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Responding to Fiscal Tensions and a Changing Educational Context: A Librarian Entrepreneur

Kristen E. Willmott¹ and Andrew F. Wall¹

Abstract
This case explores various entrepreneurial initiatives introduced by Dr. Ron Dow, dean of libraries, at a private, research-extensive institution in the northeastern United States. The case serves as an example of how entrepreneurial ideas can be applied within educational contexts, specifically, the academic support context of the university library. The accompanying teaching notes facilitate analysis of the potential and limits of entrepreneurial practice for educational leaders who operate within the ever-changing fiscal landscape of academe.

Keywords
entrepreneurship, institutional planning, academic leadership

Case Narrative

University Context

In the modern knowledge economy, change is a constant norm (Tierney, 2006); indeed, the very survival of universities is at stake. As a result, institutions cannot afford to be conventional, rigid, and impervious to change (Azad, n.d.). Competition between institutions of higher education for students, scarce resources, recognition, and prestige, is central to today’s higher education landscape (Zemsky, Shaman, & Shapiro, 2002). Resource allocations in higher education are now governed on one hand by structural fiscal crisis and, on the other, by pressures from business and

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political leaders tasking universities to help meet the challenges of a new economic order (Barrow, 1996). Adapting to fiscal stress requires higher education institutions solve fiscal challenges and serve societal goals simultaneously (Leslie & Fretwell, 1996). The growing competition among universities and other entities that now develop, distribute, and market education is compelling academic leaders to become entrepreneurial and seek unique ways to strike the delicate balance between mission and money.

This case describes the ways in which Dr. Ron Dow, an educational entrepreneur, navigated the challenges of fiscal resource tensions while advancing a research university agenda as head of the University of Rochester libraries in Rochester, New York. The case is instructive of how higher education leaders can apply entrepreneurial processes toward advancing traditional academic values rooted in the disciplines of the academy.

**Dr. Ron Dow, Head of University Libraries**

As a self-reported entrepreneurial leader, a case analysis of Dow’s transformation of the University of Rochester libraries serves as a useful tool for understanding ways in which entrepreneurialism can be used to benefit higher education. Dow’s tenure as head of libraries from 1997 to 2008 was at a time when advances in digital information were reshaping how individuals conceive of library holdings, be they books, journals, or other artifacts. Dow oversaw a central library that boasts more than 3.5 million volumes, hosts an extensive collection of electronic resources, and, dating back to its inception in 1850, has remained in the top 50 research libraries in the United States and Canada.

The University of Rochester library system consists of four main libraries. The largest of the four is the River Campus Library. Named for the third president of the University of Rochester, it is called Rush Rhees Library. The library features a 186-foot high tower, many rows and corners of study spaces, computer labs, and close to 42 miles of shelving with more than 350,000 square feet of floor area (“Libraries,” 2012). The second main library is the Sibley Music Library. Founded in 1904, it is the largest academic music library in North America. It is located across town from Rush Rhees and is part of the Eastman School of Music. Named for industrialist and philanthropist George Eastman, the founder of Eastman Kodak Company, the Eastman School of Music has been one of America’s leaders in musical composition, performance, and education for more than 90 years (“Eastman School of Music: 90 Notable Years,” 2012.) The third main library is the Edward G. Miner Library; it provides the University of Rochester Medical Center and the greater Rochester community with resources to support health, discovery, teaching, and learning (“Libraries,” 2012). As part of the University of Rochester Medical Center, Miner Library is connected to the University of Rochester’s teaching hospital, Strong Memorial Hospital. The fourth library is the Charlotte Allen Whitney Library and Teacher Resource Center, also known as the Allen Library. Founded in 1913 and open to the public, it is housed at the University of Rochester’s Memorial Art Gallery, a gallery with holdings representing
more than 5,000 years of art history (“Rochester’s Art Museum,” 2012). As illustrated by the breadth of library holdings and facilities, the head of libraries’ position at the University of Rochester involves significant responsibility with oversight and management of all four main libraries, plus several smaller on-campus libraries.

Prior to Dow’s arrival as dean of libraries, the library system was not optimally drawing in students, faculty, or staff, and the physical structure appeared aged and uninviting. Prior to Dow, the University’s library, though centrally located on campus, fell short of attracting students and faculty to best utilize its resources and was experiencing a time of significant fiscal tension. Nonetheless, despite extreme budget constraints, Dow undertook his position at the library with the objective of increasing and enhancing the quality of the library collections. Although aware of the challenges and issues he faced, he arrived at his new job bursting with ideas for change and prepared with fresh perspectives. He is a man with tremendous drive and dedication but also great vision, ability to tackle old problems in new ways, and a spark for creativity that is both contagious and inspiring; it is these personal characteristics that earned him his job and greatly intrigued those who interviewed him (“Ronald F. Dow Named Dean of River Campus Libraries,” 1996).

