

Trends

IN LAW LIBRARY MANAGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGY

Edited by Philip C. Berwick ♦ For academic, firm, corporate, and government law librarians

Planning for the 21st Century: Creating a Strategic Plan at the Yale Law Library

Part I: Planning the Plan

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After seven months of work and deliberation the Strategic Planning Committee was about to deliver the final version of the Yale Law School Library Strategic Plan, 2010–2015, to our director. We had one final decision to make. It was an important and controversial decision that in some ways would set the tone and reflect the attitude of our entire organization. We had polled the librarians and found them split right down the middle. It was up to us to decide whether or not the strategic plan should include a smiley face :-)) emoticon.

This article is the first of a two-part series about the strategic planning process, from creating the committee to signing off on the plan, at the Lillian Goldman Law Library at Yale Law School. Part 1 describes our research and information gathering strategies that formed the basis of our plan; Part 2 will discuss the writing of the plan.

Beginning the Process

Due to budget considerations and the belief that a good library committee could do just as well, the law library administration declined to engage the services of a strategic planning consultant as had been done in the past. Rather, the administration appointed a Strategic Planning Committee made up of five librarians: our technology (and newest) librarian; a technical services librarian with more than thirty years' experience; our rare books librarian with only a few years at Yale but many years' professional experience; our Associate Librarian for Administration; and, as Chair, a reference librarian for foreign and international law with just over four years at the law library.

After charging the Committee with creating a five-year strategic plan, our director, Blair Kauffman, made just two requests: (1) that we complete an environmental scan including a survey of our patrons, and (2) that we deliver the final plan by June 30, 2010, a timeline of about seven months. Blair would not attend our meetings unless we requested he do so; we were on our own.¹

The Committee decided early on that we would aim to deliver a concise and memorable document, a few pages at most. We also agreed, somewhat begrudgingly, to weekly meetings. However, it became readily apparent that we had an immense job ahead of us, and frequent meetings were required to keep the Committee moving forward at a steady pace. Each Committee member assumed individual tasks depending on the stage of the planning process, such as collecting and sharing strategic planning information from outside sources, preparing an online student survey, or coordinating focus groups.

A final early commitment we made as a group was to involve the entire library staff in the strategic planning process. This was a complicated proposition that involved careful thought and planning because we had recently experienced budget and benefit cuts, layoffs, and other financial hardships involving both the professional librarians and unionized support staff.

Environmental Scan

The environmental scan consisted of two parts. First, we examined strategic plans from academic libraries, law libraries, and public libraries as well as various multinational companies. Second, we surveyed our colleagues, faculty, students, and other patrons to determine their view of the library and needs for the next five years.

In reviewing strategic plans we looked closely at vision and mission statements, and began to get a sense of what form and format we favored. We paid close attention to strategic plans from the Yale University, Yale University Libraries and our parent institution, Yale Law School, so we could closely align with their respective missions.

We also reviewed the strategic planning literature, including several how-to books as well as the plethora of articles in the library literature databases. As we read how other libraries went about the strategic planning process, we identified methods and procedures that would translate well to our endeavor. We benefited by the triumphs and challenges shared by our colleagues.

We used a Sharepoint site to coordinate all of our work. We uploaded documents and articles for the Committee to review. We were also able to post thoughts and encourage discussion with comments on the site.

This information gathering process proved to be a time-consuming and critical part of preparing to write the strategic plan. We were influenced by the variety of plans we evaluated. For example, our smiley face emoticon debate has its roots in the Walt Disney Company mission statement, “To make people happy.”

Survey, Survey, Survey!

Reviewing the literature and strategic plans gave us a concrete sense of the questions we needed to ask our patrons to help us create a plan for the next five years. Each Committee member was responsible for coming up with several questions about his/her respective department, particular subject areas, and a few general questions.

Our first survey was sent to the library professional staff, which consists of about 20 librarians and managers. The survey included sections on technology, collection development, reference and instruction, administration, library space, diversity, and environmental consciousness. We obtained 100% participation from our library colleagues, resoundingly demonstrating their commitment to this process and support of the Committee's work.

Incorporating both issues raised in past surveys and interviews as well as some information gleaned from our initial survey to our colleagues, we next developed an online questionnaire tailored specifically for students. With several iPods randomly awarded for students who participated in the survey, we obtained about 40% participation.

Immediately after the online survey closed, we examined the results and then solicited student participation in focus groups to follow up on issues raised in the online survey. The focus groups were surprisingly well attended, possibly due to the free pizza lunch offered to participants, and they proved invaluable for clarifying and expanding upon certain thoughts, ideas, and considerations raised in the survey.

We held two focus groups. The first focus group discussed reference services and library technology; the second group discussed collections and access. The focus groups elicited student thoughts and opinions on library policy, use, and direction. For example, we asked students whether or not the library should be "quiet," how they learned about library services, how best to communicate with students, if the collection met their research needs, and similar core issues.

Rather than attempt an online survey of faculty, the Committee asked the reference librarians to meet with their faculty liaisons and interview them about the services the library currently provides while asking for suggestions for improvement. This methodology seemed more consistent with the personal service we try to offer faculty members. Reference librarians wrote short reports summarizing the feedback received from faculty. Although we never achieved 100% faculty participation, those who did participate provided extremely valuable feedback.

Finally, we surveyed para-professional library staff. The Committee felt it was important to survey the librarian and para-professionals separately to identify any tensions or disconnect between these two important stakeholders. This was a prime opportunity to seek anonymous opinion on all aspects of the law library, and it was heartening to find that we again had almost 100% participation with mostly positive yet still highly constructive responses and pointed suggestions for improvement. One message was clear: all employees valued their work and their colleagues, and all were committed to continuous improvement.

Ready to Write

Thanks to the sophistication and ease of use of the online survey tool Survey Monkey, we were able to instantly view the results of the online questionnaires in the form of pie charts and bar graphs as well as written form. The Committee compiled the results of all the surveys and focus groups into a master document organized by topic or theme, such as technology, library space, or diversity. This helped us organize our preliminary discussions about goals and strategies.

By the end of April, the Committee had concluded our environmental scan: we researched, read, surveyed, reviewed, thought, and analyzed. It was finally time to stop talking and start writing.

“Every visitor to the library should be greeted with a smile,” one Committee member said early in the writing process. The story of how this closed-door statement addressing a specific problem turned into a library-wide debate over the

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appropriateness of a smiley face emoticon would be emblematic of the sharing, openness, and honesty the Committee brought to the writing process.

This story will be continued in Part II of *Planning for the 21st Century: Creating a Strategic Plan at the Yale Law Library*.

Notes

I. It is not unusual at the Yale Law Library to be given a task, the freedom to define the process by which it is to be completed, and the format of the final product. This is one of the many joys of working at the Yale Law Library.

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Trends is published by

William S. Hein & Co., Inc.
1285 Main St. / Buffalo, NY 14209
Phone: (800) 828-7571; (716) 882-2600
Fax: (716) 883-8100
Email: mail@wshein.com

ISSN 0893-6773

The complete collection of articles published
in *Trends* is available in HeinOnline
(<http://heinonline.org>)

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