A Starter's Guide for New Academic Library Leaders: Advice in Conversation

Chapter 12

Crisis Management

With:

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Martin Garnar (MG): One month into my term as president of the state library association, I found myself on the front page of the Denver Post in a story titled "Library Secure for Kid Porn."[1] As you can imagine, this was not the kind of fame I desired. At the time, I was a tenured faculty member and felt confident that I would survive this crisis, as my library dean made it clear he would defend and support me should there be any blowback (there wasn't). Now, as a library dean myself, I'm the one who would be in the hot seat if there's a crisis, whether it's negative press about one of my staff members, a personnel matter that spins out of control, or, like my immediate predecessor as dean, responding to an investigative journalist's "discovery" of library materials being thrown out as part of a weeding project and ending up on the evening news. Adriene, what's been your experience with crisis management?

Adriene Lim (AL): First of all, Martin, I'm very sorry this happened to you. Unfortunately, your story reminds me of dozens of incidents affecting library leaders in the past several years. When we choose to become leaders of complex organizations, especially those of us in highly visible, public roles, we expect to take a few hits now and then as we carry out our duties. We have to stand up for our values, do what we believe is the right thing to do, and not be driven by fear of backlash or recrimination from those without the full knowledge of situations in question. This doesn't make the professional and personal pain any less intense, however, when a major crisis happens and a flood of negative publicity, consequences, or reactions begins. For me, the first public crisis I faced in my 20-year career was by all measures an extraordinary one. It occurred just three months after my appointment as dean of libraries at the University of Oregon (UO). At the onset of the crisis, advisers at the university tried to prepare me for the media storm that would follow, warning, "Get ready, this is *Chronicle* level" (referring to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*), but in retrospect, when something like this happens, there is little that advisers can do to prepare you for the shock of media inquiries, anonymous trolling, harassing emails, and so on.

The crisis I encountered as a new dean was associated with the decades-long assignment of university-wide records management into the libraries' portfolio. Although I cannot discuss

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[1] Cardona, F. (2007, November 18). Library secure for kid porn. *Denver Post*, p. A1. https://www.denverpost.com/2007/11/17/library-secure-for-kid-porn/

some of the issues associated with the case, I can describe the factual circumstances surrounding the incident and the nature of the records involved: Over 50,000 electronic records were released to a library user, without those records having gone through a records-management or archival-review process. The files were associated with the UO's Office of the President, as held under four former presidents and one then-current president. In contrast to the media's characterization of these records as archival documents, only about 20% of the cache was appropriate for accessioning into the archives, while over 80% represented non-permanent administrative and business records, many of them containing confidential, legally protected, and/or sensitive data. I learned later that, years earlier, a technological program had been installed on the desktop computers of those working in the Office of the President, and the program had been churning away, sweeping records and files automatically onto library servers. This was the explanation for why the Libraries had such a large volume of non-archival, sensitive administrative records in the first place.

The crisis taught me many lessons, including the realization there are few experts, theories, or models available to assist leaders when they may have little control over a crisis situation as it unfolds. We don't often discuss this in library education or leadership training programs, but library deans/directors report to university executives, such as provosts or vice provosts. Depending upon the specific crisis at hand, library leaders may be directed by their institutions' top-level executives to refrain from making public or internal-library statements about the crises. There may be legal ramifications involved. They may be instructed to refer all inquiries to the universities' public relations directors, so that their own notions about crisis-related communication, especially ideas about prioritizing public relations, suddenly become moot. In the meantime, in the absence of public communication, library leaders may be required to endure personal attacks or the impugning of their integrity in social media or in the community. Then, if an external investigation takes place, the library deans/directors may be further obligated to remain as neutral as possible in public, to avoid any sense of predetermining or influencing the outcome of the investigations, until all facts are known. For librarians who believe in transparency and openness whenever possible, and for administrators who like to be prepared and proactive during a crisis, these strictures on communicating factual information or

being unable to reassure their communities in the early stages may be the most difficult to accept. Library leaders can advocate to release more information to the community, but if, as in my case, the answer is no, library leaders may not have any choice but to remain seemingly non-responsive for the most part, unless they wish to seek immediate, new employment elsewhere.

