In the Interim: Leadership Shorts from Three Interim Library Leaders

Tom Bielavitz: Interim Dean, Portland State University Library, OR
Dawn Lowe-Wincentsen: Interim Director of Libraries, Oregon Institute of Technology
Kim Read: Interim Dean of Libraries, Concordia University Portland, OR

Leadership can take many forms. For some it is leading by example, while for some it is more authoritarian, and yet others may have a team leadership model. Whatever the leadership model is, how does it change in a short term appointment? This article gives three perspectives from interim library leaders at different institutions. One is a large state university, one a private college, and one a smaller state university with a tech focus. While the institutions and the circumstances of the interim roles may be different, there are similarities that cross all three.

Change, communication and transparency, and balance are three of the themes all three interims mention. These are often themes in modern academic and library leadership. However, putting an expiration date on the leader adds some complexity. What needs to be done in the short term? What can be done in the short term? And what plans can be laid for the future that allow a new leader to adapt or change them in the long term?

Portland State University

I am currently serving as Interim Dean at Portland State University Library. Since 2006, my role here has been as Assistant University Librarian (AUL; similar to an Assistant Dean) for Administrative Services, Planning, and Digital Initiatives. In my role as AUL I have responsibility for, or at least influence on, high-level library decision making. Though I find my experience has prepared me well for this interim role, it's also very different being the final decision-maker.

Balancing long-term decisions v. short-term position
The biggest challenge in being in a temporary position is having to make decisions that have long-term impact. In these situations, I try to determine if I must make a decision or if it's something that can be delayed. In these situations, I rely on consulting with others, examining the pros and cons of the choices, and trying to project what the likely outcomes might be for each option. The following are a few principles I use when making decisions.

Transparency
In the best of times, transparency in decision-making is always a good practice, but I find it even more important during interim leadership. There's a domino effect when someone is serving in an interim role; some of their responsibilities have likely moved to others, and so everyone is doing more work. People become stressed in this environment. Staff may feel uneasy without a permanent leader. When discussing problems, challenges, and possible courses of action on a topic, I like to present the problem, its associated elements, and my preferred solution with a rationale of why it's my preferred solution. I

try to explain what I'm trying to accomplish or trying to avoid. When everyone understands an issue, you're more likely to have a constructive conversation. I try to be open and listen to concerns and alternative ideas, and be open to other solutions. I find that when I make a decision and someone disagrees, if they understand the context and why I made the decision they are more likely to make peace with it and move on. I also use various consensus techniques to help us get to better decisions. These tools help me better understand how strongly people feel about the options.

Over-communicating
I try to use multiple ways to communicate on the same issue. Repetition and different methods of communication means it's more likely that someone will hear the message. I make use of meeting agendas (and when possible sending materials out ahead of meeting time), meeting notes, weekly "library bulletin" updates, verbal communication at meetings and one-on-one, follow-up emails to specific groups or teams, etc. Everyone is busy and you need to provide many opportunities for staff to receive information.

Have fun!
Lastly, I try to have fun and incorporate fun things into worklife. At an all-library meeting, we recently celebrated Pi Day with pies and pie/pi related trivia. We also have several new colleagues and we're introducing work-appropriate "ice breaker" introductions at meetings to help get to know each other. We've also talked about a going for coffee on breaks, a weekend picnic and perhaps organized tours of the campus' underground tunnels. Incorporating some light moments during work or planned fun things during breaks or after-hours helps to organically strengthen relationships which in turn helps to increase trust among colleagues.

Concordia University

I am fortunate to serve on a team with exceptional people. They are great at what they do, work well together, are considerate, and are each individually driven by student success. It made sense, then, to start the interim role by focusing on my colleagues. I neither wanted to be the interim that made sweeping changes unilaterally, nor did I want to keep everything status quo if changes were desired. The first thing I did as Interim Dean of Libraries at Concordia University Portland was schedule one-on-one meetings with each of my colleagues. I asked the following questions:

- What's going well?
- What needs improvement?
- What would you like to stay the same?
- What would you like to change?
- How would you characterize your workload?
- What are your goals or hopes for your work this year?
- What are your goals or hopes for the library this year?
- What concerns do you have?

Using their feedback, I started the year by outlining library goals and priorities with the student-

driven expertise of our faculty and staff. Some areas identified for improvement included budget transparency, collegiality, interlibrary loan cross training, access to assessment tools, and procedure documentation. Regarding transparency, I shared the discretionary budget with our full-time faculty and staff and established an open door policy for fielding questions about the budget. Each month, I share the monthly summary report with the team. Regarding collegiality, many team members wanted to understand each other's roles better and build relationships with each other. To address this, at each department meeting, one or two team members are asked to share details about a project to build understanding of their specific role. Additionally, we now hold optional events to volunteer as a group at external non-profits once a semester. For the other identified areas, I made administrative and budgetary decisions to support cross training, assessment tools, and procedure documentation.

