

I Hear the Train A Comin' — An Interview with Rick Johnson

Column Editor: **Greg Tananbaum** (Founder and CEO, Anianet) <greg@anianet.com> www.anianet.com

Column Editor's Note: Rick Johnson is a leading authority on scholarly communication and open access to research. As co-founder of **BioOne**, the founding Executive Director of **SPARC** from 1998-2005 and a consultant to **SPARC, ARL, ACRL, Boston Library Consortium, Microsoft, and others** from 2005-2009, he advanced new models for scholarly communication. In 2009, **Rick** embarked on an exciting new challenge as the Manager, Reference & Research Services, at the **King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST)**, a new research university near Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on the Red Sea. I recently spoke with **Rick** about his new position. — **GT**

Tell us a little bit about your decision to leave SPARC for a position at KAUST.

I stepped down as Executive Director in 2005 — seven years after launching **SPARC** — because I wanted to catch my breath and figure out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. All work and no play were making **Rick** a dull boy. **SPARC** was on a good trajectory. We put the notion of public access to publicly funded research on the map with the **NIH Public Access Policy**. We were working with **Congress** to draft the **Federal Research Public Access Act**. The wind was in the sails of open access.

Plus **Heather Joseph** was in the wings, ready to take over management of **SPARC**. As the last five years have amply demonstrated, she had the energy, smarts, and charisma to do great things.

To clear my head, I took two-month solo road trip from Washington, DC to British Columbia, the Yukon, and Alaska. When I returned I opened a consulting business, took painting lessons, and for the first time in memory worked less-than-ten-hour days.

It was a good life. But when the **KAUST** opportunity presented itself, I knew instantly it was what I wanted to do. I realized I had another start-up in me.

What is KAUST?

It's a brand new, graduate-only research university created by Saudi Arabia's **King Abdullah** to stimulate economic development in the kingdom. The expectation is that, by bringing together scientific talent from around the world and giving them the tools and resources to do great research, business and employment opportunities will arise. The King backed up this vision with an infusion of many billions of dollars. **KAUST** reportedly has one of the largest university endowments in the world.

We're located on a 14-square mile site on the Red Sea coast north of Jeddah. **KAUST** is really both a university and a small town.

Eventually it will adjoin the planned **King Abdullah** Economic City, another ambitious investment that is projected to create two million jobs. But that's a ways off.

In 2010/11 **KAUST** will have 600-700 Masters and Ph.D. students from around the world — China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, the US, Canada, Europe, Africa, the Mideast, and beyond. There's a similarly diverse roster of faculty and researchers.

The university is focused on research in targeted areas relevant to economic development in Saudi Arabia. Functionally, the main organizational units aren't traditional disciplinary departments but rather nine interdisciplinary research centers — Catalysis, Clean Combustion, Solar Energy, Water Desalination, Plant Stress Genomics, the Red Sea, Membranes, Geometric Modeling, and Computational Bioscience. A typical research center consists of 8-10 faculty members plus 40-50 graduate students, research scientists and engineers, post-docs, visiting researchers, and administrative and technical staff. They're supported by a number of core labs and facilities, such as the **Shaheen** supercomputer, a nanofabrication lab, and a visualization lab. What's being built here is really quite ambitious.

A key piece of the puzzle is the research park that is springing up adjacent to the academic core of **KAUST**. There are already several buildings in place to provide office and lab space for companies that are working in collaboration with the research centers.

What was the state of KAUST as an institution when you got there?

I first saw **KAUST** in March 2009 when I was being recruited by **Joe Branin** to be the library's assistant director for collections and services. **Joe**, who had been library director at **Ohio State**, was preparing to take over as **KAUST's** library director that summer.

At that time **KAUST** was still a massive building site. When I visited, trucks and hardhats were racing this way and that. Construction cranes were everywhere. Tens of thousands of construction workers were laboring around the clock to ensure the university opened in September. It hardly seemed possible they'd make it.

The next time I saw **KAUST** was when I started work, a week after the official opening of the university on September 23, 2009. The scene had been transformed into a glimmering modern university campus perched on high ground above a new community that houses faculty, researchers, students, and staff. It still seems inconceivable to me that just 1000 days earlier the site had been a quiet patch of surf and sand in the fishing village of Thuwal.

I'm sure the architects and engineers would disagree, but putting up the buildings may have been the easy part. Creating a well

oiled, successful research university inside the shell is the real test. Some of the challenges are those confronted by any new university. But some are probably unique to **KAUST** and Saudi Arabia.

A lot of the work really couldn't begin until the buildings were up and a team was assembled. Some of the labs have only recently opened, having spent many months obtaining highly specialized equipment from overseas and getting it set up. In our first academic year, everyone accomplished quite a lot, but there's much more to be done.

What was the state of the library?

The first semester was a wild time. All at the same time buildings were opening their doors, staff and students were pouring in, and key business systems were being implemented. It was pretty intense. We needed to remind ourselves daily that it would take time to make it all work. But it was often very frustrating for those of us who were in a hurry. It's hard for faculty and students from other institutions to understand that you don't just flip a switch to turn on the digital library. Established libraries have spent many years putting their systems in place and making them work. The advantages **KAUST** Library has enjoyed — such as not having to support a legacy print collection and having a very good budget — has been offset by other kinds of challenges. But we're making good progress and our basic services are now in place.

