

Beyond Good Intentions: Developing and Operationalizing Values in the Structure of Digital Library Programs

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Abstract

Defining values for an organizational unit has become a standard practice for creating and supporting successful teams across sectors in business, government, and nonprofits. Given the centrality of professional values for librarians and archivists, this practice is particularly salient for work in library and archives organizations. At the same time, implicit values in technology sector organizations have been widely criticized for leading to staff burnout and contributing to increased precarity and harm to employees. This presents a significant challenge for digital library organizations that often straddle aspects of start-up and information technology organizational culture and library and archives culture.

This case study presents the development of a set of values for the newly created Digital Content Management (DCM) section at the Library of Congress. The authors provide general context and background on this effort, then describe the approach to collaboratively developing shared values and the resulting work to refine how those values are operationalized in ongoing work activities and processes. This case study also aims to provide useful information to others working in digital library programs to support this same kind of reflective praxis.

Organizational Values in Libraries and Technology Organizations

Establishing organizational values is often a core part of ongoing activities to support organizational planning. In particular, work on organizational theory underscores that “values imbue an organization with a deep sense of purpose and resolve” (Bolman & Deal, 2017, p. 242). In this context, stated organizational values play an important role in the development and function of organizational cultures. This approach is also a key component of strategic planning efforts in various sectors, but is also widely viewed as being specifically critical for library and other information organizations (Evans & Greenwell, 2020, p. 92).

In this context, it is worth noting the key connections between stated values and the emergent culture of any given organizational context. Work to define and enact organizational values has been identified as a key part of supporting the development of effective work cultures in libraries (Mierke & Williamson, 2017), but it is also widely argued that stated assertions about

these values are often out of sync with the lived experiences and realities of what staff in organizations experience (Brown, 2018). To that end, it is critical for any organizational unit that sets out to establish values to also develop methods and strategies to operationalize those values in the rhythms, routines, and daily work of the group.

Discussion of organizational values in library and archives organizations needs to also connect with and address the inherent professional values associated with these fields (ALA, 2019; SAA, 2020). These professional values express key sets of ideas about how and why librarians and archivists approach their work. It is particularly worth underscoring that the high-minded nature of the values have been identified as contributing to the general problem of “vocational awe” and burnout among library professionals (Ettarh, 2018). That is, a calling “is often an invitation for exploitation, whether you’re a zookeeper, or a teacher, or a pastor” (Petersen, 2020, p. 82). Specifically, approaching librarianship and archival practice as a calling can result in library and archives workers being asked to take on more work and duties with fewer resources to support them. Furthermore, these professional values have also been connected to problematic assumptions about the inherent nobility of all library work and organizations, which keeps librarians and archivists from engaging with the ways their respective organizations and institutions have and do serve oppressive functions in society (de Jesus, 2014). To that end, high-minded ideals and values can themselves work against efforts to create genuinely inclusive and supportive workplaces (Hathcock, 2015).

Being explicit about the values that drive work on digital library initiatives is especially important due to the range of ideological frames that come with concepts such as disruptive innovation (Daub, 2020; Vinsel & Russell, 2020). Indeed, digital library programs and initiatives have begun to increasingly focus on clarifying the kinds of values that they support as a way to demonstrate how libraries must stand apart from the general ideology of digital culture typified by Silicon Valley (Owens et al., 2018). In this context, work to center notions of repair (Jackson, 2014), care (The Care Collective, 2020), and maintenance (Arnold, 2016) offer powerful alternatives for approaching and defining values counter to the prevailing ideologies often associated with Silicon Valley technology cultures.

In light of this context, we believe it should be a priority for digital library programs and initiatives to establish and hold themselves accountable to explicit values. The complexities and tensions in library and archival professional values are tied up in vocational awe and can lead to burnout. The ideologies that largely frame how digital technology works are tied to problematic visions of precarity and disregard for the critical nature of maintenance and care work. Of note, this perspective is very much in line with ongoing attempts to establish and articulate a positive

vision for information maintenance work as a practice of care (The Information Maintainers, 2019). To that end, when the new Digital Content Management section was established at the Library of Congress, we believed it critical to engage in an explicit effort to define values in acknowledgement of both the issues in librarianship and in digital technology. In what follows we describe our approach to this process and what we learned along the way. Our hope is that in doing so we can provide useful information to others working in digital library programs to support this same kind of reflective praxis.

