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PORTALS Planning: Revisiting the future (and past) of the virtual library

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PORTALS Planning:

Revisiting the Future (and Past) of the Virtual Library

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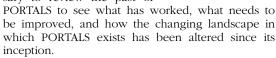*Executive Director, PORTALS*
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T he Portland Area Library System (PORTALS) recently observed the fifth anniversary of the signing of the Charter that established the consortium. On July 21, 1993, the president and chief executive officers of the fourteen member institutions signed the document that established "an organization of public and private institutions committed to working cooperatively to expand and enrich the information resources and services necessary for the scholarly activities of the college and university community and those people with similar needs in the greater Portland area" (from the PORTALS Mission). Although five years seems like a relatively short period for most of us, these five years perhaps have included dramatic changes in the area of library and information services worldwide as well as for the member institutions in PORTALS.

When PORTALS was established, less than half of the member institutions had local integrated online library systems, many did not have high-speed Internet connections, and the World Wide Web was still just over the horizon. As this fifth anniversary of the official founding of PORTALS approached, not only had the member institutions moved well beyond the capabilities they had in 1993 but they were eager and ready to assume an even more aggressive approach to the realization of the virtual library that was the basis for the creation of PORTALS. It was time to take stock of the present of PORTALS and to see where it should go in the future. In doing so, it was also necessary to review the past of PORTALS to see what has worked, what needs to be improved, and how the changing landscape in which PORTALS exists has been altered since its inception.

To address these various issues, PORTALS initiated an intensive planning process in July 1997 with the goal of having a renewed vision and direction for the consortium by the time of the fifth anniversary observation. This paper reports on that planning activity as well as the developments leading up to this renewed planning process. Many questions remain unanswered as several other variables remain to be determined, but the planning effort undertaken provided a framework in which to build upon the past and to prepare for the future.

HISTORY

The history of PORTALS is rooted in planning activities. It was "A Strategic Plan for Improving Academic Library Resources in the Portland Metropolitan Area," a document submitted in October 1990 to the Governor's Commission on Higher Education in the Portland Metropolitan Area, that perhaps can be viewed as the formalization of the idea that something like PORTALS should exist in the Portland Metropolitan Area. This document reflects the vision identified by an ad hoc committee of library directors from eight of the institutions that would come to be PORTALS members. The authors of this "Strategic Plan" submitted this document to the Council of Presidents of the participating institutions. In addition to identifying an initiative for a "Regional Research Library," the Governor's Commission also called for the creation of the Greater Portland Trust in Higher Education (GPT) with one of its initial tasks to be "a fundraising effort for a regional research library serving all institutions in the metropolitan area."

In February 1992 a newly formed Library Steering Committee (soon known as the PORTALS Steering Committee) met for the first time. Later that year a grant proposal was prepared and submitted to the Murdock Charitable Trust requesting funds "to complete and implement a strategic plan for the [PORTALS] project." In June the Trust awarded a $65,500 planning grant for PORTALS and the Consulting Librarians Group (Sandra Cooper, Linda Crowe, and Robert Drescher) was hired as consultants for the planning process. The Murdock-funded planning project resulted in several documents that served as the focus of PORTALS planning; the "Final Report" of the Consulting Librarians Group largely addressed organizational issues, and the "Report of the Steering Committee" focused on functional objectives. With the submissions of the planning documents in March 1993, the path had been laid for the formalization of the PORTALS organization. Following the signing of the PORTALS Charter in July and Doug Bennett's appointment as Executive Director, PORTALS set out to address those goals and objectives established in the planning process. In the months following the charter's signing, additional planning resulted in several important documents, including a statement on "Access to Resources and Services of the Portland Area Library System" and policies on Reciprocal Borrowing and Affiliate Libraries.

