Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, Threat (SWOT) Analysis

Interview: Mr. Houbeck, Library Director

Julie Miller

Wayne State University INF 7040

For the SWOT Analysis, I interviewed Bob Houbeck, Director of the Frances G. Willson Thompson (FWT) Library at the University of Michigan-Flint (U of M-Flint). Mr. Houbeck has been the FWT Library Director for 25 years, providing a continuity of leadership for the library while 10 provosts and 6 chancellors have come and gone. Mr. Houbeck worked for U of M-Ann Arbor Library for 16 years prior to U of M-Flint Library which was key to the successful relationship between the two university libraries.

One of the major strengths of FWT Library is multiple, strong ties to U of M-Ann Arbor Library. They have a common integrated library system, ordering/payment system, and interlibrary loan system. FWT Library uses U of M-Ann Arbor’s copy-cataloging, shares no-charge inter-campus book borrowing, and has free access to U of M-Ann Arbor book collections. FWT Library is fortunate to have many three-campus (with U of M-Dearborn) discounted digital licenses for databases. FWT Library collection is another strength, where U of M-Flint users have virtual parity with U of M-Ann Arbor users in print and digital books and digital journals. Digital journals is a strength of FWT Library. FWT Library created an instrument for measuring journal parity in which FWT Library has current issue licenses to 90% or more of the top 100 most-cited journals as compared to U of M-Ann Arbor Library in 19 out of 20 subject areas. FWT Library is a consistent net-lender of books to U of M-Ann Arbor users. Since 2008, U of M-Flint lends U of M-Ann Arbor users four books for every one that U of M-Flint users borrow from U of M-Ann Arbor. FWT Library has a $6.5 million endowment for acquiring collection resources. The endowment generates approximately $250,000 per year in spendable interest which supplements the general fund collection budget. FWT Library has an active regional archive called Genesee County Historical Center, that is an abundant, underutilized resource that has a community-oriented archivist. An additional strength is FWT Library is seen as a hub of academic services, both library and non-library related. The hub contains more than 100 computers, a writing center, a writing classroom, the honors program offices, the education abroad offices, the faculty-oriented Thompson Learning & Teaching Center, and the graduate admissions office. The library as a hub is a great asset to attract patrons and keep patrons coming to the FWT Library. One interesting comment Mr. Houbeck made was in order to protect the library’s space, some space has to be given away to other groups within the university. This shows the library’s value to the university and the Director is respected as a reliable team player by his leaders and peers within the university. The FWT Library is a handsome building, with a dozen study rooms, portable white boards, ample seating for 700, an expandable footprint, and about 180,000 annual gate count for the last several years which is up 20% compared to ≤ 2010. FWT Library knows more about students’ academic, non-academic situations and needs than just about anybody else on campus because up to 1,200 students patronize the library per day during a regular semester. Lastly, Mr. Houbeck emphasized the strength of the library’s clear, easily memorized, and adaptable mission [statement] “to link people with ideas” which is achievable through their collections, technologies, spaces and services.

One of the major weaknesses of FWT Library is its location in downtown Flint, with all the negative perceptions such as elevated crime rates and the water crisis. Indeed, violent crime was up 23% in 2017 as compared to 2016 making the city of Flint the sixth most violent city in the United States (ABC12 news, 2018). Robinson (2018) said “the American Dream may not be readily available in Flint, Michigan, but its citizens are still fighting for a better reality.” Flint’s fight for a better reality is evidenced by the efforts of the Flint Registry to make Flint a lead-free city by 2022 (Zeitz Ruckart et al., 2019). The Flint Registry is a collaborative group made up of public, private, and various levels of government striving to achieve its goal (Zeitz Ruckart et al., 2019). Another weakness is the informal arrangements with U of M-Ann Arbor. Although the links with U of M-Ann Arbor are 15-25 years old, they are not formalized in a written agreement which makes FWT Library vulnerable. Despite the fact Mr. Houbeck put pest infestation in the threats category in the interview, it should be in the weakness category too. University students would not want to utilize the library if it had a pest infestation, and rightly so! Without patrons visiting the library, it wouldn’t stay open. Currently, the library is pest free, but since FWT Library had a bedbug and rodent problem at one time, it could happen again which is the reason for the traps, checks, and routine deep cleaning. Mr. Houbeck added to the list of weaknesses that he and his staff don’t do a good job of informing faculty and administrators of successes. He went on to say that the library has a blog but no attractive annual report or brochure. I theorize the reason FWT Library hasn’t invested the time and money to create an attractive annual report or brochure is in part due to insufficient staffing. Two reference librarians retired recently and one more will retire at the end of 2019. The remaining librarians are stretched to cover the responsibilities of the librarians that retired, leaving little to no time to communicate their value. This situation will hopefully change soon, as FWT Library recently announced job openings for two reference librarians. Mr. Houbeck alleged that there hasn’t been regular increases in the collection and acquisition budget which could be viewed as a weakness. I think the Director doesn’t want to ask for increases in the collection and acquisition budget because a renovation to the FWT Library is a higher priority. This may be a strategic move on the Director’s part, since the library needs to tackle a major renovation project soon to move the main entrance/exit to/from the library from the third floor to the first floor. The renovation has been talked about for years. Nearly everyone visiting FWT Library notices and comments on the awkward entrance/exit configuration. This change will make the library more welcoming and less confusing to patrons. In order to make the entrance/exit change, many other changes will need to happen simultaneously such as relocating the circulation and reference area to the first floor, possibly removing an elevator and others. I imagine the Director has to be calculating in his requests for money, so I think rather than request increases in the collection and acquisition budget, Mr. Houbeck is making plans to request a much larger sum of money for the much needed renovation. Another weakness is the library doesn’t have regular staff or a program for fundraising. Harris-Keith (2016) found that fundraising/donor relations is the least developed skill among academic library Directors as evidenced by a survey of 296 academic library Directors which is consistent with Mr. Houbeck’s assertion. Professional development, mentoring opportunities, and/or delegating fundraising/donor relations to an experienced library staff member are possible solutions for this weakness.

