

Summary

External Review, Queen’s University Library

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INTRODUCTION

The members of the review team were provided with detailed terms of reference and asked to “explore the current state and potential direction of the library.” They were also asked to comment on the characteristics Queen’s should look for in the next Vice-Provost and University Librarian.

The review team received a detailed self-study, a substantial number of confidential letters from library staff and the broader university community, and planning documents and consultants’ reports dating back to 2010.

The reviewers conducted the on-site visit October 31 and November 1, 2019. The visit included more than twenty meetings with individuals and groups from inside the library and across campus.

The reviewers are grateful to all members of the Queen’s community for their outstanding work in preparing for our visit, and for their engagement and commitment to the success of the external review process.

STRENGTHS

The Queen’s University Library (QUL) is highly regarded by the campus community. Many of the students we engaged with spoke about QUL having welcoming and engaging spaces and about the Library being central to their academic lives. We heard about the significant contribution QUL makes to supporting student success. Most campus leaders and faculty were equally laudatory in their praise for QUL and the many talented people who work there.

There was also some specific appreciation for the vision and leadership of the former University Librarian related to the positive impact QUL has had on supporting research infrastructure, particularly in terms of research data management and open access.

A number of individuals at QUL are well known nationally for their work, particularly related to the Canadian Association of Research Libraries. In addition, QUL and its staff have taken an important role in OCUL’s Collaborative Futures initiative.

QUL should also be commended for its strong planning approach over a sustained period. We saw some excellent planning work directed at discrete parts of the organization -- much of it completed through work with external consultants.

OPPORTUNITIES

Academic libraries are ideally positioned to be strong partners in the research missions of their universities, as well as support and develop the digital literacies that are necessary for student learning and student academic and career success.

The reviewers saw many areas of great opportunity for the QUL in the coming years, including but not limited to:

- **Indigenous Issues:** We sensed tremendous good will from indigenous colleagues throughout our visit. QUL was praised for some of the physical changes it has made to create a more welcoming environment for indigenous students. We also heard that much work is yet to be done. Spaces could be made even more welcoming. QUL, like all research libraries, is the “holder of many untruths”. The Library’s strategic plan, we were told, could be nuanced to account for more indigenous ways of knowing. The Indigenous Knowledge C&R Working Group would be pleased to have the Library name a representative to their group, and QUL should be seen as a key stakeholder in moving the priorities of Queen’s forward in this area.
- **Bibliometrics and its relationship to rankings and reputation:** We heard strong support from senior leaders for a bibliometrics service, as long as the service respected the variations in disciplines. Senior leaders would appreciate assistance in identifying peer-reviewed articles that might have been missed by, or need correcting in, Web of Science and Scopus, and want to be sure that the data is used in an ethical manner. QUL is well positioned to lead this work given its strong knowledge of the publishing industry and its nuanced understanding of disciplinary variations in the use of tools.
- **Digital Scholarship:** There is interest on campus in supporting new, digitally intense forms of scholarship. The Library is very well positioned to develop spaces and services to support this work across the university, as well as strengthen an interdisciplinary community of graduate students. There are many reports and models to draw from in order to help inform what might work best in the Queen’s University context.

OBSERVATIONS

Organizational Structure

QUL exhibits a very complex organizational structure framed around four library-wide divisions, five faculty liaison units, and University Archives & Special Collections. There is some excellent work being done in areas and by individuals across this structure, but the structure itself inhibits innovation, and organizational adaptability, as well as potentially contributing to climate concerns.

The five liaison units: The vast majority of Queen's librarians are engaged in traditional liaison work (some combination of instruction, reference, relationship building, and collections development). This model creates strong synergy with the academic departments but, at the same time, has the tendency to isolate this large and prominent group of library professional staff from the other critical work being developed and happening elsewhere in the organization. This isolation is, in some ways, limiting the group's ability to innovate and respond to opportunities that emerge outside of their identified scope. The structure also increases the possibility of dropped balls and missed connections.

As well, the liaison librarian unit "stack" is structured as a group of related subject teams rather than one large group with a shared purpose and a shared voice at the senior leadership table. Each liaison librarian reports up to one of five faculty unit heads with each head reporting to the University Librarian.

Pace of Change

The organizational changes introduced by QUL over the last several years are very much in keeping with changes happening in most other research libraries across North America. Combining circulation and reference desks and removing reference librarians from the public service desk has happened at many (if not most) major research libraries. Budgetary constraints over time have led to a significant reduction in support staff, necessitating regular and significant re-jigging of staff positions and responsibilities, sometimes resulting in organizational confusion and decreased morale.

