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## The “Double Dean”: Embracing the Unexpected Opportunities of a Non-librarian Interim Dean

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## CHAPTER 2

# The “Double Dean”: Embracing the Unexpected Opportunities of a Non-librarian Interim Dean

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## Introduction

Serving as an interim administrator is never an easy thing to do. Walking into an interim administrator position when it is not in your area of expertise... well, that is just crazy. Or is it? A University of Arkansas practice is to fill vacant dean positions with an interim leader who is a current sitting dean from another college. When our former dean announced his departure, the university appointed the dean of the Honors College to serve as interim dean of libraries. For the senior library leadership group, all relatively new associate deans from other academic organizations, this practice at first seemed a bit bizarre.

Many libraries struggle with maintaining organizational momentum on key initiatives in the vacuum of interim leadership. How would this work with someone whose field of expertise was so unrelated? As we quickly learned, having an experienced administrator with already established campus relationships to

advise us became an immediate asset for the libraries. A neutral advocate at the table for campus decisions meant more exposure for the libraries, more access to decision-makers, and greater opportunities to build and advance our core programs and services across campus with key stakeholders. This relationship is also not one-sided, as our new double dean was very candid about what she saw as an investment in a long-term relationship between her home college and the libraries. This chapter will explore, from the perspectives of two associate deans and the interim dean, what those advantages were and why this arrangement served academic libraries well.

## Literature Review

In contrast to the private sector and other academic cultures, in which an interim executive might be someone hired on contract from outside the organization, most interim library leadership comes from within the library itself.<sup>1</sup> While this creates an opportunity to provide continuity for the library itself, given the complexities of library operations, it often also poses challenges for an interim library leader. With less experience in budget and personnel management than a permanent leader, an interim leader not offered the support needed to cover existing operations and responsibilities will be challenged to take the time needed for the interim assignment.<sup>2</sup> Noting the absence in the library literature on interim library leadership, in particular, Irwin and deVries' study identified some of the challenges encountered by librarians in interim leadership roles, with the goal of assisting future interim library leaders and the university executives who appoint them.<sup>3</sup> Clarity in the role and expectations for the interim assignment is critical, as is the support of both library personnel and the campus administration for the interim library leader's success. Library organizations differ on whether an interim library leader may be considered for the position permanently. However, some authors note the awkwardness of assuming a position of authority over former peers<sup>4</sup> and the difficulty later of transitioning back into a former position once the organizational landscape and leadership have changed.<sup>5</sup> It can be difficult to balance long-term decisions with a short-term position, and yet acting as an interim leader can also be a chance to define some of the long-term changes that need to be made and define those as priorities for the new dean.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the challenges of taking on an interim role, many describe it as an opportunity to gain executive leadership experience, learn a new set of responsibilities and practice those on a wider scale, and provide a training ground for developing new skills that may lead to a next career move.<sup>7</sup> Irwin and deVries found that those respondents who felt they had learned from the experience as an interim library leader were very specific about the skills they had acquired, including "advocacy, hiring, budgeting, prioritizing, solving problems, developing

a tolerance for ambiguity, and articulating a vision.”<sup>8</sup> For most who take on an interim library leadership position, the biggest shift is one of perspective. An interim library leader suddenly gains very powerful insight into where the library sits within campus networks, allowing them to see library relationships with stakeholders in a new or more nuanced way than their permanent position might allow.<sup>9</sup> Understanding the need for transparency in decision-making while also ensuring discretion for campus decisions not yet communicated is critical, as are the political skills to handle sensitive personnel matters. It can be eye-opening for many interim library leaders to find they must now think about the big picture, including the implications of decisions across all the library’s operations, the importance of building alliances across campus, and an appreciation of the organizational politics that govern campus dynamics and the library’s place in the campus hierarchy.