There are strategic actions library leaders can take, however, even in these seemingly no-win situations. In some crisis scenarios, it may help to reach out confidentially for advice from other experienced professionals and mentors. For example, during the first phase of this particular crisis, I consulted with the American Library Association's Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF) and I reached out to other leaders in special collections and archives within my personal network. Their support, insights, and affirmation of our shared library values and principles were invaluable to me as I navigated the crisis, and as I worked to enable my institution and the libraries to move past the incident and recover successfully. Throughout the crisis, I also collaborated with other colleagues to correct the long-standing problems in our infrastructure. I became determined to craft the strong policies and changes in infrastructure we needed, vetted by many stakeholder groups, and we worked together to enact better procedures and training in the libraries. Finally, I prepared preemptively a written statement for the community, in anticipation that I would need such remarks quickly one day. When I was asked by the administration to speak about the incident at a university senate meeting with only 30 minutes of notice, I was very glad to have that written statement ready to use. When *Library Journal* (*LJ*) wrote an inaccurate article about the incident and the reporter failed to reach out to me in advance before publishing it, I was able to send her via email the letter of support from ALA OIF describing the results of my earlier consultation. Thankfully, the ALA OIF letter prompted the *LJ* reporter to call me within minutes of receiving it, and she quickly corrected her original online story. These are just a few examples of the way that preparing in advance and networking with professional associates helped saved the day, at least for me and the UO Libraries in this case.

MG: Wow -- what a way to start your tenure at your new institution! I'm so sorry that this happened at any point in your career, but I think it's especially difficult when you're new to the role and haven't yet established your credibility within the institution. You've done an excellent job of outlining what a library leader might face during a crisis, and I think you've identified a big gap in our education of leaders. As a matter of fact, when I think back to the leadership institute I attended as a newer librarian, we didn't cover anything about crises, nor did it come up in my one library administration class. I know that some organizations and associations provide media training to leaders (including responding to crises) when they enter a position, such as the ALA president, but in my experience, it tends to be offered as just-in-time support when a crisis is on the horizon or has already blown up. As for resources, you're absolutely right about the general dearth of them, and the ones I've found are fairly basic. I was even part of a group that made a toolkit for ALA with a section on crisis communication and all we could do was come up with a bulleted list of tips -- though it's better than nothing, it's not much.

In your case, it sounds like the crisis was something that happened to you rather than was caused by something you did (or didn't) do. I know that leaders are ultimately responsible for what happens in their libraries, but it feels different when you're not the one who instigated the incident. However, sometimes a leader can be the one who inadvertently causes a crisis, whether it's for that leader personally or for the institution. A year or so after the "kid porn" incident, I was serving as chair of the ALA Intellectual Freedom Committee when I was asked to sign off on a statement regarding a political nominee for a position in the Obama administration. We were concerned because this person was being attacked for his connection to a bibliography on LGBT resources for teens, and the statement made the usual points about the importance of free expression to democracy. I didn't think anything of it until I was summoned to the library dean's office for a meeting with the university president, who had been receiving calls for me to be fired. As it turns out, a conservative website that was part of a coordinated campaign to smear the reputation of this nominee[2] picked up on the statement and accused me of supporting child

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[2] Gertz, M. (15 December 2009). Unraveling the Right's false attacks on Kevin Jennings. Media Matters for America, https://www.mediamatters.org/research/2009/12/15/unraveling-the-rights-false-attacks-on-kevin-je/158160

pornography. They then listed my place of work along with the president's email address so that readers could contact him and tell them why I should be fired, especially since I was working at a Catholic institution. The good news is that I was assured that I wouldn't be fired (having tenure helped), but I did learn a big lesson in the importance of making sure that my boss (as well as the public relations office) was always alerted whenever I was contacted by the media or making a public statement, and to gratefully accept their assistance in vetting statements before talking with the press. In my current role, I've expanded that to keeping my boss (the provost) in the loop about almost anything that could be controversial, as he would rather get too many emails than be caught off guard. To be clear, I'm not contacting him on a daily basis, as I'm learning what are the potential trigger points in my community. However, what worries me is what will happen when I'm the one not in the loop: in other words, when someone on staff does something and doesn't think to let me know about the potential for trouble. On the one hand, I don't want to micromanage everyone and ask for minute-by-minute updates on their activities, but I also want to help them develop that sense of when I need to know what's going on just in case it goes wrong. Do you have any tips for developing a crisis-aware culture in a library?

