

Starting a Library from Scratch. . .Again (Well, Sort of)

How does one start a library from scratch? That's the question I was faced with when I accepted the position as library director for the Charlotte campus of Johnson & Wales University in September of 2004. Many librarians would consider it a dream come true to start their own library. In my case, I was about to do it for the second time...well, sort of. The first time was when I had taken the position as library director of Johnson & Wales' Florida campus in August of 1997. While not entirely new, the library was operating out of a classroom space when I arrived and, within that first month, moved, under my supervision, to a new 10,000 square-foot facility intended to serve approximately 1,150 undergraduates.

The Johnson & Wales Florida campus library was noteworthy for its decor and furniture. It featured expensive tables, chairs, and study carrels. For example, the basic straight-back chairs alone cost almost 900 dollars each. The display cases were unusual for libraries. As opposed to the kind that lay flat, the vertical display cases seemed better suited for displaying trophies and similar objects. The combined reference/circulation desk was made entirely of thick, black marble. The artwork on the walls centered on a very large mural, entitled "The Transit of Gargantua through Bilbao," by Jose-Maria Cundin which is clearly visible from the reference desk and/or upon entering the library. The carpeting is a burgundy color that goes well with the black shelving and dark-stained woods featured in the current periodicals display case. Anyway, the lush interior design had been determined just before I arrived. My job, of course, was more focused on the central tasks of establishing library policy, and procedures, and recruiting staff.

In Florida, I was allowed at the outset to hire, in addition to my one library assistant, a full-time librarian. It may sound a bit crazy but I deliberately requested a non-librarian for this role. I was able to convince the Dean of Libraries that a good friend of mine who had been looking for a job as a teacher would be a great fit. We both were young, single and willing to work as hard and as long as necessary to get everything accomplished. While some people warned us of the dangers faced by friends working together, I believe it was our friendship that helped lead to so many of our successes and strengths in those early years of operation.

Since the Florida campus did have some traditions and resources in place (it had opened its doors five years earlier with a total of 62 students) the campus library was not quite organized from scratch. The library director before me had managed to cobble together a fairly decent collection with very limited funds. Most of the collection focused on the school's premier program, culinary arts (Programs in business and hospitality were added the year I arrived). Unfortunately, this promising collection had not been cataloged properly. For example, inaccurate cataloging records had been borrowed from other libraries. Also, none of the periodicals had been bound. They were all just neatly stored away. So, one order of business was figuring out how to get the items we had into

the Innovative catalog which we shared with our Providence, RI campus. Luckily, the Rhode Island campus was very helpful in this regard. For instance, Providence allowed us to send items to them for cataloging. It was a slow and painstaking process but it worked well enough. We were eventually able to hire a librarian to do our basic cataloging, while supplementing her work with an OCLC TechPro contract for more difficult items.

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Policies and procedures were interesting challenges from the very beginning. Since we had our hands full with the move to the new facility (which also, by the way, included the installation of 40 new computers in the library and library computer lab), I decided very quickly that we would probably just have to go with whatever policies and procedures were in place. This meant, unfortunately, relying upon an old-fashioned card checkout system, a lack of proper reserves area, an overdue accountability system (that was irregular and relied upon going to teachers to let students know that items were past due), and countless other anachronisms that had worked when the school was very small but had already shown that they were incapable of handling the challenges of a growing student body. Over the course of that year, as I grew to understand the institutional culture and history, as well as the needs of students and faculty, we made steady improvements.

In the area of instruction we did not do much beyond the basics. It is ironic in some sense that I now see instruction and information literacy as central to the library's role on campus. But during that first year, library instruction entailed little more than walking students around the library and pointing to where things were located.

Despite all of the trials and tribulations experienced during those early days as library director in Florida, I would not trade the experience for anything. Not only did it allow me to mature and grow as a person; it was an opportunity to learn so many different things that no other job would have presented. Most importantly, I was able to learn from my mistakes, always receiving the full support of the administration. I didn't realize it at the time but I was going to be given the opportunity to take all of this trial and error education to actually create another library truly from scratch on the next go around!

I and my wife moved from a condo in Florida and arrived in Charlotte, North Carolina in June of 2004. My wife was seven months pregnant; we had a new house, and didn't know a soul. So, in addition to my numerous personal challenges, I had a new library to develop as well. Luckily, I had laid out my plan six months before while still back in Florida.

