A Local Look at the ARL 2030 Scenario Planning Project: KU Libraries

Jennifer Church-Duran and Deborah Ludwig
University of Kansas Libraries

Overview of Scenario Planning

At its core, **scenario planning** is designed to help connect the dots between future possibilities and present action.

- *a structured, disciplined technique for identifying key driving forces in the environment that have an impact on the organization*
- *using that information to design a series of scenarios or stories that describe possible futures*
- *build strategies that will help the organization reach its goal under a variety of circumstances*

### Scenarios are Created Through an "Outside-In" Approach
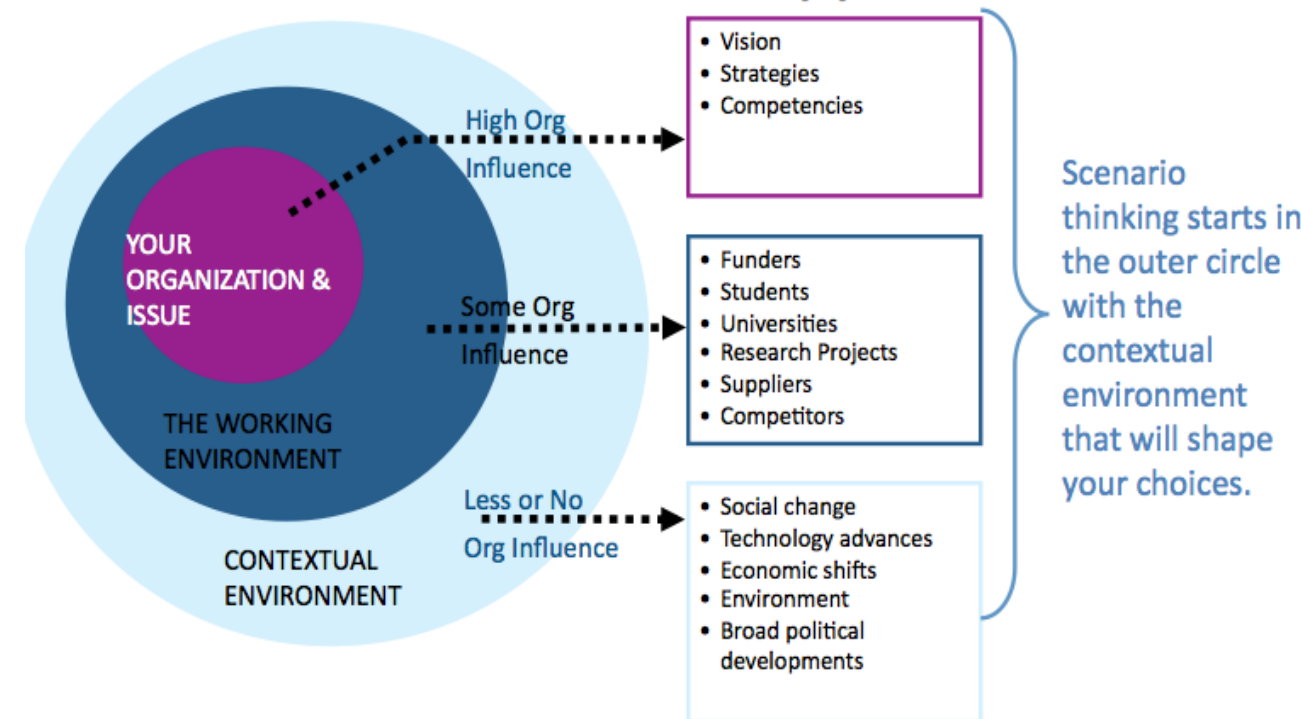
Traditional Strategic Planning: focuses on a single, anticipated future

Scenario Planning: provides alternative versions of that future, to be used as lenses for viewing and focusing different organizational possibilities

Scenario planning is not about forecasting or making the right prediction – instead it is a tool to help make better decisions in the face of **critical uncertainties**

