

Planning from the Middle Out: Phase 1 of 2CUL Technical Services Integration

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Abstract

The Columbia and Cornell University Libraries' partnership is now in its fourth year. Its composite acronym (2CUL), which condenses a doubling of the two participating libraries' initial letters, in itself reflects the very nature of the collaboration's strategic purpose: a broad integration of library activities in a number of areas – including collection development, acquisitions and cataloging, e-resources and digital management, and digital preservation. In what is perhaps their boldest, most ambitious 2CUL initiative to date, the two libraries have begun planning for and have taken the first steps towards an integration of their substantial technical services operations. In this paper, the authors outline the goals of 2CUL Technical Services Integration (TSI), report on the first phase of the work, reflect on what they have learned so far in planning for this operational union, and look forward to the next steps of the project in which the two institutions will initiate incrementally the functional integration of the two divisions. The period covered in Phase 1 of TSI is September 2012-December 2013.

Keywords: 2CUL; Technical Services; Integrated Technical Services; Columbia University; Cornell University

Introduction

Envisioned as a “transformative and enduring partnership” between the Columbia and Cornell University Libraries to provide greater content, expertise, and services to their respective user communities, the two libraries (located over two hundred miles apart, one rural and one urban, yet sharing a vision of radical collaboration) launched their “2CUL” initiative in 2009.¹ Over the first three years of the project – with the generous support of a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation – Columbia and Cornell began co-development of their already considerable collections; expanded access privileges to users of both libraries; conducted joint investigations into research questions of mutual interest; initiated shared-staff arrangements in limited, but promising ways; and realized significant savings, cost avoidance, and reinvestments in functions previously supported separately at each institution. The second phase of the 2CUL initiative (scheduled for 2013-2015) aims to consolidate the partnership further; build the requisite infrastructure

for additional collaboration and operational integration; and develop new capabilities and approaches to meeting teaching, research, and learning needs.²

Perhaps the most significant component in this second phase of the 2CUL initiative – at least in terms of planning effort and impact on library staff – is the integration of the two libraries' technical services operations. 2CUL Technical Services Integration (TSI) aims to create a unified and deeply collaborative operation that will support the goals of the broader project on a grand scale. Approximately 20% of library staff at both Columbia and Cornell is currently involved to some extent with technical services – a considerable body of skilled personnel that presents myriad possibilities for realizing economies of scale. Moreover, because much of this work is labor-intensive, repetitive, and requires a wide range of language expertise, integrating these two large divisions of the partner libraries offers the greatest opportunity for both staff savings (or repurposing) and the creation of additional capacity



for technical services productivity and scope. In the fall of 2012, technical services staff at the Columbia and Cornell University Libraries began the first phase of planning for this exciting, but challenging three-year project for which the two libraries are once again benefiting from the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

In this paper, we will report on the progress of 2CUL TSI thus far, including: (a) a summary of the goals of TSI Phase 1, (b) a narration of the steps leading to the achievement of these goals, (c) reflections on lessons learned so far in our endeavor, and (d) a glance at next steps and expectations for TSI Phase 2.

The Plan and the People

Broadly speaking, the two strategic goals for 2CUL TSI are:

1. A reconception of the institutions' separate library operations to achieve integration across both campuses by realigning staff responsibilities, workflows, and reporting lines;
2. A transformation of the vision, priorities, and values of both libraries' technical services to support the overall institutional goals for 2CUL and to view inter-institutional collaboration as fundamental to regular library operations.

In order to successfully achieve the first of these goals in ways that are effective and productive for both institutions, it is important first to understand fully each other's operations and then to propose, test, and in many cases adopt mutually favorable approaches to fulfilling the libraries' respective missions. It is also important to distinguish between those integrative measures that are truly beneficial to both institutions and those ventures which promise no clear advantage or for which the costs outweigh the benefits. In other words, just because it's 2CUL doesn't necessarily mean it's good. Thus, the reconception of Columbia and Cornell technical services must be strategic, incremental, and supported by careful testing and assessment.

The second of these strategic goals differs in both nature and intent from the first, in that we believe

the importance of promoting understanding among and buy-in from technical services staff is directly linked to the successful achievement of the first goal – that is, the integration itself. To accomplish this second objective, it is important to communicate to all staff the potential benefits of TSI, as well as progress towards (and the inevitable setbacks that inhibit) the project's realization. It is also important not only to engage as many technical services staff in the process as possible but to solicit – and *rely on* – the considerable amount of experience and expertise that the staff of these two operations have to offer.

