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Sharing Visions/Sharing Stories

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"What kind of information should our newly-formed task force gather to inform our visioning process?" That really isn't a very exciting question, but the answer turned out to be so important. Like the Vision 2010 committee before us, we had the advantage of support from the Oregon State Library Board and the Oregon Library Association Executive Board. We weren't going to have to gather all of our information ourselves—so where could we use an expert's help?

The Vision 2010 committee had benefited from some excellent environmental scans as they put together their statement, and that was something we could choose to do too. Talking to the people who led that effort, however, another option emerged. They told us that while they had had the opportunity for people to send in their thoughts, because that information was not gathered in a systematic way, with a plan for analyzing and using it built in, they weren't able to take advantage of the rich input they received. We decided that we would put our resources into gathering this kind of qualitative input from Oregon libraries and Oregon librarians. Working with a consultant, we decided that the way we would do this was by conducing a Delphi study.

The Delphi method has been around for a while, but it's not well known. It is a research method that brings together experts on a topic and then has them work together to develop consensus around that topic. For our purposes, it was an exciting way to bring together people from around the state—and to allow them to collaborate across time and space. We're a big state, and distance is a barrier to participation. As we used it, the Delphi method lets everyone participate equally without having to travel.

The committee members, who themselves represented a cross-section of Oregon libraries, identified our initial group of participants. We took care that those 75 people represented a good mix of library types and of librarian types. Those who agreed to participate were then given three sets of questions to answer.

The first round of questions was open-ended:
- In an ideal world, what will your users experience when they use your library in 2020?
- What needs to happen between now and then for that vision to come true?
- What could get in the way of achieving that vision?

Participants could write as much or as little as they wanted, and they did. A few hit the pre-set limit on our online survey software and sent their lengthier responses via e-mail. Our consultant took those hundreds of pages of responses and broke them into individual concepts and ideas. She grouped those ideas into seven broad categories:
- The library environment
- Access to library services
- Library and Community
- Inclusiveness in Libraries
- Library technology
- Collaboration among libraries
- Library staffing

Looking back, it is striking how much of the final document we can see in those themes.

We then created a list of almost three hundred ideas that were pulled directly from the participants' responses. That list was turned into a survey. In the second round, participants went through those 300 statements and indicated their agreement or disagreement with each one. In this way, the participants could have a virtual "conversation" or debate about the concepts they'd generated in round one.

Once that round was over, the consultant took the ranked statements and generated a list of core goals. At this point, we dropped the third question, about barriers. At this point it was clear that finances and funding was such a significant barrier that it rendered the question almost meaningless. No one could comment meaningfully on barriers besides funding, because funding was so significant that it was hard to see past it. In the third and final round, the participants were asked to rank their top three goals in each thematic area.
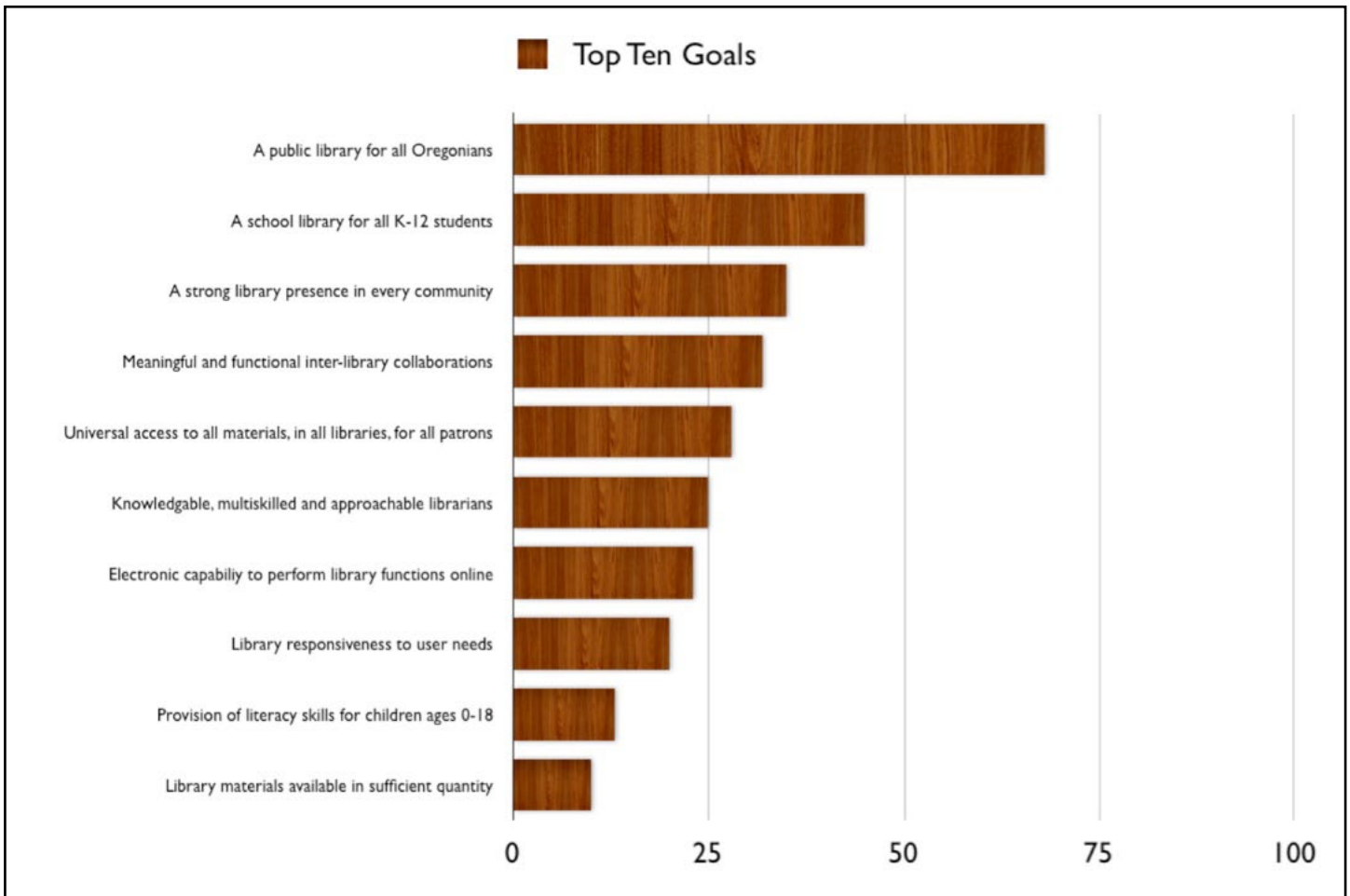