Despite challenges inherent in restructuring and upgrading library facilities within a loosely coupled, highly decentralized university (Birnbaum, 1991) experiencing a budget crunch, Dow approached his position and task with a unique, nonconformist, entrepreneurial approach. Dow engaged in serial innovations as a means to address the challenges of the library system. In this case, we see innovation not as a discovery of new things but the implementation of innovations as new things within a particular context. As Baregheh, Rowley, and Sambrook (2009) put forth,

Innovation is the multi-stage process whereby organizations transform ideas into new/improved products, service or processes, in order to advance, compete and differentiate themselves successfully. (p. 1334)

Dow’s enthusiastic nature, entrepreneurial approach, and engagement in specific innovations were major contributors in generating the required resources and nurturing an environment conducive to the much-needed transformation of the academic library system.

The Use of Entrepreneurial Innovations to Advance the Library

Dow arrived at the University at a time of considerable fiscal tension. One of his first challenges became emblematic of his entrepreneurial spirit—the need to make a budget recommendation in a time when cuts were imminent. Despite the extreme budget constraints of the institution at the time, Dow began his leadership at the library with the goal of increasing the quality of the library collection. He recognized that to increase library collection quality over time, he needed to garner the support of institutional leaders. He decided to propose a library budget cut, saying,
So I wrote to the provost and said I want the 2% cut and my thinking was, one, it makes me a better partner with the college for later, two, it gives me an opportunity to create extensive urgency in the library for doing something different, and three, if we did it right, we would never again have to hear the argument from the college administrators, or anybody else, that the collection we were purchasing did not match what was going on at the University.

The urgency imposed by a budget cut created the context for Dow to go to his librarians and explain that each of them would need to make a 35% budget cut. He asked his staff to come up with a list of core materials essential to supporting the faculty and curriculum. Subsequent cuts would then be made after first and foremost fulfilling the must-have items faculty needed, thus reducing the collection from what faculty did not report needing. The change in thinking was important in that it focused not on continuing past material collections but rather refocused the library collection on what the faculty and curriculum must have to complete their current and future activities. In Dow’s own words,

You’re going to take a 35% cut to your budget and what you must do is come up with a core collection for the discipline you support, meaning serials and lists of publishers where we buy everything, [so] that if we did not buy them you couldn’t say we supported this discipline at all and you couldn’t even really offer degrees in this discipline because you’re not following the standard things. So . . . you the librarian must go to the faculty and come up with a list of what are the standard titles, you then must come back to the head of collections and convince that head of collections that you have done that.

The library was then committed to buying collections faculty reported they must have, but everything else that had been previously purchased was open to removal from the budget. Once the collection had been trimmed to include only items faculty reported needing, the faculty were then asked for a list of wants. Dow reported that even after the requests were purchased, expenditures were US$200,000 less than the previous year; funds were reallocated even with a 2% overall budget cut.

As it was evident existing library facilities were not inviting to students, the budget was not the only challenge Dow faced in his new position. Yet, rather than focusing on the bleak facilities, Dow began to put forward a vision of the library that would invite students to participate in both literature and learning, and ultimately restructure the idea of the use of library space itself. He articulated his efforts to transform the library as,

It seemed to me that if you wanted to focus as a librarian on bringing students to the literature, to support what was going on in the classroom and going on in the major, then you needed to go back to the issue of facilities because the facilities had to reflect the same quality as what was going on in the literature that was in the library.
Willmott and Wall

The strategy Dow used to address the library facilities reflected his entrepreneurial leadership approach and large personality. He used storytelling as a means to gain resources and transform the culture of the library (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). His approach was to talk about the need for facilities upgrades to transform the library into a place for students to engage in learning. He told the story of the library facilities at every venue possible, including in front of the University Trustees, and through seeking out new relationships with businesses and donors, funded a transformation of the environment. His vision of the library was not simply as a collection of books and a repository of knowledge but as a uniting experience for students. The following passage articulates how he made his case to one of the University Trustees to support a remodeling project.

He [a University Trustee] came to see me and he said “I understand what you want to do, what could you do for $250,000 in the periodical reading room?” . . . So we began to look at it and we said, you know, the chairs were old and worn down, the floor was cork and worn out, there were fluorescent lights on the ceiling so you couldn’t see the art on the ceiling, so it looked like a space that was very tired. It didn’t have lights on the tables, it didn’t have Internet access, it didn’t have anything basically and it was pretty empty. We said for $250,000 we could do this, but for $500,000 we could do much more and so he gave us $500,000.