Separate from but crucially related to TSI is the understanding that the full benefits of this initiative will only be realized through the implementation of a shared library management system in which the two institutions' data, tasks, and workflows are merged in a single back-end system, with permissions to allow operators to work across the integrated operation. While it is not yet clear if and when the implementation of a shared system will be feasible, the 2CUL libraries are currently working on finding, evaluating, and ultimately purchasing such a system. Although it is possible to work in each other's current Voyager systems by means of virtual desk top technology, the barriers to making those workflows effective are significant. For TSI to be truly productive, 2CUL is dependent on the success of this parallel initiative.

In order to address the two strategic objectives for TSI described above, 2CUL project planners have adopted a middle-out approach. Promoted by Barack Obama as an economic strategy that supports and empowers the middle-class to generate prosperity, a middle-out approach to library organizational development is an appealing option for fulfilling a charge that includes both organizational improvement *and* staff support for and engagement in that improvement. For this reason, planners began their work with the simple, basic understanding that the two technical services operations would achieve integration by mid-2015. The fine points of that integration (which functions will or will not be merged) will be identified and tested, incrementally, by those staff members who know the functions best and are in a position to act on their findings – that is, by unit supervisors, coordinators, and other key

individuals who are not necessarily technical services administrators.

The TSI initiative was structured from the very beginning with equal representation in mind. Planners believed this would begin to set the tone for a new culture of collaboration. The integration has this underpinning structure:

- Two senior Integration Managers provide overall leadership.
- A six-member TSI Steering Committee (3 members from each institution representing different functional areas) helps plan and guide the three-year project.
- An Administrative Team with the 2CUL Project Directors (one senior library administrator from each institution), liaisons for assessment and human resources from both libraries, and the TSI Integration Managers takes responsibility for those aspects of TSI that fall beyond the pale of the Steering Committee's authority, such as clarifying work rules across institutions or administering assessment surveys.
- Functional working groups and other project-based teams provide first-hand expertise and middle-out leadership for the integration.

These functional working groups (with project leads from both institutions) represent: batch processing, copy cataloging, database maintenance, electronic resources, electronic resource troubleshooting, monograph ordering, monograph receiving, non-MARC metadata, original cataloging, and print serials. In addition, teams were appointed to review and monitor e-resource platforms jointly and to provide shared support for remote desktop computing between institutions.

Although early project planners envisioned three areas that were particularly ripe for integration – ordering of new library acquisitions; licensing and providing access to electronic resources; and the automated import, export, and maintenance of catalog data – the aim to unify 2CUL technical services *as a whole* demanded a broader focus. Moreover, the middle-out approach to TSI planning called for the working groups themselves to recommend which technical services functions would be the most mutually beneficial to inte-

grate. In addition, the involvement of unit supervisors, coordinators, and other key staff from all areas who understood the functions best would simultaneously fulfill the second strategic goal of the project: broad staff engagement and the cultural transformation required for a productive and healthy operational merger.³

The Landscape and Its Potential

The purpose of the first phase of TSI was twofold: (1) to begin making the acquaintance of staff members from the other institution working in similar roles, and (2) to gain familiarity with each other's functions, workflows, and operational climate. While the charges for each of the working groups varied somewhat, the fundamental features of every charge included: the compilation of inventories of each unit's staff, expertise, policies, practices, and workflows; the exchange of information regarding reporting and decision-making structures, as well as dependencies for and limitations on the scope of each unit; and the sharing of baseline productivity numbers, if available. The TSI Steering Committee also asked each group to submit recommendations, ideas, and suggestions for moving the project forward beyond this initial phase of information-gathering. The working groups were encouraged to converse via phone, Skype, or other videoconferencing means (such as WebEx), and to meet in person at least once.

The results of this initial planning phase were gratifying and impressive. Over a period of 3-6 months, the ten "functional working groups" produced a rich array of insightful and thorough reports. While some teams expressed reservations about the potential for productive integration within their areas (Print Serials, for example⁴), others were expansive and clearly eager to get started (Non-MARC Metadata⁵). In all cases, the documents spoke reams, explicitly and implicitly, about the groups' levels of integration-readiness, as well as supplying a useful overview of the individual libraries' technical services operations. 2CUL Project Directors, Xin Li and Robert Wolven, stated that collectively "these reports represent one of the most thorough comparative studies of research library technical services operations ever conducted."⁶ They also provided the TSI Steering Committee with a

somewhat daunting amount of information to review and from which to distill some kind of general, overarching plan for beginning the actual work of TSI. However, several hours of face-to-face, in-person brainstorming during two days in New York City in late summer of 2013 spawned two seemingly promising approaches to charting the course for the next, more concrete phase of TSI.

