

## **Editor's Column: Being Tested**

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We've all heard the saying *be careful what you wish for* – sometimes it is difficult to anticipate the ramifications of one's decisions, especially in the long term. When I entered librarianship in 2002, I decided then and there that I always wanted to be an in-the-trenches librarian. I was not interested in management or administration. I wanted to be on the front lines, helping people do research. But the best laid plans go oft astray, as Robert Burns once wrote; I found myself in the position of department head ten years after I entered the profession. I told myself that I wanted to be there, to make a difference and facilitate – but I NEVER wanted to go into administration.

Then, the dean of my library suddenly retired. The assistant dean was made interim dean, and I was made interim assistant dean, which surprised me. But a little voice whispered, “Think of the differences you could make, think of the ways you can facilitate.” So I stepped up, though I did not feel prepared. Over the course of a year, I learned a lot of things about being a library administrator and an administrator in higher education. It was, to put it mildly, rather eye-opening. As the interim dean and I entered year two of our positions, we attempted to continue the Library's transition to a more digital format, trying to do so with limited funding and in the face of a drastic change. Our campus administration decided to hire a Chief Information Office (CIO) who would be over both the Library and the Computing Center (what we call our IT services). This was an interesting, though not unheard of, approach; it had just never been done on our

campus prior to now. Until the CIO was hired, the dean of the library reported to the vice president of Academic Affairs, while the director of Computing reported to the executive vice president. The library was considered an academic unit, and given that the library's faculty go through tenure and promotion, it made sense. However, the layer of reporting added by the CIO's position confused things slightly, though ultimately it was decided that while the library would fall under student support services (and therefore the executive vice president), all faculty related issues (i.e., tenure and promotion) would be referred to the vice president of Academic Affairs.

In the midst of this, the interim dean decided to retire. If I were to hazard a guess, I would say that the uncertainty that came with these changes and decisions was a bit too much, a feeling for which I cannot blame her. The uncertainty that accompanied those changes would only be resolved by the CIO's arrival; many decisions about the library going forward rested in his hands. Given that his background is IT and customer service and NOT libraries, it was a scary prospect. Would he appreciate the library's role at the university? Would he understand the challenges which are unique to libraries in higher education? Would he neglect the library and focus all of his time on IT, despite his responsibilities regarding the library? I'll confess that before his arrival, I started applying for jobs at other libraries.

The interim dean left before the CIO arrived to assume the job. The executive vice president asked me to continue as interim assistant dean in the meantime *and* to facilitate the CIO's transition. I agreed to it, but I thought: how am I supposed to facilitate the CIO's transition and help him understand the dean's job (which is a part of the CIO's position) when I had just finally gotten comfortable with my position as interim assistant

dean, not to mention helping a non-library administrator become an administrator in the library? I was afraid the situation was going to turn into a fiasco, or a hot mess, as the students would say. It seemed like I was being tested, and I was afraid I would be found wanting or otherwise fail.

Thank goodness I was wrong. Very quickly, the CIO admitted to me that he recognized he had a lot to learn about running a library and was relying on me to help him learn. He promised to always be upfront about things and to be as transparent as he could be. He asked me how he could help me do my job and to improve things in the library, which obviously started us off on the right foot. That question – what can I do to help? – has been a hallmark of his administration so far, and his desire to enhance the library has been refreshing and energizing, especially in the face of more budget cuts to higher education and low morale on campus because of those cuts.

Do I think he will succeed at all the ideas and plans he's shared with me for the library? Despite their feasibility, no; that's not pessimism on my part per se – that's the reality of higher education in this state. There's simply not enough money to go around. But he's *trying*, and he has ideas, and he's willing to take the risk of asking – which can be so hard to do, especially when you've gotten used to being told *no*. He has actively asked questions about libraries, sought out initiatives and practices at other libraries as models, and done as much as one can expect a person to do to learn on the fly how to run a library. We have become a great team, and I am glad to have him here, and glad for the opportunity to work with him.

He has undoubtedly felt tested, both by the library side of his job and the challenges associated with higher education in this state, which are similar to the

challenges of higher education all over the country. I have seen and heard his frustrations; we share many of them. To protect the library's interests, he created a position which is new for our library, director of the library, and gave me the job. Once again, I find myself plunged into a position for which I do not feel fully prepared. I am not sure what this job is supposed to look like for my library or at this university, even though I was tasked with writing the job description for it.

But I'm making the best of it. I feel tested every day as I encounter tasks and challenges which I never faced as a reference librarian or a department head or even as an interim assistant dean. When the university president announced that a shortfall in the state's budget would mean more and significant cuts to higher education, I felt tested (but unsurprised). How would we carry out all these great ideas and plans the CIO were developing together without funding? How could we effectively support the library faculty and staff, much less the campus community?

It would be easy to get overwhelmed and despondent. It would be easy to lose morale, to develop a healthy cynicism and pessimism and give up trying. I'm sure the CIO feels the same way. But these are the tests we face together as administrators of this library. There are also the tests we all face together working in libraries, any library, whether we're librarians or staff or library students or library managers or administrators. Working in higher education, especially in public higher education, seems like a constant test – to maintain resources and access, to offer our students and faculty the resources they need, to keep doors open and libraries adequately staffed – in short, to meaningfully meet the needs of the communities we serve.

I think we should regard these moments where we feel tested as opportunities to

learn, to re-assess, and make sure our priorities are clear. Speaking from experience, it can be very easy to lose perspective and lose sight of one's priorities when we're in the thick of things. It's like having the flu: cognitively you know you're going to get better, but when you're in the deeps of it, you feel like you'll never feel good again. Once you're well, though, it seems strange to think that you'd never get better. I'm not saying that things in higher education or things for libraries will get great any time soon. But I feel confident that they will get better, especially if we band together and look for solutions to the challenges we face. This is one of the reasons I feel so strongly about open access publishing: it offers a cost-effective way of disseminating and accessing critical scholarly research which often contains important information about possible solutions to the problems we face. This is even the case when one's initiatives or research don't go the way one expects: that information still adds to our understanding and our knowledge about things, and that's important. Even failures help us learn, and we can't lose sight of that. So, when you're feeling tested, look at the situation as an opportunity to learn and to seek solutions. What can you learn – about yourself or the situation or even libraries – that will help you and others? Share that information any way you can – through blogs, through social media, through research. Remember: somebody else might be going through what you're going through and benefit from your insights and findings. We're all in this together!