

Reorganization at the Harvard Law School Library (A)

As a new and self-proclaimed “rookie” library leader, John Palfrey reflected on recent reorganization activities at the Harvard Law School Library with equal measures of pride and uncertainty. Had the process really gone as well as many thought? What had been done right? Could a different approach have been taken that would have produced less fear, trepidation, and anxiety among library staff? How might his experience help other library leaders struggling with how to best meet the challenges of organizational change and library transformation?

Harvard Law School

Established in 1817, Harvard Law School (HLS) is the oldest continuously operating law school in the United States. Several leading national publications consistently ranked HLS among the top three law schools in the country. Historically, HLS had admitted about ten percent of its applicants annually and boasted such notable alumni as United States President Barack Obama and, in 2011, six of the nine sitting Justices of the United States Supreme Court.

During the 1980’s and 1990’s, HLS had also been known for its politically contentious faculty. During that period, a divide between conservative and liberal faculty members led to very public squabbles about faculty appointments, tenure cases, and policy decisions. Deadlocked by bitter ideological infighting, the faculty had gone years without a single new hire. Newer faculty levied charges of political incorrectness against older faculty, particularly regarding minority and feminist issues. Unrest then spread to the student body, when, in 1992, nine students occupied the office of then-Dean Robert Clark for a twenty-five hour sit-in protesting a lack of black and female faculty. During these tumultuous decades, HLS earned the unflattering moniker of “Beirut on the Charles.”

In 2011, the Harvard Law School Library (HLSL), housed in historic Langdell Hall, was the world’s largest academic law library. The library’s extensive collections were rivaled only by the Law Library of Congress. HLSL also curated one of the world’s most comprehensive and notable collections of research materials for the study of legal history. The Historic and Special Collections Department was comprised of more than two thousand linear feet of manuscripts, over two hundred thousand rare books, and more than seventy thousand visual images (photographs, prints, paintings, and objects) spanning from the fifteenth to twentieth centuries.

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The Deanship of Elena Kagan

After joining the faculty in 2001, Elena Kagan was appointed Dean of Harvard Law School in 2003. Outgoing Dean Robert Clark had hired many new faculty members and traveled to six continents to complete what was then the largest capital campaign in school history. However, faculty divisiveness persisted and, as one student noted, many felt HLS was characterized by “an institutional climate of apathy and complicity” toward issues of racial and gender inequality.

In this unsettled environment, Kagan quickly established herself as a change agent. She grew the faculty from 60 to 103, halved the size of first-year courses, and catalyzed a curricular review that produced greater focus on practice-oriented problem solving and international law. Kagan also spearheaded the largest capital campaign in the history of legal education, raising \$500 million, which had funded a new building complex, increased financial aid, the hiring of new professors, and other improvements. This massive financial influx had also enabled HLS to make several quality-of-life improvements: free coffee in classroom buildings, an ice-skating rink in the winter, and several large-scale building renovations.

Perhaps most notably, Kagan managed to resolve the decades-long rancorous faculty infighting by demonstrating political neutrality that eased the school’s long-standing liberal/conservative faculty divisions. She actively recruited new female and minority faculty, meticulously evaluating candidates, paying careful attention to the opinions of colleagues and, above all, the HLS mission. Former Dean Robert Clark offered his perspective on the new Dean:

Elena came to Harvard Law School at a critical time in its history and determined it was her job to make the biggest, richest, and most famous law school in the world also the best. She did it by recruiting excellent teachers from across the ideological spectrum and making students with diverse points of view feel they were part of a vibrant intellectual and professional enterprise. Under her leadership, faculty and students came to feel that HLS was not just a place to work or an experience to endure, but was an enjoyable and satisfying part of life that should be embraced in its entirety. She saw that as her job; that was her role. She threw herself into it wholeheartedly. And she succeeded.

In 2006, when pursuing a large-scale assessment agenda, Kagan turned her attention to the school’s library. Many viewed relations between the Dean and the Library as strained; this tension was often attributed to a personality conflict between Kagan and HLSL Director Terry Martin. Additionally, newly-hired faculty members who were pursuing interdisciplinary scholarship felt the library was underequipped to support their academic work. After hearing several such reports, Kagan commissioned an advisory committee to assess the state of the library and develop recommendations for academic and organizational improvement.

An Advisory Committee to the Harvard Law School Library

In 2006, Sharon O’Connor was chosen to lead the Advisory Committee to the Harvard Law School Library. An HLS alumna, she had recently completed a successful twenty-five year tenure as Director of the Boston College Law School Library. O’Connor selected the other two Committee members: Bob Berring, a former HLS professor and current Director of the Berkeley Law Library, and James Hilton, Associate Provost for Academic Information and Instructional Technology Affairs at the University of Virginia.

