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Surviving or Even Thriving in Times of Crisis: Plans and Planning on the State and Local Level

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Introduction: Libraries,
Planning, and September 11
One reason that libraries were able to react in meaningful ways so quickly following the September 11 disaster is that they have a clear sense of vision, role and function. As information-based organizations, libraries recognize the need to establish planning processes and program plans. Plans and planning make a difference, especially in times of crisis.

The ability to plan for uncertain events should be considered a critical part of the overall planning process for any institution or organization. A disaster recovery and business continuity (DRBC) plan will allow an organization to return to normal functioning as quickly as possible after a disaster of any sort has disrupted the organization.

According to Lester Digman (Digman, 2001), DRBC planning has four major benefits: it helps organizations get into a better position to cope with unexpected developments; it reduces indecision, uncertainty, and delays when something unusual happens; an organization with a continuity plan is more likely to respond rationally to an unplanned situation than an organization without one; and, continuity planning forces people to think in terms of multiple possible outcomes, rather than just the most likely outcome. When planning for emergencies or unexpected

events, it is crucial to include all members of the organization in the planning process. In order to have total buy-in and effectiveness, each individual needs to feel a part of the plans that directly affect their well-being as well as that of the organization. During the planning process you may also find that many people have skills and experience that will prove invaluable should crisis ever hit.

Literature in the field of psychology also notes other important effects of pre-disaster planning and emergency preparedness, such as increased feelings of self-efficacy and self-reliability in individuals. The ability to take part in the planning process and be informed and educated about possible outcomes and after-effects of any type of crisis or disaster acts as a sort of stress inoculation (Dunning, 1990). Stress inoculation in the form of disaster awareness and continuity planning will help to minimize stress and emotional strain during and after times of crisis.

Plans and Planning

Planning within an organization is of critical importance because planning processes are the central mechanisms for converting inputs into desired outputs. Inputs are the building blocks of planning, e.g., personnel, budget, facilities, and collections. Outputs are the services, programs, and products that organizations strive to provide. Processes convert inputs to outputs. More specifically, a planning process consists of a series of steps deliberately taken to achieve goals and objectives.

There are different levels of planning, particularly comprehensive and operational. Comprehensive planning refers to long-term overall, global program or institution planning and it is common to plan out 3 to 5 years. A rolling 5-year plan begins with a detailed plan involving steps and objectives and moves to a more broad and general plan projecting into the



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future. This is called a “rolling plan” because at the end of year 1 there is again a projection 5 years into the future with the former year 2 becoming the new year 1 and so on. The point is that planning is an ongoing process, which requires continuous revision and re-evaluation. A rolling plan does not imply never reaching one’s goals. In fact, at any period, one should be able to look back and determine whether original objectives, steps, and goals were attained.

Operational planning targets specific areas or subsystems of the organization. Ultimately, the concern is with day-to-day operations, services, and functions. Operational planning is short-term in scope and oriented to implementation of strategies and activities. Once established, operational plans are less flexible than comprehensive plans as they help create the important structures that keep things flowing smoothly on a daily basis.

Whichever planning method is the focus of concern, major areas should be blocked out with broad strokes preceding penciling in details. This approach involves plans within plans: master plans and subplans. After priorities and overall tasks are determined, details for each level can be spelled out.

The converse approach to planning is a linear or sequential one. Here, activities are taken in order, regardless of priority or consideration of components within components. While appealing for its simplicity, linear planning often leads to unfinished projects. For example, consider the process of weeding a library collection. Generally, the approach is sequential or linear: start with the first classification section and continue on to the next section. Unfortunately, most efforts rarely get beyond the first few classes. Treating the problem from a broad perspective might first involve a sampling of the collection to determine problem areas.

Then, priorities are blocked out, and the activities to be completed are determined.

Example #1: The Information School of the University of Washington
At the University of Washington, we used both comprehensive and operational planning to transform from a relatively small, narrowly-focused unit with limited scope and resources to one that is significantly larger, broad-based, and well-supported. Our comprehensive planning method is comprised of the following parts: vision, analysis, planning, implementation, and assessment. “Planning in an organization must originate from the long-range goals, objectives, strategies, priorities, and information needs of that organization.” (Tom, 1991) Taking that into account, the Information School looks at the environment for which we are planning and implements the above steps in 5-year rolling increments. The 5-year plan incorporates broad goals for each year, with review and revision of the plan and goals each year as well. The administrative planning moves into operational planning when it lays out tasks for meeting each comprehensive goal and acknowledges the completion of specific tasks within set time frames.

