is done, the workload remains a major challenge. Many expressed the desire for more videos. And the management of collections housed offsite registered as a concern.

The libraries' five-year strategic plan aims to improve both what we already do well and what we need to improve. Specific actions for this first year have been developed to begin to address primary needs. To jump start the change process, we have:

- Installed new copiers in all libraries.
- Replaced the computers in Neilson with new PC's with large flat screen monitors.
- Opened Neilson's electronic classroom for general use when not scheduled for instruction.
- Formed a joint librarian/faculty committee to study information literacy.
- Acquired e-journal locator software to help patrons identify and access online journals.
- Conducted usability testing of the website and incorporated changes based on user feedback.
- Introduced an online chat reference service, described elsewhere in this issue.
- Installed ergonomic seating at all public computer workstations.

These are merely first steps. A continuous, sustained effort over the next five years will yield a transformative change.