When it comes to the specific goals of the interim assignment, internal interim library leaders may be less likely than an external interim leader to be expected to make permanent changes or implement new initiatives.<sup>10</sup> In most cases, an external interim library leader may be considered only when there are no other individuals able to step into that interim role, although it may also be the case that an external interim library leader is deliberately appointed when there are permanent cultural or organizational changes that need to be made before another permanent leader is selected.<sup>11</sup> In fact, hiring an external interim library leader avoids many of the pitfalls associated with temporarily promoting someone already employed within the organization since there is no awkwardness when an external leader finishes their assignment as the interim. Assuming the university administrator has already decided to hire an external interim as a temporary measure only, it is crystal clear to all that the interim will not stay long term. In hiring an external interim leader, the university can also take its time filling an important vacancy, ensuring that the search for a permanent leader is not rushed and attracts a good candidate pool. An external interim leader can also make the tough calls about changes that an internal interim leader may not have the freedom to do, such as confronting sensitive HR issues like inequalities involving salary compression, opportunities for professional development between staff and faculty, and ensuring that hiring and faculty processes are compliant with campus policy. The use of an external interim executive allows that person to provide a safe transition for organizations in need of change, especially if the person chosen as interim is someone already well experienced with the skills needed for upper administration and management.<sup>12</sup> Since they are likely to be seen as a neutral and objective voice of reason, the external interim leader can steer the organization toward best practices without being entangled in organizational history or politics, ultimately positioning the new permanent hire for success by having already corrected any structural or cultural problems that were limiting the organization’s growth.

## The Libraries in Context

As Arkansas' flagship institution, the University of Arkansas offers more than 200 academic programs and is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as a Research 1-Doctoral University with very high research activity. Located in the heart of campus, the David W. Mullins Library is the university's main research library. Branch libraries include the Chemistry and Biochemistry Library, the Fine Arts Library, the Physics Library, and the Robert A. and Vivian Young Law Library. The University Libraries provide access to more than 3.1 million volumes and more than 180,000 journals. They also offer research assistance, study spaces, computer labs with printing and scanning, interlibrary loan, delivery services, and cultural exhibits and events.

At the end of October 2020, the relatively new dean of libraries at the University of Arkansas Libraries announced he would be leaving the libraries for personal reasons effective January 2021, after only eighteen months in his current position. Although his time with the libraries had been brief, he had initiated many needed changes, including rethinking the libraries' organizational structure and assembling an administrative team to lead the libraries' operations. The new associate dean for research and learning had started in August 2020, and the new associate dean for content and digital initiatives had started in October 2020. They joined the assistant dean for finance and administration and the newly promoted associate dean for special collections. Given that most of the library leadership team had not been in their administrative roles for very long, the newly promoted provost asked the sitting dean of the University of Arkansas Honors College to step in as the interim dean of libraries. They had been long-time colleagues from their days as fellow faculty members in the History department and held each other in high regard. Because of this history, and because the new provost was juggling two jobs—chief academic officer and vice chancellor for student affairs—the dean of the Honors College felt compelled to say yes.

## An Organization Facing Many Challenges

For the new administrative team, the prospect of tackling the organization's continuing challenges without a permanent dean in place was daunting. Most of these challenges revolved around the disconnection between the libraries' priorities and current campus priorities, something a permanent dean would normally take the lead in correcting. All members of the administrative team understood they would need to pick up additional administrative roles by stepping up to engage with campus stakeholders and partners in a more visible way in the absence of a permanent dean. It had taken the outgoing dean some time to establish connections across campus, something that had also been complicated by the onset of the pandemic only a few months into his tenure as the new library

leader. He also confronted an organization that had not seen much change in its vision of library services for a very long time, a situation that compounded the libraries' lack of visibility in key campus initiatives.

The previous library administration had declined an offer to be an integral part of the new campus effort to ensure student success, which would have included funding to expand the main library to connect to a planned student success center to be built next door. The libraries' lack of targeted outreach also limited their presence on campus, a situation that only exacerbated the challenges of stretching too few library personnel and too little funding for collections to meet campus needs in emerging research areas across multiple new campus research initiatives. The university was determined to expand its reach as an entrepreneurial engine in advancing economic development and marketplace commercialization, and the most important of these new campus research initiatives was the creation of an integrative research facility funded by one of the largest private grants ever given to a university.<sup>13</sup> Connecting funding for library services, library personnel, and library collections to the new Institute for Integrative and Innovative Research (I3R), along with other major initiatives, needed to become a priority for the libraries. The libraries needed to improve advocacy across campus to gain support for important library initiatives, such as increasing open educational resources, streamlining public services, and strengthening collections. For example, most academic libraries spend years working with campus administrators and faculty to build an understanding of how the soaring costs of academic journals impact the affordability of academic resources and the new role that open access can play in both sustainability in the academic publishing marketplace and in raising the profile of research-intensive universities. Much outreach on these important issues was still needed, and this became a priority for the recently hired associate deans.

