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Bottom-Up Strategic Planning: The UC San Diego Libraries Experience

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ABSTRACT

This case study describes a large-scale, highly participatory strategic planning process employed at a large public academic research library. In academic year 2008-2009, The University of California San Diego Libraries faced unprecedented budget reductions that, along with the continuing shift from print to digital content, called for a different approach to strategic planning. Based on this, the Libraries' Administration charged a 22-member Strategic Planning Working Group to develop a draft strategic plan based on extensive solicitation of ideas and perspectives from Libraries staff, users, and partners. After gathering, distilling, and synthesizing this information, the Working Group identified six main themes. These themes were presented to, and accepted by, the Libraries Administration, and formed the basis for the Libraries' 2011-2014 strategic plan. Following the completion of the plan, the Libraries continued to use participatory approaches in developing action plans in support of the strategic plan. These included an internal call for Libraries staff to submit action ideas and vote for action items they supported. Staff also had the chance to serve on teams that developed implementation plans for turning action ideas. Benefits of the process included increasing staff engagement, creating a sense of ownership of the strategic plan, and developing action ideas. Drawbacks included the significant investment of time and a need to avoid over-engineering parts of the process. Overall the process resulted in an energized staff committed to charting the Libraries' future.

INTRODUCTION

Academic libraries have a long history of setting organizational goals and objectives using strategic planning processes.[1] The University of California (UC) San Diego Libraries share this history, having developed over the last dozen years a series of strategic plans to guide the organization over three-year planning horizons. Initiated and managed by the Libraries Administrative Team, these planning processes typically included 1) input from campus stakeholders on activities and initiatives across campus, unmet needs of faculty and students, and new directions the Libraries might consider; 2) reflection on that input and development by the Libraries Management Group of possible strategic responses to the input; and 3) finalization of the strategic plan by the Administrative Team. This general approach made sense during periods of fiscal growth and organizational stability.

All that changed in academic year (AY) 2008-2009, however, when the UC San Diego Libraries began to suffer the effects of the California and national fiscal crises. Along with the rest of campus, the Libraries began to experience unprecedented, significant budget reductions. Hiring was frozen and furloughs enacted. It was clear that, unlike economic recessions of the past, the magnitude and timescale of what

was to prove a global economic downturn would require that all of higher education take a hard look at how it went about its business now and in the future.

At the same time, the shift from print to digital that had been occurring steadily in libraries since the mid-1990s began to accelerate dramatically in the first decade of the 21st century. At UC San Diego:

- E-journals were rapidly becoming the norm.
- E-books, after several failures in the marketplace, had finally arrived.
- Digital course content was becoming ubiquitous.
- Digital library development efforts were bringing primary resources out of the confines of special collections and into the light of day.

Economic challenge and digital opportunity met head on, leaving the Libraries a perfect storm as the backdrop for strategic planning.

The Libraries' strategic plan was due to expire in 2009, a time when there was no prospect of fiscal recovery, and certainty of additional, and larger, reductions. Clearly, it was not going to be business as usual. This called for planning that was much more aggressive and fundamental, planning that would result in transformational change, and change that would position the Libraries for success in the "new normal" confronting the academy. What was also called for was a different approach to planning for such change.

The UC San Diego Libraries Administrative Team knew that the usual top-down approach to strategic planning would not produce the broad buy-in and support needed from Libraries staff and campus stakeholders to effect transformational change. Instead a new planning process was developed: large-scale, transparent, highly participatory, and with an emphasis on communication. A 22-member Strategic Planning Working Group was formed to carry out the planning process, with representation from every Libraries department and every Libraries staff classification. The Working Group was chaired by a librarian who was neither a member of the Libraries Administrative Team nor a Libraries department head, and was charged to 1) work with the Administrative Team to develop the strategic planning process, 2) coordinate that process, and 3) prepare a draft strategic plan for consideration by the Administrative Team and the broader Libraries Management Group. Chief amongst the objectives of using this bottom-up approach to planning was the wish to cast the broadest net possible for gathering the ideas and perspectives needed to ensure truly transformative change.