Coming up with a Strategy

The Dean and Vice President of the Charlotte campus encouraged me to come up with an initial strategic plan and to begin moving forward as soon as possible. Since the Charlotte campus was part of the larger Johnson & Wales enterprise, I could dedicate a fair amount of my time towards planning the Charlotte library while still in Florida.

In starting the planning process, I realized that there were a number of assumptions I could make. For example, since I came into the process late I knew that I would not be able to participate in assisting in the design of the facility or in the selection of furniture and would have to work within the limitations of what was there when I arrived. I discovered, however, that I would be able to control the purchase of much of the electronic equipment (e.g. security gates, scanners, etc.) and how certain staff spaces would be utilized. Other assumptions I could make included the expectation that the campus would initially grow very rapidly from 1,000 students the first year to 2,000 students the second and then slow into a steady but gradual growth (which we are seeing now in the fourth year of operation). A final major assumption was that the Charlotte campus would be acquiring all of the library materials that, at the time, were located at the Charleston and Norfolk campuses. The latter two campuses, focused primarily on culinary arts programs, were being phased out with those programs being relocated to Charlotte.

Everything starts with staff. If you don't have good people you have nothing. In that light, I began crafting a strategy for hiring staff and thinking about what sorts of qualities would be most important to me. There were so many practical concerns. With regard to the qualities I was looking for in hiring our first two full-time librarians, there were a number of things I identified as critical. I needed people with dynamic personalities and as much energy as possible to help lead our instruction efforts-- an area I knew we needed to focus upon. At the time I hadn't quite been sold on some of the more popular notions of Information Literacy but sensed that the teaching role of librarians would be important. Another critical concern I had in doing the initial hires was subject knowledge, especially related to culinary arts. I have grown to recognize that providing reference services to culinary students is a special challenge.

To this day, I feel that my success in the first wave of full-time hires was the result of three things: my experience, a large pool of applicants, and some luck. Both of my first hires were enthusiastic recent MLIS graduates. One position, which was slated to focus mostly on reference, was filled by a librarian already located in Charlotte. In a stroke of luck, this person not only possessed the right attitude. She had a background in and continuing interest in culinary arts. The last step in building the basic staff was to hire a part-time librarian or library assistant. I was fortunate enough to find someone with significant experience as a school librarian who was working her way through her MLIS.

A library isn't a library without collections. My next goal was to look very carefully at what would be needed in terms of a collection. Since the curricula in Charlotte were essentially going to mirror those at the Florida campus (with programs in business, culinary arts, and hospitality) I was already fairly knowledgeable

about certain basic collection needs. One challenge, however, was that we had built the collections not only based upon curricula but also on the specific suggestions of the faculty in Florida. I knew that I'd need to hold a significant amount of funds in reserve to be responsive to the Charlotte faculty but also knew that I would have access to them very late in the process and so, needed to get some things right away. One way that I chose to deal with this was to go to faculty at the Florida campus and ask them to consider what they would list as the most critical or basic materials in their area. I compiled many lists this way. Since I was inheriting major collections I needed to be especially careful not to spend money on for culinary arts early on. With the help of my old friend and partner in Florida, I was able to come up with a list of the "top 50 reference books" and the "top 100 culinary books in general" which I used to start my work. I also received further lists and feedback from the future Dean of Culinary Arts in Charlotte (then the Director of Culinary Arts in Norfolk). In terms of strategy I decided to put emphasis on basic reference sources in the Arts and Sciences. Since these were expensive I cross-checked everything against the Norfolk and Charleston holdings to make sure I was not spending money on expensive resources that we would inherit gradually over the following two years.

After flirting with the idea of going to all digital periodicals available through online databases, (Our databases were essentially all selected through our Providence campus at the time.) I settled on a more conservative approach to building our periodicals collection. I decided to design an excel spreadsheet that contained the holdings of the Norfolk, Charleston, Denver, and North Miami campuses. I then made a list which included any title that showed up on the list for any three campuses and/or any title that showed up on both the Norfolk and Charleston lists. Since neither Norfolk nor Charleston supported a business program I then looked at the North Miami and Denver collections (which did support business programs) to determine what resources would be most critical for business. Once this list was complete I sent it to all the future department chairs in Charlotte (who had been identified in advance) to review and then to EBSCO for pricing and to Charlotte accounting (which had just begun rudimentary operations) for payment (Subscriptions can take a while to get started so moving on this early was very important.).