That said, QUL is strongly encouraged to close the loop with staff and the campus community to determine which components of the public service model have been

successful and which components need to be adjusted since the introduction of this change.

We heard some concern about the removal of librarians from the reference desk as “deprofessionalizing” liaison librarians. We acknowledge this change as a departure from older models and see benefit in reviewing the new service model now that it has been in place for a number of years. However, we feel quite strongly that the removal of the more transactional duties from librarians’ roles has expanded the capacity of librarians to engage in the myriad of professional opportunities in 21st century librarianship that align with institutional missions, rather than detract from them. QUL should be commended in taking this foundational step to modernize its professional services.

We heard from many staff members’ perspectives that the pace of organizational change has been unrelenting and executed at such a speed that they have had insufficient time to comprehend or prepare. We are not surprised by expressions of concern about rapid change: the face of research libraries has altered dramatically in recent years and QUL is no different from its peers in this respect.

We do, however, see some core communication issues that may be leading the staff to perceive the rate of change more negatively than is warranted.

Climate

The reviewers heard concerns from library staff across the organization and from every employee group about workplace climate. Much of this discontent appears to stem from a succession of organizational changes conducted over the last decade and the perceived failure of the library leadership team to adequately communicate the reasons for change, prepare the staff for change, and address ongoing questions and concerns of staff.

Some participants suggested that the environment was “punitive” - with the perception that library staff are moved to new duties if they questioned a decision. Some noted that a climate of mistrust had spread throughout the organization, with area heads copying the behaviours they see in the leadership team, and then individual staff displaying similar behaviours with colleagues.

Given the limited amount of time we spent in the workplace, we can only make assumptions as to the causes of the climate issues. We surmise that concerns about retribution are more likely indicative of inadequate communication practices than

malicious intent. Library staff may interpret reassignment of duties as being punitive when either a) they are not being told of decisions in a timely manner; or b) the reason for reassignment is not communicated clearly. Decisions may seem random if they are not carefully and repeatedly put in context - with regular reminders of the Library's ultimate objectives.

Regardless of whether these morale issues are justified or not, the feeling is widespread and must be addressed as a key priority for the organization. All staff must also commit to engage and take ownership and personal responsibility for their role in addressing internal climate and culture change through a robust and sustained process that should begin immediately.

Communication

Communication is a perennial challenge in all large organizations. QUL's issues might be more intense at the current time than some other research libraries, but the general themes remain the same.

We heard radically different opinions during our visit. Faculty unit heads seemed to think that communication had improved since they were brought into the leadership group, but rank-and-file library staff often reported that the amount of communication had actually decreased.

We surmise that, at least in some cases, the staff members' desire for better communication is really a reflection of their wish to provide feedback before major decisions are made. Staff recognize that the leadership group will ultimately make the decisions but want an opportunity to provide insights on changes before they are decided. Others just want additional time to percolate new ideas before they are enacted.

Budget

QUL faces two main budgetary issues, one universal to Canadian academic libraries, and one specific to Queen's. The former is namely the challenge related to the unsustainable cost of research materials, while the latter is the sustained underfunding by the university of annual salary increases in the Library.

University Librarian

We feel strongly that the next University Librarian needs to have exemplary communication and interpersonal skills. They must be comfortable navigating diverse opinions and skilled at mending fences. They should possess strong knowledge and vision about the impact of technology on research and learning to allow them to contribute in meaningful ways to the University's digital plan in which the Library has an important and critical role. They should be committed to collegial governance and decision-making. They should have an ability to articulate the need for nimbleness and flexibility in organizational structures in 21st century Higher Education and demonstrable experience in organizational change management. They should possess an interest in, and some experience of, library Advancement. They should be able to articulate an inspiring vision as to how libraries are partners in learning and research success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 Liaison librarians: QUL should rethink the faculty liaison units' positioning within the organization. Serious consideration should be given to (1) distributing some of the librarians across the organization and its divisions; (2) ensuring there is a mix of subject and functional duties and responsibilities for each librarian; and/or (3) creating an AUL that incorporates learning services to bring liaison librarians into the larger life and strategic directions of the library and to ensure that communication travels in both directions between this group and the rest of the organization.

2.1 Public Services model: Conduct an assessment of the implementation of the 2016 public service model to identify where mid-course corrections may be required. The review should focus on user experience and needs.

