Open meeting to discuss the Literatures and Languages Team draft report
December 16, 2009
10:15-11:30 am
66 Library

Team members present were Robert Cagle, Miles Efron, JoAnn Jacoby, Doug Kibbee, Kathleen Kluegel, Carl Niekerk, Curtis Perry, Bruce Swann, Caroline Szylowicz, John Wagstaff, and Charles Wright

In addition to the Literature and Languages Team members, over 20 people came to the meeting. At least 6 of these were faculty from outside the Library (Mara Wade, Larry Schehr, Robert Parker, Renee Trilling, Lori Necomb and Martin Comargo).

John Wagstaff, Team Leader, welcomed everyone and explained that the meeting was convened to discuss the DRAFT report and revise this draft based on input. We are here to listen to what you say and incorporate relevant perspectives and any new information that is brought forward. Once the report is revised, it will be submitted to the University Librarian and the Library Executive Committee. An implementation team will be charged, drawing on the membership of the current planning team for continuity. Comments will be accepted through the December 20, and can be submitted via the form at www.library.illinois.edu/export/nsm/tellus.html (anonymously if you like).

The report (available at the Team website: http://www.library.illinois.edu/nsm/lit/) proposes a merger of English and Modern Languages into a space on the 2nd floor. Responses to the survey show that the other libraries used most often by respondents are (Main Stacks, Reference, HPNL) are also on the second floor of Main Library. The Team is excited about the prospect of having a strong, more prominent presence in the Library for literatures and languages. The Team benefited in its discussions from a number of visitors. John Unsworth joined us to talk about digital humanities. Tom Teper, the AUL for Collections, came to talk about the broad collections picture.

John thanked the Team for their phenomenal level of engagement, commitment, and hard work. He also thanked everyone who had provided input and responded to the survey, and expressed appreciation for all who care so deeply about the Library. He then opened the floor for questions.

Bill Maher (Library, University Archives) – The report talks about room 200. Are you talking about the whole room? How will you demarcate this space? Team members explained that the wall currently enclosing room 200D may stay where it is, or be moved to just beyond the door to 225, to provide a single point of ingress into the unit and create a contiguous space. Reference tools will be part of the open room, and integrated into the reference collection currently in Room 200. This can create an integrated collection of integrated dictionaries, which will be a boon, and get rid of duplicate materials. There is a preference for concentrating the humanities materials on the south end, as far as possible.

Jo Kibbee Library (Reference, Research & government Information) -- Does it make sense to have a separate reference collection for just literatures and languages in the new model? Jo would like to see
things in a single Dewey order without index tables. Kathleen would like the pertinent materials as close as possible to the new combined collection – will need to look at this in the implementation. John noted that we as librarians are constantly making small adjustments to make things easier for our patrons, and that the proposals in the report are not contingent upon this particular recommendation, even though the Team does stand behind the recommendation.

Lori Newcomb (English) – The proposed new arrangement will require collaboration and consultations around what materials are in 200, building on current practice in the Library and around the management of the collections by libraries within overlapping collection responsibilities. Will moving the wall affect the grand architecture of the room? How costly would it be? John explained the operational advantages to the library, and to patrons, of having a single entrance, and JoAnn noted that she has discussed this with Library Facilities – the cost is not insignificant, but the visual impact should be minimal. The distance involved is not great, compared to the scale of the room.

Jo talked about the Stacks Reference collection which is being created just inside the entrance to the Main Stacks. Large bibliography sets like the National Union Catalog that were formerly in room 200 are being moved there. The idea behind Stacks Reference is to provide a convenient home for things which are still needed onsite, but not as frequently used as before. This is allowing the Library to restore Room 200 to its former grandeur, to make it more inviting, and provide more tables.

Tom Teper (Library, Office of Collections) - asked about the proposed name for the unit, “Literatures and Languages.” If the scope is just Western Literatures, will this be confusing to patrons? He noted that this question may not merit a name change, but might suggest the need to clarify relationship to other units. Wagstaff noted that the proposed name is no more confusing than the current set-up, which uses the name “Modern Languages” which suggests that all currently spoken languages should be included. Charlie Wright (English & Team member) noted that everyone has figured out how to live with that library’s current name, nonetheless. Sort of like the World Series – context matters. Just because International and Area studies unit includes the term “International” doesn’t mean that people will expect to find everything from outside the U.S. (e.g., French literature) there.

Larry Schehr (French) – What would be your three bullets for justifying this? John talked about bringing overlapping areas together to make research easier. Larry mentioned that his collection (French) has been split in the Stacks. Larry wondered what overlap Curtis and he had, for instance? Larry noted that he no longer uses collections on site, but depends solely on mail option to have materials delivered – it makes no difference to him how many individual libraries there are because of this.

In answer to Larry’s original point, Doug Kibbee (French) talked about the opportunity to provide more robust services, longer hours and save people time and travel. The survey results suggest that many people who use the Modern Languages Library use English as their next most frequently used Library, and vice versa. Charlie talked about the benefit for medievalists, as well as the more general benefit of bringing together the resources (books, expert librarians) to explore the important transcontinental cross-
currents between continental, British, and New World literatures. Larry suggested that these be foregrounded more clearly in the report.

