

Directing the Digital Agenda

By Glenn Drexhage

Allan Bell caught the technology bug when he began programming computers in high school. And he hasn't recovered since.

Bell – the new Director of Digital Initiatives at UBC Library – brings a lifetime of passion and expertise to his new role, including private and public-sector experience.

Before coming to UBC, Bell served as the Associate University Librarian for Information Technology Services at the University of Waterloo. Prior posts include stints at Stanford University Libraries, Ovid Technologies Inc., the University of Texas and McGill University.



Allan Bell, Director of Digital Initiatives, UBC Library.
Photo by Martin Dee

The future of the library

His eureka moment came while attending a bibliography course at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario. There, Bell managed to indulge an interest that combined the esoteric world of rare books with the binary logic of the digital realm. "You could see that computing was going to be the future for the library, for sure," he recalls.

At UBC, Bell will oversee and guide the Library's digital initiatives. This new role is a key one, given the importance of the digital agenda to the UBC Library. Ingrid Parent, the University Librarian, has stressed this agenda as a top priority since arriving at UBC in 2009. In addition, the new UBC Library strategic plan, which can be found at <http://strategicplan.library.ubc.ca>, lists "Manage Collections in a Digital Context" as one of its five main directions for the next five years. Bell began his new job in September, and his vision for the Library is already coalescing. "I would like the Library to be seen on campus as an active problem-solver and engaged academic partner to improve the teaching, learning and research at UBC," he says. He would also like to make the Library's rich collections more broadly available, and collaborate with other organizations to pursue projects.

Partnering to solve problems

Indeed, Bell's a big believer in collaboration. During his tenure at Waterloo, he was part of a small consortia that included Wilfrid Laurier University and the University of Guelph. The trio shared an online catalogue and worked together on various projects. "We were very, very different organizations, and yet we were able to work together to solve common problems," he says. "Had we acted alone, we could not have afforded to do many of the things that we had done."

He's keen to continue this approach at UBC. "Collaborations across the province are necessary. It's important to try to bring these things out on a scale that's broader than just your university – and engage people across the province, across the country, across the world."

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