Connecting the libraries to these campus efforts would be that much more difficult given the elimination of the libraries' human resources department in favor of a centralized campus HR services model, leaving the libraries with only one HR partner shared with three other campus colleges. This meant months of delay in filling mission-critical vacancies in areas such as Libraries IT and public service departments. Libraries IT, for example, with only three full-time personnel and no director of IT, had trouble covering even the most basic IT support and almost no time to program innovative library services, migrate legacy systems, or implement new tools, all of which play critical roles in developing innovation spaces and virtual services in modern research libraries. Additionally, a decreased HR unit meant that faculty-related processes were left to the faculty to manage for themselves. The libraries did not have a strong culture of faculty governance and had recently learned that their longtime faculty practices were

not compliant with campus best practices and policies for faculty promotion, tenure, and annual performance reviews.

The last challenge the libraries were facing was by far the greatest—low morale and a great fear the “bad old days” would return with the departure of a dean who was widely lauded as bringing much-desired transparency and accountability to the libraries’ organizational culture and stewarding the libraries personnel through the worst of the pandemic with calm and reassuring leadership. Wider distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine in the spring of 2021 meant planning, after a long period of mostly remote work, for a return to campus and in-person library services amid an ongoing renovation project involving multiple floors of the main library. With pressure mounting to bring students and faculty back to in-person learning, the messaging to campus users and the campus administration would need to be clear about what the libraries could or could not do. This would be difficult for the new administrative team to do since they had only limited relationships with senior campus administrators. And finally, given the challenges the libraries were facing with HR support, the prospect of waiting more than a year before the leadership position was filled and a new dean was on board had caused the morale of library personnel to plummet. A particular concern was that since the last search for the library dean had not used a search firm and had a very limited pool of candidates, another in-house search so soon after the last one might mean the university would not make the effort to market itself more broadly to attract more diverse candidates for the dean position.

## **Sustaining Momentum for Growth and Change**

Many organizations make the mistake of assuming that an interim leader means no progress can be made toward growth or change. In fact, this had been the experience of each member of the new libraries’ administrative team at some point in their career, especially when the interim leader was tapped internally from the existing library administrators and advised not to make any big changes in the organization. Many libraries put themselves on hold with an interim leader, delaying filling important vacancies and holding off on new initiatives. Doing this demotivates and demoralizes library personnel, especially if this period of organizational liminality lasts too long and leaves them with no way to cover work previously done by departing personnel, few options for changing policies to address new user needs, and little support for tackling large organizational problems. The new libraries’ administrative team was determined not to let that happen. But how would this function with a dean who did not have a great deal of experience with library management? Any concerns we had were quickly put to rest as our new external interim dean made it clear she wanted the administrative



team to continue pushing for change to make progress on initiatives and was willing to learn as much as she could about what the libraries might need to succeed. As we began working with her, we picked up even more momentum on the initiatives we had started with our outgoing dean. The energy she brought was infectious!

For the libraries, an external interim dean who had experience as an upper administrator and knew her way around campus quickly became an asset. Her pre-existing relationships across campus provided the libraries with a strong advocate within an established network of trusted campus peers. This was particularly an advantage for the newly hired associate deans because the new library leader could provide a wealth of knowledge about the university and critical mentoring when needed for complicated personnel problems or challenges with the organizational culture at the university. Having someone who knows whom to talk to about such matters as faculty promotion and tenure, annual evaluations, personnel changes, budget processes, and mentoring and leadership opportunities proved to be a great advantage. This insider knowledge eliminated much of the learning curve that might have been present had our interim dean come from inside the libraries. It also played a vital role in helping the libraries gain speed on many of its new initiatives.