The Open Source Textbook initiative is a student-focused opportunity initiated by one of the new reference librarians that Mr. Houbeck is excited about. This imaginative new opportunity can save students thousands of dollars per semester. After a successful pilot with the Math Department, they are working to expand interest in the Physics, History, Psychology, and Biology Departments. The Open Source Textbook initiative would also create much needed visibility for the FWT Library and show excellent library leadership. The expansion of the Murchie Science building is yet another chance for the library to show leadership and get more visibility. The expansion creates an opportunity for the library to manage the study spaces and rooms in the new addition using the library’s experience and technology to manage a dozen study rooms and open spaces. An additional opportunity is the Genesee Historical Collections Center (archive). The archive has a new energetic archivist bringing the archive into the 21st century. Prior to hiring the new archivist, the record keeping was mainly done on paper with no digital management. The archive is becoming more accessible to researchers. The archive also has a strong book and journal collection. The final prospect for the FWT Library is probably the most discussed issue by patrons, faculty, and staff, which is transforming the 25-year old facility to change the entrance/exit to/from the library from the third floor to the first floor. Currently, visitors to the library have to take an elevator to the only entrance to the library on the third floor. It is especially confusing for visitors coming from the campus cross walk on the third floor mistakenly thinking they can exit the library on the first floor. Mr. Houbeck explained that the next step in the process is to engage an architect to create conceptual drawings and a rough budget, enabling the library to begin fundraising.

One of the threats Mr. Houbeck sees is FWT Library being viewed as a “warehouse of opaque paper objects administered by antiquarians” (B. Houbeck, personal communication, June 5, 2019). I think the threat of libraries becoming irrelevant is widespread but can be seen as an opportunity to educate those that see libraries this way. Dadzie & van der Walt (2015) recommends that subject librarians need to be assigned to university departments to seek opportunities for presentations on the available digital resources and their usefulness in teaching. Or to seek to be a regular face of the library at the faculty department meetings. Also, for libraries to show their relevance, librarians should convince faculty to allow librarian to speak to their students about the library’s databases and resources. The librarians should regularly email [faculty] to promote digital resources (Dadzie & van der Walt, 2015). Due to the reality of some people questioning the use of books anymore, there is the threat of losing space within the library. The library must be assertive about creating a vision for the FTW Library transformation. Another threat is the library’s openness to the public, i.e. non-students, faculty and staff. Mr. Houbeck wants to remain an open, accepting library however, due to fear of crime, allowing public patrons could lead to a drop in student-use of the library and force closing off the facility to the public. There are about 10-15 regular homeless public patrons in attendance at FWT library daily. Most of the public patrons keep to themselves, however, there have been instances where there has been complaints about a public patron from a student causing concern for student safety. To protect the safety of students and staff, there is a student safety patrol in the library during the hours the library is open. There is also routine walk-throughs conducted by an official campus security employee. An additional threat is the possible pressure to remove or refrain from buying materials for the collection that offend students, staff, or faculty sensibilities or trigger opposition. Mr. Houbeck feels that the library needs to defend access and free inquiry and free speech. FWT Library is considering the purchase of a book on Mohammad for the collection even though it may offend some people and it might “disappear” from the library. Apparently, some books that insult a patron’s religious beliefs have gone missing in the past. The last threat Mr. Houbeck identified was pests such as bedbugs and rodents. At one time, there was a bedbug infestation in an area of the library, and it wasn’t in the public patron area as many library staff suspected. The infestation was removed, and the library initiated the use of traps for bedbugs, quarterly checks with sniffer dogs, and all garbage cans were converted from open top to closed top.

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