Over the course of the subsequent year, the Advisory Committee interviewed HLS faculty, staff, students, and library visitors. They also surveyed HLS alumni from the five most recent classes and interviewed librarians and professionals from the American Bar Association and peer institutions. Interviews and surveys included a series of mission-critical questions: What is the Harvard Law School Library? What is it supposed to do? For whom? The Committee also sought to understand the organizational culture: What's working and what isn't? What challenges does the library face? How could it improve?

In Summer 2007, the Advisory Committee delivered a twenty-page confidential report to Kagan. Committee recommendations fell into two broad categories: 1) structural reorganization that positions HLSL as a leader in the digital future and, 2) cultural reorientation to address issues of leadership and performance. In no uncertain terms, the report articulated a call for reform:

Overwhelming changes taking place in the world of information and technology will necessarily change the way the Harvard Law Library fulfills its mission to support research and teaching... In the digital world, new services will have to be provided. The difficult question is whether and how past practices should be altered to make way for needed change... There is a need for strong library leadership in the upcoming period of dynamic change. The library should build on its existing strengths while adding expanded expertise in emerging areas... It is a complicated world for libraries in general, and the Harvard Law Library has more complicated problems because of its size, history, and special place in American society. There will be no quick fixes.

The necessity of change was explicit and emphatic; the question was not if the Harvard Law School Library would be reorganized, but when and how.

Departmental Fiefdoms and Information Elevators

News of the Advisory Committee report spread quickly within the library. While many employees read a redacted version, very few had access to the complete document. Nearly everyone, however, realized it was critical of the library. Concurrently, Terry Martin announced his retirement (in June 2008) after twenty-seven years as HLSL Director. Given these developments, it seemed clear that significant (and unclear) changes were afoot. As a result, internal anxiety escalated.

Despite this apprehension, many employees felt the HLSL organizational model was broken. There was also a shared sense that the road to reorganization was almost certain to be rocky. The dominant HLSL culture was exceedingly hierarchical and characterized by inefficient information flow. Posing questions across library departments required the involvement of six or seven individuals. Questions traveled vertically from the originating employee, up through a supervisor, then up to a department head who passed the query horizontally to another department head. The second department head would then pass the query down through the appropriate supervisor and staff to its final destination. Responses or clarifying questions moved in reverse order through a circuitous information chain. This "elevator effect" discouraged questions and impeded cross-department communication, cooperation, and teamwork, producing professional and social divides. Speaking on behalf of many, one staffer lamented a lack of "cross-pollination," noting that "there was almost no socializing across departments."

Organizational isolation seemed to spawn a peculiar form of cultural fragmentation. Most department heads held long-term appointments and enjoyed nearly autonomous control over their units. By vigilantly hoarding information, department heads ensured their continued authority. Cathy Conroy,

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HLSL Director for Discovery and Access, recalled how this phenomenon played out in the course of day-to-day work:

There were little fiefdoms everywhere. People built their little kingdoms and maintained control over them. They would tell you the bottom line of their work, but they wouldn't tell you how they got there. They were comfortable telling you what was wrong in another department, but not in their own. Information was power and no one wanted to provide more of it than was absolutely necessary.

Each department developed a distinct culture and characteristics that derived largely from the management style of the department head. Many were concerned about mission creep as individual library units pursued independent agendas. An Advisory Committee member noted that, "If every fiefdom has a mission, then there's really no mission."

Additionally, the library's physical structures promoted siloing and inhibited cross-departmental teamwork. HLSL spanned five floors in Langdell Hall. The main floor was labeled as the second floor. Technical Services was located one floor below. Floors three and four housed public-facing departments such as document delivery. The fifth floor – dubbed "the Adminisphere" – housed offices for managers and senior library administrators. This layout created hierarchical tension. Many perceived that rank and importance correlated to an employee's physical location within the library. Housed either in the basement or on the first floor depending who one asked, technical services staff often felt particularly isolated. As one staff member noted, "You can call it the first floor and put a "1" on it, but it's still the basement." Pam Peifer, HLSL Administrative Director and Steering Committee member noted that, "Our physical layout prevented the open and smooth flow of information. Those who received and handled information and collections were physically separate from those who used these resources to serve the public."

Although many employees acknowledged that these organizational issues had inhibited HLSL's success, they were at least familiar problems that seemed, for some at least, to be less painful to address than having to change.

