

## A role for the library in awakening to the power and potential of institutional metrics for research

INTERVIEW WITH PREMA ARASU | DECEMBER 8, 2014

*A land grant institution established in 1863, Kansas State University (KSU) opened its Olathe campus in 2011 to engage more deeply with the commercial hubs and community of the greater Kansas City metropolitan area. The flagship campus is located in Manhattan, Kansas.*

### Please tell me a bit about your transition from researcher to administrator.

I began my career as a biomedical research scientist and built my program at North Carolina State University studying the interaction of parasites and their hosts during pregnancy. In 2002, I went to Washington, DC as an American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) congressional fellow and had the opportunity to work on international health issues in Senator Ted Kennedy's health office. That was a turning point in my career as I engaged with lobbyists and world organizations and saw firsthand how policy and legislation are developed and impact our activities as individuals and institutions. I returned to NC State feeling like I wanted to continue on a more holistic global path, taking a broader approach to higher education, and so I started my administrative career. I eventually became Vice Provost for International Programs at Washington State University (WSU) and then joined KSU Olathe as CEO and Vice Provost in October 2013.

### What has been your experience of working with the library during these transitions?

Quite honestly, as a researcher I didn't interact much with the library except for accessing journals. As faculty members, we focus on our individual teaching, research and service obligations, and the priorities of our department, first, and our college, second. And it's not just the library that's not on our radar. Until I was an administrator at NC State, I didn't really have much need or opportunity to interact with the university's senior administration or understand

institutional priorities and challenges. This makes me think that libraries are an underutilized and perhaps underappreciated resource. They need to establish stronger channels of communication with their institution's constituents to override older mindsets of libraries as collections of "dusty books and journals" and to brand themselves in more engaging and interactive ways, exposing the vast and diverse expertise residing in librarians.

At the Olathe campus, we are focused on building a very business-centric environment targeted at the regional community and private sectors. We want to provide working professionals with the technology skills and the personal, transferable skills and know-how to address real, complex issues in the local work setting. Our campus is a two-hour drive from the library's physical location in Manhattan, so our faculty and students engage with the library largely through online resources, and by this I mean not only library resources, but the librarians as well. I don't see the library as a repository of books anymore, but rather as a repository of people with tremendous expertise who can support faculty and students in any number of innovative ways from technology, tools and textbook requirements to research, article preparation and publication.

### How did you become interested in institutional performance metrics?

My academic career has mostly been in land grant institutions which have long histories of international engagement. But the predominant focus of this engagement has been sending students for study abroad, recruiting foreign students, and transferring aid and knowledge through development projects in developing countries. As WSU's Vice Provost for International Programs, I started to assess the opportunities for international collaborations and opportunities that aligned with strategic institutional research priorities. In partnership with the

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Office of Research, we studied the publication and funding record of WSU's faculty and noted a substantial amount of papers involving international coauthors.

Delving deeper, we discovered there was very little internationally earmarked extramural funding (approximately two percent), but publication output showed that about 30 percent of peer-reviewed publications involved international coauthors. At the same time, we had national data indicating that US research output is going down and that we are losing our global competitiveness. But we had no *institutional* basis for judging the global impact or productivity of our international collaborations. At that point, I felt like I was raising questions that should also have been asked in the domestic context many, many years ago. Or if this was being done, the information was not easily available to either university administrators or the researchers themselves.

At WSU we were awakening to these questions and using Elsevier's SciVal tool to analyze and help answer: Who is funding these collaborations? Can we deepen these relationships? Are we building the right strategic partnerships in the international arena? And though I didn't realize it at the time, the library had capability in these types of tools including subscriptions to other research platforms. Seeing the potential to help us address some of these challenges, the library took the lead on the SciVal software renewal and training, positioning itself as a center of expertise for this current and growing need in analytics.

The work we were doing at WSU engendered an NSF-funded project to determine which metrics are helpful in determining the impact of strategic international collaborations. We are in the middle of a multiphase project to develop a blueprint for institutions to use data that they are already mining and metrics that can help in decision-making and resource allocation. Elsevier's SciVal team also contributed to this project by providing an analysis of WSU and four other comparator public research universities.

### **Why did you become involved in Snowball Metrics?**

Last February I went to an AAAS presentation and met John Green, a life fellow of Queens' College, Cambridge and the retired chief coordinating officer of Imperial College London, who helped found the Snowball Metrics group in the UK. He was presenting alongside others from the UK who support this university-driven initiative. They were asking some of the same questions as my NSF project team and had already made progress on defining metrics to help them to make decisions based on the data. I joined the US Snowball Metrics group to advance the dialogue, bring the perspective of a researcher and administrator to the table, and serve as a liaison between our various teams working on this related topic.

These projects on metrics, including others such as UMETRICS (<http://www.cic.net/projects/umetrics>), etc., interest me because it's a way for different entities to validate and decide upon a set of metrics that we can all aspire towards and use as appropriate benchmarks. In July 2014, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) convened the summer meeting of research officers and vice presidents at the same time as the meeting for international officers to enable joint sessions and discussions on metrics in international research. This was another strong signal toward more alignment and convergence.

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### **What is Snowball Metrics?**

[www.snowballmetrics.com](http://www.snowballmetrics.com)

Snowball Metrics is a university-led global initiative in which universities agree how they want to understand their own strengths and weaknesses. The universities agree on methodologies to calculate metrics that are robustly and clearly defined, and draw on all data sources they have available, so that they enable the confident comparison of apples with apples. These metrics are data source- and system-agnostic, meaning that they are not tied to any particular provider of data or tools; the methods are free and can be implemented in any system. The resulting benchmarks between research-intensive universities provide them with reliable information to help understand their research strengths, and thus to establish and monitor their institutional strategies.



### **Is there an opportunity for the library here?**

Absolutely! Everyone is so understaffed and overworked, and we need more expertise in this area. You need to ask, "Where should the expertise to mine, collect, analyze and interpret the data reside?" That may be the library. Also, the library may be a neutral and central resource among the various data generators, including the Provost's Office, Institutional Planning and Research, the Research Office (where pre- and post-award information may be in separate subdivisions), the Foundation, the Technology Transfer Office, the International Affairs Office, and the list goes on. **LC**