The transformation of the library into a space that truly invites students in has been a core initiative of Dow’s leadership. Remaking the library facility was key to achieving the vision of the library as a student-centered space that contributed to student learning and growth. Ultimately, Dow did not just transform a few rooms, but in fact changed the form and function of the library space. In one swift and symbolic move, Dow opened the library to student use of food and drink based on the rationale that it was what students wanted. He sought not simply to transform the appearance of the library space and to bring students in to engage with the collection, but he also marketed the library as a student-friendly space that is the hub of campus life, complete with food and drink to better meet student desires.

Dow envisioned integrating the University library with student life on campus; he knew that for students to use library resources effectively, they needed to visit the library. Dow emphasized a proactive approach for his librarians and routinely shared his belief that “librarians are educators” with his colleagues and staff. As he states,

Librarians have a very set way of thinking about things and they’re very passive, they wait for students to come . . . they view the library as a delivery service to the campus so that when you come in, I will assist you because I deliver a service . . . I disagreed with that perspective.

To initiate and establish a rapport with the student community, Dow encouraged ideas such as hosting a breakfast for incoming students’ parents and an annual Halloween event called the “Scare Fair” for students. Dow reintegrated the library into campus
life and connected the library back to the University’s past. For example, his innovative approach to create and fund the annual “Scare Fair” threads the library to university history. In 1929, when the Rush Rhees tower was being built, a young mason named Pete Nicosia fell from the 150-foot tower during construction. Nicosia’s ghost is rumored to haunt the library and so library staff use the legend as an opportunity to pique students’ curiosity about the library, even creating a “stack stalk” where students hunt for books from a list in exchange for candy (Buitrago, 2005). Dow saw student-centered events as opportunities to make visits to the library not only intriguing but also fun. He saw it as the role of the library to market itself to students, to make the library an outreach and student service-oriented culture.

Sensing the need for upgrading and integrating technology into library processes, Dow identified staff who could develop and lead the initiative of a digital library. Despite his skepticism about cost and legality issues in digitizing the library, he perceived the need to engage in new ways of accessing and thinking about the library collection. He provided the required freedom, or the permission, to be entrepreneurial, to innovate and develop solutions that would benefit the library and, by extension, the University community. In the following passage, Dow discussed the library’s research offerings before technological updates were implemented:

Students who were doing this kind of Google searching, they might be writing papers, but they weren’t writing papers that really modeled the life of an academic and therefore they really weren’t becoming engaged in discipline. So, the question became would there be a way that we could make the library approach, the catalog to the library, more like Google and so we began testing how students used the catalog.

Dow allowed his team the freedom to be creative and approach problems and constraints as opportunities for improvement. He calls this “painting a vision,” a vision that embraces entrepreneurial ideas and action that provides individuals with the opportunity for agency to transform the organization. Dow’s digital vision for the library, developed in part out of his staff’s agency to be institutional entrepreneurs, prompted a major change in how individuals access and are counted to access the library. For instance, visits to the library count whether they are physical visits or digital visits through the online portal. The space of the library is not simply the physical space, but includes the virtual space accessed through library websites.

Discussion

The case of Dow presents a story of how entrepreneurial leadership can aid in organizational transformation when both core academic values and fiscal resource issues are attended to simultaneously. Dow’s entrepreneurial success is evident in three central areas: a transformation of the library space, including facilities upgrades complete with student spaces and invitations to bring in food and drink; a transformation of the library with technological updates, including a digital catalog and reserves; and
a transformation of the attitude of the library to achieve Dow’s vision which, through student outreach and events, transitioned the library into a student-centered space and reinvigorated the library into campus life.

Although Dow may not be too distinct from an effective manager, he does exemplify certain key traits of entrepreneurial thinking in his leadership. Although the challenge of striking a balance between fiscal tensions and organizational mission at the library was not uncommon, the way Dow approached it and sought solutions was distinct from mere effective management. Instead of micromanaging and controlling all aspects of the difficult situations that arose, Dow worked through problems with his staff by inspiring them and setting them free to find the most effective solutions.

Dow’s leadership can be viewed as an example of the potential of entrepreneurial thinking and action when applied to the challenges of leadership in higher education. Dow was effective and successful in taking advantage of the loosely coupled organizational structure of the University of Rochester, which also allowed him sufficient space to be a nonconformist in his approach. His entrepreneurial leadership provides solutions to problems faced by mission-oriented institutions, which ultimately must also survive, sustain, and grow in a world with harsh economic realities.

The fiscal realities of higher education make it clear the academy needs leaders who consider the fundamental mission of institutions to be places where students can be transformed through the acquisition of knowledge and skills. However, this transformation needs to happen in the context of leadership that attends carefully to providing resources that can make lofty mission statements possible. Dow’s sage and effective leadership through difficult budgets begs the question of not simply, “Is there an entrepreneur in the library?” but “Where else do institutions of higher education need academic entrepreneurs who have the sense to balance fiscal tensions with core academic intentions?”

