EDITORIAL

Engaging with Engagement: An Administrator’s Perspective

José Díaz

Engagement defies convention. The model for engaged librarians tasks them to strategically integrate libraries into the research and instruction cycle and to create a learning environment that combines the discovery and use of appropriate information sources into the research processes of students and faculty.

This editorial does not challenge the engaged librarian model. Instead, it supplements that model by focusing on the hitherto unexplored role of administrators in preparing and implementing this new paradigm. It acknowledges the complexity of engagement and ponders how administrators could think about it, mentor their staff, and use the inevitable criticism as an asset.

Engaging from the Top

Library administrators who implement a pervasive engagement agenda impose a crisis. By necessity and design, they upset the proverbial apple cart. In a field that values predictability and quality control, and that typically is risk-averse, these administrators ask their colleagues to change time-honored processes and routines. They remove the familiar and shift to a new model. Like all new paradigms, this one elicits a backlash. Administrators should be prepared to respond to this reaction, and its accompanied concerns, with a solid understanding of why this change is important for the organization and the profession.

Some Background on Engagement

The literature on engagement continues to grow at a robust pace. Its foundational document, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Framework for Articulating New Library Roles, has been joined by a new crop of articles tackling, among other things, librarian roles and the gap between skills and demands. This scholarship emphasizes...
the shift from mere service to partnership building, and it implicitly acknowledges that change has become a permanent feature of the library’s and the university’s ecosystems.¹

Some of this literature chronicles the development and history of the liaison model and its transition to engagement. Another segment addresses the need for librarians to assume new and more aggressive engagement roles. Such concepts as social capital and relationship building between librarians and faculty have been covered extensively. Finally, methodologies to assist the liaison librarian to make “all the right moves” and participate in “playful engagement” look at ways to bridge the gap between traditional roles and contemporary demands.²

This rich and expanding corpus of literature, however, is virtually silent on the role that library administrators, at all levels of the organization, must undertake when implementing the engagement model. Learning how upper and middle managers could realign the tools and human capital they have at their disposal will provide a big payoff. Examining the putative roles of library directors and department heads and sharing the burden of expectations will help administrators clarify, if not cope with, the stresses and strains of the engagement model.

Administrators should adopt a multifaceted approach to implementing engagement. This method, I argue, requires them to develop a sense of urgency, articulate a vision, assess and mentor their staff, prioritize goals and remove barriers, and manage resistance. In other words, it urges library leaders to engage with engagement.

**Develop a Sense of Urgency**

Changes in information delivery, data-seeking habits, and material formats have conspired to make the library’s old ways of doing business quaint, if not downright obsolete. Even in this fluid environment, administrators should not assume that their colleagues understand that change is inevitable. They must not imagine that all librarians want to “get with the times” and follow newer professional trends. Administrators cannot take for granted that their colleagues understand or care that the library’s and the university’s future are inextricably linked. They should never presuppose that all members of their unit share a similar vision for the future. It is the administrator’s job to develop a healthy sense of urgency across the organization, and, at the same time, to make a case for change.

Developing a sense of urgency around the necessity for change is vital to a library that wants to remain relevant and indispensable to its campus. Building such a sense entails far more than showing liaisons and subject librarians how reference statistics have plummeted or talking about Google and mobile technology. It requires an open and convincing dialogue centered on two issues: the inadequacy of the previous liaison model and the current academic predicament. The former is partly driven by new demands and expectations from students and faculty. The latter is the outcome of an academic enterprise under financial scrutiny, the inevitability of digital environments, and the changing nature of research, teaching, and learning. These seismic changes are closely followed by the collaborative imperative, the push to globalize research, and the need to internationalize the student experience. In today’s academic libraries, Harvard University librarian Dan Hazen says, “Local control of content is no longer the sole
means to support research and learning, and building collections may not even be the best way to proceed. If collections have lost their potency, then how do libraries go ahead? Perhaps a conversation about leveraging liaison work and engagement is the way forward.