3.1 Committee membership: Library leadership should create open calls for committees when appropriate. Consider one or two open call slots for most committees, with selection through a transparent process, when at all possible.

3.2 Review of committees and working groups: Conduct an internal audit of committees and working groups with attention to updating terms of reference, membership (including staggered terms), work plans, effectiveness, etc. Commit to updating the committee roster on a regular basis (e.g., at the beginning of each academic term). Ensure that this information is openly accessible on the staff intranet (without requesting special access permissions).

4.1 Identify the elements of the climate issues: QUL should commission an external consultant (or campus organizational behaviour expert) to conduct a formal review of workplace climate. This review may include use of a standardized staff engagement survey instrument to isolate areas of key concern, then some combination of focus groups or interviews to understand the true dynamics of the organizational issues. This information will be essential in a longer process of addressing the major roadblocks to a healthy, trusted work climate.

4.2 A values driven library: The next University Librarian (quite likely with a consultant's assistance) should build on work done over the next 6-12 months, and lead an inclusive process to identify and articulate Library values. These values will make explicit the expectations and aspirations of how everyone in the Library will interact with each other. The values should be animated by modelled behaviour of all staff and in all work situations. Ongoing attention to, and assessment of, the Library values will be important.

5.1 Communications working group: Recognizing that communication is a two-way responsibility in which each individual should be personally invested, strike a working group to discuss and make recommendations for improving internal communication. This group should be broadly representative and the call for participation should be open. The group should be tasked with identifying a small number of meaningful, achievable changes that can be enacted in the next 6-12 months. This group could also consider how a potential ongoing internal communications committee might be structured.

5.2 Consider new strategies for letting staff know what each individual does: This could take the form of regular social events in units, a staff webpage with photos and list of main duties, communication via staff newsletter, etc. This could be part of the terms of reference for the communications working group.

5.3 Use all-staff meetings for two-way communication: Rethink the all-staff meetings to ensure that they become opportunities for two-way conversation. Ensure that a call goes out for agenda items before each meeting. Do an open call for staff to present on what they are doing at the end of each meeting.

5.4 Project charters: Include a statement and plan around internal communication in all project charters.

6.1 Strike a staff learning committee: Strike a staff learning committee (using an open call). Mandate the group to make recommendations regarding new learning opportunities and identify critical skill gaps. Report on staff learning at all all-staff meetings.

6.2 Consider establishing a staff development office: Consider establishing a Staff Development Office with at least 0.5FTE support and a budget for staff training.

7.1 Assessment plans: Include assessment plans in all project charters so that it is clear how projects will be evaluated. Library leadership should frame their discussions of new initiatives on how they will be assessed.

7.2 Review key initiatives for impact and sustainability: Library leadership should work with areas of the Library to review current programs such as library instruction, the website, and the acquisition model (and then other areas) to ensure highest impact and sustainability.

8.1 Equipment procurement: Library staff need a clear way to ask for equipment, software, and server space as well as a guarantee that their request will be considered and responded to in a timely and transparent fashion.

9.1 Renew Library Advancement program: Start modestly. Explore the feasibility of a 0.5FTE development officer position based in the Library with a clear connection to central Advancement. Focus on building a pipeline through prospect research and identification, integrating library events into an Advancement strategy, and crafting clear stewardship plans. Consider some focus on annual giving and planned giving to move modest but long-time donors to the next level of philanthropy. Ensure that this individual is trained and connected to central Advancement to leverage central resources, but is also physically based in the Library in order to better understand the unique needs and opportunities of the Library.

9.2 Articulate Advancement priorities: Identify a crisp set of fundraising priorities through a call for support that will speak to donors at a variety of capacity levels. Also update the language and ideas included in the Library & Archives Master Plan (LAMP) to ensure that it resonates with donors. Take every opportunity to involve all library staff in this process in order to, over time, inculcate an internal culture of philanthropy.

10.1 Acquisitions costs: Provide the full cost of inflationary increases to the acquisitions budget. Use mitigating strategies to lessen the risk of currency fluctuations.

10.2 Personnel costs: Ensure that all increases in the cost of Library salary and benefits are fully covered each year by central university funds.

11.1 Search Process: The selection process for the next University Librarian needs to be rigorous and transparent to ensure that the incumbent earns the respect of the staff and the campus community. The search should be international in scope and engage an experienced and respected search firm to aid in identifying the best candidates possible for this key position within the university.

11.2 Library reviews: We encourage the University to consider having external reviews of the Library on a more regular basis, perhaps every 5-8 years.