A Need for New Library Leadership

The Advisory Committee report included forceful recommendations about a need for new leadership. The incoming HLSL Director would need to initiate cultural change, ease internal tensions, improve the library's relationship with the Dean, earn the respect of faculty and library staff, and communicate the library's relevance and agenda in ways that reversed HLSL's historic isolation from the rest of the school. Advisory Committee Chair Sharon O'Connor elaborated on this formidable set of leadership challenges:

The library needed someone with the intelligence, humanity, and energy to address organizational change. It also needed someone with a solid grasp of the digital future – someone with the ability to manage big picture conceptual issues and translate them into more discrete details and actions. The new Director needed to be someone who did not just run the library, but also used the position as a platform to help the larger profession think about issues like digital preservation and open access and to form thoughtful responses to these developments. That was a tough bill to fill.

As the search progressed, John Palfrey emerged as the Dean's clear choice. In March 2008, Palfrey was announced as Terry Martin's successor and the new Director of the Harvard Law School Library. A graduate of Harvard College, the University of Cambridge, and Harvard Law School, Palfrey had started

his career in intellectual property and corporate law. He had returned to the university full-time in 2002 as Executive Director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society and became a professor in 2006. While at Harvard, Palfrey had quickly gained notoriety as a “rising star” and, during weekly HLS managers meetings, had developed a close working relationship with Dean Kagan. During these conversations, the Dean and Palfrey discussed his vision for the future of information and digital technology. These interactions convinced Kagan that Palfrey had the requisite skills and qualities to lead HLSL.

Palfrey’s appointment drew mixed reactions within HLSL. According to one employee, two distinct camps formed: “those who really believed in John and wanted change and, well, those who didn’t.” Some questioned Palfrey’s credentials, particularly his lack of a Master of Library Science (M.L.S.) degree, an issue that also created waves in the larger academic law library world. Angry library bloggers had argued that both an M.L.S. and J.D. were necessary prerequisites for a Library Director, particularly at an institution as prestigious as the Harvard Law School.

Replacing a Saint

In August 2008, Palfrey officially assumed a dual role as HLSL Director and Vice Dean of Library and Information Resources. The tone among library staff seemed decidedly anxious. Palfrey was a non-librarian and neophyte in the profession. At Harvard’s Berkman Center, he had grown a small start-up operation into an innovative and vibrant organization. In contrast, HLSL was huge, steeped in history, formally structured, and, during Terry Martin’s lengthy tenure, culturally and organizationally change averse. With Palfrey’s appointment, most employees anticipated (and some distinctly feared) that large-scale change was in the offing. Additionally, many staff members had been quite attached to Terry Martin, a leader who inspired such fondness to have earned the nickname “Saint Terry.” As Palfrey described it, “Terry had hired every person at the library. He had created a family – his own family – and I was walking into Saint Terry’s family.”

Palfrey immediately immersed himself in the library world, attending conferences, reading “a ton,” and gathering advice. He found this work enjoyable. “I’m a dilettante to some extent,” he noted. “I like to learn from different angles, collect lots of data, and hear many different points of view.” While he acknowledged being a library neophyte, Palfrey considered that fact a distinct asset because he was not bound to the profession’s historic traditions and norms. Instead, he felt comfortable bringing fresh and innovative perspectives to the job. “I was a complete blank slate about traditional libraries and that was my only advantage.” Advisory Committee Chair Sharon O’Connor affirmed Palfrey’s sense of changes underway in the profession:

In the future, library leadership will not be the profession I grew up in. There will still be people who need to acquire, curate, and provide information, but the library won’t be organized as it has been in the past. It’s clearly a changing world.

During his first weeks, Palfrey met with every HLSL staff member, either one-on-one or in small groups. From these conversations, he determined that the existing library culture was too deeply entrenched to be salvaged. There were too many layers of management, too few voices at the top, and too many organizational incentives to impede the flow of information. He concluded that a top-to-bottom reorganization was needed to raze the existing hierarchy and implement a more collaborative, less stratified organization. According to Cathy Conroy, Director for Discovery and Access, “It would have

been impossible to pull off the reorg if we ended up with as many senior managers as we had before – nine in total. There would have been some people who just didn't have a place in the new organization."

Early on, Palfrey was also struck by a palpable sense of isolation – both actual and symbolic – between library leadership and library staff. Nowhere was this phenomenon more evident than with the "Adminisphere" on the top floor of Langdell Hall. In the far reaches of the fifth floor, through a set of double doors and behind a frosted glass window, sat Palfrey's office. Much to his dismay, the Library Director felt decidedly removed from the rest of the library:

In terms of physical distance, you literally couldn't get any further back in the library than my office. I told Elena that I especially hated that frosted window and that my first official act as Director would be to knock it out with a sledgehammer. But then the financial crisis hit and it didn't seem prudent to go around smashing windows.