Library administrators need to speak out loud and clear about these changes and point the way forward. They need to articulate the threats and opportunities the shifting library landscape proposes. If they do, then the transition to engagement might become more organic and will expand with the energy that both management and staff give it together. If administrators fail to communicate the perils and possibilities, then change appears capricious, thoughtless, or, worse yet, punitive.

Library administrators, including middle managers, have a crucial role to play in making change the topic of conversation. Those laboring in international studies, for example, are keenly aware that nothing sparks a conversation around engagement, and its potential impact, quicker than bringing up the National Resource Center Program of the U.S. Department of Education. This initiative provides funding grants to American universities to establish, strengthen, and operate centers for language and area or international studies that will serve as national resources for teaching modern foreign languages. The grants not only support courses on specific world regions and languages but also provide generous scholarships for outstanding students, particularly underserved students and those with financial need, to pursue regional and language studies. The grants also fund public outreach programs that share the most recent research on the centers’ regions and topics, including workshops for K–12 and college educators. Although the United States today faces unprecedented demand for globally competent citizens and professionals, the availability and dispersion of these monies hinge on myriad factors, including how well libraries support their centers for language and international studies.

For many specialists in area and international collections, talking about these centers means speaking out about collections. Administrators could shift the conversation around National Resource Centers by acknowledging what nearly all librarians know: building collections centered on specific geographic regions is a necessary step but not the entire answer to the education and formation of competent global citizens. Librarians also know that, without collections, there can be no engagement and outreach. The dialogue can then move beyond the all or nothing thinking of collections versus engagement and into other ways to support teaching for international studies.

Collections and engagement are two sides of the same coin. For example, librarians could bring their considerable expertise and, yes, their collections into the research flow by setting up digital exhibits centered on courses or topics currently being taught. They could explore how to combine digital acquisitions and legacy collections to create home-grown open educational resources, teaching and learning materials that would be freely available online for everyone to use. They can promote their library as an intellectual crossroads and raise awareness among graduate students around issues of scholarly communication and copyright by partnering with teaching faculty and their colleagues in special collections to foment the use of special collection materials.

The rise of digital humanities also offers the engagement practitioner a unique opportunity. Digital humanities is serious about breaking down silos and encouraging
scholars to share critical resources, ideas, and information with others. Digital humanities is also serious about getting people to work across traditional boundaries. Engagement, too, involves doing away with the silo mentality. Reducing the silo mind-set increases efficiency, enhances morale, and positively impacts library culture. Librarians in all disciplines have the chance to engage with digital humanities practitioners and help shape future scholarship. Their job is not necessarily to become proficient with new software, such as Omeka for Web publishing or Gephi for data analysis visualization. Instead, their job is to recognize the viability of a project in the digital realm and its potential impact.5

Recently, librarians from the Area Studies Department in my organization discussed with members of the Department of Spanish and Portuguese the feasibility of a home-grown database called Dialectos: The Sounds in Spanish. This project brought together librarians, linguists, the Center for Latin American Studies, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Office of University Relations to revive a moribund yet useful database and explore funding opportunities to upgrade and enhance its capabilities. Teaching faculty, digital humanities librarians, and subject librarians joined in a concerted effort to modernize the learning experience and discuss pressing issues such as copyright, digital humanities tools, and long-term sustainability.

This is the sense of urgency administrators and middle managers need to create. It is not about abandoning the liaison model but about leveraging its potential. It is about raising awareness of the shifting ground around academic librarians and libraries and heeding R. David Lankes’s advice to expect and do more. It is about a seat at the right table. Finally, it is about having good conversations that will set the bar a little higher and demand a modest share of the intellectual profits.6

Articulate a Vision

When administrators think about implementing the engagement model, they tend to have many great ideas and projects. However, linking ideas and projects to an overall vision that staff members can grasp and remember is critical. A clearer vision helps everyone understand why library leadership is asking librarians to change their habits and routines. Better yet, if properly articulated, a distinct vision can serve as the main catalyst for driving behavioral changes and can assist librarians to take risks and envision for themselves what their manager wants them to achieve.7

