A New Feature, New Assignment, and Fresh Perspective Worth Noting

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I was pleasantly surprised and pleased to become a member of the portal Editorial Board and editor of the new feature “Worth Noting.” The opportunity to gather, present, or help create new content based on the interest of readers and noteworthy trends in libraries and the academy is an exciting venture.

This new assignment comes at a time of significant change in my own life. Last August, I became an associate university librarian at Arizona State University (ASU) Library in Tempe. Yes, despite the Arizona heat, moving in the summer was a great time to relocate from Midwest to the Southwest! Previously, I was the associate dean for academic affairs at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. My professional interests include managerial leadership, librarians as educators, information literacy, information technologies for improved discovery, and learning space design to enhance student success. Now, I am adding editorial acumen.

As I began to mull potential topics of interest to share in this feature, I gravitated to the recently published NMC (New Media Consortium) Horizon Report: 2017 Higher Education Edition. This 14th edition of the Horizon Report is a collaborative effort between two nonprofit organizations: the NMC, an international group of experts in educational technology, and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, whose mission is “to advance higher education through the use of information technology.” The annual reports examine findings from the Horizon Project, an ongoing program to identify and describe emerging technologies for learning and teaching. The reports track higher education trends, challenges, and the development of educational technologies in hopes to promote teaching, learning, and creative inquiry. These documents have been some of my benchmark readings to decipher what to watch for in higher education, information technology, and academic libraries. The NMC Horizon Report: 2017 Higher Education Edition states, “Across the world, education has become the most important currency.”

A major theme of the 2017 Horizon Report is digital equity, which it defines as “equal access to technology, particularly broadband Internet.” In its executive summary, the report lists the top 10 trends that will likely drive educational change for the next five
years. Trend 4 is: “Despite the proliferation of technology and online learning materials, access is still unequal. Gaps persist across the world that are hampering college completion for student groups by socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and gender. Further, sufficient internet access remains uneven.” In the section “Significant Challenges Impeding Technology Adoption in Higher Education,” the report categorizes increasing digital equity as a “difficult challenge”—that is, one “that we understand but for which solutions are elusive.” It explains:

UNESCO reports that while 3.2 billion people across the globe are using the internet, only 41% of those that live in developing countries are online. Further, 200 million fewer women than men are accessing the internet around the world. The United Nations has identified internet access as essential to meeting its sustainable development goals of alleviating poverty and hunger and improving health and education worldwide by 2030. This rampant social justice issue is not just affecting developing nations: more than 30 million Americans lack access to high-speed internet. Efforts to improve these figures are necessary to promote full participation, communication, and learning within society.

Since I arrived at ASU, the topic of digital equity has become even more prominent on my radar. ASU was the university rated number one by U.S. News & World Report in the category of innovation for both 2016 and 2017. The criteria for the ranking lists improvements of curriculum, faculty, students, campus life, technology, or facilities. U.S. News does not say exactly what earned ASU the top ranking, but among the likely factors are many new programs the university has recently launched, including several focused on widening access to higher education and ensuring student success. In 2015, for example, ASU began the Global Freshman Academy, the first university program to allow students to complete their first year online through massive open online courses (MOOCs), without even going through the application process. ASU also developed a system called eAdvisor™, which helps students select a field that suits their talents and career goals and then tracks progress toward graduation. In addition, ASU continually monitors the job market, creating new majors to anticipate market needs. Starting in 2013, the university was among the first in the country to offer a master of science degree in business analytics. This program, offered both on the Tempe campus and online, teaches students how to utilize data and modeling to improve business processes.

The ASU Charter says that the university should be measured “not by whom it excludes, but by whom it includes and how they succeed.” Since my arrival, I have experienced this emphasis on access to education firsthand with two e-learning projects that utilize electronic technologies to deliver educational materials outside of a traditional classroom. The first project is SolarSPELL (Solar Powered Educational Learning Library), a solar-powered, Wi-Fi-ready digital library device deployed in remote Pacific Islands in partnership with Peace Corps volunteers. Laura Hosman, an ASU assistant professor with a joint appointment in the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering and the School for the Future of Innovation in Society, developed SolarSPELL. After reading about SolarSPELL in ASU’s student newspaper, my colleague Lorrie McAllister reached out to Hosman to investigate a potential collaboration between the library and the two schools with which Hosman is affiliated. A partnership ensued between ASU Library and SolarSPELL. The library hosted a hackathon inviting students, librarians, and Hos-
man to become familiar with the software and content for future improvements to the learning library using open educational resources (OERs), teaching materials that are freely available online for everyone to use. A team of students and faculty, including Hosman and McAllister, traveled from ASU to Tonga in late December 2016 to deliver portable, ruggedly designed, solar-powered digital library devices for use in schools and communities across the many islands that make up Tonga.

Another e-learning project at ASU is the MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program to enhance digital equity globally. ASU is one of a handful of educational institutions that partner with the MasterCard Foundation to create a new social learning network to support participants in the MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program, which provides scholarships to prepare next-generation leaders in Africa. The Scholars Program is building a global network of academic institutions and nonprofit organizations committed to its vision to educate young people. Partners in the program are selected for their shared values, academic excellence, nurturing environments, and programs relevant to developing countries. The scholars chosen must have high academic talent and a strong desire to give back to their community in their country of origin. The digital learning community developed by ASU will ultimately link 15,000 MasterCard Foundation Scholars with the tools, resources, and relationships to build upon their educational experiences to aid and contribute to their hometowns, provinces, and nations. ASU designed a new learning platform that will support the MasterCard Foundation Scholars Program’s mission to prepare children and young adults in the developing world, particularly in Africa, to lead change and make a positive social impact. The program will help students develop educational and leadership skills to promote cultural progress at the local level.

These two digital equity initiatives at ASU are impressive, innovative approaches to advancing global prosperity. But the Horizon Report and the experiences of participation in these initiatives indicate that some difficult challenges remain. Experiences at ASU thus far point to several problems of communication between scholars in remote places with either nonexistent or inconsistent Wi-Fi service. Simply having electric power to use electronic devices is rare in these locations. Seldom do we stop to think about areas of the world that lack this technological convenience and the gift that we enjoy in modern, industrialized nations of open and reliable access to information.

A second obstacle is the question of how to curate the most effective content for a local community—that is, how to most effectively gather, organize, and present information—when the experts are local citizens who must also perform much of the curation. Evaluating appropriate resources combined with working with local experts in their own environment is critical to developing useful digital content to alleviate poverty and hunger and to improve health and education for all children and adults in the developing world.

This brings me back to that fresh perspective. It has been an amazing experience these past several months acclimating to the innovative ASU culture. Through interdisciplinary collaboration, ASU students and faculty create solutions to solve global problems. I have provided a few examples of initiatives in which I am directly involved. I am sure you have similar partnerships happening at your institutions. I welcome your examples, comments, and submissions for future items you think are worth noting. I look forward to hearing from you.
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Notes

2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 30.