Scenarios: Creating Advantage from Uncertainty
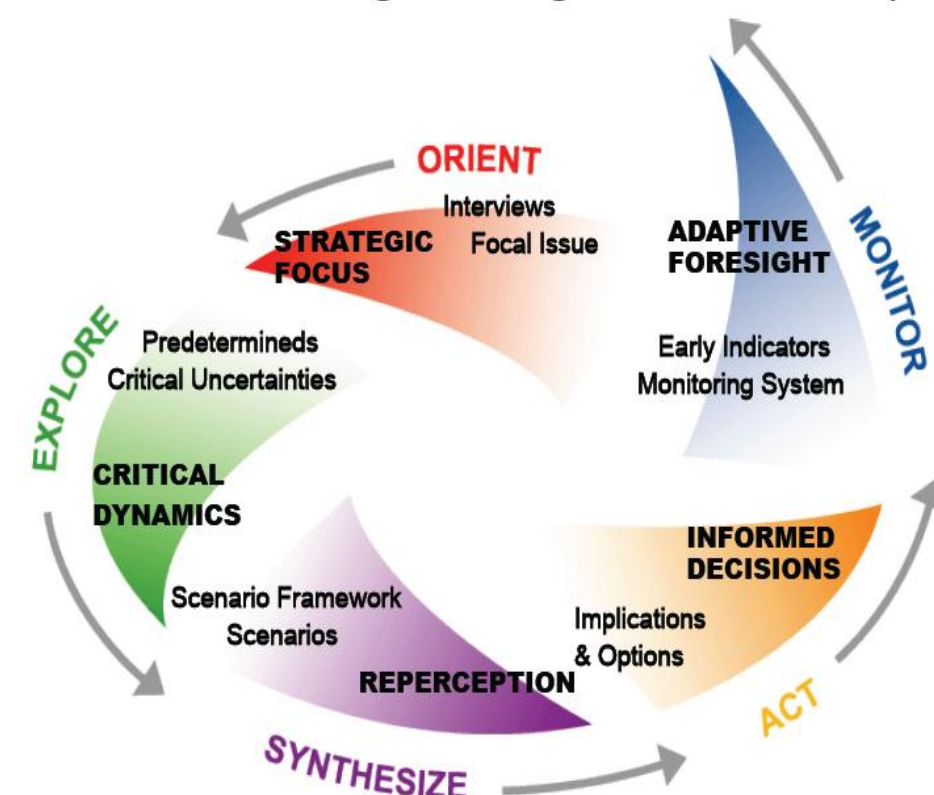
ARL 2030 - Envisioning Research Library Futures: A Scenario Thinking Project

ARL Scenario Set:

- *rich, descriptive narratives of four possible futures for the research enterprise*
- *each presents a particular exploration of many **critical uncertainties** in a way that considers the dynamics that might unfold over a twenty-year time*
- *explores synergies and interactions between uncertainties*
- *no single scenario represents a complete picture of the future*
- *none of the scenarios specifically mention libraries*

The four scenarios offer similarities and differences represented by their position along two axes: the state of the research enterprise and the environment in which individual researchers operate.
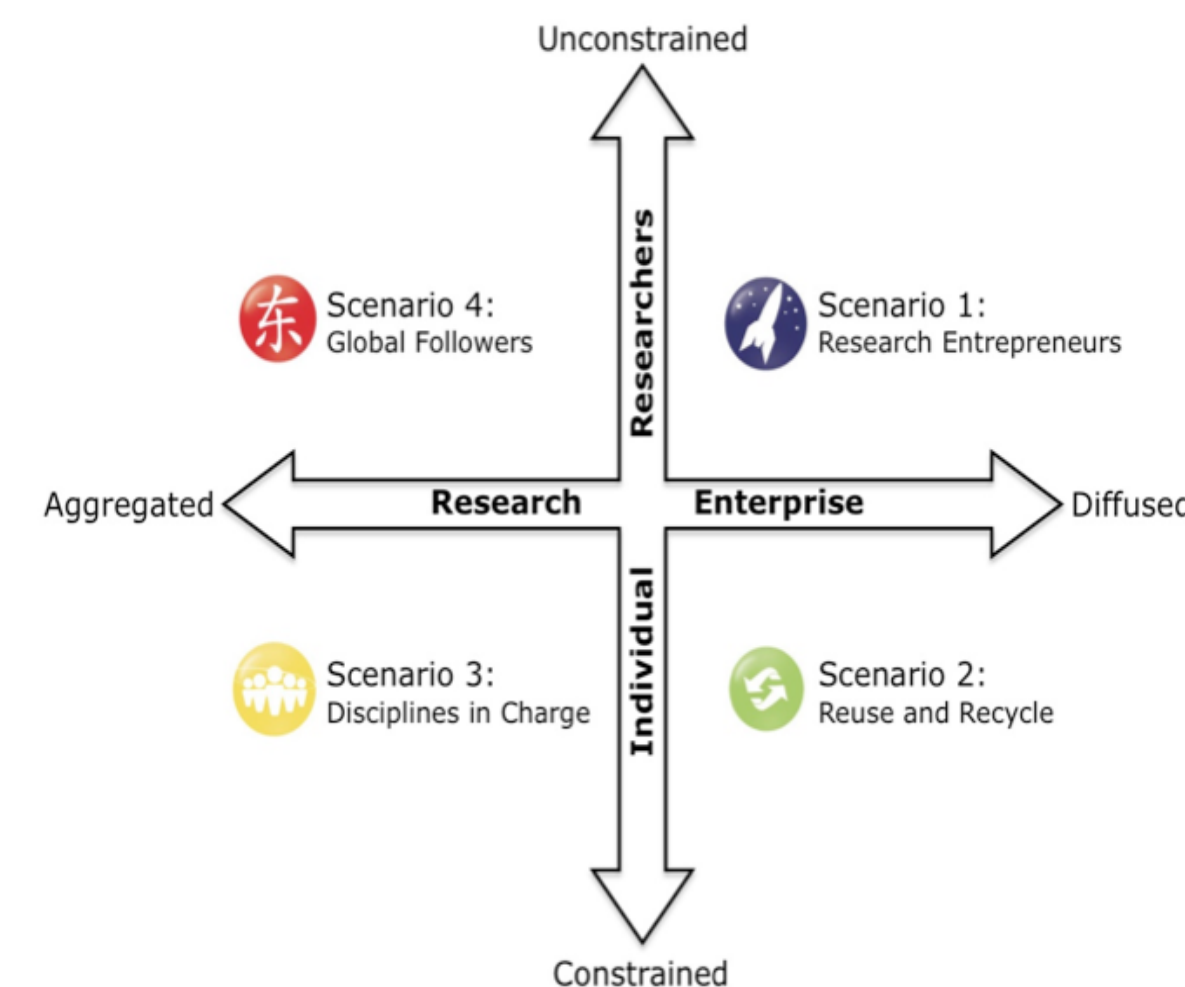
Research Entrepreneurs – research is shaped by the rise of entrepreneurial research; individual researchers are the stars of the story.