What administrators do with their vision after its creation could determine the success or failure of the engagement model. The message of engagement is not the only message library staff receive daily. Typically, librarians spend their workday balancing their time among teaching, service, and professional commitments; doing in-person or virtual consultations; and attending to the daily barrage of the expected and unexpected request ranging from material cancellations to urgent demands from faculty and students. Library administrators must be mindful that gaining the attention of busy librarians means communicating their vision frequently and powerfully, and embedding it within everything they do. They should talk about it every chance they get. They should use the vision to make decisions and solve problems. If kept fresh in everyone’s minds, then librarians will remember it and embrace it.
A clear and succinct vision should not only focus on the future but also serve as a source of inspiration and motivation. It should describe not only the future of the unit but also that of the organization’s librarians and information professionals. A vision that seeks to enhance discovery and access to a distinctive collection dealing with the world’s major regions and to engage in the life cycle of research, teaching, and learning currently guides librarians in our Area Studies Department. This vision merges and describes the unit’s functional skills and the engagement model.

Library administrators at all levels should engage with engagement. It is not what they say but what they do that matters. If library administrators expect middle managers to engage with teaching, scholarship, and service, they should do so too. If managers expect their direct reports to engage in the classroom, they, too, should teach when possible. If they assume librarians will get into the research flow, they, too, should attend research-based events and carry out research. If managers insist that the team be conversant with everything from scholarly communications to the basics of copyright law, they should as well.

High-performing organizations have a clearly defined vision. This vision helps guide all employees and administrators to its desired destination and explains why its objectives are important. This explanation matters. Library administrators must address the organization’s concerns and anxieties. They must apply their vision to all aspects of operations from training to performance reviews. If the goal is to develop new and more profitable relations with teaching faculty, then administrators and middle managers must encourage their staff to attend training sessions on such matters as relationship building and change management.

Even performance reviews should explicitly address the seriousness of the organization’s vision. Every performance review should reflect how well engagement activities move the units forward. Do these activities promote or delay the unit’s engagement vision? Encourage the former. Create opportunities to rectify the latter. Finally, administrators should check in with their staff often and promptly. They should listen to people’s ideas and incorporate their recommendations if possible. In the end, the key is to tie everything back to the vision.

Prioritize Goals and Remove Barriers

Library administrators should think concretely about how to manage the engagement model. They should spend time setting and articulating priorities and goals. This goal setting has a multiplier effect of engaging the staff in thinking about what is important and how to adapt as priorities change. Administrators should also analyze the potential pros and cons of these goals and move forward with those wishing to engage. They should reward the people who make engagement a reality and mentor those who oppose it.

Successful engagement is made up of both short- and long-term objectives. Short-term objectives should be easily quantifiable: for example, increase classroom engagement by 5 percent, engage one new faculty member every fall, or integrate a newly acquired collection into your classroom instruction. Long-term structural transformations are more complicated. They include scale, magnitude, duration, and strategic importance.
These are not innovations the staff can accomplish expeditiously. They are, however, the engagement model’s sweet spot.

When planning for engagement, administrators should prioritize what they would expect from their staff. For example, it is feasible to ask a librarian to spend more time on the type of face-to-face engagement that builds personal relations, makes room for the library at the table, and generates modest digital initiatives. It is also reasonable, as a long-range goal, to ask the same librarian to reduce his or her direct engagement with collections and to turn requests for one-shot library instruction into cohesive and pedagogically sound educational programs. This prioritization should be done in the service of one clear strategic goal: to place librarians, not collections, at the center of the engagement effort.