Serving as interim is an opportunity to define and establish expectations and priorities of the Dean position before a permanent Dean is hired. For example, it is part of our culture now, that budget transparency is expected of the Dean. Additionally, I scheduled multicultural competency trainings for our team throughout the year, similarly establishing an expected part of our culture. While the possibility exists that a new Dean might make changes, establishing procedures, defined role expectations, and policies that prove successful will hopefully become part of the library's more permanent organizational culture.

These are brief examples of the internally-focused work of Interim Dean. Externally, it also made sense to approach the work as if it would have long-term effects. I have engaged in relationship building, collaboration, and advocacy wholeheartedly. Because those things are so crucial for libraries, I wanted to ensure we didn't lose ground in any of them.

Finally, with both an internal and external focus, our library is embarking on a process I am referring to as, "strategic planning lite." We will complete this by the end of the fiscal year, defining who we are, what we do, the value of what we do, how we assess this value, and how we contribute to the university's overall mission and vision. The library has not previously engaged in strategic planning work and we are excited to define and share the library's identity and value.

It has been a great honor to serve as Interim Dean. I feel grateful to be supporting such an outstanding group of library people and join with them to lead from a student-centered philosophy.

Oregon Institute of Technology

For me, my interim has been as a change leader. Change the organization structure, change the director to a dean, change to a more open door transparent culture.

At a recent event a library director told me, "Leadership is Partnership." This has come 6 months after I first took on an interim leader role, but it is the tone I have tried to convey. In this together, we can make a better place to work. In this together, we can build a library that thrives with the abundant change we are about to face.

The leadership at Oregon Institute of Technology (Oregon Tech) has had great change over the last

couple of years. In April of 2017 a new president started, in July, a new provost, and as of July 2017, the director of the library position has been open. With any change in leadership change will trickle down. With the overhaul of Oregon Tech's leadership, the change has flooded down and can be felt across all faculty and staff.

I started off my interim by talking to all the faculty and staff in the library. I had a base set of questions that I asked but let the person I was meeting with take the conversation where they wanted. I heard from many that there was a need for change. I followed this up with some exercises and group SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, timely) goal setting at a retreat about a month later. I was introduced to SMART goals as part of a budgeting process on the regional campus I am part of. This method of goal setting seemed a good way to set the tone for an interim, and to give clear timeline for the goals set.

At the same time as setting goals, I also began working on the new director of libraries position. Through research, conversations with people in the library, conversations with the new provost, and remembered conversations with the former library director we worked out a new position with a new title that could have the freedom to lead and reach outside the building walls while also being accessible to the faculty and staff within those walls. The position was posted three months after my interim officially began. As of this writing the committee is in the applicant review phase to fill the position.

By changing the director position to be more outward facing, we needed to restructure some of the inward positions to deal with the day to day activities in a more efficient manner. Part of this was already started in a bottom up process to look at staff workload while the previous director was still at Oregon Tech. The workload review showed some inefficiencies. The meetings with staff brought up a desire for change. With all this, I embarked on reorganizing the staff structure. I met with Human Resources, people who I believed would be affected most by the change and the library faculty. I proposed, listened to feedback, made changes, and proposed again. This process is ongoing. It has not been without its bumps so far. Through these I have tried to listen and adapt the plan where needed.

The amount of change brought on in my interim would make anyone take pause. It has not been all change though. Many of the structures that were already in place have remained the same. These include periodic meeting for the librarians, and for all the staff. These meetings are one way I have tried to keep as transparent a process as possible. At each all staff meeting we go over progress on SMART goals, we have some sort of activity as a group and I try to leave time to ask questions. I try to keep an open door/email/cell phone policy so people may contact me when they feel the need. And I listen. Above all I try to listen. I have tried to find that common goal where we can partner, staff and librarians, to take on the change together.

Conclusion

The occupational outlook handbook from the late 1990s said there would be a gap in qualified librarians. It seems many reports and articles since then have echoed the call for more librarians, and specifically, more library leaders to be ready. Looking at the library leaders in the Pacific Northwest region, there seems to be a mix of new leaders, and more experienced leaders; leaders at the beginning of in-

terim, and those who may be looking at what comes next. No matter how one comes into the leadership role, or how long they may be in it, a few things stand out as common threads: change, communication, and balance.