AL: I believe strongly in the value and utility of good policies and training for staff as mechanisms with which a library can avoid some crises preemptively, facilitate the management of crises when they do occur, and develop a more crisis-resilient organization. The mere creation and vetting of new or revised policies become shared learning experiences for you and your colleagues, and in some cases, your university, as the policies move through governance processes. The processes will also, hopefully, inspire thoughtful discussions about the issues embedded in the policy and the need for training. All new leaders should take stock of their core policies and the organizational maturity of their units. If any critical gaps are there, they should prioritize fixing these issues as a first, unglamorous step. Even if you do this, however, as I had started to do at UO, you might still not be able to fix the problems fast enough, i.e., you might not learn about hidden programs living on desktop machines or vulnerable data lurking on servers. Definitions for the word "crisis" usually include adjectives such as "sudden," "unpredictable," and "surprise," after all. But finding high-risk gaps and addressing them as

quickly as you can will always be my recommended approach, even if it did not help me evade a crisis this particular time.

As you described, Martin, I also have tried to build a management culture in the libraries that adheres to the motto, "no surprises if at all possible," where I try to brief the Provost and/or upper administration about any sensitive matters or changes I'm making in advance if I think they have the potential to cause risks, controversies, or disruptions. I try to discuss these matters with my library management team, too, as freely as I can (there are always exceptions if an issue is highly confidential, of course), and I've asked them to share similar information with me, especially if it relates to personnel matters, political considerations, or other possibly volatile situations. Having said all this, however, I agree with you that the crux is finding the "sweet spot," the right balance between trying to share too much and sharing too little.

MG: Let's talk more about the policies. You noted earlier that you needed to develop some policies in the middle of the crisis. Was it a matter that there weren't existing policies in place, or were those policies found to be deficient in the face of what was happening? How did you determine the stakeholders for vetting the draft policies, and what sort of training did you implement once the policies were created and adopted? (Yes, I know: so many questions!)

AL: In the case of the records incident, there were a few, brief policies in place when I arrived, but none that truly framed our work beyond a few traditional library functions or that helped guide us in terms of staff training or evaluating our operations. For example, a cursory "intellectual freedom" policy mentioned privacy protection, but that statement dealt only with privacy issues associated with circulation transactions. It did not address privacy concerns and responsibilities in other functional areas we managed in our operations, such as records management services and federal/state regulations related to these records, special collections with embargoed materials, and academic technology services that included all aspects of the learning management system with associated FERPA-protected student records. It did not address the fact that we in the libraries dealt with privacy issues in a number of ways and according to a variety of different ethical codes (e.g., librarians as compared to archivists). It also

did not address the long use of security cameras without policies in our special collections and archives facilities, as another example. In an environment that had now become hypersensitive to issues of privacy, this gap became another priority of mine to fix as well.

Prioritizing the development, review, and approval of policies and then implementing those policies with good training and compliance evaluations are important actions to take. My answer for the question "by whom should policies be reviewed?" depends upon the type of policy, of course, but for any broad, overarching policy that addresses the library's philosophy of service in some way, I believe it's better to consult with more groups of stakeholders than fewer. In the case, of our new, extensive Privacy Statement, I consulted with our library faculty body, library staff, my administrative team, the UO Senate-based University Library Committee, the Office of the Provost, and the Office of General Counsel, in addition to consulting with a few non-library faculty who expressed interest. We did not take the policy through to the entire University Senate for approval, however, because the library's Privacy Statement is a unit-level policy and these types of policies have not ever been addressed by the full Senate. External to the university, we used an ALA OIF template as our starting point for the policy and then asked the ALA OIF to review the draft and make sure that it reflected the principles endorsed by ALA. It's helpful to remember that consultation with others will likely make your policy stronger, but I admit that there may be times when you'll have to defend and provide the rationale for keeping some points intact, even if a group doesn't agree with certain parts. Hopefully, they will still see their perspectives are respected and that a leader has listened to their concerns. Once you have the proper policies in place, procedures can be developed using the policies as foundations. Good training activities and workshops can be addressed next, because now you have established clear foundations and structures within which to work.