After identifying, recording, and discussing the most salient points from the Phase 1 reports, the Committee ranked these elements to derive a rough estimate of their relative importance for TSI. The group then built a matrix on which to map the most compelling considerations for integration-readiness as gleaned from the reports across functional areas. Among these factors were: (1) whether work was centralized within a given unit or dispersed beyond that unit, (2) whether staff within a given unit focused exclusively on the primary work of that unit, (3) whether integration of tasks within a given unit was likely to yield significant gains in efficiency or scope, (4) the extent to which collaboration in a given area would require the use of similar tools and software versions, (5) the extent to which units required shared systems (a joint LMS, for example) for productive collaboration, and (6) whether the unit seemed culturally ready to integrate. This matrix confirmed some of the conclusions already envisioned by project planners months earlier – for instance, that the ordering of new monograph acquisitions and the automated import, export, and maintenance of catalog data were strong candidates for fruitful integration – but it also revealed less obvious findings and some surprises. Non-MARC metadata work may not seem like a likely candidate for integration because the required skill sets and tools vary significantly and the work itself is largely project-based, unique, and locally conceived. The rapidly evolving nature of and demand for these skills in today’s research libraries, however, create favorable circumstances for collaborative work in this area, and the group saw much potential in shared tools, information, documentation, and training. Conversely, although the potential gains from integrating 2CUL electronic resource operations are high, the dependency of these teams on the use of similar or shared tools and systems is also high. The political will and finan-

cial commitment necessary to change existing workflows and implement shared systems in a complex and rapidly changing environment may be more challenging than anticipated. Both groups are eager to move forward (and have, in fact, already started to work together), but the path is considerably clearer for the former to proceed relatively unencumbered than for the latter.⁷

The second actionable result of the summer brainstorming sessions was the realization that the TSI Steering Committee needs additional administrative support in order to act on key recommendations and potentially to serve as an ongoing decision-making body once integration is achieved. This group, the TSI Joint Senior Managers Integration Network (JSMIN, or “Jasmine”), brought the technical services departmental directors from both institutions together with the members of TSI Steering to review the recommendations, ideas, and suggestions proposed in the Phase 1 working group reports from the point of view of staffing and resources.⁸ In particular, JSMIN is responsible for balancing current needs and commitments within the two separate operations with the staffing effort required to achieve a successful integration. It is also responsible for addressing the additional resource allocation required to support the technical services aspects of a shared system implementation, if indeed the institutions decided to undertake this important, parallel initiative simultaneously with TSI. Finally, the convening of a technical services directors group provides the opportunity for these 2CUL technical services leaders also to begin working together to rank and provide initial support and approval for the recommendations, ideas, and suggestions proposed by the functional working groups. This feedback constitutes a kind of joint administrative blessing on the incremental steps leading towards full integration that would characterize TSI Phase 2.

“Integration Is a State of Mind”: Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Since other institutions have shown an interest in the 2CUL initiative, we would be remiss not to reflect on some of the lessons learned in this phase of the project, including some of our reservations about the process. Among its initial



tasks, the TSI Steering Committee participated in a series of meetings and phone calls with project leads from other collaborative library technical services ventures; some counseled us to consider outside project managers or consultants. However, given the unique nature of and inherent risk involved in 2CUL TSI – that is, the functional integration of such large segments of the two libraries, without the prospect of forming a formal business or legal entity to ensure its creation or maintenance – we decided to engineer the integration ourselves. We intuited that forming a steering group consisting of key members from each institution who evinced an early interest in the project and creating largely self-directed functional teams with equal representation from both institutions is more likely to foster staff acceptance and serve us better in the long term. While we did not know it at the time, the “Operating Principles” that the TSI Steering Committee proposed at its first meeting – which emphasize trust, collegiality, and innovation – set the stage for the middle-out approach.⁹ We agreed early on to respect cultural differences and pledged to preserve local practices where they made sense. In addition, the administrations of both libraries assured staff that gains in efficiency generated from the collaboration would be reallocated to fund new and deferred initiatives, rather than used to eliminate jobs – a commonly perceived threat in this kind of initiative.

But creating the infrastructure for this approach to inter-institutional integration takes more time than one might imagine. Meetings, documentation, and reporting add up to a significant cost in overhead, and the importance of holding a certain number of in-person meetings, including time for meals and other social activities to help get to know and trust one another, add to this cost – especially when the integrating institutions are located over 200 miles apart. In order to further foster the bilateral cultural integration required for successful collaboration at this level, regular communication among staff across institutions is also critical, as are writing reports and presenting at meetings and conferences together. Although informative, and often stimulating and rewarding, these endeavors frequently require more time and effort than they do when working independently. Navigating the differing political realities, accounting practices, and staffing con-

siderations across the two institutions is exceptionally challenging, of course, and is likely to delay or prohibit some aspects of integration.