Developing DCM Values

In 2017, 10 new staff members joined the newly created Digital Content Management (DCM) section.¹ This new section brought together the organization's Web Archiving Team with new staff charged with the management of the Library's general digital collections, setting policy for digital content management, and supporting the goals outlined in the institution's digital collecting plan to dramatically expand workflows and processes to acquire, preserve, and deliver born-digital content. Shortly after new staff members were hired, DCM worked through a process to define and commit to shared values for our work and work relationships. In this section we briefly describe that process and also share the resulting value statements.

Workshop Pre-work

Drawing on existing lists of values, a small group drafted and developed a series of values statements. The statements and a set of background readings were then shared with the broader team in advance of a workshop and are referenced throughout this article (American Library Association Council, 2019; Arnold, 2016; Jackson, 2014; Nowvieskie, 2015; Society of American Archivists Council, 2011).

Values Workshop Process

The entire team, at that point 16 staff members, then participated in a two-hour workshop led by the Section Head. Staff broke out into small groups for short activities and discussions. First, we started with discussion of different value terms. A frequently used set of values cards served as the basis of an initial list (Miller et. al, 2001). That set of cards was augmented to include

¹ See the blog post about the Digital Content Management team:
<https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2018/04/teaming-up-digital-content-management-joins-the-signal/?loclr=blogsig>

values that appear in the SAA and ALA lists, and blank cards for team members to propose additional terms. Some terms that were very similar led to discussions about the nuances between terms and helped us refine our thinking. Next, the same small groups brainstormed definition statements for the terms they had chosen, and wrote these rough drafts on poster boards around the room for others to consider.

Staff were rotated to new groups and discussed how to put the proposed values into practice in a few hypothetical scenarios. Inspired by the Society of American Archivists' Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics², which states that we “are often subjected to competing claims and imperatives, and in certain situations particular values may pull in opposite directions,” each scenario described a situation that might challenge our values or pit one value against another. There were no right or wrong answers for this activity, and staff came up with multiple approaches to exhibit our values in each situation. Finally, to close the session, every staff member was asked to share an experience when a colleague outside of our section modeled one of the proposed values. This activity highlighted that the values are maybe not always explicit but implicit in our colleagues' daily work.

The meeting organizers refined the resulting proposed value terms and definitions into a first version of the DCM Values statement. The goal was to be thorough but concise, so that the values could be easily recalled in our daily work. This was no easy task; in the effort to pare the list down, we tried to combine like-terms and sentiments. For example, some of the intention behind the proposed value of “safety” was incorporated into “care” and “trust” statements. We shared the draft version with all DCM staff members for their feedback and group approval to implement the statement.

More importantly, the value statement is intended to be a living and evolving document. After attending the Digital Library Federation Forum 2018³, where inclusivity and safety were demonstrated by organizers, presenters, and attendees (and emphasized in their Code of Conduct⁴), one DCM staff member again suggested adding “safety” to the DCM Values statement. We realized and recognized that we had not fully captured the importance of safety in our first version. Furthermore, explicitly adding “safety” as a value demonstrates awareness that libraries and archives are predominantly white spaces (Vinopal, 2016). In order for the values to be interpreted as belonging to all members for the section, incorporating “safety” acknowledges this

² SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics: <https://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>

³ 2018 DLF Forum site: <https://forum2018.diglib.org/>

⁴ DLF Code of Conduct: <https://www.diglib.org/about/code-of-conduct/>

context for enacting them. The addition was discussed with all DCM staff, and the group agreed that it would be a great addition, not just as one of the values, but as an overarching objective of the entire document.

To keep the values in mind in our work, we posted it in our digital collaboration space, so it can be shared with colleagues throughout the Library. We also created a print-able poster version, so that it can be displayed in our shared meeting spaces. This will serve as a reminder and reference during meetings, and help to integrate the values into our section's culture as we further the important work of managing the Library's digital content.

The Resulting Values

These nine core values were collaboratively defined and developed by Digital Content Management section staff. They articulate our shared commitments in our work and our relationships. All of the values work together, but "safety" is particularly essential as a foundation for enacting the rest of these values. They enable us to support each other and hold each other accountable.