In answer to one of Larry’s other questions, John noted that for many patrons, this new model will still require some patrons – for example, in Linguistics – to use more than one library. The trick is to get the scale right.

Kathleen Kluegel (Library & Team member) noted that she currently buys books on continental literature, so merging the collections will bring them into proximity with their brethren.

Charlie reiterated his support for this plan, and noted that even if we did nothing there is no guarantee that things can continue as they are. There are advantages to claiming a highly attractive space when it becomes available. We need to work within the other changes within the Library. For instance, in Room 200 there will be bleeding into the rest of the reference collection – this intermingling may serve humanities scholars.

John noted that Team gave serious consideration early on to the option of doing nothing, and rejected it as an undesirable option.

Mara Wade (German) likes the idea of combining the two units, provided the implementation is done appropriately and responsibly. She suggests making the arguments for this within the frame of the campus rhetoric of “what to do with the humanities?” This reconfiguration once again makes the library the jewel on campus, supporting the tuition engine. Mara also requested that the final report should have Larry’s proposed “13 bullet points for the Tribune.” This report is an investment in the faculty members in the humanities.

Specifically, Mara would like to see the following addressed in the report:

- Humanities faculty are print-oriented, but this does not mean digital humanities are not important. The point here is that humanities should be proportionately under-represented in Oak Street and should have a strong presence in the West Stacks. We have the opportunity to move from the very angry faculty meeting of 1-2 years ago, when people were ready to take this to The Chronicle (A world class library is being dismantled!) to a reconfiguration of our collections and services in such a way as to reinstate our place as one of the greatest humanities libraries worldwide.

- John noted his sympathy with the way humanities faculty are treated here and elsewhere compared with some other disciplines.

- Jo noted that, like Mara and Charlie, she is excited about the 2nd floor location. She would like to see the reference collection become a really strong interdisciplinary humanities and interpretive social science reference collection.

- Renee Trilling (English and Medieval Studies) voiced her strong support of the Team’s proposal because it will make her work easier. Bringing together these strong collections is a way to highlight the strengths of our University and Library. One concern is the staffing question – it would be a shame if there was a reduction in subject expertise and staff support. JoAnn Jacoby (Library & Team member)
noted that while the Library, like the rest of campus, is at best in a “resource-neutral” situation, there is a continuing commitment to having subject specialists with training and expertise in there areas of responsibility. John noted that the team had discussed concerns about continuing support for librarians with responsibilities that included German, Scandinavian, and linguistics.

Curtis Perry (English & Team member) thinks office space will be the challenge. Bob Cagle noted that he had spoken out against moving this wall of 200D for this reason, because this money would be better spent in other ways.

Lori Newcomb asked “Why did the Team argue against keeping things are they are when there is a loss of square footage?” Kathleen said that in fact it was likely that the units were not going to lose space, given the availability of 200D and the integrated reference collection.

Lori wanted to make sure that the former English Library was going to continue as Library space. She finds the argument based on scholarship uneven but ceded that it may make it easier for librarians to manage the collections and work together. She suggests that the report specifically asserts that there will be an increase in hours, work-stations, and outlets. She also also wants a statement regarding the maintenance of current staffing levels.

Stuart Albert (Library) is delighted by the people he has seen here today and also happy to see the focus on the constituents. We serve the faculty, the faculty are the university – we need to continue to work together in this way. Spoke to the tragedy of Oak Street and lost records.

Bill Maher (Library) wants more intellectual honesty – in his opinion, what we are really talking about is a careful process to do retrenchment. He agreed that we should have good bullet points, and noted that he strongly supports this idea and find it to be the most convincing of the new service model proposals. He suggests that the report address the issue of integrating the Classics Library, and specifically why it wasn’t included in the report – it was purely political, in his view. John said that this was not behind the lack of discussion in the report – it just didn’t come up. Kathleen argued that there are good intellectual reasons not to include Classics – it is both broader and more encapsulated than Literatures. Curtis noted that he uses Classics a lot, more than Modern Languages, but if we want to make a strong argument it works at cross-purposes if we start qualifying that argument. Curtis thinks we should try to sell this, make the argument punchy and assertive.

Charlie noted that as a medievalist would be happy to have Classics integrated, but is content to acknowledge that Classics has made a separate peace. The important thing right now is to move forward with what we all think is a good idea. Charlie went on to note that the proposed space for the combined unit is perfectly situated in terms of in location and its configuration for the scope of the unit. It is laid out in a way that would support a browseable print collection, a reading room space for new issue of periodicals, and reference materials relocated into what is already a Reference Library. Going into this process he had feared the worst, but was now very excited.
Robert Parker (English) – this would vastly increase the use of the Library, especially among graduate students and undergraduates. It also makes a lot of intellectual sense. Theory books would be brought together, not divided into continental and American, books in English by Chicano authors would also be in one place. It would reduce confusion about what librarians to bring a specific question to. It always struck him as odd and unwieldy that the two were separated. John Wagstaff thanked all present for their attendance at such a busy time of year. Once again this shows how committed both librarians and academic faculty are to the present and future of the library.