An interim dean with strong administrative experience and connections across campus helped the libraries by identifying opportunities we otherwise would not have known about, many of which also laid the groundwork for significant structural and cultural changes for both the libraries and the university. After discovering the dearth of HR support for library positions, she convinced the university administration to hire an external search firm to help us with the dean's recruitment, resulting in a successful search process in a fraction of the time we would have expected it to have taken to identify the next dean. It is expected that the University of Arkansas might make more use of search firms in the future given the success of the libraries' search. When it became clear that the new administrative team did not have a solid understanding of how the larger campus HR processes worked in relation to personnel and budget, she arranged for a meeting with campus HR administrators to give the administrative team an overview of campus policies and procedures. These conversations revealed ten additional librarian lines allocated to the campus by the state system that had not yet been assigned to the libraries. These positions would help the new dean with filling in much-needed gaps in expanding library services to meet new campus priorities, but only if the libraries are also able to negotiate for more than one HR partner shared with three other colleges. When she realized that the campus' tiered plan for distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine disadvantaged the libraries' front line library staff, who had been on campus in person throughout the pandemic and now faced the return of unvaccinated students to campus for



the spring semester, she worked with the provost to push those personnel up the priority list for vaccine eligibility. Realizing the challenges the libraries faced with the affordability of academic resources, she arranged for meetings with the provost and other academic deans to allow the libraries to make the case for more funding. These events resulted in \$430,000 in end-of-year funds to offset the costs for those resources most frequently requested by campus faculty and \$65,000 for a campus partner-funded pilot program to help faculty and student authors with publishing open access. These approaches made it obvious to the libraries why the interim dean was highly regarded on campus for facilitating positive change by not only her faculty and staff but equally by her peers and the provost.

While the challenges the libraries were facing were many and weighty, it became evident early on that having an external interim dean was advantageous. One very clear advantage was neutrality. Our new “double dean,” as she called herself since she was the dean of two entities simultaneously, could also act as a neutral sounding board for library staff. It was important for the library personnel to hear someone from a neighboring campus unit praise them publicly for their work. When leading an organization experiencing great change, over-communication is not possible. As library personnel began to see her door was always open, it became easier for them to discuss any problems they faced with her in individual meetings or in group meetings with peers. She also started a tradition of weekly dean’s chats in addition to continuing the monthly all-staff meetings that the departing dean had begun. Her goals for these communications were also to surface some of the thornier problems the organization was experiencing and then to offer herself as the neutral change agent in resolving them.

Another area in which neutrality would play an important role was the fact that our interim dean would not be in the running as a permanent dean later when the position would open for a national search. She had a day job already—one she could not wait to get back to full time after completing her assignment as our interim dean and hopefully having paved the way for a successful new decanal colleague. To ensure this, our interim dean began a ticket item list for the incoming dean identifying some of the libraries’ biggest challenges along with some possible solutions. Having this ticket item list will further help to transition a new dean by giving that person a snapshot of the culture and persistent areas of concern. A list like this compiled by someone viewing the organization from another campus unit, while fully aware of the challenges the libraries faced with reconnecting its services and programs to campus priorities, would be invaluable to a new library dean since it would decrease the time it will take for them to come up to speed, as would the introductions she could make for the new dean across campus, again as a champion for the libraries’ continued success. The connections the new library dean would have with the Honors College could also strengthen the libraries’ future partnerships with other colleges and campus units.

## A Model that Works Well

Having an interim library leader who is external to the libraries but internal to the university worked well for us and likely may have a benefit for many other academic libraries and universities. This is especially true for any library organization in which organizational, structural, and cultural changes are needed, all of which might be more difficult for an internal interim library leader to make. Our external interim dean came to the position with extensive knowledge of the libraries' culture and challenges and was determined to deploy her connections across campus for three major purposes: (1) tackling pressing promotion and tenure issues, (2) recalibrating certain administrative structural flaws, and (3) bolstering the morale of the libraries' personnel during the transition to a new permanent dean. An essential benefit of having an interim dean from another college is the ability of that administrator to act as an outsider or "professional stranger," to use the terminology of cultural anthropology. As a stranger, an interim dean can interrogate tense zones of a library, from the anxieties bubbling up among the untenured library faculty to the unequal distribution of staff workloads between those with heavy supervisory responsibilities versus those without them.