- **Care:** We are maintainers and supporters of the collections, collection users, and each other. We care for the collections of the Library; and we create an environment that ensures the people who care for the collections, in the section and partners inside and outside the Library, feel safe and supported. We model an ethic of care in all our interactions: to bring kindness, generosity, patience, and compassion to our work.
- **Collaboration:** We support the work of others, and our work is supported by others. We are open to the points of view of colleagues across the Library and respect their varied experiences and expertise. As one section within a tightly coupled system, our success is dependent on the success of all of the Library's units and staff.
- **Craft:** We apply the established professional principles and values of librarianship in our craft and resolve any friction or tension between them with discerning judgment anchored in reflective practice. We improve the craft of librarianship by building a community of practice inside the section, division, service unit, and institution committed to sharing and refining digital content management practices.
- **Ingenuity:** We continuously and creatively improve every aspect of our work and are always curious about new ways to do things. We establish and maintain flexible workflows, processes, and meetings. We take opportunities to course correct and allow ourselves the

freedom to fail. We are adaptable and resourceful in order to scale up the Library's ability to manage growth in collections and changes in their use.

- **Learning:** We are committed to continual learning and creating opportunities to learn together. We learn from others across the field and the Library and we share and teach others about what we have learned. We stay informed on current research and apply our learning to develop novel solutions. We are reflective and deliberate about distilling, synthesizing, and sharing what we learn in our work to improve digital content management methods.
- **Safety:** We are committed to establishing and maintaining a safe space to do our work. This is a foundational requirement to enable us to learn, collaborate, build trust, and hone our craft. We work to identify and mitigate potential sources of harm to each other, the organization, and the collections. We work to ensure that everyone can feel safe and supported in their work.
- **Service:** We serve staff across the Library who themselves serve the Library's full range of audiences. We are consistent, responsible, supportive, and positive in all of our interactions.
- **Sustainability:** We ensure stable and enduring content, systems, practices, collaborations, and selves by maintaining balance. We plan our work and commitments to deliver results while allowing time to be mindful, thoughtful, and deliberate in our approaches and methods. We increase our personal, team, and institutional capacity while considering personal, organizational, fiscal, and environmental sustainability.
- **Trust:** We ensure both the trustworthiness of the Library's collections and ourselves. We extend trust to others across the Library and build trust through achieving results. We provide dependable service to ensure enduring access to digital content. We respect and support each other and other units of the Library to exercise autonomy in accomplishing our shared mission. We are open and transparent about the work we do: we update partners equally about successes and setbacks. We strive to be trusted as experts and leaders on digital content management in the library, across the country, and around the world.

Using DCM Values

Following the initial values workshop, one of the first ways in which the new section used the new set of values was through the concept and implementation of "DCM liaisons" to Library

divisions. Liaisons are assigned to units across the Library and serve as the primary DCM point of contact to these units in order to: 1) strengthen relationships with units in order to be responsive to their digital content management objectives; 2) communicate and connect units to DCM initiatives, resources, and services; and 3) connect units to appropriate parts of the Library for digital content management objectives out of scope for DCM. In most instances, divisions welcomed DCM liaisons as willing collaborators and in other instances, some colleagues were skeptical and unsure of where DCM fit within the Library and, specifically, its role in their operations. For example, some colleagues thought we were part of the Office of the Chief Information Officer because the word “digital” was in our name and so we had to clarify that we were classified as librarians. Being new did not immediately engender trust across all divisions and was something we had to demonstrate by initiating introductory meetings where we presented on our mandate and intention to be supportive and collaborative. We also joined established digital collection planning meetings. As part of another major initiative, we also self-initiated conversations to review and potentially remediate digital content inventory records where we had an opportunity to further build trust by sharing our expertise in digital preservation practices. The liaison program was and continues to be one of our major activities to operationalize and enact the set of values. As a result of how successful this program has been in emphasizing collaboration and building trust, divisions often communicate their deep appreciation for the work that their liaison has accomplished in supporting their digital collections via email or even through broader staff communications like newsletters.