PRE-PLANNING
Input Gathering [January-May 2010]

The charge from the Administrative Team and subsequent guidance from the University Librarian made it clear that the efforts of the Working Group should focus on extensive information gathering from stakeholders. Stakeholders were identified as being both internal to the Libraries—i.e., Libraries staff— and external to the Libraries including campus administration, faculty, students, staff, and key partners. For external users, multiple approaches for gathering input were employed including separate meetings with vice chancellors, faculty, researchers, and clinicians, as well as representative groups like the Associated Students of UC San Diego, the Graduate Student Association, various library advisory groups, and other key stakeholders and partners. When these meetings were completed, more than 100 external stakeholders had attended meetings arranged by the Working Group.

The Working Group also wanted to provide avenues for "on-the-fly" input from external users, so a blog was created on the Libraries website where individuals could provide input to the process. The Working Group also placed white boards in strategic public areas throughout the Libraries on which users could respond to specific questions supplied by the Working Group. Both of these methods proved to be particularly popular with users looking to express ideas or concerns related to the Libraries' physical spaces. Not unexpectedly, the strong desire for 24-hour access to the Libraries' study areas was clearly expressed through these venues as well as ideas about different types and configurations of study areas.

The Working Group placed a premium on careful development of the overall approach to soliciting feedback. There was agreement that whenever possible the Working Group would strive to use an "open-ended" approach. That is, attempt to understand the role of information and library services and spaces in the users' work and study, rather than asking them specific questions about traditional library services. The Working Group hoped this approach would encourage users to think broadly about the role of information and existing and possible new library services and spaces. The Working Group felt this approach was especially relevant when requesting input from external stakeholders. For example, when speaking with a faculty member regarding her or his instructional efforts, the Working Group avoided library-focused, closed questions like "Do you find the Libraries Course Reserves service helpful and easy to use?" Instead, the Working Group asked "What types of challenges do you face in providing needed information or study materials to your students during the quarter?" There was, of course, a need to gauge satisfaction with traditional services, but the Working Group found that soliciting input in an open-ended fashion freed users to be imaginative and make interesting connections between existing and possible new services. Examples of other questions the Working Group used included:

- "Tell us what your information needs are and how well those needs are being satisfied."
- "How are your instruction and research methods changing with technology?"
- "What are some of the biggest challenges you are facing right now in your department, and what challenges do you foresee in the next two to four years?"

When developing the process for soliciting in-person input from Libraries staff (i.e., internal stakeholders) in group settings, the Working Group believed it was important for staff to have sufficient opportunity to reflect on challenges the University, the Libraries, and libraries in general were facing in preparation for providing input. As a consequence, whenever possible the Working Group shared the questions to be presented by meeting facilitators in advance of meeting with groups of staff. Additionally, the Working Group wanted staff to have more than one opportunity to attend a meeting where they could provide input. Through careful scheduling and assistance from department heads and committee chairs across the Libraries, 33 departmental or committee meetings were scheduled, in addition to three open-invitation "town hall" meetings on the future of collections, public services, and technology. This gave Libraries staff the opportunity to attend and provide input in more than one meeting and context. Although there was no effort by the Working Group to track whether individual staff members attended meetings, the intention was that every staff member should at least have the opportunity. Gratifyingly, there were more than 500 attendees at the 36 meetings.[2]

Although the Working Group worked diligently to maintain an open and relaxed atmosphere when meeting with Libraries staff in group settings, not all meeting attendees chose to speak. This was not surprising as individuals might have felt uncomfortable speaking in a group setting, or in front of their co-workers and/or supervisors, or simply not had a particular opinion on what was being discussed. Concerns about the anonymity of their comments were commonly voiced by participants, as is not uncommon in processes like this. The Working Group was very sensitive to confidentiality issues in these

meetings. While notes were taken during the meetings, participants were assured that no meeting attendee names would be recorded, and that comments would not be attributed to individuals in the meeting notes.