Library administrators should also patiently build on the change. Engagement often requires culture change, which runs deep and takes time. Each victory on the road to engagement provides an opportunity to build on what went right and identify what can be improved. Administrators should not focus solely on what succeeded but should also assess what needs improving. Teaching either a semester-long course or a one-shot is a welcome opportunity. These sessions, however, should be followed by a debriefing that reviews not only students’ performance but also the classes’ key elements. Librarians should deconstruct their performance, move beyond the fundamentals (for example, sources and lectures), and think about information literacy, course design, curriculum mapping, textbook affordability, and open educational resources. The goal is to use the engagement model to create a culture of ongoing improvement through empowered and engaged librarians.

It is important to discarding components that do not work, hinder progress, or both. Before administrators start dismantling obstacles, they should be sure they have communicated the change, assessed the cultural landscape, made the case, and involved every layer of the organization. Doing these things puts in place the right structure for ongoing change.

Having the right structure in place empowers the people who will execute an organization’s vision and move change forward. Removing barriers, human or systemic, is labor-intensive yet critical. For example, library administrators should identify and hire only those who can do the job and deliver change. They should understand their organizational structure; create position descriptions that fit the future, not the past; and advocate for performance review and compensation systems that align with their organization’s vision. It is also essential to recognize and publicly reward people for making change happen.

Successful engagement initiatives should not be the libraries’ or the university’s best-kept secret. If engagement is working and your team achieves positive and long-lasting changes, make sure your organization and the broader institution hear about it. Your library’s leadership team should know and continue to support the change you and your staff are working to establish. Make continuous efforts to ensure that engagement successes are seen and heard in every aspect of your organization and beyond: write, talk, and present about them. In other words, make the engagement model an intrinsic part of the library’s and the university’s culture.
Cultivate a Mind-Set

Change has a way of exposing both personal and professional strengths and shortcomings. The possibility of a less-structured work environment, shifting boundaries, new professional roles, and a perceived lack of expertise can cause team members to doubt their capabilities to perform the new and more visible duties engagement demands. It could potentially convince librarians that they lack the dexterity and the professional courage to become engaged and bring their talents, and the library’s richness, to students and faculty. Worse yet, this anxiety could mutely sabotage the organization’s overall forward progress.

In the library profession, issues of low self-esteem and impostor syndrome—that is, librarians’ feelings that their achievements are not real or that they do not deserve praise or success—and the consequences of these mistaken beliefs are more chronic than acute. It would serve no didactic purpose to reassess the piles of articles dealing with librarian stereotypes. These studies, however, have provided feedback worth considering as the profession makes engagement, an admittedly more aggressive way of doing business, its intellectual horizon. For library administrators, the lesson is clear: issues of self-worth and confidence are real. If administrators leave them unattended, engagement will not take root.9

The best antidote against a lack of confidence or feelings of self-doubt, and the paralysis they could trigger, is to build the team’s skill set and to emphasize what its members do well. Any skill gaps your librarians have need to be addressed. The skills they do have need to be accentuated and the unique knowledge they possess highlighted. Librarians must be reminded that they have a compelling skill set centered on information organization and retrieval and, in some cases, subject expertise. Administrators should seek out training opportunities for staff and inculcate the simple but powerful notion that, for librarians, learning is an integral part of the job.9

From time to time, it behooves library administrators to revisit the idea that classroom instructors, even with their impressive academic credentials and years of research, do not have all the answers and cannot keep up with the avalanche of information currently being generated. Nor can they keep up with changes in the publishing environment, copyright laws in the digital age, new communication technologies and services, and the collective impacts these have on the scholarly landscape. Keeping abreast of such developments is the librarian’s job. Librarians are trained to do it, and they do it well.

Library administrators, particularly middle managers, should help librarians focus on their own deep and essential domain of expertise. Their skills and expertise are different but no less valuable than what professors or graduate students bring to the table. Library leadership could also use the profession’s past to lift sagging spirits and motivate staff. To reflect on the time-honored history of libraries, and to remember that librarians are caretakers of a long tradition of building, servicing, and preserving collections, has profound meaning and should inspire pride. Librarians must be reminded that their expertise is expansive and their culture generous. These are the library’s greatest strengths.
Manage Resistance

Managing resistance is a pivotal part of building a successful change strategy. Often, managers at all levels of an organization assume that resistance is a problem they need to overcome. Worse yet, they wrongly surmise that resistance will eventually go away and they will prevail. Resistance rarely goes away, and complete victories are uncommon.