Having opted to pursue a major redesign, Palfrey called an "all hands" meeting (the first time in many years when all library staff convened as one group). He announced a year-long reorganization process, promising that "this will be a very different library by July 2009."

Palfrey's goals for the reorganization mirrored Advisory Committee recommendations, most notably rethinking the library's work in a digital era and flattening the organizational hierarchy. To overhaul the entire library, Palfrey felt a need to create as much turnover as possible through an early retirement buyout. In his estimation, this move was the best way to initiate the process. "I wanted to give those who would be change-averse a chance to go."

Prior to the reorganization, Cathy Conroy and Kim Dulin, Associate Director for Collection Development, had instituted a hiring freeze. "We needed to create a situation where John could bring in new blood without layoffs," they reasoned. "We didn't want him to be the layoffs guy." After four rounds of early retirement offers, twenty-five full-time equivalent (FTE) employees left HLSL, including five of nine department heads. Some had been planning to retire soon and happily left with lucrative early-retirement packages in hand. Others, however, were angry and upset. Conroy recalled negotiating with an outgoing manager who was so enraged that he refused to share crucial operating information about his department. Only after an HR representative threatened to revoke the early retirement buyout did the manager convey the necessary information. By Fall 2008, HLSL's FTE staff had fallen from almost 100 to 76, nearly a 25% reduction.

A Steering Committee and Reorganization Proposal

As the reorganization process got underway, Palfrey, Dulin, and Conroy decided to engage the services of an independent consultant to advise on the process and offer an objective perspective. Conroy explained the rationale for this decision:

We realized it would be difficult to do a genuine self-examination without an outside reality check on what was happening. None of us had done a major re-org before – tearing an organization apart and putting it back together. John knew he wanted a major shake up. But he had only been in his job for six weeks. He knew a lot about information technology, but the inner workings of a library were not one of his strong suits. We needed someone who could provide a sense of where to start, what to do, and how to manage the process. We figured it would be hard to facilitate meetings in which we were also participating, so concluded that outside help was needed and would be beneficial.

In Fall 2008, Palfrey enlisted Maureen Sullivan to bring her decades-long expertise in library management and reorganization to bear at HLSL. Sullivan had begun her career in local public libraries, and had later assumed senior library administration positions at the University of Maryland and Yale University. She had also been active in the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), including service as President. Sullivan had consulted to and overseen technology-driven reorganizations within multiple academic libraries at large research institutions and was well respected in the library world. Palfrey recalled that, “I asked people, ‘Who should I use?’ and, time and time again, Maureen’s name kept coming up.”

Having previously worked on short-term projects at HLS, Sullivan was familiar with the school and seemed ready to hit the ground running. Initially engaged for a one-day planning session with Palfrey, Dulin, and Conroy, the HLSL leadership team quickly decided to extend Sullivan’s working relationship. Conroy explained: “It was very clear at that initial meeting that we had a strong dynamic with Maureen and great chemistry as a team. It was a very good first meeting, and we quickly concluded that she could guide the entire process.” Sullivan affirmed Conroy’s assessment, noting that “it was an effortless collaboration from the start.”

Eschewing a top-down approach, Palfrey and Sullivan instead created a Steering Committee comprised of library staff. They believed such a group would underscore Palfrey’s commitment to inclusion and transparency during the reorganization process. Over the next several months, the committee developed a reorganization proposal. Sullivan led the committee, while Cathy Conroy and Kim Dulin served as co-chairs. Sullivan guided committee work and led committee meetings, while Conroy and Dulin tended to the group’s day-to-day needs and activities. Palfrey initially adopted a hands-off approach, explaining: “I wanted to receive a proposal from the staff, not run the process. I wanted to be transparent and inclusive, and have people be annoyed by how frequently they were being asked for their opinions.”

HLSL employees filled the other seven slots on the Steering Committee. Any employee could nominate others and/or him/herself for a Steering Committee position. About two-thirds of HLSL staff expressed interest. Palfrey, Conroy, and Dulin made final membership decisions, striving for balance among professional and non-professional staff, men and women, librarians and non-librarians as another way to reinforce their message of inclusion and transparency. Palfrey gave the Steering Committee a six-month deadline (April 30, 2009) to submit a reorganization plan to him.

Not everyone was pleased with the Steering Committee selection process. Some criticized the choices, demanding to know “Why these people?” Others were disappointed, and one employee reported being “crushed” when not selected. The intensity of these reactions reaffirmed Palfrey’s desire for greater involvement, inclusion, and transparency. Several ad hoc committees and an online wiki were established to enable any employee to post a comment or question for response by the Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee met regularly with Maureen Sullivan. Guided by Advisory Committee recommendations, the Committee promulgated a set of organizational goals for the reorganization. These included:

- An affirmative (and accelerated) transition to the digital age, in which HLSL develops a new collections policy and increases its commitment to open access and digital innovation.