As mentioned earlier, we had limited access to Charlotte faculty in the summer leading up to the opening of the campus. At the outset, I knew that a major goal to stay focused on was building relationships with the faculty. We also needed to pay careful attention to Charlotte students' needs that might differ considerably from the needs of students at the North Miami location. As a result, my staff and I aggressively pursued meetings with faculty both one-on-one and in groups. We also conducted shorter and more comprehensive surveys of both students and faculty to find out what they needed and how we were fulfilling those needs. Lastly, I sought feedback from the staff both informally as well as formally. While it was vital to our success early on, this approach of continually assessing the library's impact by seeking feedback in a variety of ways has become embedded in our Charlotte library culture.

As stated before, I had a strong desire to emphasize and highlight our teaching role in Charlotte. In my opinion, we needed to start off our instruction program slowly but gradually increase what we

were doing on several levels over time. To start out, the instruction librarian and I outlined a plan to provide some basic library instruction to incoming students through the English Composition course. We also agreed that we would provide specialized, upon-request instruction as well. While we established a good reputation with faculty early on by our work in familiarizing students with the basics of library services, there were some flaws in the program that became apparent. For one, faculty members were so eager to get students into the library that some students returned to the library computer lab for several instruction sessions in a given semester. Since we had outlined a basic instructional approach students tended to find the sessions very repetitive. Again, the overall feedback was that the sessions were good but that we needed to differentiate and develop more approaches and levels. In subsequent years, we developed an aggressive, information literacy program, breaking it up into modules that could be adapted and used with different classes. In fact, the evolution of our information literacy program would be quite an interesting story in itself.

While surveying and gathering feedback was critical to our early success, marketing the library was also important. From the very beginning we developed a library newsletter to get the word out (later named "The Queen City Brew"); we designed faculty orientation packets; and we attended departmental meetings where we offered research assistance and resources. As we got to know faculty, we delivered information to them one-on-one about specific resources they might want to utilize. Lastly, we instituted and developed a library committee that included a significant amount of faculty participation and commitment. The resulting ability of faculty to go back to their respective departments and share what we had to offer proved beneficial. Since that time, more recent endeavors to engage students and faculty have included the creation of faculty and student library blogs.

Another important area we addressed was policy. Since I was free to develop library policies pretty much the way I had wanted in North Miami I was prepared to transfer much of the policy I developed in Florida to Charlotte. There were some policies, of course, that had to be custom-designed for the new campus. For example, since

we were starting out much smaller in Charlotte we scaled back a bit by offering hours on Sunday but not Saturday. Another way we diverged from policies in Florida was with copyright policy. We decided to address the policy more directly, spending more time and energy communicating copyright issues with faculty.

In starting a new library in Charlotte we faced numerous challenges and were required to readapt a number of times and in different ways as the campus matured. For example, the integration of the Charleston and Norfolk collections was a considerable undertaking which required a massive reconciliation of our entire collection. We now serve a population of nearly 2,500 students with four full-time librarians, two part-time librarians, one student assistant, and a dozen or so work-study employees. We offer full inter-library loan services to our faculty and have grown the collection to four times the size it was in our first year. We have added comfortable furniture and a user-friendly area called "The Percolator" which contains popular books and videos as well as soft seating, games, etc. Our cataloging, once mostly outsourced is now done entirely in-house. And, we have an information literacy program that truly demonstrates best practices.

When I took on the job of starting a new library in Charlotte, I had a number of advantages over someone unfamiliar with the organization. Having been part of another branch within the same institution I didn't have the challenge of learning the culture of the institution that an outsider would have faced coming in afresh. I also had a good understanding of the technical problems we confronted (being part of a multi-campus system spread throughout the country). And though there have been plenty of trying times, it has proven to be a wonderful experience overall which I attribute to the people I have come to know and the librarians I have been privileged to work with. If someday you get a chance to start your own library, I hope your experience will be as rewarding.

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