

# A teacup idea: The research retreat

By Peggy Wright

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## *Practical tips for research and writing projects*

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**W**hy get involved in research? Who will publish it? How can I finance research activities? These and other questions concerning a vital part of academic life were the subject of a day-long retreat for librarians at Western Kentucky University (WKU). Librarians hold faculty status at WKU, and in keeping with the school's increasing emphasis on research for tenure and promotion, the library recently adopted guidelines similar to those governing "classroom" faculty. In the future, involvement in research activities will be an important factor in determining those who receive tenure and promotion. Many pronounced the new standards a publish-or-perish policy that spells their doom.

### **An idea comes to life**

Over cups of tea, a couple of us discussed how research fears and frustrations might be alleviated. What about a workshop that featured the combined expertise of local and visiting researchers? We approached several colleagues with the idea. They applauded the proposed retreat, and the dean of libraries agreed to provide small honoraria for a couple of guest speakers. We selected the Monday before fall semester and reserved the meeting room at a hotel on the edge of Mammoth Cave National Park. A half-hour drive from the university, the hotel offered quiet dining facilities that overlooked a peaceful countryside, and the absence of telephones and other interruptions that plagued campus get-togethers. Flyers distributed at mid-summer announced the date and basic agenda.

The retreat's morning session consisted of three 45-minute talks. David Lee, the university's representative on the Editorial Board of the University Press of Kentucky, explained that the press represented a consortium of state schools which encouraged scholarship. Although the majority of its publications relate to history, government, and literature, the press welcomes all well-written manuscripts (except novels and genealogical studies). If accepted for publication, a manuscript might take two years to edit, design, print, and bind, he warned.

### **Using NOTIS to support research**

Flo Wilson, assistant director of libraries at Vanderbilt University, offered research ideas that held special appeal to technical services librarians, and focused on using NOTIS to support research. Since the original purpose of NOTIS, according to Wilson, was to enable each library to do its own thing, vast opportunities for creativity exist within the system. To tap this, there exists a need for a strong list of Statistical Applications of Social Science programs and a team of programmers. Currently, easy-to-use formats are hard to find. She explained further that NOTIS offers many opportunities for report writing and, as ideals gel, programmers are necessary to pull the information which already exists in the system. It is, therefore, critical to study the system to understand how ideas get into it.

Wilson suggested the following research possibilities in NOTIS: transaction logs offer numerous possibilities for collection development reports; cross-reference logs could help catalogers in designating subject headings; circulation history files, created when a book is discharged, could describe the use of that item, and the category of user; analyzing patrons'

use of the collection (place of publication, date, etc.) and comparing the data with the National Shelf List could reveal the strong and weak points of the library's collection.

NOTIS provides the opportunity for comparison, and comparative data allows the library to test the assumptions in the answers to the following questions: Do our library users use the catalog differently from other institutions? How important is the catalog? How does copy cataloging differ from original cataloging? How do libraries handle backlog? How can these backlog files complement the online file?

The crux of the research process, according to Wilson, is the need to understand how ideas get into the system in order to get them out. Those who input data should ask themselves, "Is this data being recorded so that it can be retrieved?" and should think through what users want to retrieve before the input takes place. Finally, Wilson counseled that a wealth of information exists in NOTIS; it is up to each individual to share it with the next person.

### **Writing for journals**

The last presentation for the morning featured *KLA Journal* editors Gwen Snodgrass and Carmen Embry, who made witty observations and valuable suggestions for good writing. They advised their listeners to select topics that relate to their expertise and interests, to conduct extensive literature searches to determine what already has been published on the topics, and to brainstorm with colleagues about writing ideas. If a project requires additional skills, engage the talents of an expert rather than waste time and energy struggling with an unfamiliar discipline.

They also advised that if you're in doubt about the content or form required by a particular journal, contact the editor and ask for advice. Whenever possible, engage in a joint writing project with a colleague. On completing a manuscript, ask several associates to read and criticize it; incorporate the ideas offered. Always submit a clean, readable manuscript. Although everyone can write, Snodgrass and Embry assured, some find it easier than others. Hard writing makes easy reading; the more one writes, the easier it becomes, they promised.

### **Writing book reviews**

Book reviewing is an academic responsibility of the library profession, submitted Brian Coutts, head of WKU's Library Public Services Depart-

ment. Many publications, including professional journals and local newspapers, seek well-written reviews; contact the book review editor and offer your services. Before writing a review, Coutts counseled, read the book from cover to cover and then reread it and take notes. Set aside the completed review for a few days, then rewrite and polish it. Good short reviews, he warned, are preferable, but harder to write than good long ones.

### **Obtaining a sabbatical**

Connie Foster, serials supervisor at WKU, supplied helpful hints on how to acquire a sabbatical. Planning should begin 18 months before the anticipated semester. Following the selection of a topic and some preliminary research, determine the amount of time needed for the project and discuss it with the department head and dean. Administrative support assured, conduct an extensive literature search, focus the topic, fine-tune all research plans, and make arrangements for training another to assume some of your regular duties.

Foster cautioned that, though a sabbatical is the ultimate of research perks, the writer must prepare for a change in his or her life. This includes personal discipline in treating sabbatical days as work days and in staying on task for a 30- or 35-hour week. Regardless of the project, research expenses can mount up, especially if one travels to an area away from home, warned WKU special collections librarian Nancy Baird, but Kentucky's many repositories offer resources for a wide variety of research topics close to home. A recent survey listed manuscript collections in more than 300 public facilities across the state; published finding aids to these materials can help in the selection of topics as well as in planning research trips. Before visiting an out-of-town facility, Baird advised, write ahead and ask for detailed information about holdings, hours, holidays, and nearby hotels. A week before the trip, send a note about your impending arrival and a reminder on the materials you intend to use; follow your visit with a letter of thanks.

### **Applying for grants**

The last three speakers of the afternoon were WKU librarians Marv Leavy, Sue Lynne McGuire and Pat Hodges. Members of university committees that make small grants to help defray expenses for conducting research and for travel to present research papers, they distributed

sample application forms and talked briefly about projects that the committees have recently funded. They also suggested a few do's and don'ts for successful applications.

Inspired by the suggestions about where to do research, how to obtain funds, what to write, and who might publish it, the 32 participants agreed that the retreat was a great success. Basking in its laurels, the committee has already begun formulating plans for next summer's "teacup" idea.

### Suggested reading

A quick literature search revealed many interesting articles, ideas, and innovations, but we discovered that if we read them all, our retreat would never get off the ground. Our bibliography, therefore, makes no attempt to cover all of the bases, but may inspire ideas for conducting similar workshops.

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