The Working Group set up two additional avenues for staff to provide confidential input. Libraries staff could 1) choose to meet one-on-one with an individual member of the Working Group to provide input or 2) provide input using an anonymous online survey. Both of these methods succeeded in gathering additional input from staff who did not feel comfortable sharing their comments in group settings. Unfortunately, the Working Group's best efforts notwithstanding, some staff still feared their input would not remain confidential, and chose not to participate. As noted above, this is not uncommon in workplace environments attempting to survey employees.[3]

Input Distillation and Synthesis [June-July 2010]

At the completion of the input gathering phase, the Strategic Planning Working Group had amassed almost 55,000 words of recorded input. The raw data needed to be analyzed in order to serve as input to the draft strategic plan. As a prelude to analysis, the Working Group decided first to both distill and synthesize what had been recorded in the meeting notes. Distillation was necessary as the notes from meetings were often quite extensive, and in many cases long responses to a question could in fact be condensed down to one or more specific points. Synthesis included reflecting on back-and-forth discussions, collecting responses around a particular topic, and summarizing information from multiple conversations. The distillation and synthesis processes were time-consuming, requiring attention to detail and maintaining objectivity. It was beneficial, therefore, that the Working Group was large (22 members), as this allowed these processes to be shared across the Group.

Because of the need to maintain objectivity, the Working Group avoided assigning individuals to distill and synthesize notes from their own departments or committees or in instances in which significant overlap with their work responsibilities existed. Also, a template was designed that allowed the distilled and synthesized notes to be displayed alongside the original notes. This allowed distilled and synthesized notes to be easily tracked back to the original record of a particular meeting. As these tasks were completed, the results were placed on a shared computer network drive so that all the members of the Working Group could access them. This allowed questions or concerns about how the notes were refined to surface and be discussed. Often the Working Group member working to distill and synthesize a set of notes would consult with the Working Group member who had recorded the original meeting in order to make sure that the correct interpretation was being drawn from what had been recorded. Although this process required a lot of effort, the Working Group members felt strongly that the process was critical for understanding what the internal and external stakeholders were hoping to convey with their input.

THE PLAN

Preparation [August 2010]

To begin the process of drafting the strategic plan, the Working Group held a day-long retreat to work collectively to identify the themes that were consistently expressed by in- and external stakeholders. As preparation for this retreat, all the Working Group members were required to read all the distilled and synthesized notes from all the different input venues. This gave a strong foundation to the day, and through a number of different large and small group activities it became clear that six main themes could be drawn consistently from the input received:

These were the need to:

1. Reimagine collections and information services to meet users' needs in the digital environment.

2. Develop more varied and flexible spaces for both users and Libraries staff.

3. Support the campus' digital scholarship and data curation and preservation needs.

4. Improve transparency, communication, and staff support within the Libraries.

5. Develop partnerships around mutual goals with on- and off-campus organizations.

6. Develop new ways of documenting and promoting the positive impact of the Libraries.

Drafting and Approval [September-October 2010]

The Chair of the Working Group shared with the Administrative Team all of the documentation and the six themes that had been identified. The Administrative Team agreed that the themes were supported by the input provided by the in- and external stakeholders, and the Team endorsed moving ahead with drafting the strategic plan. A subset of members of the Working Group drafted the strategic plan and formally submitted it to the Administrative Team, which subsequently presented it to the Libraries Management Group for approval. The plan was approved and adopted. The Libraries Communications Director collaborated with the Administrative Team to develop the public-facing version of the plan that was shared with the campus and can be viewed at http://libraries.ucsd.edu/_files/pdf/strategic-plan/ucsd-libraries-strategic-plan-2011-2014.pdf.

IMPLEMENTATION

Once the Strategic Plan was completed, the next step was to create action plans to help Libraries staff achieve the strategic directions articulated in the plan. Two processes were put into place to gather input. The first, a Call for Action Ideas, was an internal call for all Libraries staff to submit action ideas that would move the Libraries forward. The call was open for two weeks and submissions could be made anonymously.

The second process, conducted simultaneously, was a call for volunteers to serve on Tactical Implementation Planning & Progress (TIPP) Teams. The TIPP Teams, one for each of the strategic directions, were to be responsible for reviewing Action Idea submissions within each strategic direction, creating a list for review by the Libraries Management Group, developing a framework for implementing priority Action Ideas, and then monitoring and reporting on progress toward implementation of those ideas.

