Embracing the Future

By: Rebecca K. Miller, Heather Moorefield-Lang, and Carolyn Meier

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Abstract:

In April 2015, the iPad turned five years old. For those of us in libraries, the tablet revolution sparked by the iPad ushered in a period of excitement and exploration (see AL, Mar./Apr. 2013, p. 20). We wondered how tablets might change the way we engage with our users. We understood that these devices held great promise for enhancing teaching and learning opportunities, access, and reference and circulation services.

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Char Booth's 2009 report, "Informing Innovation: Tracking Student Interest in Emerging Library Technologies at Ohio University" (goo.gl/ATwzM3), cautions against experimenting with too many programs at once. She argues that decisions should be grounded in insight into local library, information, and technology cultures--a policy that we call "intentional integration."

A 2014 Pew Research survey indicates that 64% of American adults have a smartphone and more than 42% of American adults own a tablet (pewrsr.ch/lNieoMY). Educause's 2014 data shows that 58% of university students were projected to own tablets in 2015 (bit.ly/lUByyas). But we need to look beyond these big data points to focus on local community and library goals.

Here are some methods and approaches that we gleaned from the case studies in our report. They are guideposts for the intentional integration of new technology.

Work within the big picture. As a first step, review mission statements and plans for your state, municipality, consortium, university, and your library. They will help in making decisions about integrating new technologies and gaining support from leaders and administrators.

Understand your community. Libraries in our report used surveys and web analytics to learn about their users. More important than the research methodology or type of data is the simple act of observing user behaviors, needs, and characteristics. Relevant data may already exist in your library, campus, or local government.

Seek and build collaboration. If you're working with mobile devices, get friendly with the people managing your wireless networks. At the Ohio State University Libraries, Juleah Swanson noted that the pilot circulation program depended on close collaboration between the acquisitions, IT, and circulation departments. Finding enthusiastic collaborators should be simple if you've connected with big-picture goals and community needs.

Assess. Developing an assessment plan and timeline at the beginning of a project is the best way to be intentional about evaluating a program. Both Ohio State and North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University used surveys and data to gauge the impact of their programs and make difficult decisions about their future. Assessment will help you make improvements to a program or decide to discontinue it.

Know when to stop. Acknowledging that your program, however intentionally developed, may not be successful is sad and frustrating. Ending the program, however, is also intentional and strategic. It liberates people and resources for a new project with greater impact.

Currently the buzz is wearables, the "internet of things," and machine learning. Keeping up with tech that not too long ago was found only in science fiction has its challenges. We are encouraged by the library world's response to mobile computing, embracing it to promote the core values, ethics, and competencies that have always driven the library profession. The next new thing? We don't know, but if we move from questions to exploration to strategic action, we are ready for whatever comes along.

REBECCA K. MILLER, HEATHER MOOREFIELD-LANG, and **CAROLYN MEIER** are academic librarians and editors of the October 2015 Library Technology Report "Mobile Devices: Service with Intention."