As the section grew and matured its liaison program, it was also engaged in parallel efforts to operationalize the values in daily work. DCM staff identified a need to organize the work of the section and decided to experiment with a Scrum-based project approach. Scrum is defined as a “lightweight framework that helps people, teams and organizations generate value through adaptive solutions for complex problems” (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2020). Although Scrum is typically associated with software development methodology, archives and libraries have adapted Scrum and associated frameworks such as Agile and Kanban in project management activities (Shein et al., 2018). Given that the new section had a growing and lengthy list of potential projects and assignments, the Scrum framework was proposed for managing the complex projects that staff would be working on. The Scrum framework outlines values, roles, and events that are aligned with the DCM values and the goal of becoming self-organized. For example, there are five Scrum values of Commitment, Focus, Openness, Respect, and Courage that could be connected back to the DCM values of “service,” “craft,” “trust,” “care,” and “ingenuity” (Schwaber & Sutherland, 2020). Although the words may be different, the intention of creating project teams

that would be collaborative, ensuring that staff would be trusting in their work and with one another and that staff would be safe to attempt and carry out solutions for projects, proved that Scrum could be a good match for the section's daily operations. As a result of the initial adoption of a Scrum framework, the section staff could more easily get a sense of how the values were aligned with daily operations.

In addition to cross-divisional efforts and internal projects, DCM staff utilizes values in its administrative approach to the recruitment and hiring of new colleagues. While interviewing with the government is often a tightly scoped and scripted exercise, DCM staff reference the values throughout the recruitment process. Prospective applicants who inquire about what it is like to work in our section are often referred to our public blog post⁵ about the section's set of values. Applicants could also readily find the blog post if conducting their own online research into working with the section and adapt the values into their applications. At the interview stage, when finalists ask questions about the work culture, potential colleagues, or even project work, DCM staff reference the values to describe how the values support daily interactions, assignments and projects, and how the section operates within the Library. The values provide a succinct way to describe the foundation upon which the section staff frame their work and how it is core to our culture.

Further Operationalizing DCM Values During the Pandemic

Roughly two years after DCM identified its values, the team revisited and reflected on the established values. In that period, DCM brought on two new staff members, experienced natural turnover, and had become a more established section within the Library; it was also the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was a time when the team relied on the values as a stable force while the virus uprooted our lives and work environment. With these factors, it was an opportune time for the team to iterate on our values and confirm who we are and what our team strives toward.

A Library staff member external to DCM led a Scrum-style retrospective for the 12 DCM team members and ensured that the group adhered to community agreements. In the spirit of the values, several DCM staff members proposed and sought out the external facilitator for the review. The staff members felt that an external facilitator would encourage honesty and safety to

⁵ <https://blogs.loc.gov/thesignal/2019/02/defining-shared-values-in-our-growing-digital-content-management-section/>

speak freely during the session. Ahead of the retrospective, the team was asked to review its values and answer the questions:

- What do you like about the values and how do they help you in your work?
- How would you like to see these improve and how can they better help you in your work?
- What additional questions do you have or need clarity on?

At the two hour retrospective, we reviewed each other's anonymized responses and then grouped them by theme. This allowed us to see trends in how we approached our values and how we could improve upon them. At the end of the retrospective, we then identified actionable next steps.

The group recommended incorporating these values into our routine work to ensure that we are consciously and consistently reflecting on our values. The section has most noticeably woven values into more daily operations such as a weekly section stand-up and team retrospectives for projects. Staff reserve time during retrospectives in particular to not only discuss what went well and what could potentially have gone better on projects, but they also address how colleagues incorporated their values into tasks and in working with one another. Such reflections often provide moments of levity, appreciation, and pride in their work and in one another.

Furthermore, our approach to routine meetings and sprints within the Scrum framework can also be seen as a reflection of our values. By dedicating time throughout the year for clean-up tasks within personal and shared spaces, our team practices "sustainability." By periodically reconsidering the structure of our sprints and meetings, and thus adapting schedules, approaches, and task organization, we demonstrate our "flexibility" and our defined value of "ingenuity."

As was highlighted earlier, values were referenced during the recruitment process but this was taken a step further into the consideration of how new staff were onboarded. Originally, DCM asked new staff to read the values as part of their initial orientation but recognized that this was not an interactive way for new staff to engage with the values and understand their importance. Now, new staff meet with a few members of the section to review the list of values and share examples of how staff actively embody and follow the values. New staff members are also paired with a mentor that serves as a one-on-one introduction to not only the work of the team, but the values and practice of the values within the section.