To say that the completion of TSI Phase 1 was necessary to set the stage for the inception of joint testing, pilot projects, and more fluid collaboration between the Columbia and Cornell University Libraries is not entirely true. Along with the work cited in the introduction to this paper, a number of collaborative technical services projects had been initiated, chiefly as one-off efforts, during the initial Mellon-funded investigations of the potential benefits for 2CUL prior to 2013. Among these were an agreement under which Cornell has been cataloging several hundred Korean-language items for Columbia; the development of an automated tool for firm orders (the Pre-Order Online Form, or POOF!) now in use at both institutions;¹⁰ and significant sharing of information, techniques, and vision on the part of the two institutions’ e-resources operations. Academic staff involved with e-journals, e-books, and the acquisition of streaming video have also begun to present together at both local and national forums.

What *is* distinctive and important about TSI Phase 2 will be the coordinated, formal steps to actually integrate the two operations – in other words, to go beyond individual collaborations towards thinking as a single library division. Beginning with a revision of the working group charges, based on the recommendations that resulted from the teams’ activities during TSI Phase 1 and JSMIN’s input regarding the viability of these ideas, the TSI Steering Committee will be relaunching the working groups with the overarching directive to begin the integration, one idea at a time. This “soft” integration is scheduled to take place over an 18-month period, during which the functional working groups will leverage their knowledge and understanding of each other’s operations, gleaned in TSI Phase 1 to: (1) evaluate and test options for streamlining or improving workflows, individually or jointly, to maximize effectiveness and improve service to users, (2) investigate ways to expand the collective scope of 2CUL technical services in cost-effective ways, and (3) work with TSI Steering, JSMIN, and other stakeholders to extend TSI models, innovations, insights, and cultural syn-

ergy to other library operations and divisions. This work will be ongoing; it will certainly not cease with the official establishment of 2CUL Technical Services in 2015 which, in any case, is not destined to result in the formation of a formal business or legal entity within the two institutions, but in a well-integrated and well-supported, virtual union. This deep, collaborative fluidity is likely to be challenging to achieve, yet liberating to adopt – a new way for technical services at the Columbia and Cornell University Libraries to surpass their traditional limitations and transcend their institutional boundaries. For this reason, those involved in leading 2CUL TSI remain confident that the middle-out, rather than a top-down approach to engineering this new model represents our best hope for success. We normally think of integration as a process through which separate parts are combined into an integral whole, but for 2CUL TSI it is equally important to recall that, as 2CUL JSMIN member Joyce McDonough puts it, “integration is a state of mind.”

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Endnotes

¹ Columbia University Libraries and Cornell University Library, “2CUL,” accessed December 6, 2013, <http://www.2cul.org/>.

² Columbia University Libraries and Cornell University Library, “About 2CUL,” accessed December 6th, 2013, <http://www.2cul.org/node/17>.

³ For further information on the administrative framework for the TSI planning effort, see “Project Reports, Milestones, and Other Planning De-

tails / TSI Planning Teams,” accessed December 6, 2013, <https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/2cullts/Project+Reports%2C+Milestones%2C+and+Other+Planning+Details>.

⁴ “Phase 1 Print Serials Report,” accessed December 6, 2013, <https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/2cullts/Phase+1+Print+Serials+Report>.

⁵ “2CUL TSI non-MARC metadata Phase 1 report,” accessed December 6, 2013, <https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/2cullts/2CUL+TSI+non-MARC+metadata+Phase+1+report>.

⁶ Xin Li and Robert Wolven, email message to TSI team, October 8, 2013. The TSI Phase 1 working group reports are available on the project wiki, “2CUL Phase 2 – Technical Services Integration,” accessed December 6, 2013, <https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/2cullts/2CUL+Phase+2+--+Technical+Services+Integration>.

⁷ Since construction of this matrix involved close, candid, and sometimes impressionistic readings of the working group reports, especially in regard to the question of “integration-readiness,” the completed matrix itself is not reproduced in this study.

⁸ “TSI Phase 1 Working Group Reports – Recommendations, Ideas, and Suggestions,” accessed December 6, 2013, <https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/2cullts/TSI+Phase+1+Working+Group+Reports+--+Recommendations%2C+Ideas%2C+and+Suggestions>.

⁹ “Operating Principles,” accessed December 6, 2013, <https://confluence.cornell.edu/display/2cullts/Operating+Principles>.

¹⁰ “POOF! Pre-Order Online Form,” accessed December 6, 2013, <http://poof.library.cornell.edu/content/about>.