MG: That's an excellent overview of policy development, and I really appreciate the thoroughness of your approach. You are so right about the importance of having good policies in place as the basis for procedures and training, so now I'm curious (and a bit scared to ask) if you've had any other crises that cropped up and gave you a chance to test this or other policies.

AL: Lately, we've been experiencing a different kind of crisis, one that is unrelated to policies or lack thereof, but one where good policies, proactive initiatives, and campus-wide discussions and communication have helped us to turn the crisis into a catalyst for positive action. The crisis has to do with large WPA-era murals that are integrated into the architecture of our main library building, constructed in the 1930s and registered now as a National Historic Place. One of the murals contains a phrase, "...preserve our racial heritage…," that has caused public controversy, and other murals depict the advancements of civilization as distinctly Euro-, White- and male-centric. Brown-skinned people and women are shown at the bottom of the hierarchy, close to the earth and animals. Except for a figure assumed to be Marie Curie in the "science" scenes, women and people of color are entirely missing from the "progress of civilization" shown at the middle and top sections of the hierarchy. This makes the underlying ideologies of White male supremacy and manifest destiny in the pieces quite stark for most observers.

The murals have inspired occasional media attention and passionate reactions within the university community and within the libraries, ranging from exhortations to remove the murals on one side of the spectrum to expressions of outrage over the calls to remove them, and many other stances in between. Although the murals in question are located physically in the main library, they are not part of the Libraries' collections, per se. We do not have the authority to remove them, but we also have not joined with others to advocate for the removal or shrouding of the objects. I have been skeptical of calls to relocate the murals to our campus art museum, because the museum holds at least one work of art that has come under similar protest. Relocating these relics would, in my opinion, be another way to defer future confrontations rather than address them head-on.

My library colleagues and I agree that the placement of these murals in our main library is problematic and offensive, given our commitment to diversity and inclusion. Most of us understand the reasons why a group of students posted a *Change.org* petition to remove the murals and why some administrators have asked if we would be willing to shroud the pieces. But for me, Martin, I just could not and cannot intellectually and professionally advocate for the removal or shrouding of these original artifacts in our library context. I believe we in the

Libraries and the University Archives have a stake in the conservation of these WPA-era works, because they are artifacts related to the university's history and because they are original features of a registered National Historic Place. I also believe strongly that we must counter calls for censorship of intellectual and artistic expressions, especially when they occur in a library context. Many of the books, manuscripts, and artwork in library collections have been and are targets of censorship. Prior to coming to the University of Oregon, I experienced three of these types of censorship demands and they all targeted works related to minority voices and marginalized communities in our society.

For these reasons and more, as the appointed library leader at the University of Oregon, I have tried to handle the crisis through purposeful, educational contextualization of the murals, and consistent messaging about our library mission and values. Over the past three years, this has manifested itself in several ways. We've created an extensive online research guide about the historic building and its art and architecture. We've written open letters of support for our diverse and inclusive community, and we've posted explanatory signs near the murals. We've held public forums on relevant topics with faculty guest speakers and produced unique exhibits emphasizing minority perspectives and histories in our collections. Working with the UO's Division of Equity and Inclusion, we also formed a cross-campus team to carry out a process in which we called for artistic works from UO students in response to the murals. Six of the award-winning submissions are on exhibit in our main library now. The award for best in show was given to a student named Deanna Chappell Belcher for a large multimedia piece entitled, *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor (with Thanks to Tuck and Yang)*.

Other more lasting changes have also occurred. For example, we funded and soon will be completing digital scholarship projects highlighting political movements and civil rights-related content in our archives, including an interactive, online tour about the university's "hidden" history, full of lost stories and forgotten voices of those with less power. With funding from the university president, we inaugurated a new biennial symposium entitled, *Intellectual Freedom and Information Policy in an Era of Change*, which aims to bring national scholars and library speakers to the UO to address contemporary issues affecting higher education and research libraries. Last year's session was titled, "Allies Not Enemies: Intellectual Freedom and Social

Justice," and received good reviews. At the university level, a new presidential task force will convene to address the disposition of the murals and other controversial public artworks and monuments across the campus. Perhaps we would have achieved some of these accomplishments without the murals crisis to spur us on, but they might not have been prioritized the way they were, if not for the need to manage the crisis in a thoughtful, proactive manner.