The team also aims to publish more interview-style blog posts⁶ with members of the section and specifically ask them to share a value that resonates with them the most. Thus far, staff have mentioned that the values of “care,” “ingenuity,” and “safety” are the most meaningful in our work culture for reasons such as asserting their new role and feeling free to experiment in a supportive environment. The interviews serve dual purposes: provides staff additional opportunities to engage with the values and promotes transparency of our work and values to those internal and external to the Library, perhaps reaching those who will eventually be new colleagues.

Although the team has worked toward incorporating the values into our routine work and Scrum framework, the team has also recognized them at unplanned moments in time. During the first week of 2021, the DCM Section Head sent an email acknowledging the difficulties of the previous year and the events of January 6, 2021, and that despite the challenges, the team was able to accomplish a significant amount of work. However, the email did not focus on outputs and numbers. Not unlike the project retrospectives, the Section Head reflected on the values the team incorporated into our work when everything was upended, such as “care,” “collaboration,” and “ingenuity.” The team was then asked to not only take pride in our task-related accomplishments, but the ways in which we demonstrated our values. The work accomplished during the unprecedented year was held in the same regard as the way that the team responded to the challenges, which ultimately emphasizes that work and workplace culture are intertwined and essential in creating a sustainable, purpose-driven team.

Conclusions and Implications

As the Digital Content Management section moves into its fifth year of operation, it has become clear to members across the multiple teams in the section that the shared values we developed together are a key part of our success. As new team members have joined the group, we have worked to develop ways to make sure that these values genuinely become a part of our team cultures. In many cases, texts like mission statements or values statements can be written up and shared as a one-time event, but those kinds of texts do not become enacted organizational values. Based on our experience with creating values together we offer the following three observations for other library teams and sections for developing and implementing values.

⁶ Including [Every collection and project is its own unique journey: An Interview with Marcus Nappier](#), [Diving into Digital Content Management: An Interview with Mark Lopez](#), [Joining By the People: An interview with Abby Shelton](#)

Collaborative development of values is critical: The process for creating the original set of values is itself a demonstration of several of the values. We workshoped them together and, through deliberation and consensus building, we worked through the consideration of tensions and questions of what was the most important to emphasize in our values. In that regard, we also attempted to make sure that everyone on the team felt safe as we collaboratively learned together about how we each saw the terms and concepts. As an end result, the activity of developing the values is a key founding story to how we see ourselves and our work. As we bring in new team members over time and share out about that work and those stories, we are inviting them into our now established culture where we encourage them to read themselves into the values to further advance our interpretation and enactment of them.

Enacting values requires embedding values: After our original development of the values, the ideas and concepts of them were fresh in team members' minds. However, we had not yet ironed out how and where we would bring up consideration and deliberation of them in our ongoing day-to-day work. To that end, when we held a retrospective about the values as a whole section, it became clear that to make them more useful and used we needed to be more deliberate on where we embedded them in our ongoing activities and work. By deliberately identifying points in time, like values discussions with team members as part of onboarding, and a discussion of what values were the most relevant and how they were relevant in each project closeout/retrospective meeting, we have embedded consideration of our values into our ongoing work.

Working with values requires time and a safe space for deliberation, discussion, and reflection: Inherent to our approach to values is the idea that there are tensions that emerge between individual values in a specific context and that the way to resolve those is to work through them in discussion and deliberation. Along with that, it is only possible for a value like “learning” to take root and support our other values if we ensure that we have the time and space to discuss, reflect, and distill what we are learning. In this regard, this kind of values work is only possible if organizations are intentional about how much work they commit teams to take on. By creating the time and space for this kind of reflection, it is possible for teams to engage in the kind of continuous improvement activities that allow teams to increase their capacity to tackle more complex projects and initiatives.

In keeping with those three points, this paper is itself a part of our reflective practice to further refine and develop our craft and work with these values. In documenting how we arrived at this point and why we have taken this approach, we are simultaneously further refining our current ideas about these values, publicly sharing out about those values to the field, and

producing another layer of interpretive text developed by our evolving section that our future colleagues can read and engage with as well. In this regard, this essay itself is part of how we continue to operationalize and enact these values.

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