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- Modernization of services to faculty, particularly those pursuing interdisciplinary research.
- Increased participation in HLS curriculum development, employing traditional library services, academic computing resources, and other modes of support.
- Creation of an organizational culture that promotes faster innovation, greater accountability for performance, heightened commitment to measurement and analysis of processes and outputs, and a clear and unequivocal service orientation toward all in the HLS community.

Steering Committee members felt the way they conducted committee work also fostered more open communication. As one Committee member noted: “Everyone could just talk. It was refreshing. John was largely hands-off but clearly supportive, so we were able to discuss substantive issues.” Palfrey attended a handful of key meetings and impressed the group with his ability to synthesize complex ideas while simultaneously building consensus. Maureen Sullivan recounted a story that illustrated Palfrey’s interaction with the Steering Committee:

The Steering Committee was meeting one afternoon to settle on an optimal visual image for the library’s new organizational structure. It was a tough meeting. We weren’t really getting anywhere and seemed to be spinning our wheels so, at a particular point in the discussion, I just said, ‘Everyone take a break and put your ideas on paper.’ John happened to walk by at that point, saw what we were up to, and asked to join in. He listened and offered his perspective, which was really a synthesis of many different ideas. John’s contribution was the thing that moved us through that stuck place. He walked in and created a conceptual breakthrough. Talk about cutting to the chase – that was leadership!

Committee work represented a significant time and energy commitment for its members during a busy time of year. As the April 30 deadline approached, and the end of the academic year and close of the fiscal year loomed on the horizon, Committee duties often drew people away from their “normal” work. With the demands of their routine jobs added to Steering Committee responsibilities, members found it difficult to fulfill all their professional obligations within a standard 9-to-5 work day.

Apprehension also mounted among library staff, particularly about the issue of layoffs. Despite constant admonitions from Palfrey that the reorganization was “not about reducing staff size,” many found his assertions hard to believe. These fears were compounded when, in response to the global financial crisis that began in 2008, Harvard announced a series of university-wide layoffs.

Although Palfrey’s heretofore inclusive orientation had resonated with library staff, concerns about transparency still persisted. HLSL Administrative Director Pam Peifer recalled this situation:

Even with implementation of the wiki and the ad hoc committees, people still wanted more communication, even though they also recognized attempts had been made to share information. To complicate matters, managers faced questions from employees that they simply couldn’t answer: “How will I be affected?” and “What will all this mean for me?” It wasn’t that someone at the top was consciously withholding information. The information just wasn’t known, or hadn’t been determined yet, even though many people found that hard to believe. This unsettled situation made for a very long and very hard spring.

A Three-Ring Steering Committee Proposal

Meeting its deadline, the Steering Committee delivered an HLSL reorganization proposal on April 30. Palfrey proclaimed the document “picture perfect” and shared it with Dean Kagan, who made few changes. The proposal presented a radical redefinition of the HLSL organization chart (See Appendix 1 for the new organizational structure.) The prior library organization had been quite traditional – positions were organized vertically based on department function and organizational rank. Nine separate and distinct manager positions sat atop functional silos, all reporting to a Library Director. The new organization chart abandoned this hierarchical design entirely, instead presenting a circular, three-ringed model. The inner ring included many of the library’s departments: Discovery and Access; Research, Curriculum, and Publication Support; Management of Circulating Collections; and Collection Development and Digitization. It also included the library’s interdepartmental teams: Reference Team, Faculty Services Team, and Digital Stewardship Team. The outer rings – Collection Development, Administration, and Project Management – encircled the “inner” departments to demonstrate a commitment to holistic support of each of the more autonomously operating departments and teams. Multi-directional arrows spanned traditional departmental divides, highlighting the new emphasis on inter-unit cooperation and collaboration. A star labeled “Front Door” sat at the very center of the circle as a graphic illustration of the library’s dedication to serving the larger HLS community.

Palfrey convened another “all hands” meeting to share Steering Committee findings. During this gathering, he indicated that all employees would be asked to “hand in” their current job descriptions and reapply for positions within the new organizational structure. This move was both symbolic and pragmatic; in the words of one employee, it was also “very, very scary” for all involved.

Notably, the Steering Committee proposal had not included new job functions or descriptions. Early on in the Committee’s work, Sullivan had suggested giving employees a hand in crafting their own positions within the new structure. Palfrey was initially hesitant, worrying that many staff would propose positions he would not be able to provide. Sullivan, however, allayed these concerns, predicting that, based on her prior experience, some three-quarters of employees would get their desired self-developed positions. In light of this information (though with a certain degree of trepidation), Palfrey agreed to adopt the staff-crafted job approach.

