Listening to the Library Community

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As many of you know, I have been doing a lot of traveling this summer. I have met with hundreds of library staff members from all types of libraries across the three-state region. My goals in these visits have been two-fold:

• To introduce Minitex services to a large audience. Both in the SWOT analyses undertaken as part of the current Minitex strategic planning process and in our stakeholder survey, respondents felt Minitex needed to focus on getting the word out about the range of services we offer.

• To meet with more of you in the Minitex region library community and listen to your concerns and issues.

There are many pressing issues that are impacting the libraries Minitex serves, and I would like to try to summarize some of the trends, concerns, and ideas for collaboration that I've been hearing during these meetings.

Two Big Issues: Funding & E-Books

No surprise, the No. 1 concern I heard is financial, and that concern is common to all types of libraries in all regions. Everyone was impacted negatively by the 2008 recession and the slow recovery. Financial problems are a long standing concern in our profession, but many spoke about this recession as being especially difficult. However, some libraries have recovered funding and are doing well, and library buildings, in particular, have been a bright spot with many wonderful facilities opening or being remodeled in recent years.

The next topic I heard about was ebooks. The community has a strong desire for some kind of shared ebook system that would cost less than each library going it alone. Many people have heard about shared, centralized ebook systems in states like Kansas or Wisconsin, or have heard about independent publisher aggregation systems, such as the one developed by Douglas County in Colorado. Many speculated on how systems like these could play out in Minnesota.

In my conversations, I found that the term ‘ebook’ means different things to different people. There doesn’t seem to be an awareness among public, K-12, and academic libraries that the ebooks they use are from different publishing companies with different platforms, different formats, and very different content. As I discuss the situation’s complexities, I often receive some version of the following response: “Minitex should provide all types of ebooks for all types of libraries.” Of course, most speakers were aware of the difficulties inherent in this prohibitively expensive undertaking.

And, the Other Issues

After fiscal issues and ebooks come a host of issues that were raised at some of the meetings -- but not at all:

Technology

Concern about keeping up with changes in technology, knowing which technology bandwagons to jump on, and staff training were among the more frequent comments. There is a general sense that the pace of technological change is out-of-control, and few felt they had the superhuman knowledge to know which new technologies to embrace.

• Related to technology was the issue of mobile apps: Beyond providing catalog access in mobile format, what apps should libraries be developing?

• Bandwidth capacity and concerns about the impact of e-governance initiative were also raised.

Remaining Relevant

Many spoke of a desire for the library to be nimble in the face of so many societal changes. This concern included technology and social media, but also the changes in how students want to learn and gain information and how the public is approaching reading. Several mentioned that library staff place high demands upon themselves to provide the best resources and services available to our patrons, and what if we don’t really understand the new information-seeking behaviors?
Ebook ILL and e-Content Creation
A secondary issue related to ebooks was the desire to be able to easily interlibrary loan ebooks between partner libraries. Open access scholarly ebooks, etextbooks, and journals were mentioned by a few academic library staff as well. The library’s role in creation of econtent was raised at one location.

Copyright
There is an awareness that copyright is changing fast, and people want to feel confident in their decisions. Areas of particular concern are for materials made by teachers or faculty as part of the educational mission of a school. Some speakers expressed uncertainty about which reproductions rights library staff should assume they have, particularly with audiovisual materials.

Electronic Library for Minnesota (ELM)
Ideas for additions to ELM included the Credo series of products, streaming videos, and more content in general.

K-12 School Librarianship
Concerns for the future of school libraries were raised in a few places, and unease was expressed about unprepared students entering into higher education without having been through library training in their schools. The burden placed on public libraries to serve areas without adequate school libraries was also mentioned.

Conclusion
There were several things that really struck me in all these meetings and in hearing from staff members of so many different types of libraries. Our community has a strong desire to reach out to talk and work with staff from different types of libraries. Many felt that Minitex has been a broker in bringing people together and hoped that we would stay focused on that task.

Another issue is the deep passion many have for the collaborative infrastructure here in the Upper Midwest. As a newcomer to this community, I am amazed by the amount of cooperation and commitment to shared systems in the area. Many spoke of a strong need to ensure that, as people retire and new library employees move into the profession, we not lose sight of our collaborative value system. Some spoke elegantly of the need to not assume that everyone recognizes the value of working together and for us all to spend time and energy to foster one of our key values.

Overall, I want to thank the many library directors who invited me to come to their areas and the many library staff members who attended the meetings. I have learned much about the community here and look forward to deepening my relationship with this community.