

Anne R. Kenney
2002
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June 27,

Dear Anne:

Thank you for inviting me to visit the Cornell University Libraries on June 24, 2002, to review and comment on your plans for the new formulation of the Instruction, Research, and Information Services (IRIS) Division.

I had an enjoyable and informative visit, meeting with you, Sara Thomas, Ross Atkinson, David Block, Karen Calhoun, Scott Wicks, members of the IRIS Transition Team, CUL bibliographers, and members of the Collection Development Executive Committee. In preparation for the visit, I perused the written documentation you provided and the information on the IRIS Transition Web site at <http://www.library.cornell.edu/iris/>. During the morning of my visit I made a presentation entitled "From Collection Development to Collection Management to Knowledge Management: the Changing Nature of Collections Work in Research Libraries." A copy of the powerpoint slides I used for this presentation are available at http://www.lib.ohio-state/Lib_Info/cornell.html.

Cornell University Library has the deserved reputation to be one of the great research libraries of the world. Cornell is ranked tenth in overall strength among ARL Libraries and is clearly a leader in aspects of both traditional library services and resources and new digital media and preservation research and development. Cornell won the 2002 ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries Award; its collections exhibit on the history of home economics won the 2002 RBMS best exhibit award; and you have been the recipient of numerous prestigious research and development grants from agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Science Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation. Add to these accomplishments, a relatively healthy library budget, a beautiful campus, and an idyllic community setting, and you have a situation that makes you the envy of most other research libraries.

I was certainly not disappointed during my visit. I found library administrators and staff engaging, knowledgeable, and thoughtful in our discussions of collection management and organizational change issues. I was heartened by the large turnout for my presentation and by the perceptive questions and comments made by staff about the various issues I raised regarding collection use, digital collection management, the future of place and paper in libraries, the impact of consortia arrangements on collections and services, and the move toward knowledge management and enterprise-wide content management.

I suspect there was little I talked about during my visit that was new to Cornell Library staff. Your staff members are well aware of the major issues in collection management, and I probably learned more from them than I imparted. Clearly, collection management is changing because of digital technology, economic constraints, and new priorities in libraries and in higher education. I maintain that we need to move from a “collection management” to a “knowledge management” perspective, which means expanded responsibilities in the areas of information policy, print and digital information systems coordination, consortia arrangements, enterprise-wide content management, web publishing, and reforming scholarly publishing.

How these expanding knowledge management responsibilities will manifest themselves in terms of library organization will vary, of course, from research library to research library based on institutional resources, traditions, and personalities. At Ohio State, for example, we are changing our organization in collections for both programmatic reasons and for more opportunistic or required needs related to changes in personnel and budget reductions. Carol Dietrichs is the new (for two years now) Assistant Director for Collections, and she adds this responsibility to her previous duties as Assistant Director for Technical Services. Carol coordinates all of collection management for the Libraries, allocates and monitors the collections budget, and makes broad collections policy and procedure decisions. We also have a new division called Main Library Reference and Research Services that brings together reference, instruction, stack management, and collection management for the humanities, some of the social sciences, and area studies under a new Assistant Director, Jim Bracken, who was (and still is) a senior bibliographer for English Literature.

I see many similarities between Jim’s new division and your proposed IRIS division. Jim is trying to create a more unified and integrated public services and collection management operation in our Main Library. Librarians in his division have specialties and home units, but they are all suppose to participate actively in collection building, faculty liaison, reference, instruction, research and development projects, and in some cases cataloging. We cannot afford, plus I do not think it programmatically healthy, to have bibliographers who do only collection development in the traditional sense. As I quoted from Battin and Hawkins at the end of my talk, librarians “can no longer meet the information needs of faculty and students through the traditional avenue of simply adding to their collections.” I think collection building remains a core responsibility in a research library, but it should not be done in relative isolation. The new roles for all librarians in Jim’s division at Ohio State include knowledge management (working more closely with faculty and students to design, organize, and maintain a broader range of print and digital assets), a more active role in the educational and research mission of university (integrating information resources and services in course and research projects), being active educators themselves (teaching students and faculty information literacy), and using information technology to create new organizational (metadata), retrieval, and storage (preservation) options.

I am hesitant to make specific comments on your organization at Cornell because of the short time I was there and because I know that organization is essentially idiosyncratic and dependent on many local factors. But here goes. Take these all with a grain of salt.

1. IRIS as an organizational entity looks fine to me. I like your vision: “to bring individuals and information together.” As I said, we are doing something similar at Ohio State. The integration of functions you are trying to achieve with collections, reference, instruction, access, and preservation makes sense to me. Bringing the talent and special knowledge of your subject specialist to bear on a variety of functional needs should benefit all. While you asked me to look mainly at collections, I should tell you, from my experience at Ohio State, that the real challenge and puzzle for me is the future of reference services not collections. It will be interesting to see what happens to this functional area.
2. As you move to a more distributed model of collection development in IRIS, you will need effective coordination to ensure proper supervision, communications, support, training, and evaluation for collections work within IRIS and also in the context of the entire library system.
 - a. Make sure there is clarity of collections supervision and responsibilities. (There were comments from a number of staff that they are “confused” about what is happening in the collections area.)
 - b. Appoint dynamic leaders who understand knowledge management issues to key collections positions within IRIS. (David Block is an excellent example of the kind of superb talent and experience you have in IRIS.)
 - c. Broader coordination of collections in the context of the entire library system is critically important. IRIS collection management must be viewed as part of the overall management of humanities, social sciences, and sciences collection management at Cornell. (Ross Atkinson is no doubt the leading thinker and writer on collection management today. In Ross you have an experienced leader who can advise IRIS and provide overall coordination for collection management at Cornell.)
 - d. Keep reminding collections staff that their responsibilities in collections have expanded from collections development to collection management to knowledge management. For me this means the following list of responsibilities in the collections arena:
 - i. Selection and acquisitions assistance
 - ii. Collection and information policy development
 - iii. Acquisitions and access budget allocation
 - iv. Collection analysis
 - v. Use and user studies
 - vi. Training and organization of knowledge managers
 - vii. Consortial or cooperative knowledge management
 - viii. Preservation and storage selection
 - ix. Managing the relationship between the print and digital information system
 - x. Enterprise-wide content management
 - xi. Reforming and advancing scholarly communications

3. There are collections support operational issues within IRIS that you will have to address: the distribution of publisher announcements and publisher catalogs, order search and verification, selection procedures, acquisitions assistance. I cannot give detailed guidance here (I have away from these operational details as a Director), but I would strongly recommend streamlining, consolidating, and batching as much of these processes as you can. You want to free your subject specialist as much as you can from these routines, so that they have more time for knowledge management, reference, and instruction duties. (I was a bit surprised by the level of concern and questions I got about the use of standing orders, blanket orders, and approval plan. I would use them to the fullest extent that you can. I do not think they undermine the quality of collection development, but instead enhance it by freeing selectors to work on less routine matters.)
4. The pending renovation of the Olin and Uris Libraries provides an opportunity to rethink the use of space in these libraries and the organization of services and staff. In the collections arena, it is a time to reconsider the collections storage capacity of these facilities. As I discussed during my presentation, at Ohio State we will be reducing our shelving capacity to create a more balanced allocation of space to collections, services, staff, and users. Your Library Annex should play an important role in the strategy you devise for collection storage.

I look forward to seeing IRIS in action at Cornell. The integration of functions and talent that you propose should bring a new level of accomplishment to your venerable and dynamic institution.

Sincerely,

Joseph J. Branin