Every staff member received a form on which he or she had to indicate three rank-ordered departments and roles. Employees could nominate or self-nominate individuals for management positions. Palfrey, Dulin, and Conroy reviewed all preference forms and made final staffing decisions. Five senior managers – one for each working group proposed by the Steering Committee – were selected first. These managers then joined Palfrey, Conroy, and Dulin during weekly meetings to match the strengths of existing staff and their stated job preferences with departmental needs. This process was aided by senior managers drafting job descriptions for their work teams. Palfrey and his senior managers then held individual meetings with every library staff member to offer a new position and explain the associated job description.

For many employees, these meetings were the most stressful moments of the entire reorganization. One employee recalled: “You arrived at this meeting having no idea if your old job would continue to exist or, if not, what your new job would be. You walked into a room with your bosses where you found out all of this on the spot. How could that *not* be stressful?”

When all was said and done, however, Palfrey considered the exercise a remarkable success. He described how the process played out:

About seventy people got something very close to what they had proposed, four were not very happy, and two were very mad. We were able to fix one of those two. The other person, unfortunately, opted to leave. So, at the end of the day, we managed to satisfactorily place at least seventy employees within the new structure. Overall, I consider that result a great success that fully validated Maureen's sense of how things would unfold.

Implementing the Reorganization

Meeting the needs of HLS faculty was a central goal of the reorganization. The Advisory Committee report had indicated that: "A need for interdisciplinary materials was the most consistent request voiced by faculty and their assistants." In response, the Steering Committee proposed creation of a Faculty Services Team comprised of representatives from multiple library departments. The team's goal was to coordinate efforts to provide high-quality, seamless service to faculty. This objective was accomplished by identifying and acquiring more relevant interdisciplinary materials and gathering and internally disseminating information about current faculty research. Throughout, Palfrey emphasized the ever-changing needs and interests of HLS faculty: "They're a demanding and impressive group; it will be a constant challenge to stay even a little bit ahead of them. We will have to be incredibly nimble."

HLSL hired two post-doctoral researchers whose time was dedicated exclusively to supporting faculty research, particularly in quantitative areas. Additionally, Palfrey supported extensions to FRIDA (Faculty Research and Information Delivery Assistance), such as the implementation of a new Scan and Deliver service, a digital arrangement through which faculty could request documents and quickly receive them electronically. According to Palfrey, this initiative was a big hit with professors: "FRIDA has become the most popular person on campus! I think some faculty believe FRIDA is an actual person, but it's really a team dedicated to getting the faculty what they want – and fast."

Scan and Deliver was just one of many new digital initiatives. A Digital Innovation Lab, co-directed by Palfrey and Dulin, was also established. The lab created open source software applications that re-imagined how students and faculty could use the library. For example, a ShelfLife application "hacked" library data to create online clusters of books called "book neighborhoods." Library patrons could browse these visual clusters to discover webs of related research. Similarly, a LibraryCloud application aggregated important library data like book usage. Eventually, Palfrey and Dulin planned to make LibraryCloud a resource for multiple libraries and have the data available as an open online resource.

Palfrey also articulated policies for collections and information technology. Before his appointment, no clear division of labor existed between library and information technology staff. With new digital initiatives like a library blog, more clearly defined policy in this area was crucial. Advisory Committee Chair Sharon O'Connor noted the benefits of greater clarity in this area:

It used to be that Harvard had every possible collection. In this day and age, however, that approach isn't really feasible. The Harvard Law Library needed to make clear to the larger academic law library community which collections it would acquire, which it would not, and what role it would play in digitization and open access. From the start, John was emphatic that the library profession was looking at a hybrid future that would combine digital and traditional collections.

Palfrey offered a more pragmatic take on the new realities confronting 21st century library leaders:

Librarians have to get out in front of the digital mob and call it a parade. We must build the hybrid analog-and-digital libraries that will become the core learning environments for our academic communities for the foreseeable future.

Leading and Managing Cultural Change

Another major goal of the HLSL reorganization was to flatten hierarchy and remove structures the Steering Committee felt “clamped down” people’s creativity. Palfrey believed such changes would necessarily involve a significant cultural shift. In his mind, HLSL had to become an organization based on trust, continuous learning, and commitment to a shared agenda. All staff had to be comfortable working in teams and embracing change. These critical cultural objectives mirrored HLSL’s structural goals.