Despite these efforts, however, the crisis is far from over. This past summer, an unknown person vandalized one of the murals, smearing red paint across the words "racial heritage" and posting a small sign on the wall nearby, asking "Which art do you choose to conserve now?" When the person's action gained traction on social media that same week, it resulted in another flurry of media attention and administrative angst about whether to shroud the murals. To make the controversy more complex, a UO faculty member began to advocate publicly for the preservation of the vandalism as an act of "free speech," while other colleagues expressed their beliefs that we should leave the protester's sign on the wall permanently as a compelling work of art. Another faculty member advocated strongly for the immediate repair of the mural and for the harshest prosecution of the person who had damaged the artifact.

But here is where the policies I enacted with my colleagues and our professional codes of ethics and library values helped me feel confident about how to respond. I've already described my stance on removal, relocation, and/or shrouding of the artifacts, but I also turned to our existing policies on users' rights and responsibilities, library exhibits, and posting of signs in the libraries' facilities to determine that these regulations called for the removal of the protester's sign and the repair of the vandalized artwork. Because we also held archival materials related to protest movements at the university, I saw a solution to people's desires to preserve the protester's sign in some way: We would consider the protester's sign for accessioning into our university archives. I wanted to make a public statement about the vandalism and our next steps for addressing it, so I drafted a "dean's message" that I planned to send to the entire campus community the next day. As we've both stated, Martin, in these moments, it's a good idea to check with your provost and your university communications division. but in this case, I sent it to our university communications division first to see if they had initial suggestions. I was surprised to receive their message in return, "we will not release a statement at the moment."

Apparently, because there had not been enough media pickup of the story, some colleagues believed a statement from me would potentially attract media attention and invite unwanted coverage, rather than help alleviate the crisis.

My experience as a leader told me otherwise. This time, I pressed forward anyway and sent my draft statement to the president and the provost, presenting it along with my rationale for a timely statement; I believed a proactive public statement would benefit the campus community and the libraries as we continued to grapple with these controversial issues. I believed and still do that our open library environments are vulnerable ecosystems that require well-understood social agreements among all parties, and that we achieve this understanding and agreement through policies, laws, and regulations that inform how we co-exist and relate to each other and to the library's resources. In this case, I cared less about any negative media reactions than I did about sharing my frank professional perspectives and using my voice to join with others in an effort to make sense of these contentious issues in our culture and society. I wanted to ask for the continued respect of our libraries' policies. Thankfully, both the president and provost agreed with me, and my statement was posted the next day. Although there were a few negative reactions to my statement, overall, the responses from students, faculty, and community members were almost entirely positive. One faculty member even wrote to the university president, cc-ing me, to ask for wider media promotion of my statement, which then took place posthaste. Several students, staff members, and library professionals external to the university wrote to me to express their support.

For me, this episode illustrated again how a leader's experience, advance preparation, relationships, and instincts can help in some circumstances, but I am convinced that one can be the same person, the same leader, and have the same instincts, and yet the next time, have the crisis management not go as well, no matter how much advance preparation and strategic thought you put into it. If crisis management has taught me anything, it's that each crisis is different, with its own characteristics, circumstances, pitfalls, and needs. Living through these crises has also taught me to judge other leaders with more understanding, especially when I am not privy to what is going on behind the scenes and when the people involved are executives serving in what are essentially middle-management positions.

My hope, Martin, is that other new leaders out there will never have to face a crisis at the "*Chronicle* level." But if they do, I wish for them the ability to stay strong, to draw upon the experience and integrity they developed as they advanced in their careers, and to receive the good support and advice of other colleagues in their moments of need. It may not seem like it during a crisis, but the old adage, "this too shall pass" is true. If you make it through the crisis and help your organization thrive, you will not only be a stronger leader, but a more resilient, resourceful one because of it.

MG: Adriene, thanks for sharing your story, and your closing statement is an excellent reminder that we can always learn from difficult situations.