Slightly over three years ago, the Graduate School of Library and Information Science had one degree program, 150 students, and ten faculty. The 1996 “Futures Report” offered a new direction for the School that was expanded and accelerated by incoming director, Mike Eisenberg. The vision was to become a broad-based information school, with an expanded Master of Library and Information Science program, additional academic programs on the undergraduate, graduate and doctoral levels, and with a major research program. The School also aimed for extensive relations within the communities of the Northwest; to be known for “high quality





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and high impact.” Accomplishing this vision required: analyzing the existing structure and makeup of the School; considering the needs and demands of students, professional organizations, and the community; and discovering the nature, amount and sources of resources and support.

We also had to capture the attention of the University administration, and we did so by developing clear and direct plans and communicating those plans broadly and frequently. (We still do this. See <http://www.ischool.washington.edu/5yrplan.htm> for the current version of the iSchool plan).

We planned for the revision of the MLIS program and for the implementation of new degree programs on the Bachelors and PhD levels. We then hired the necessary support staff and faculty to put these programs in place. At the same time, we engaged in constant assessment and reassessment of our programs, our structure, and our overall vision. Our plan has been rolling along with new goals and objectives always on the horizon.

September 11 had a profound effect on the Information School in terms of a reevaluation of its role and plans. Looking comprehensively, we view ourselves in a position to understand and make available

the information needed in times of great tragedy and uncertainty. We teach people to find information, to evaluate it, to organize it, and above all, how to be information professionals. In light of the September 11 tragedy, the School held a forum on freedom of information moderated by Dr. Stuart Sutton, and with participation from several other iSchool faculty members. Dr. David Levy (faculty member and native New Yorker) made a site visit to look at the situation in terms of the documents left behind and the documents produced for those lost, and has made several presentations. We also have faculty and students collaborating with several libraries on putting together information resource pages.

The financial fallout from September 11 is also affecting us. Just as in other states, the State of Washington is looking at serious revenue shortfalls with resulting cuts in support across the board—including for the University of Washington. To deal with this, the School is again falling back on its strategic plan and using collective planning skills to consider alternatives and to project programs and services and the requisite financial and other resources. With this solid base, we are able to effectively interact with the University’s process of budget analysis and decision-making. Although this doesn’t necessarily ease the pain, it does ensure that decisions are based on systematic and thoughtful plans as well as articulation and consideration of alternatives.

Finally, on an internal, operational level, we are reevaluating our own disaster preparedness plan. Something that, quite honestly, was inadequate. We have put together a DRBC plan, compiled contact information, and ordered more first-aid kits, supplies, and emergency devices. We will be holding a first aid class and have designated outside meeting areas, appointed emergency floor war-



dens, and have scheduled drills. We try not to ask whether we would have been prepared should the disaster have struck here, but rather to ensure we are prepared for the future.

Example #2: Washington—
Designing Our Future

As we write this article, the Washington State Library is under a cloud. In response to severe, statewide economic difficulties, the governor has proposed to eliminate the Washington State Library. This would eliminate a range of programs and services including centralized library research and information services for the Legislature and state agency staff, state support to local communities to establish and develop their own library services, access to integrated special collections, facilitated access to government information online, and supported library services at state residential institutions.

In mobilizing to react to this untenable proposal, the library community in Washington is able to draw on the statewide library plan developed by the State Library and the various statewide planning groups, particularly the Library Commission and the Library Council of Washington. The Library Commission is appointed by the Governor, and provides oversight and approval for expenditure of LSTA funds. In recent years, the Library Commission has become increasingly active and engaged. The Commission is advised, in turn, by the Library Council of Washington, an organization representing the various constituencies of the library community and general public. The Library Council, along with members of the State Library staff, does the hard work of nurturing new ideas and bringing them to proposal stage, developing plans, and reviewing various programs.

All three of these elements—the plan and the two organizations—were important sources of information and action for

responding to the Governor. A document was quickly drafted which outlined all the services provided by the Washington State Library as well as details on the nature of services, usage, cost, alternatives and their costs, and other considerations when appropriate. The rapid response and detailed summary of alternatives and cost breakdowns was only possible due to the existing strategic and operational infrastructure in place within the State Library.

The existence of planning processes and plans is already paying off. There is increased public awareness that libraries and library services and programs throughout the state would be severely damaged by the Governor's proposal.

While the future is in doubt, there is hope that the Washington State Library will survive this current threat. What is not in doubt is that the State Library would have a very difficult time in even building a case without the statewide plans and the planning processes in place.

Summary—Lessons for Individual
Libraries of All Kinds

The purpose of planning and plans is to connect tasks, affiliations, and timelines to best achieve an organization's goals. The benefits of having a solid plan in place are numerous and include improved performance, higher productivity, better decision-making, and happy, responsible, confident personnel. It is important to remember that implementing comprehensive and operational plans for an organization is not a one-time event—it is an ongoing process. Libraries and library communities in the Pacific Northwest are among the strongest and most vibrant in the country. Incorporating strategic planning into all library and information based organizations will ensure that we stay on track and at the top of our game, especially in the uncertain times to come. 