To reduce organizational divides and foster greater horizontal thinking and interaction, the Steering Committee recommended adoption of an “80/20 rule.” This model, a hallmark of Google’s famously worker-friendly and entrepreneurial culture, enabled employees to spend 20% of their time (typically one day a week) in work outside their formal job description. Palfrey and Sullivan viewed this arrangement as mutually beneficial. By encouraging employees to build knowledge in multiple departments, HLSL’s vertical boundaries would become more permeable. According to Sullivan, “The 80/20 approach got people to see a picture bigger and encouraged cross-pollination. People got to talk to and deal with others from across the entire library.” Additionally, employees were able to gain new skills outside their core jobs, build their resumes, and cultivate new professional interests and relationships. There was only one stipulation – any “outside” work had to be meaningful for the library. Some managers initially greeted the 80/20 rule with skepticism, worrying about lost employee time, even for one day a week. Palfrey emphasized that the 20% was not a permanent commitment. If the arrangement ended up not working, employees could swap or drop their 20% job after six months. Palfrey later reported that the program had been “hugely successful.” Two-thirds of HLSL employees expressed interest in adding a 20% position. Only six later changed or dropped these assignments.

One of Palfrey’s fundamental goals for the reorganization was to create a culture of data and accountability. Toward this end, he requested monthly reports from each department – in any format the unit chose – that captured departmental productivity for the month. This requirement was a marked departure from the library’s prior “fiefdom” culture, and some managers balked. Palfrey offered a clear rationale for instituting this activity:

I wanted to know what was happening in all departments each month, presented in whatever way they wanted. I wanted to know if things were improving, staying the same, or getting worse. Some people thought I was the devil for asking if they had accomplished anything that month. But I thought it was important to couple increased collaboration and transparency with a clear sense of accountability for achieving tangible results.

The Year of the Learning Organization

Even with the reorganization well underway, Palfrey framed the process as a work in progress, declaring the first twelve months of the new structure “the year of the learning organization.” During this period, HLSL would, as he put it, “try out” the new library structure and operations. With employees slotted into new jobs and adjusting to new roles, senior administrators began to fill vacant positions. Each department manager made a case for additional staff. The newly-created digital group also had to be

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staffed fully. Only three current employees were qualified to work in this new unit; seven additional positions would have to be filled with tech-savvy programmers and web developers.

In February 2010 (six months into the reorganization), Palfrey called another “all hands” meeting and asked, “How are we doing?” Staff members compared their progress against the library’s new organizational goals. Some adjustments were made, including a “mini-reorg” of the Collection Development process, called the “CD Reboot.” By the twelve-month mark, HLSL was fully up and running with its new structure.

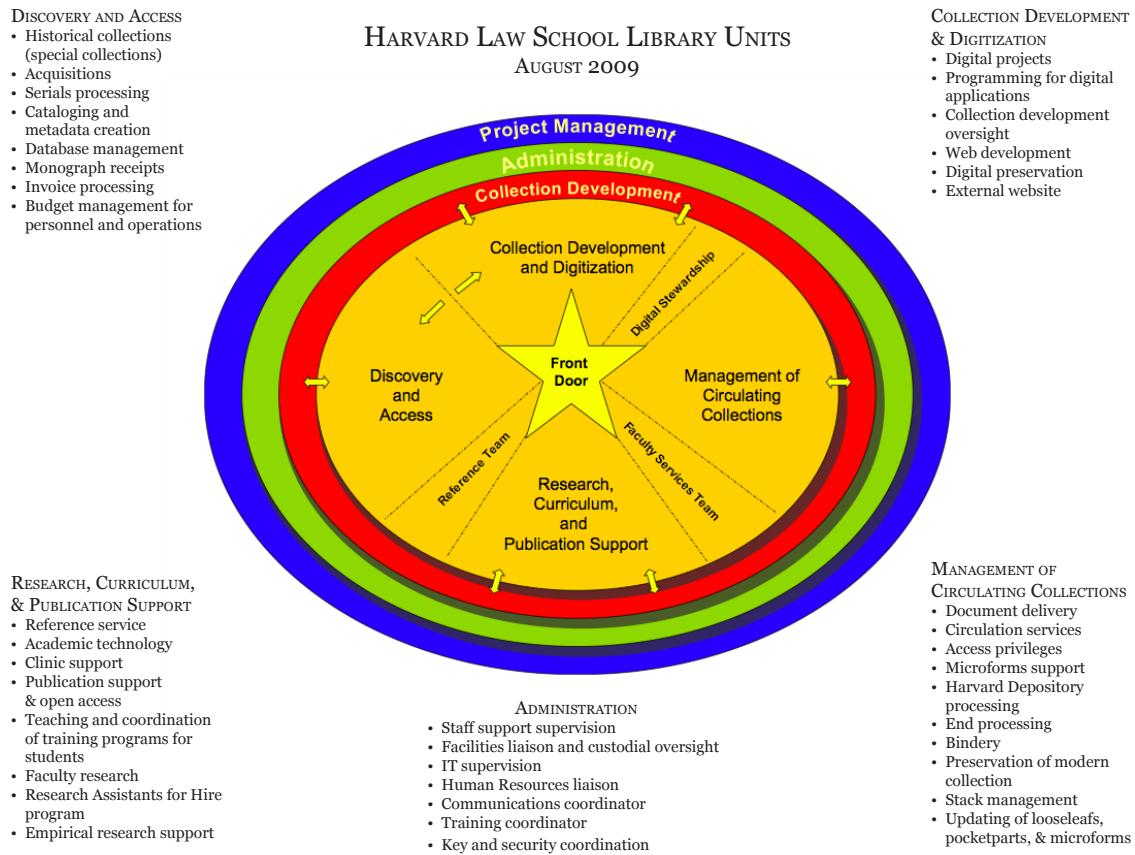
By early Spring 2010, the library’s FTE count totaled 90 and was en route to 95. Morale was high and communication seemed vastly improved. Cathy Conroy, Director for Discovery and Access, happily reported that, “It is such a delight now to have department heads who will actually tell me what they’re doing.”