Action Ideas [November 2010]

The Call for Action Ideas was sent November 1, 2010, and was open for 12 days. All Libraries staff, departments, and committees were invited to submit action ideas that would move the Libraries forward in achieving the strategic directions contained in the Strategic Plan. Libraries staff were asked to submit ideas that would help achieve the vision of the UC San Diego Libraries as "leaner, more efficient, more focused, and widely recognized as essential contributors to UC San Diego's academic,

research, service, and patient care success."[4] A simple feedback form was posted on the Libraries intranet (Appendix II). While staff had to enter their network name and password in order to enter the site, as per standard site protocol, all identifying information was stripped from the form once it was submitted. There was no limit to the number of ideas staff could submit. Ideas submitted ranged from the practical (e.g., create a consolidated remote storage requesting form for all the Libraries to use) to the strategic (e.g., consolidate all service desks) to the playful (e.g., purchase a Ping-Pong table for the staff room). Overall, staff submitted more than 325 Action Ideas designed to help the Libraries achieve the vision articulated in the strategic plan. These were subsequently synthesized, categorized, and consolidated into a manageable list.

TIPP Teams

A call for volunteers to serve on one of six Tactical Implementation Planning & Progress (TIPP) Teams was also sent on November 1, 2010, and was open for 10 days.   Any Libraries staff member, with approval of her or his supervisor, could volunteer to serve on any one of the six TIPP Teams. Each TIPP Team was to have five members including: one Librarian, one Paraprofessional, one non-Librarian Professional, one Libraries Management Group member, and one additional Libraries staff member of any classification. Qualifications of TIPP Team members were broad and designed to ensure staff members were engaged in the process:

- Be knowledgeable about the Libraries and interested in helping the Libraries achieve their strategic directions
- Be in good standing with their department
- Have good project, program, and/or time-management skills
- Have experience in leading or working on teams
- Be able to meet deadlines and goals
- Be available to serve (i.e., have supervisor's approval and available time)
- Be familiar with and support UC San Diego's *Principles of Community* [5]

Staff members were asked to submit a volunteer form that included their name, department, classification, and any special skills or interest they would bring to the team (Appendix II). They were also asked to indicate on which one or more of the TIPP Teams they would like to serve. As part of the call, responsibilities, time commitments, and qualifications were outlined.   More than 40 staff volunteered for the 30 openings. The final TIPP Team membership was announced in late November 2010, along with an ambitious timeline of next phases in the process.

The TIPP Teams were charged to:

- Review submitted Action Ideas associated with their Team's strategic direction including de-duplicate, bring like ideas together, present an organized list of action ideas to the Libraries Management Group for discussion with the Administrative Team, and prioritize.
- Develop a framework for implementation of priority action ideas including description of the action idea, rationale, area of AUL responsibility, stakeholders, peripheral stakeholders, outcomes, milestones, timeline, and communication plan.
- Communicate regularly with implementation teams.
- Monitor and report progress broadly.

The TIPP Teams immediately began the work of sorting, de-duping, categorizing, and organizing the Action Ideas, many of which supported multiple strategic directions. Because the Action Idea submission process had been an anonymous one, some of the ideas submitted specified that specific staff members or departments carry out certain activities. This required that the TIPP Teams work with considerable sensitivity to honor the ideas submitted, while maintaining confidentiality.

Action Idea Survey and Processing [December 2010-January 2011]

The organized list of Action Ideas was distributed to staff in survey form with a request that they rank them as to their value and likelihood to help the Libraries achieve the vision articulated in the Strategic Plan. The survey, open from mid-December 2010 to mid-January 2011, was divided into six sub-surveys, one for each strategic direction, so that staff could complete the sub-surveys in any order and not need to complete them all at once. More than 100 staff (40% of all staff) participated in ranking Action Ideas.

Rankings of "Very Likely" and "Likely" were combined, while "Don't know enough for informed decision" rankings were removed. A final list of Action Ideas was then compiled by the rankings assigned to the Ideas by staff, from highest to lowest, and sent to the Libraries Management Group. Then the Management Group reviewed the ranked Action Ideas, discussed any that did not make it into the top 20% but that should still be considered for other reasons (strategic, political, etc.), and created a revised, prioritized list. In all, some 70 Action Ideas were reviewed and prioritized by the Libraries Management Group.

