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Progressing Through Groundhog Day

Navigating the Impacts of Campus Turnover on Library Collaborations

Collaboration is inherent in academic libraries, and the relationships and partnerships we develop with our colleagues across the university are central to our effectiveness. Building and sustaining those relationships takes time, energy, and intention, but those efforts can be disrupted when there are shifts in the organizational structure of the university. Turnover in key positions carries the potential of lost institutional knowledge, communication breakdowns, and shifting priorities. Projects may stall, not because they lack vision or merit but because they are not yet embedded in the university's framework and depend heavily on the advocacy of individual champions. When those champions depart and new colleagues fill those roles, the library must reintroduce its expertise, demonstrate its strategic value, and rebuild a shared sense of purpose.

This challenge is a familiar one for the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) Libraries. In just over a decade, the University has experienced significant turnover in senior leadership, with six vice presidents for research (VPR), four provosts, and five presidents, including interim appointments. Each new leader has brought a distinct set of priorities, often accompanied by ripple effects that reach other administrative roles as teams are reorganized. These changes have been especially impactful as UNLV continues to grow its research enterprise, having relatively recently been designated an R1 institution. The libraries have been actively engaged in a cross-organizational effort to develop services, tools, and infrastructure to support our researchers and have been at the table with partners including deans, the Research Office, University IT, and faculty experts. Although these partnerships have been productive, progress has frequently hinged on individual leaders who can make decisions, drive change, and allocate resources. At this stage in UNLV's development, the institutional scaffolding for a robust research infrastructure is still developing, and individual relationships carry the momentum. This makes them drivers of progress but also precarious points of weakness. When the abovementioned turnover disrupted these relationships, the libraries found itself having to regroup, reassess, and adapt its approach to restart stalled initiatives. One example was a university-wide initiative, led by the VPR, to develop a research excellence program. The libraries had been partners in program development and were committing staff resources in key areas such as research data management, open access, and author identity management. We were also in the process of establishing a shared position with the research office to support its success.

When the VPR left the university, however, the initiative lost momentum. The university redirected funds and resources to other priorities, leaving the libraries to reassess our approach

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to integrating these services and resources into the research life cycle. Without the authority and visibility of a university-wide program, we shifted to a more localized strategy, working directly with individual colleges and departments and using individual library relationships to facilitate introductions and outreach. This approach moved progress forward more slowly, but it allowed us to maintain engagement. With the arrival of a new VPR, we again needed to reintroduce the libraries' expertise and demonstrate our strategic value in advancing the university's research enterprise. This cycle of restarting conversations, revisiting proposals, and reestablishing trust is part of the reality of working in the frequently changing environment of higher education, but it has been frustrating and at times demoralizing for staff, who feel like they are in an endless version of Groundhog Day, where the same ideas and initiatives must be explained and advocated for again and again.

So, what can I share from my Groundhog Day experiences that may help other librarians stuck in this repetitive cycle remain motivated and positive? OCLC's work on social interoperability, defined as "the creation and maintenance of working relationships across individuals and organizational units that promote collaboration, communication, and mutual understanding,"[1] is something that I return to frequently to help. This framing reminds me that relationship-building is not simply a means to an end but is a valuable and tangible outcome in and of itself.

Often, or maybe I'm speaking only for myself, we focus primarily on the outcome a partnership might yield, say, co-developing a research data management program with the Research Office. When that outcome is not readily achieved, we consider our efforts to be a failure and we overlook and/or undervalue the essential "social interoperability" work we undertook. To address this, we should more actively articulate the work of collaboration and relationship-building as a tangible outcome for inclusion in goals, tenure and promotion materials, and annual reviews. We can work with colleagues, supervisors, and our library directors/deans to advocate for this, using the language of social interoperability to define this work. If we are able to make this work more visible and give weight to the ongoing investment of time, effort, and expertise that facilitates successful collaboration, it can help us feel supported and build resilience as we move through Groundhog Day cycles.

Of course, acknowledging the value of this work doesn't make it any less frustrating when projects stall. It's valid to feel drained by starting over, repeating conversations, and reexplaining and readvocating for your work. But it's equally important to remember what is still in place after turnover: the relationships you have with colleagues who remain, the trust you've earned, and the recognition you've built for the library's expertise. These connections can be your entry point to reengage new leadership and continue advancing shared goals. Progress may feel slow—much slower than we would like—but the foundations you've built are still there. Each turnover cycle, although disruptive, also brings opportunities for fresh perspectives, different strategies and renewed energy. And, as in the classic movie *Groundhog Day*, it presents a chance for a "do-over," to sharpen your message, revisit what really resonates, and let go of what hasn't worked. ⚏

Note

1. Rebecca Bryant, Annette Dortmund, and Brian Lavoie, *Social Interoperability in Research Support: Cross Campus Partnerships and the University Research Enterprise* (OCLC Research, 2020). https://doi.org/10.25333/wyrd-n586.