Figure 1. Top 10 goals

At this point, it became clear that we had what we wanted: the voices of Oregon libraries and Oregon librarians were clearly threaded through our whole process. But it was also clear at this point that we could not simply rely on the "results" of this process to define the Vision 2020 statement. The Delphi process, at the end of the day, is designed to produce consensus. And consensus, at the end of the day, is not very visionary. We needed go beyond ideas so widely accepted and return to the concept of vision.

To do this, we went back to that first round of open-ended questions and the stories people told there. We took the shared values revealed by the Delphi process: universal access, collaboration, sharing, innovation and leadership and we asked ourselves—if our libraries are going to be dynamic, active spaces at the center of their communities in 2020, what things need to be true?

We had always understood the Delphi data to be one of multiple "streams" of information that we could use to inform our process. To get from data collection to vision creation, the small task force met for two days in a retreat at Oregon State University. In that retreat we analyzed the Delphi data. Each member read widely for visionary statements and ideas and shared those that resonated with the group. Our final stream was quantitative; we updated the environmental scans that had informed the Vision 2010 process.

At that point, we headed into a brainstorming phase. Using dozens of post-it notes, every group member brainstormed ideas—ideas that resonated from the literature, from the Delphi stories, ideas that resonated with them individually, and ideas they believed reflected the needs of "Oregon libraries." We all wrote down all of our ideas twice and when we had two complete sets of post-its, we broke into small groups to do what librarians do best: organize.

When we came back together, we discovered that had come up with the same broad categories for our collection of ideas. That gave us a lot of confidence that those categories -- staffing, community, place and sharing—were the right ones. We broke into pairs, each pair took a category, and overnight we drafted a description and some examples to illustrate its importance. We ended our 48 hours knowing each other a lot better, with a fully articulated draft statement.

The Delphi process was invaluable to us as we did this work. For example, librarians spend a lot of time focusing on our users, for good reason. We design user-centered services, and put together user-centered collections. Sometimes, it seems almost wrong to focus on our own needs in our program development. Reading through what was shared in the Delphi process, however, it became very clear that Oregon librarians believe that Oregon libraries cannot thrive if they are not places where good people want to work. Hearing how important issues like work environment, leadership and staff development are to Oregon librarians in the Delphi process gave us, for lack of a better word, permission to include those librarian-focused issues in the Vision 2020 statement.

Finally, we took the conversation back to the people of the Oregon Library Association. Each section of the Vision 2020 statement was posted online for comments, which were gathered using an online form. As we posted each section on Libs-OR and asked for feedback, dozens of comments would roll in. This feedback was then incorporated into revisions, and the final statement reflects a lot of what we heard in that process. It reflects our description of a 2020 where libraries are thriving. And it reflects the voices and stories of Oregon librarians, who gave their own answers to those questions every step of the way.