**Teaching Notes**

This is a case example for how one might use innovation and entrepreneurial practices to assist in navigating through troubled financial times while supporting the mission and values of higher education as a purveyor of the public good. Four specific areas for discussion of the case are intended: (a) Examine the meaning of entrepreneurship as an approach to leadership that focuses on adding market or social value; (b) Explore the meaning of “innovation” or are new approaches within a social context innovative even if they are not novel within the broader field of educational leadership? (c) Can you identify entrepreneurial practices within the case of Dr. Dow and the description of his innovations within the university library? If so, what value and tensions do you see in using entrepreneurial practices within educational contexts? and (d) How do entrepreneurial practices differ from other approaches to leadership that appear to have similarities, such as transformational leadership? Do similarities and differences matter in the context of educational leadership? We provide background in developing these four areas of discussion below:
1. Scholarship that focuses on entrepreneurship points toward the promise of what Max Weber (1958/2003) calls “the entrepreneurial man,” by focusing on what the individual action of leaders or managers can do to foster organizational advancement toward the development of capital. The entrepreneur as an individual has been grounded in Schumpeter’s (1947) work that defines entrepreneurship as, “the doing of new things or the doing of things that are already being done in a new way (innovation)” (p. 151). Entrepreneurship can be seen as a primarily market-oriented behavior, but some (see specifically Mair & Marti, 2006) have argued that social entrepreneurship is a way to use entrepreneurial practices toward social good. Explore the case example and discuss to what extent Dow’s entrepreneurial leadership was focused on market and/or social aims?

2. Entrepreneurial action is often described as “innovative,” but what is innovative in one setting may not be innovative in another. Restate the definition of innovation here. Do you see what Dow did in the case as innovative or simply savvy? Does it matter whether his actions were innovative or savvy in defining his actions as entrepreneurial leadership practice?

3. Recent research on entrepreneurship has emphasized the importance of approaching the study of entrepreneurship as a process (e.g., Baron & Shane, 2005; Vecchio, 2003). This approach suggests the value of examining what entrepreneurs do as they engage in new ventures or innovations—that is, identifying the practices they use consistently and successfully as they undertake specific innovations. Based on a review of entrepreneurship literature, including the emerging field of social entrepreneurship, we have identified the following six key common practices of entrepreneurs across fields and organized them along several complementary areas:

- **Vision**—Use vision as the ultimate guide. Having a clear vision guiding one’s action has been identified in the literature as a key characteristic of entrepreneurs.

- **Opportunities**—Be constantly alert to and proactively seek out opportunities for innovation. Identifying and pursuing opportunities is at the very core of several definitions of entrepreneurship.

- **Resources**—Pursue worthwhile innovations regardless of the resources currently held. Entrepreneurs have been characterized as individuals who pursue opportunities “without regard to the resources they currently control” (Stevenson & Jarillo, 1990, p. 23).

- **Risk**—Evaluate the risks involved in an innovation from unique perspectives. Entrepreneurs are often considered high risk takers, although some research studies (Busenitz, 1999; Palich & Bagby, 1995) suggest this is not how most entrepreneurs would describe themselves but rather that entrepreneurs evaluate the risk involved in pursuing a new venture, as well as other risks, differently from most other people.
Decision making—Make decisions quickly with incomplete information when needed. Entrepreneurs are characterized in the literature as tending to make and implement decisions quickly and, when needed, willing to come to a decision with incomplete information rather than miss a window of opportunity (Bygrave, 2004).

Growth—Seek to continually increase impact. Rapidly growing one’s business is often a major drive, as well as a measure of success, for business entrepreneurs (e.g., Kelley & Marram, 2004).

These six categories of entrepreneurial practices can be a guide for entrepreneurial leadership action. Please review the case and identify which of the entrepreneurial practices are present within the case. Describe how the practices were used and the impact you perceive they had in framing Dow’s leadership of the libraries. Then, brainstorm examples of how you have seen each of the six categories of entrepreneurial practices exemplified in other educational and/or business environments.

4. Fisher and Koch (2004) draw attention to how the ideas of transformational leadership and entrepreneurial practices are similar. Burns (1978) describes transformational leadership as a process in which “leaders and followers help each other to advance to a higher level of morale and motivation.” Given Burns’ definition and the six categories of practices listed above, compare and contrast entrepreneurial leadership with transformational leadership. Do you see the actions of Dow in the case example as more indicative of entrepreneurial leadership, transformational leadership, or something else entirely?

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