Of the 70 prioritized Action Ideas, 22 were scheduled for implementation in AY 2010-2011. These included developing and implementing a plan for reducing the size of the Libraries' bound print collection, developing and implementing a plan for repurposing library space for best use by patrons, creating a consolidated reserves operation, providing 24-hour study access, building out the Libraries' data curation program, creating a Libraries-wide statistics system, creating a new organizational structure, developing a new communications strategy focused on internal-to-the-Libraries communication, and branding services and resources. Several Action Ideas, such as using more off-the-shelf software or looking at vendor-supplied solutions, were considered simply good business practice and were referred to existing groups for implementation as part of their standard operating procedures. The remaining action ideas were retained for future consideration.

Action Idea Implementation Teams [April 2011- July 2012]

The TIPP Teams created implementation frameworks for each of the 22 Action Ideas scheduled for implementation in AY 2010-2014. Each framework included a brief description of the Action Idea, expected outcomes, possible impacts, stakeholders, possible consultants, the Administrative Team member who was accountable for assessment and implementation, the timeline for assessment and implementation, and a method of tracking implementation progress. Finally a call for volunteers to serve on Action Idea Implementation Teams (AIITs) was issued, and the Libraries' Cabinet, responsible for allocating resources, assigned staff to the various AIITs based on responses to that call. With few exceptions, work on each of the Action Ideas commenced immediately. Most of the Action Ideas had one-year timelines which some had longer timelines or delayed start dates. The TIPP Teams kept in close contact with the AIIT leaders and meeting minutes, reports, etc. were shared with Libraries staff via the Libraries intranet. In addition, TIPP Teams reported to the Libraries Management Group on a quarterly basis with progress of the AIITs for which they were responsible.

PROGRESS TO DATE

As of July 1, 2011, 6 of the 22 Action Ideas scheduled to begin implementation in AY 2010-2011 had been fully implemented, 14 were still in progress, and 2 had delayed start dates. Because of a mid-year start, progress in this first year of implementation was slow. As of July 1, 2012, 9 of the 22 ideas scheduled for implementation in AY 2010-2011 had been fully implemented, as had 9 of the remaining Action Ideas scheduled for implementation in AYs 2011-2014. Six months into AY 2012-2013, 18 of the 22 Action Ideas had been fully implemented.

In the fall of 2011, two things occurred that, in combination, profoundly affected progress toward implementing the 70 original Action Ideas: 1) work began on Action Idea S1-B, Organizational Restructuring, and 2) the Libraries received another million-dollar-plus budget cut, its fourth cut in four years. The cumulative effect of these cuts included a 20%+ reduction in core (i.e., State) Libraries funding, the concomitant loss of 50 FTE, and the release of 17% of the Libraries space back to the campus. As a consequence, the organizational restructuring called for in Action Idea S1-B became less a matter of belt-tightening and tweaking around the edges, and more a matter of completely re-thinking the services and organization of a library whose budget, staff, and space had been severely reduced.

That said, and in contrast to what one might expect, the budget cut did not force the Libraries to abandon the Strategic Plan that people had worked so long and so hard to develop. On the contrary, the Plan provided critical guidance to the Libraries in making difficult budget-driven decisions. It also served as a guiding framework for considering how best to reengineer the Libraries organization to provide an integrated suite of resources and services with substantially reduced financial, staffing, and space resources. That is, it has provided us with the needed strategic guidance to indeed become "leaner, more efficient, [and] more focused."[6]

LESSONS LEARNED

The bottom-up approach the UC San Diego Libraries took in strategic planning has had at least three demonstrable benefits:

- Considerably more staff engagement with the process than would otherwise have been the case
- A deeper sense of staff ownership of both the process and the outcome: it is the Libraries' Strategic Plan, not the Libraries Administration's
- The generation of far more ideas than would otherwise have been the case

Of course it has also had some drawbacks; chief amongst them the time the process has taken and continues to take. Deep consultation is, of course, inevitably time consuming. However, in our case this was exacerbated by parts of the process, notably the AIIT/TIPP Team construct, being somewhat over-engineered.

We also learned that one simply cannot communicate enough, and that however open and trusted/trusting the organization, some within it will nevertheless worry about the anonymity of their input. While these, of course, are lessons many other organizations have learned under similar circumstances, they have been instructive if only as "eternal verities."

