Dear Colleagues,

The PLSR project is now in its third year. We’ve seen an astounding amount of work done by well over a hundred people, volunteering their time and experience for the chance to be part of something with tremendous potential to be transformative. In many ways, the project has already turned a benefit when we consider the amount if introspection and questioning of norms it has provoked. As the project draws closer to producing the key deliverable, I have been thinking a great deal about what is currently going on in the library community (call it, “realities on the ground”) and what implications these realities have for how PLSR should wrap-up. I’m going to try and summarize these thoughts without writing a novel - please bear with me.

Perhaps one of the most ubiquitous things that crosses my mind about the PLSR process is that the library community is still very divided. On one side of the spectrum, there are those who feel that the system needs to be blown up, and a new comprehensive vision put in its place. On the other end, some feel that the current structure is as close to perfect as is possible, and that no changes whatsoever should be made. As we all know from our conversations with our colleagues throughout the community, there are an infinite number of unique perspectives. As we look at this spectrum of differing perspectives, though, I think it's important to concede that there are a number of important stakeholder groups who are still lukewarm or even outright critical of the PLSR project. In my opinion, some of the criticism is founded in well-intended rational rigor, and some is dubious.

At the end of the day, at least some components of whatever deliverable we produce will need to have a critical mass of support from the library community in order to be viable. I think it’s interesting to note here that, in virtually every conversation I’ve had with stakeholders (regardless of where they fall on the “PLSR opinion spectrum”), everyone agrees that the worst possible outcome would be if PLSR turns into “just another report” with no real changes occurring. If the final report does not contain any concrete recommendations that can achieve that critical mass of support, and if in the weeks following submission to DPI, a general lack of support is expressed by influential stakeholder groups, than the worst case scenario will have occurred.

This scenario must be avoided.

How do we do that? Based on feedback from the library community through surveys, focus groups, individual submissions through the online feedback mechanism, questions asked at conference sessions, etc., it would appear that there are a number of individual service improvements that could be implemented independently of a greater “model” structure. If we can find a way to include separate proposals for these independent service improvements, then the conditions will be created for significant positive outcomes to occur even if there isn’t enough critical-mass support by the entire library community to endorse a comprehensive model. Back when we first began the project, we identified the need to find the “low hanging
fruit”. I can easily see a situation in which that low hanging fruit proves the difference between success and failure.

Here are some examples of discrete service improvements that could be developed, evaluated via CRC and/or at the summit, and written-in to the final report as an Appendix:

- An Online Portal for CE: there is widespread, enthusiastic support for an online CE portal to foster information sharing, access to online CE resources, and online tracking & validation of CE hours & certification status.
- Data Centers: approach DPI to provision and host a “white box” space where library systems can independently (or in concert) deploy and manage IT infrastructure (example: virtualized servers, PC images, ILS backups).
- A Common Language for ILS’s in Wisconsin: work with DPI and regional systems to develop a common interchange language (SIP2, REST, SOAP, etc.) that allows ILS’s to talk directly to each other, and make it a requirement of vendors wishing to do business in Wisconsin. This would be a huge step forward and sets the table for a wide variety of future collaborations (including a statewide discovery layer).
- Incentivize & support moving delivery toward a regional model as proposed by the delivery work group, or move toward statewide provision of delivery to the local library level via direct centralization or oversight of vendors.

I’m sure other discrete service improvements can be synthesized from the rich feedback that has been gathered, but the above service improvements are the most obvious in my mind. With refinement, they could meet the core principles of PLSR very well even if a comprehensive model recommended by Steering is not able to be implemented for any reason. Having a set of these types of low-hanging fruit projects would allow Steering to provide specific recommendations to DPI that would serve as direct inputs to their own planning for how to use LSTA and WISE funding. Further, Steering would also have a ready-made opportunity to interface with WLA’s Legislative Committee (LD&L) and provide a tool for their own legislative outreach planning. I think it’s also worth noting here that, sooner or later, PLSR and LD&L’s efforts will have to intersect somehow in order to be effective.

In closing, I’d like to clarify that I’m not proposing that Steering should “cave-in” to pressure from certain individuals, or abandon its charge of producing a report including a best-shot at a comprehensive model. But I do think that we need to include a mechanism in our deliverable that creates the conditions for success even if a comprehensive model proves to be out of reach. A palpable sense of tension has developed out there as PLSR has run its course, and I now see part of our charge - though unwritten - as bringing the library community back together by finding (and championing) the “wins” we can all agree on.

It has been - and will continue to be - an honor to tackle these challenges with you,

-Steve