Reuse and Recycle –recycling and reuse predominate in research activities. Disinvestment in the research enterprise has cut across society and government's ability to fund research and research-intensive education has become limited to non-existent.

Disciplines in Charge –computational approaches to data analysis dominate the research enterprise. Scholars, whether humanists or scientists align themselves around data stores and computational capacity that address grand challenges and large-scale research questions, often operating at a disciplinary and sub-discipline level.

Global Followers - the locus of the funding that drives the research enterprise migrates from North America and developed western nations to nations in the Middle East and Asia.

Images courtesy of the Association for Research Libraries (ARL) 2030 Scenario Planning Project

Implementation at KU Libraries

Preparation:
Team of energized staff, with organizational development and leadership interests, prepared and conducted two workshops aimed at library-wide staff participation.

ARL *User's Guide* and related materials served as valuable templates, but the process necessitated adaptation for our organizational climate.

Introduction:
- 90 minute brownbag orientations for all interested library faculty and staff
- Provided conceptual overview and the opportunity to learn more before committing to the more extensive workshop

Workshops:
- Offered two workshops, one held in May 2011 and another in July 2011, with 43 participants total
- Modified the ARL proposed agenda of two full days, instead - developed a ½ day, full day, ½ day schedule
  - Increased flexibility for broader attendance
  - Provided participants a chance to decompress overnight and return to the process refreshed the next morning

Challenges:
Disconnection between *scenario building* and *scenario planning*.
- Implementing a set of scenarios constructed without direct engagement by local participants created a larger credibility gap
- Increased questioning of the validity of the futures described and less initial conviction in responding to the scenarios

Process:
Build a foundation of understanding to enhance buy-in
- Pre-assign staff to a specific scenario working group
- Request in-depth study of all narratives
- Conduct **early indicators** research prior to workshop

Early Indicators Research: gathering evidence of future scenario characteristics already at play in today's environment
- Staff explored the current literature and carried out a brief climate study
- Results demonstrated the interrelated dynamics woven through the scenario set (as some indicators apply across multiple narratives)
- Brought in the driving forces and current trends that shaped the scenarios, generating stronger "buy-in" and closing the credibility gap

"Deep Dive" Activities: small group exploration of the assigned scenario. Resulting analysis generates strategies for just *that one scenario*

Robust Strategic Agenda:

Robust Strategic Agenda: transition from small group, deep dive analysis of one scenario to the *use of the scenarios as a comprehensive set*.   The desired outcome is a *strategic agenda* robust enough to place us in a highly flexible, adaptable position when change occurs.

A successful agenda is shaped by these key characteristics:
- **Robust**—works across a divergent and challenging set of scenarios
- **Distinctive and Advantaged**—leverages the distinctive competencies of the organization toward achieving an advantaged position in the external research environment
- **Inspiring**—delights the end use customer and inspires the staff
- **Focused**—requires strategic choices of things to do and things not to do, assessed against a realistic understanding of capabilities and resources

(Association of Research Libraries , 2010)

Challenges:
- Deep dive process tended to lock participants into their assigned scenario
- Required substantial facilitation and "on the fly" adaptation of the process
- Harder to identify actions that could work across all possible futures

Outcomes:
The *robust agenda* that emerged from our first workshops:
- Become an agile organization able to rapidly adapt and change
- Develop new and diverse funding models
- Create a culture of collaboration and partnership for a broader audience
- Rethink and realign resources, collections & infrastructure

Influenced and shaped our up-coming strategic plan, with two goals directly connected:
- Strengthen KU Libraries' position as an agile, responsive organization capable of continual improvement and change.
- Stabilize and grow existing funding sources, secure new funding opportunities and enhance public accountability

Developing a Strategic Culture:
- Working through scenario planning facilitated an organizational analysis that questioned shared assumptions, beliefs, and values
- Created a mindset that informed decision-making and enhanced capacity for adaptive foresight