

FAILURE IS AN OPTION!

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM UNSUCCESSFUL SCHOLARLY COMMUNICATION INITIATIVES

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Too often, the failure of a scholarly communication initiative is viewed as an unacceptable outcome, with negative personal and professional implications for those who were supporting it. Realistically, it is impossible for every initiative we pursue to be successful, and expectations placed upon a scholarly communication program that indicate otherwise are unrealistic, unachievable, and likely to inhibit the creativity and initiative of those who support this important work. We should be ashamed of failure only if it results from a true lack of effort, either as an individual or an institution, toward seeing an initiative succeed. Often, though, this is not the case. Many failures come about as a result of internal and external influences that were not properly identified, addressed, or resolved when planning and executing an initiative, and while these situations are frustrating, if viewed in the right context they provide an opportunity for reflection, change, and ensuring future successes.

WHAT WENT RIGHT?

It is rare for an initiative to produce no results whatsoever, and it is important to identify successes that did result from our efforts. For example, perhaps only three people may participate in a workshop offered on Creative Commons licensing, when least thirty participants were expected. The low attendance may be disappointing, but if the participants left with an understanding of what these licenses are and how they can be used—an understanding they put into practice by openly licensing works they create—then the effort should not be seen as a failure. Here, reframing perspective to focus on session outcomes rather than attendance numbers helps us identify what went right with the initiative.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

While celebrating small victories is important, staff do need to identify why a scholarly communication initiative failed to meet established goal or produce expected outcomes. This is especially important if a significant amount of resources invested in the initiative (e.g., staff time, money, space, supplies) did not provide a satisfactory return for the institution. Questions to ask include

- Was the initiative not properly tailored to meet the needs of the campus community? Too often, scholarly communication initiatives are pursued because they are on trend in the profession or because other institutions are having success with them, but what works well at one institution may not be a good fit for another. For example, research impact services may readily find traction at an R1 institution but not see much engagement at an institution that focuses more on teaching than research.
- Did the team supporting the initiative have access to adequate supplies, technology, and funding given the scope of the initiative? A lack of resources can make it difficult to effectively launch and administer any scholarly communication project or program.
- Was there a breakdown in communication or collaboration among the team supporting the initiative? This should not be seen as an exercise in assigning blame. Rather, team members should try to identify why they were unable to act as a cohesive unit in supporting the initiative.
- Was there a failure to effectively market the initiative to those it was intended to serve? If the target audience does not understand the scope and intent of an initiative, they are not likely to engage with it. For instance, a workshop on the Technology, Education and Copyright Harmonization (TEACH) Act may be useful for faculty teaching online classes, but if they are unfamiliar with the purpose of the statute and options it provides for sharing copyrighted works online with students, they are unlikely to attend.
- Did some key piece of information the team missed during the planning process result in gaps or redundancies in services that could have contributed to the failure? If the scholarly communication team launches a data analytics and visualization service, but it is narrow in scope or duplicates services offered by another department, the library's services are not likely to gain traction on campus.
- Was the timing right to launch the initiative? For example, was an initiative to get faculty to adopt OER (open educational resource) launched during the winter break, when their focus is on transitioning from the fall semester to the spring semester, rather than in early spring, when they might be thinking about what textbook they will use in the fall?

WHO WAS (AND WAS NOT) REPRESENTED?

It is also important to consider if the right people were involved in the planning process. For example, were other employees in the library, such as subject librarians, invited to get involved to provide input and promote the initiative to their faculty and students? Were there individuals or departments on campus who could have contributed knowledge and expertise to the initiative or been able to invest resources (e.g., time, staff, technology, or funding) to help ensure its success?

Team members should also ask who might have been left out of the planning process. Was the right audience targeted by the library in marketing the initiative? For example, was an instructional session on text and data mining offered to faculty, but not graduate students? Were members of marginalized or underrepresented communities, such as persons of color, LGBTQ individuals, those with a disability, and individuals from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, invited to participate in the planning process to help ensure their voices were heard and needs addressed?

SOURCES OF ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK

The scholarly communication team may wish to speak with members of the intended audience to find out why they did not engage with the initiative. Team members should also interview individuals who did engage with the initiative to identify what parts of it they found most useful and areas for improvement. For instance, a graduate student may say that they enjoyed participating in a workshop that explored opportunities for sharing and promoting their scholarship via the institutional repository but would have benefited from follow-up appointments with staff where they received one-on-one assistance in uploading their works.

At this stage, it can also be useful to discuss the situation with colleagues outside of the institution. External perspectives can be valuable in identifying where mistakes were made or considerations were overlooked. This should include people who have had successes or experienced frustrations with similar initiatives to see what insight and recommendations they might have.

IS THE INITIATIVE SALVAGEABLE?

Armed with all of the information and insights gathered in reviewing the initiative, members of the scholarly communication team should have frank and open discussion about its future. It may be decided that

- The initiative will be continued, but in a smaller capacity. For example, perhaps only one or two events will be planned to celebrate Open Access Week, rather than planning a different event each day.
- The service has potential, but needs to have more resources devoted to it in order to see it succeed, such as additional funds being provided to support an APC (article processing charge) fund that was drained too quickly.
- The service will be continued, but revised substantially. For instance, an OER publishing service that did not see much engagement might be revamped to support open access journal publishing.
- The initiative will be retired or phased out, with lessons learned about its successes and failures applied to future endeavors.

TIPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following tips and recommendations will not ensure success in every undertaking, but when combined with lessons learned from other project failures can provide a solid foundation for launching new initiatives:

- Be open to new ideas, from your colleagues, constituents, and the profession.
- Be realistic about what resources you have available, including staff time and expertise, space, finances, and capacity.
- When in doubt, start small and grow the initiative based upon interest and engagement.
- Identify ways to effectively assess the initiative, and perform assessment often.
- Be adaptable and willing to shift in different directions based upon feedback received.
- Practice self-care! Ask for the resources you need, speak up when you need help, offer assistance when others seem to be struggling, and keep communication channels open, both internally and externally

Failures come in a variety of ways. A few are the result of an intentional or malicious action of a bad actor. Other times, someone (often unintentionally) makes an unwise move that derails an initiative. Frequently, failures come after honest and intense efforts put forward by a dedicated team that had high hopes of success. Occasionally, services that were once extremely popular need to be retired because they no longer see significant use or because resources are reprioritized in the library. When initiatives don't succeed, it is important to acknowledge that changes need to be made. However, failures can lead to future successes if viewed through the right lens and efforts are made not to repeat mistakes made in the past.