Significant cultural change also seemed to have taken root. Employees reported that HLSL was now characterized by cross-departmental teamwork, innovation, and horizontal engagement. “People work together now,” noted one employee. A group of staff had instituted a “Fun Committee” that planned holiday parties, bowling trips, and weekly poker games for employees from across the library. Many staff members said they felt “lucky” to work at HLSL and were “incredibly fortunate” to have Palfrey as their Library Director. “John’s office door is always open,” noted one staff member. “He’s made himself available. This feels like the first time people’s opinions have been universally sought and acted on.”

Advisory Committee Chair Sharon O’Connor also noted growing external support for Palfrey and the new library design. “He’s hitting all the points our Committee raised.” Palfrey also appeared to be gaining respect and notoriety in the larger library community. In 2011, *Library Journal* identified Palfrey as a “change agent” in its annual list of “Movers & Shakers: The People Shaping the Future of Libraries.” Ever committed to innovation, Palfrey considered HLSL a constant work-in-progress, propelled by employee collaboration and proactive, committed leadership:

You just have to keep telling people “I trust you, I trust you, I trust you” and keep moving forward. You need to instill a shared belief that we’re not going to get it right all the time but, aided by a shared understanding and mutual trust, we’ll keep improving and eventually get where we want to go.

Appendix 1



Reorganization at the Harvard Law School Library (B)

On March 11, 2011, Harvard University announced a university-wide reorganization of the library system. In an e-mail message to the Harvard community, Provost Steven Hyman wrote:

I write to provide you with an update on significant steps taken to date in our transition to the new Harvard Library, an organization that we expect will be the flagship research library of the 21st century... Executive Director for the Harvard Library, Helen Shenton, has been working with a transition team to plan for a significant administrative reorganization of the libraries, with special focus on a new financial model, the technological infrastructure of the library system, organizational design, and strategic innovation. We are building an organizational structure around the premise that there are services within the Library that are best held in common, while other services are best delivered at the local level. Developing that organization will be a deliberative process, and I hope that you will give us the benefit of your thoughts as the work moves from analysis and planning to more dynamic activity in the months ahead.

This news reverberated within HLSL and created widespread anxiety that the Law School's recently-completed reorganization had been for naught. Many staff had embraced the new HLSL culture and feared further change. Speaking for many, one employee noted: "We had already reorganized and did it right. We weren't a problem, so why should we have to endure another change process?"

Many HLSL employees characterized the university-wide approach as "closed," "dark," and "bureaucratic." HLS Library Director John Palfrey reported having often "bristled" at the university's process and was hoping for greater transparency and inclusion. Palfrey had agreed to serve on a new university-wide governing Board for the Harvard Library and hoped to play an integral role throughout. At the same time, however, he acknowledged feeling a certain degree of hesitation and apprehension:

I wish this wasn't happening right now. Our library has been through a lot of pain and, at the moment, we're hitting on all cylinders. On another level, however, this is life in the 21st century library – lots of change. Rather than being undone by it, I hope our Law School experience will help guide the larger university process. But only time will tell.

Planning activities for the university-wide library reorganization were expected to extend well into the 2011-2012 academic year.

This case was written by Nancy Evans under the supervision of Judith Block McLaughlin and Joseph Zolner for the Harvard Institutes for Higher Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. It is designed solely as the basis for classroom discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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