Resistance, administrators should learn, is neither good nor bad. It is, however, ubiquitous, and more importantly, it could become a useful tool. Resistance, Jeffrey Ford argues, is a form of feedback and, as such, “it provides potentially valuable information that may not be available any other way. By being willing to consider resistance as useful feedback, managers can reshape specific aspects of a change, thereby increasing the likelihood of success.” Blaming resistance for their failures, Ford reasons, “makes managers dysfunctional and defensive, posits that resistance is a unilateral phenomenon unrelated to the manager’s own behavior, and ignores the possibility that resistance could be a source of strength.”

In the case of engagement, after acknowledging frustrations, library administrators should view resistance as a valuable reaction and even as a force capable of improving their approach to change.

If resistance is feedback, those implementing engagement are bound to receive plenty of advice from below. One useful product of resistance is its ability to teach the importance of knowing what you do not know. This is valuable at every level. Sometimes, people resist change because it is not agreeable to them, but most of the time the culprit lies elsewhere. Whatever the source, resistance opens an opportunity for administrators to leave their comfort zone, find out more about their team member’s insecurities, assist them in a meaningful way, and learn about the inner workings of the organization and pressure points they might not have known existed.

The process of performance review provides a good illustration of resistance. Administrators often find themselves at odds with direct reports who resent the framework or the content of performance reviews, or both. Their objections could lead to conflicts, hurt feelings, and complaints. This pushback, however, does provide critical lessons and could lead to a reassessment of established rubrics that set out performance expectations, and in some cases, a review of expectations and results. It can also prod administrators into learning more about discipline-specific challenges and the inner workings of the departments his or her unit serves.

While pushback is both frustrating and critical, it is also an excellent tool for calibrating ideas. Often, people who criticize and set up roadblocks have something meaningful to say. Their objections can and should be construed as sign of personal engagement. These concerns could serve to redefine plans, chisel away excesses, and prevent carelessness mistakes. How administrators handle objections is fundamental to their ability to implement and grow the engagement model. In other words, when it comes to engagement, and the inevitable frictions it generates, the library leadership’s mantra should be: dissenters are welcome.
Final Thoughts

To many librarians, the idea of deeper engagement with faculty and students seems fraught with danger and complication. Some of them joined the library ranks convinced that a graduate education and offices in the hallowed halls of an academic institution provided a nearly unassailable sage-like status. Now, engagement comes along and demands some role reversals. Librarians are forced to leave the heavily fortified confines of the library and confront their constituency on an unfamiliar turf. Library administrators are deputized to push this change and convince their colleagues that engagement is an enhancement, not a diminution, of their duties. In some circumstances, this is a hard sell.

If placed in the right context, however, selling engagement is possible. After all, the need for the engagement model results from administrators’ own actions. The technology they championed and demanded for decades is now bearing fruit. The information they acquired, classified, and stored is being accessed through new technologies and methods. Their world has been disrupted by forces they encouraged and shaped. They must recognize this change and adapt to it.

Through it all, library leaders need to build and communicate a cogent narrative for engagement, set the right tone throughout the organization, and continually build their own competence and confidence as change agents. Administrators must understand change and develop strategies to help others expand their own capacity to acknowledge and fashion it. They can ease, but not eliminate, the struggle that the move toward engagement brings. The goal is not to avoid change but to create an environment where it is recognized, accepted, and managed. They should understand change for what it is: an evolution, not a revolution.

José O. Díaz is an associate professor and head of area studies at the William Oxley Thompson Library of The Ohio State University Libraries in Columbus; he may be reached by e-mail at: Diaz.6@osu.edu.

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