With Doug Bennett's resignation as Executive Director in June 1994, the focus within PORTALS shifted considerably from planning to implementation, in

PORTALS
Portland Area Library System

particular at the local level as ten of the PORTALS members had received funds from the Murdock Trust for installing or replacing local integrated library systems. The appointment of Howard McGinn as Executive Director in July 1995 coincided with the award of a Department of Education HEA II-B grant ("Hatfield grant"), and general planning activity was tabled as management and implementation of the grant took precedence. Although the PORTALS Board held a planning retreat in the summer of 1996, sustained planning activity was not undertaken at that time. By mid-1997, the need for renewed planning was increasingly evident.

NEED FOR PLANNING
The changes that had occurred in just the four years since PORTALS official inception pointed out the need to reassess several aspects of its activities, operations, and even existence. Beyond the fact that the PORTALS planning documents had grown dusty with age, there were two other major reasons why a renewed planning activity was necessary within PORTALS: 1) the need for planning at a functional level, and 2) the changing landscape within which PORTALS exists.

PLANNING AT A FUNCTIONAL LEVEL
The Strategic Plan of 1990 and the updated version of this plan done in 1993 addressed certain "functional" aspects of what PORTALS could and should undertake in specific areas, including collection development, databases, and resource sharing. In many ways, several of the stated Outcomes and Specific Strategies of these plans had been realized, largely through the committee structure put in place at about the same time as the acceptance of the revised plan in 1993. With the initial completion of these objectives, in addition to the changes taking place as noted below, a refocus on planning at the functional level was required.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE
There are many changes in the library, higher education, political, economic, and technological landscape that made the renewed planning activity vital at this time for PORTALS. Some of these are quite obvious; others are less visible but still of significance. The introduction of these new elements and the changing nature of others required a reexamination of the planning at both the functional and organizational level for PORTALS. Just two general categories of the most significant in some key areas are discussed below.

TECHNOLOGICAL
One of the most obvious changes in the landscape in which PORTALS exists is that associated with technology, from power on the desktop to network and telecommunication enhancements. PORTALS was conceived in the Gopher era when the World Wide Web was hardly on anyone's radar. The changes that are at the base of that transformation are directly linked to some of the issues that confront the existence of the PORTALS technological environment.

But the impact of the change does not just focus on the PORTALS "central" aspect but the fact that the member institutions have developed and enhanced their own local environments well beyond what was thought possible when PORTALS was conceived.

ORGANIZATIONAL
There are several ways to examine the changes in the organizational landscape surrounding PORTALS. Perhaps one of the most obvious is the realization of Orbis, which at the time of the revised Strategic Plan in 1993 was just emerging as a bona fide idea and which subsequently received funding from the Meyer Memorial Trust to give it life. Since then the growth of Orbis and the enhancements and expansion of its activities have made it an important player on the same landscape as PORTALS.

In conjunction with this is the revitalization of library consortia nationwide which seems to be based on the convergence of several factors that also bear on PORTALS existence, namely technological, political, and economic factors. This resurgence of library consortia is having an impact on the marketplace where new technological products are introduced and how applications such as databases and full-text journals are being packaged and priced.

PROCESS
The planning process undertaken in PORTALS in 1997-98 was an attempt to incorporate the efforts undertaken in the past, but to enhance these efforts with a consistent and uniform process that addressed some weaknesses and gaps of the earlier planning activity. A "Plan to Plan" document was developed by PORTALS staff and approved by the Council of Librarians in July 1997 (available at: http://www.portals.org/plantoplan.html).

As in 1992-93, planning was to take place on two levels, organizational and functional, but the functional aspects were to drive the organizational issues. Functional planning was the focus of an Ad Hoc Planning Advisory Group (PAG) appointed by the Interim Executive Director. This group consisted of the current chairs of the four active, standing committees of the Council of Librarians, the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Council, and, in an effort to identify the role that Orbis plays in PORTALS planning, the current Chair of the Orbis Council.

The PAG served as the communication "hub" for the planning process at the functional level and as a source for idea exchange, support, and problem identification. Planning Task Forces in specific functional areas were chaired by members of the PAG who mostly served as chairs of the standing committees. Task Forces were comprised of eight or nine individuals, most coming from the membership of the committees involved. Three specific functional areas were identified: Access and Delivery Services (which combined Circulation and Document Delivery Committee members), Cooperative Collection Development, and Electronic Resources.