One area in which this was most effective was creating a series of open forum meetings in which the interim dean fostered a sort of confessional space for assistant professors to express freely their concerns with the promotion and tenure process to a short-lived administrator, who then took these problems back to the administrative team but in an anonymous and professional manner. This is true also for staff and the other faculty ranks, from associate to distinguished librarians, and including contract faculty. It is often easier to discuss disparities across different categories of library personnel with respect to workloads, opportunities for promotion, and professional development with someone who sits outside of that system. An outsider dean can also spark debate in libraries about how past practices no longer serve current interests, again from a neutral vantage point. Together with the associate deans, the interim administrator can compile all this information gleaned from many one-on-one conversations with faculty and staff from every corner of the libraries, creating the "ticket-item" list of the major problems facing the unit. In so doing, the outsider dean and the senior administrative team can facilitate a seamless transition for the new permanent dean of libraries.

The double dean model is not a one-way street, with only the libraries benefiting. For the interim dean, the payoff is equally rich. The deep dive into the University of Arkansas Libraries opened the way for varied and innovative partnerships that this dean could never have imagined if she had not taken an administrative risk and added a second deanship to her portfolio. Those partnerships include librarians supervising honors undergraduate research, libraries

teaching fora in the Honors College on subjects like “The Role of Open Access in COVID-19 Vaccine Research,” librarians adding honors scholars’ interns in novel areas such as folk arts traditions in the region, and honors courses extending their foothold in the world of open educational resources. Finally, the alliance between this interim dean and the administrative team in libraries has forced her to rethink some of the administrative structures and practices in the Honors College. This was an unexpected outcome of moving into an academic unit with a shared love of pedagogy and service but with a very different apparatus for achieving the academic success of students, faculty, and the community at large. Some examples were how the libraries pushed out programming for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts through multiple venues, such as town halls, open mic events, and training sessions. Doing so allowed library personnel to engage in those initiatives in multiple ways and absorb the message through different learning styles. She also admired the way the libraries formed groups around certain library-wide work, such as the administrative team itself, a larger libraries management council to consider operational impacts of key library initiatives, and a faculty concerns committee to address concerns about faculty governance. Although the Honors College is a smaller unit, she felt it would be beneficial for her own unit to think strategically about adding some teams centered on administration and governance.

## Conclusion

One unplanned outcome of a double dean stint in the libraries was the facilitation of a smooth transition for the incoming, permanent dean. In this instance, the double dean had personally experienced an awkward transition to a deanship with no point-person to ease her way. Therefore, she knew well how important it is to bring new leadership to a unit in advance of the actual start date. The game plan for doing so materialized slowly over time. One of its key methods was to add the new dean to the weekly meetings she had been holding with the libraries’ administrative team. This way, the incoming dean will have developed a rapport with the associate deans, assistant dean of finance, executive administrative assistant, and chief development officer. By the time the new dean arrived on campus, that individual would already have become an active and engaged member of the leadership team. Moreover, the double dean launched a series of virtual one-on-one meetings with the incoming dean on subjects related to the ticket-item list she created. Together, the new dean and double dean strategized about implementing change in libraries in an efficient yet realistic way. One of the greatest benefits of partnering a double dean with an incoming permanent dean is the double dean’s longstanding network and alliances outside of libraries. For new administrators coming to an institution from the outside, one of the biggest challenges is navigating the culture of a different university and its complex, often

unpredictable politics. The double-dean/dean team together can avoid potential snares and traps outside of libraries and cement salient relationships throughout campus. Finally, the new dean will have the double dean on “speed-dial”; the double dean will be eager to serve as informal advisor and connector to other administrators at the university, a “win-win” for the health and vibrancy of the staff and faculty of libraries.

## Endnotes

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