

Vision for VALE 2007-2010 Richard Sweeney, NJIT, sweeney@njit.edu

I congratulate our VALE leadership, especially Judy Cohn and Anne Ciliberti, for promoting this VALE planning retreat. VALE's successful eight years of collaboration is a testimony to the courage, cooperation and determination of New Jersey academic libraries improving services for all. The future of my academic library and your academic library is now **permanently** tied to the future of VALE collaboration, innovation, and leveraged services and resources. VALE libraries, for good or ill, are fundamentally bound to each other, as though they are branches of some larger library service entity and it is in our mutual interest to understand this reality and foster an even higher level of collaboration that results in new and improved library services for our students and faculty. I suggest that there are four levels to such VALE collaboration in our future.

First, VALE offers services that are or were provided by individual academic libraries for themselves that can now be provided less expensively or better collaboratively. For example, library database licenses are almost always cheaper purchased collaboratively. VALE librarians learn from each other at special meetings and at our wonderful annual user group meeting. Yet, it will certainly be cheaper and more effective in the future to have all institutions share the same integrated library system, share catalogers and other special back room services. After all, most of these systems or expertise are mature, similar in functionality and have become more of a commodity. More importantly, there are real advantages in having them all work together adding new benefits to users. VALE members could even share book collections, not just as interlibrary loan but as a branch library. Such user-activated intra-library loan would be much more responsive. Imagine that when your student or faculty member searched the library catalog, he or she was actually searching the catalog of every VALE member. Imagine that a user could place an immediate hold with guaranteed delivery the next day. VALE might actually begin to recognize and implement services so that the long tail of unique or near-unique titles will benefit users of every institution (e.g. the Last Copy in NJ).

Second, VALE should and does offer services that some or all individual libraries can't provide for themselves because of the cost, expertise or resources involved. For instance, not every NJ college or university has all of the expertise necessary to plan an institutional repository which entails policy, legal, educational, cultural, and technical components, most of which are interrelated and each of which must be satisfactorily addressed for the repository to succeed. Other examples might include shared storage facilities, shared digitization facilities, shared expert professional expertise such as web developers, software designers, shared information literacy software, tutorials and shared legal and policy experts. VALE has already begun to consider implementing some of these but our "independent-streak" recidivism keeps us from making the kind of progress that would otherwise have been possible. As of now, however, VALE has done very little about developing shared paid expert staff, rather relying almost entirely on voluntary time contributions of staff from individual institutions. In most cases, we don't have enough "critical mass", e.g. staffing at any one library to achieve some of these goals. Our institutional libraries are still operating in a "home rule" mindset although that does not fully benefit our user community.

Third, future VALE collaboration should include selected shared innovative research and development. It is outside the scope of most NJ colleges and universities to embark on real library research and development. VALE members rely on the vendors for R&D who are often slow, poorly led, or under funded. How can VALE imagine, develop, and test new services that

were not possible because the technology wasn't available or because the scale needed was too vast to be cost effective? The economics of software development has changed radically. It is now possible to economically share software and large systems (e.g. open systems software, peer-to-peer communication software, and social network software) and still have much more individual customization and even, personalization. Thus one VALE open source system might contain the college /university archive for all NJ institutions. It might permit each visitor to virtually tour the local campuses during different time periods, listen to stories of what took place on that campus or in that department. Many of our users love the iTunes model of downloading music to their iPods. Can VALE promote and partner with Apple and publishers on a similar easy-to-use model for downloading scholarly articles with the metadata to create their own local catalog?

NJIT is partnering with Educational Testing Service on their new ICT (Information, Communication and Technology) literacy test to validate their ICT assessment work with some portfolio bibliographic work at NJIT. Imagine that VALE works with ETS to begin to develop wickedly interactive and engaging learning simulation modules that teach ICT, the way they are assessed. Information literacy can be taught not only by a librarian or faculty member in a classroom, or by another student (sometimes called peer-to-peer learning), or by self-learning through reading or interactive tutorials. It could also be taught by a student performing an online search in a simulated micro-database environment. (This is how ETS now assesses student ICT skills by asking them online to perform some skill in a mock database). Students today are exploratory learners that prefer to learn by doing. There is no reason why VALE can't also provide a human mentor while a student performs searches in this micro-environment to assist their learning.

Fourth, VALE itself, must work continuously with some other partners, networks or consortia since the scale or resources of non-VALE groups, public libraries, companies, national, regional, or even international groups might make possible some development that is outside the scope, resources or current expertise of VALE. Our experience with the New Jersey Knowledge Initiative and Q&ANJ are already successful examples of partnering outside of NJ academic libraries. VALE is more likely to be able to seek grants and funding if we are open to such partnering. VALE's participation in the International Consortia of Consortia was limited to those who could afford the time and money to attend; this is unfortunate.

However, very few new VALE services or significant improvements will be possible if member librarians remain in the mode of primarily independent volunteers working together. Nancy Davenport suggested that shared cataloging operations made sense. I concur. But who is willing to share the cost of catalogers? Who is willing to share the implementation of compatible ILS systems that facilitate shared cataloging? We need a far greater level of cooperation than VALE has ever displayed to get to the next level. Drowning in our day to day work and fiscal problems, can we take the time to see and act upon the possibilities for creating VALE services that ultimately would reduce some of those problems? What VALE has done has been marvelous, a real tribute to all those involved and model for other consortia. However, so much more is possible if we recognize the consortium possibilities and our own reluctance to give up some independence in favor of huge user gains.