CONCLUSION

Academic libraries are contending with transformative changes in the environments of which they are a part. These include the escalating preference for all things digital, the emergence of asynchronous

pedagogical modalities, and the continuing threats to funding combine to suggest—no, demand—that we radically reimagine ourselves. And so it will behoove us to likewise reimagine how we approach planning to do just that. The UC San Diego Libraries settled upon one such approach: bottom-up strategic planning. Largely staff-driven, it was a process of deep engagement in- and outside the Libraries, of soliciting and sifting through masses of input, and of consolidating and prioritizing that input in order to plot a strategic course for ourselves. Whatever the outcome of the various individual Action Ideas agreed upon, the process has resulted in a Libraries staff more engaged in and committed to charting the Libraries future, and their own. The not-inconsiderable investment of time and energy in the process has already paid substantial dividends and will surely continue to do so.

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1. Meridith Butler and Hiram Davis, "Strategic-Planning as a Catalyst for Change in the 1990s," *College & Research Libraries* 53 (Sept. 1992): 393-403; Douglas G. Birdsall and Oliver D. Hensley, "A New Strategic-Planning Model for Academic-Libraries," *College & Research Libraries* 55 (Mar. 1994): 149-159; Walter A. Brown and Barbara A Blake Gonzalez, "Academic Libraries: Should Strategic Planning Be Renewed?," *Technical Services Quarterly* 24 (May 2007): 1-14; Elizabeth Stephan, "Strategic Planning on the Fast Track," *Library Leadership & Management* 24 (Oct. 2010) : 189-198.

2. At the time of the Strategic Planning process, there were ca. 300 staff working in the Libraries. The total number of attendees at meetings conducted by the Working Group reflects the fact that some staff members attended more than one meeting.

3. Lori Foster Thompson and Eric A. Surface, "Employee Surveys Administered Online: Attitudes Toward the Medium, Nonresponse, and Data Representativeness," *Organizational Research Methods* 10 (Apr. 2007): 241-261.

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Action Idea Submission Form

UC San Diego Libraries Strategic Plan, 2010-2013

All Libraries staff, departments and committees are invited to submit action ideas that will move the UCSD Libraries forward in achieving the strategic directions listed in the column on the right. Your ideas will help the Libraries to achieve the vision of UCSD Libraries that are "leaner, more efficient, more focused, and widely recognized as essential contributors to UCSD's academic, research, service, and patient care success."

There is no limit to the number of ideas you can submit and ideas may be submitted anonymously. All ideas are welcomed, but please be respectful of others in your submissions.

The Call for Action Ideas is open from November 1-12, 2010.

Action Idea

This idea supports the following direction(s)

Core Strategic Direction:
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3

Supporting Strategic Direction:
- [ ] 1
- [ ] 2
- [ ] 3

Briefly explain how this idea will help the Libraries achieve this/these strategic direction(s)

Name (Optional)

Send Suggestion

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TIPP Team Volunteer Form

The Call for volunteers to serve on TIPP Teams is now open. Please complete the attached form and return via email to (omitted), with a copy to your supervisor, by November 10, 2010. Please indicate which TIPP Team you wish to serve on and if you have special skills or interests you would like us to know about.

Name: _____

Department: _____

Classification (select all that apply):

    __ Librarian
    __ LMG member
    __Paraprofessional
    __Professional

Please indicate which TIPP Team you would like to serve on. You may select more than one.

    __**Core Strategic Direction 1:** Re-imagine collections and information services to support our users' rapidly evolving information needs.

    __**Core Strategic Direction 2:** Re-imagine space to create dynamic, flexible spaces that support the changing needs of 21st century users, staff, and collections.

    __**Core Strategic Direction 3:** Engage with partners to make digital scholarly work and data openly discoverable and accessible for the long term.

    __**Supporting Strategic Direction 1:** Build a nimble, creative, sustainable, and efficient organization that supports continuing transformative change.

    __**Supporting Strategic Direction 2:** Lead the development of collaborations and partnerships that further the University's and Libraries' missions.

    __**Supporting Strategic Direction 3:** Document and promote the value and impact of the Libraries.

What special skills or interests do you have that would you like us to know about?

_____

_____

_____