A few years ago, when the decision was made to go forward with establishment of **KAUST**, the King called on **Saudi Aramco**, with its experience in organizing giant, fast-track projects, to serve as general contractor. One of the things they did was assign an **Aramco** librarian as interim library director. He arranged for a core collection of electronic resources. He did a fine job, but inevitably when we opened our doors, the library was more like a student union than a library. It's an amazing environment in which to study and collaborate and students quickly settled in. But the university's technical infrastructure was still immature and caused us some early heartburn. For reasons I won't try to recount, we didn't yet have a stable IP range so our e-resources weren't available. The integrated library management system wasn't yet implemented. And we had books on the shelves only because **Joe Branin** had taken a truck into Jeddah and purchased just about every English-language book he could lay his hands on. Those books at least made it look like a library when the doors opened.

Step-by-step we're getting beyond those challenges and laying the groundwork for a modern, world-class library.

How did you go about essentially building a library from scratch?

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While I tend to think of what my colleagues and I are doing as “building a library from scratch,” the truth is that the work of designing the building and picking out an opening day collection of e-resources predates us. The process was largely framed by the extraordinarily short development timeline. The first wave of resources was selected by mapping broad research goals to broad subjects the founders expected research to focus on.

We’re immersed now in the process of refining the collection so that it more closely matches research and teaching needs of the faculty. We’re also evaluating other needs of the KAUST community, such as management information resources. I should mention that **KAUST Library** is one of three libraries at KAUST — there’s also a public library and a school library serving the many families at KAUST. We developing close working relationships with these libraries to ensure we address the full range of needs and get the most from our investments.

We’re eager, however, to get beyond the basics of implementing critical systems and supplying scientists with journals, databases, and some books. In the coming months we’ll be talking with faculty about where the library might add value throughout the entire research process. Like many libraries today, we want to understand and cultivate our role in e-science. We don’t know yet where this conversation will take us, but we know it needs to occur.

“Knowledge management” was a recurring theme in **Saudi Aramco’s** early planning for the library. The term perhaps belies a corporate perspective, but the practices are mainly relevant at KAUST. However, while corporate KM programs tend to put up walls around information to keep it from competitors, we recognize that in our context sharing rather than confining research outputs often is the best way to leverage their value. This fall we’ll establish a repository in which to capture the institution’s digital assets, but of course that’s just the beginning.

What were the most unexpected professional challenges you faced getting the library up and running?

Well, it never dawned on me that buying and distributing textbooks would be part of our job in the library. But there was no other good option available to the university, so we volunteered to take on textbooks. Our User Education Librarian found herself reassigned to this challenging assignment from almost the moment she arrived at KAUST. She’s done a great job under trying circumstances.

Actually, acquiring printed books in general has been one of the big challenges we’ve faced. It’s cumbersome for us to procure them and time consuming to ship them into Saudi Arabia. So you might ask, why not just buy eBooks? All our journals are e-only and we’ve gotten not a single complaint. And we’ve bought tens of thousands of eBooks. But the feedback we’ve gotten from students — yes, students — is that

they want their library to offer them printed books. As research is starting to confirm, eBooks aren’t entirely ready for prime time in the university setting.

One of the interesting things for me personally has been working in a library for the first time in my career. I spent 30 years working *with* libraries and *for* libraries, but never *in* a library. I was a little nervous about how that would work out. To be honest, there have been times I’ve wished I had more hands-on experience to draw on. But I’d like to think that I’m not weighed down by old solutions to new kinds of problems. Academic libraries today are complex, evolving organisms in a highly dynamic environment, so it’s probably more important today to grasp the strategic opportunities, organize to go after them, and ultimately achieve positive outcomes. That’s what I’m trying to bring to the show.

How might the process of getting the library launched have been different if this had been a western institution?

I don’t think distinctions of east or west have been a big factor for us. Although it has a diverse faculty, student body, and staff, KAUST is built on a western model. Our job has been simplified by the early decision to collect only English-language material, which makes sense for a science and technology institution. Everyone who comes to KAUST has English skills, so we’re able to communicate reasonably well.

In my experience, everyone has gone out of their way to be respectful of one another’s culture and perspective. For the most part, I think the kind of people who are attracted to working at KAUST are the kinds who thrive in this kind of melting pot.

What were the most unexpected personal challenges you faced getting acclimated to life in Saudi Arabia?

A number of the cultural strictures of Saudi Arabia don’t apply on the KAUST campus — for example, women and men study together, women needn’t wear the abaya if they don’t wish to, women can drive on campus. So I haven’t had the authentic Saudi immersion experience. At the same time, working side by side with Saudi colleagues has afforded me an invaluable and rewarding opportunity to learn about Saudi and Arab culture more generally.

My biggest challenges aren’t what you might have expected. Instead they have more to do with navigating the inevitable bedlam of a new university, a new town, a new house, a new job, a new life. But these are universal challenges.

I would have expected the move to be harder for my wife than for me. And it probably has been. But she’s done very, very well with it. Both of us love the diversity of the KAUST community. We’ve forgone buying a car, instead getting around campus on our bicycles and hiring a car for the occasional trip to Jeddah. We enjoy living on the seashore and being surrounded by the beautiful, inspiring university architecture. It’s been a great experience. 🌳