Part of the effort to enhance the planning activity with a consistent and uniform process included two workshops offered to PAG members and others on the Planning Task Forces. Training workshops in "Effective Meeting Management: Facilitating Group Problem Solving and Decision Making" and "Strategic Planning" were held in September 1997 and sought to provide the basis for collaborative problem solving and structuring planning activities and documents. To assist in getting the planning process underway, a planning binder was prepared to provide important background information, including the "mandates" and "mission" of the organization. Following the model presented in the "Strategic Planning" workshop, each Task Force used this background information to develop goals, strategies, activities, evaluative criteria, and a vision for each of their functional areas. (See Figure 1.)

The Task Forces met from November 1997 to March 1998 and followed a general outline addressing the elements of a strategic plan. These elements were

Figure 1: Strategic Planning Elements

compiled into functional planning documents for each area and these were submitted by March 31, 1998. The PAG reviewed the individual documents at an all-day meeting in mid-April and a composite "master plan" was drafted for the Council of Librarians. At two all-day meetings in late April and early May, the Council reviewed the master plan and, in response to the question "What kind of organization needs to exist to address the strategic issues and goals?" a broader organizational plan was constructed and compiled for presentation to the PORTALS Board of Directors for their review at a June meeting. Although the Board did not accept all aspects of the organizational plan, it endorsed the planning activity and the functional aspects of the process. In September the Council of Librarians adopted an initial implementation plan for

addressing the activities as identified in the plans. New functional committees were organized based on priorities coming out of the planning process and these newly defined groups initiated their efforts in the fall.

Planning should be an ongoing process and the groups involved in planning for PORTALS were diligent in providing evaluative criteria for assessing the goals, strategies, and activities recommended in the planning process. It remains to be seen how effective the outcome of the planning process was, but in revisiting the future and past of the vision of the virtual library within PORTALS, the planning activity has proved to be of much value. **Q**

NOTES
The eight institutions involved and the library directors at the time were: Lewis & Clark College (Randy Collver), Oregon Graduate Institute (Maureen Sloan), Oregon Health Sciences University (Jim Morgan), Pacific University (Ron Johnson), Portland Community College (Barbara Swanson), Portland State University (Tom Pfingsten), Reed College (Victoria Hanawalt), and the University of Portland (Fr. Joseph Browne).

Members of the Steering Committee included: Doug Bennett (Reed), Randy Collver (Lewis & Clark), Ginnie Cooper (Multnomah County Library), Lesley Hallick (OHSU), Susan Resnick Parr (Lewis & Clark), Tom Pfingsten (PSU), Don Rushmer (Pacific), Maureen Sloan (OGI), and Barbara Swanson (PCC). Kris Hudson, Acting Director of GPT, and GPT Board members Dick Raymond and Ogden Beeman also participated on this group.

For several aspects of this resurgence in library consortia, see the March 1998 issue (Vol. 17, no. 2) of *Information Technology and Libraries,* guest edited by John Helmer. Also see William Gray Potter, "Recent Trends in Statewide Academic Library Consortia," *Library Trends* 45 (Winter 1997): 416-34.

Planning Advisory Group members were: Diane Braithwaite (MHCC, Circulation Chair), Joan Carey (Clark, User Services Co-Chair), Lynn Chmelir (Linfield, Orbis Council Chair), Leonoor Ingraham-Swets (Clark, Collection Development Liaison), Dolores Judkins (OHSU, User Services Co-Chair), Jim Morgan (OHSU, Circulation Liaison), Patrice O'Donovan (OHSU, Collection Development Chair), Tom Pfingsten (PSU, Document Delivery Liaison), Carol Resco (OGI, Council Vice-Chair), Barbara Swanson (PCC, Council Chair), Cathy Wright (Multnomah County Library, Document Delivery Chair), and Leslie Wykoff (WSU-Vancouver, User Services Liaison).

The meeting records for these Task Forces as well as other information related to this planning activity can be found on the PORTALS Web side at http://www.portals.org/strategic_planning.html.