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Untapped Resources: Graduate Assistants and Collection Development

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Abstract:
In response to budgetary crises, academic libraries are often forced to relegate traditionally professional librarian duties to student assistants, paraprofessionals, and other support staff. Among the newly transferred roles is collection development including the analysis, selection, and maintenance of materials and resources. Review of the literature reveals that this trend has substantially grown over past years; however, the scope and level of responsibility of the transferred projects has been limited. Additionally, the literature severely lacks mention of the roles played by graduate students working in academic libraries, while pursuing their MLIS degrees. The objective of this session is to explore the use of graduate student assistants working toward their MLIS degree in the conduction of complex collection evaluation, selection, and analysis from the perspective of one graduate student assistant and one professional academic librarian. The attendees will learn about the benefits of involving graduate student assistants in the collection development process, in terms of the need to acquire hands on experience prior to first-time professional employment, issues of current subject specialty knowledge, curatorial objectivity, and professional development in the mentor-mentee relationship.

Introduction

Collection-related duties have been part of the job description of public services library professionals since the 1970s (Wang et al., 2010). Sometimes referred to as the "liaison model," this approach combines the typical responsibilities of public services, such as reference, instruction, and research consultations with outreach, relationship-building, and collection services for faculty and students. According to Wang et al. (2010), it is necessary for collection development to be an integral part of public services, in order to expand, diversify, but also more importantly, to increase the depth and focus of library holdings. Communication with faculty doing research in collection areas is necessary for this, along with an awareness of the research needs of the university community at large, which can only be gathered at the point of need and within the context of the service-desk environment.

The expansion and diversification of public services duties, however, also brought a great need, both on MLIS programs and on university libraries who work with MLS graduate students, to adequately prepare them for liaison duties. Additionally, the traditional "reference" duties continued to expand to include multimodal technologies, serving the needs of many and remote users. Although a scheduled activity, reference is no longer only restricted to a 9 to 5 format and, in order to properly serve users, reference librarians are more so than ever actively engaged in reaching out and responding to unmet needs. On the other hand, funding for new positions has inversely diminished in recent years, creating both a gap in users' need for both responsive and timely public services and well-crafted and immediately accessible library collections. In fact, it can be argued that budgetary restrictions today are shaping library operations more than anything else in the recent past, possibly since the advance of digital technologies and the Internet.

Paraprofessionals and student assistants play an important and timely role in filling the human capital gap. Although frequently utilized in general public services, such as reference and instruction, the profession has been much slower in transferring the roles of collection development, such as the analysis, selection, and maintenance of materials and resources, to a non-MLIS workforce, including graduate assistants. Moreover, it is unclear if the curriculum of MLIS programs emphasizes collection development strongly enough. The reality is that most librarians entering the workforce have had little if any practical experience with collection development. This is somewhat counterintuitive, considering the importance of hands-on experience in the process. It is also not necessarily a failure on the part of MLIS students to seek more experience, but may be an oversight on the part of professionals

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working with graduate students in providing it. The objective of this paper, then, is to explore the use of graduate student assistants working toward their MLIS degree in the conduction of complex collection evaluation, selection, and analysis from the perspective of one graduate student assistant and one professional academic librarian. The readers will learn about the benefits of involving graduate student assistants in the collection development process, in terms of the need to acquire hands on experience prior to first-time professional employment, issues of current subject specialty knowledge, curatorial objectivity, and professional development in the mentor-mentee relationship.

History

Paraprofessionals have been an integral feature of library services since the very beginning of the profession. Reference and public services in particular have been envisioned, from the beginning, to be a customer service field, focused above all on courteous and responsive attention to the need of users. Dewey (1886) distinguishes between "employment" and "profession," in saying that it is a profession, which, above all, puts itself on hold for others (qtd. in Genz 1998). In that sense Dewey writes, even a janitor can do library work and be perfectly adept at it, so long as he or she shows "intelligent interest in the results" (p. 509). The need for qualifications and subject knowledge is not necessarily overruled, but there is an emphasis on service. Paraprofessionals have been integral providers of this service from the very beginning and, increasingly, student workers, interns, and graduate assistants are also contributing actively to the daily operations of academic libraries. Collection development remains a major area, however, which, according to the literature, has so far underused paraprofessionals and, especially, students.

In "Clarifying Jurisdiction in the Library Workforce," Applegate (2010) discusses what it means to be a library professional. This definition is continuously changing, but it is clear that "within library work, there are boundaries primarily oriented around the iconic master's degree (MLS): who has it, who does not; who is a professional, who is support or specialist staff" (p. 288). The author conducted a survey in which the respondents rated the importance of skills and abilities in library paraprofessionals, including categories such as teamwork, technology, reference, and collection development. The respondents were themselves a combination of Academic MLIS librarians and paraprofessionals. The results indicated that, although Academic MLIS librarians considered it very important for paraprofessionals to be able to do reference for the purposes of referral, the area of collection management (in particular, selection) was seen as strictly within the jurisdiction of professional, MLIS-holding, librarians. The study suggests that there is a perceived connection between the concept of "jurisdiction" and educational expertise. The author speculates that there is not enough structure of support, in order to allow staff to attain the expertise and education, which will lead them to jurisdiction in the profession.

This leads to an interesting and fundamental distinction between the issue of collection development for paraprofessionals and students. At the same time that paraprofessionals, due a perception of lack of experience or education, are not given an opportunity to participate in collection development and selection; graduate assistants, who are, in fact, much more involved in subject areas and/or the MLIS field through their coursework are similarly not seen as an obvious choice for working with selection and management processes. It can also be argued that, although paraprofessionals have been much more accepted in general public and technical services roles, MLIS students and graduate assistants have been less successful. For the purposes of collection development, this poses an interesting question: should graduate assistants, who typically possess more current subject knowledge, as well as theoretical knowledge of librarianship, be more included in the selection process?

Collection Development in the Curricula

The current state of collection development and management courses in the academic curricula is deteriorating compared to its level of importance in the past. According to the American Library Association's *Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies* the curriculum of an ALA accredited program should include courses that encompass "information and knowledge creation, communication, identification, **selection**, **acquisition**, organization and description,

storage and retrieval, preservation, **analysis**, interpretation, **evaluation**, synthesis, dissemination, and **management**" (ALA, 2008). However, after researching the required core courses of ALA accredited programs, many library and information science schools do not list collection development and management as a mandatory course for graduation. Additionally, many schools offer only basic and introductory courses in collection development and management with most only offering a single collection development course option. This deficit of even the most basic theoretical collection development knowledge runs counter to the increasing responsibilities of librarians who are regularly expected by employers to be flexible in their duties and varied in their abilities (Benham, 1989). Thus, this problem immediately handicaps the new graduates entering the workforce and creates a sharp learning curve during their first year of employment. While any new hire, especially a new hire fresh from library school, will always have a period of adjustment and acclamation turning theory into practice, the profession does have to wonder if its educational programs are effectively meeting the needs of the employers and in turn, how professionals can fill this knowledge gap before it becomes too wide.

Graduate Students in the Library

MLIS graduate students are often incorporated into teaching libraries in the areas of reference and instruction, however, how often are they allowed to venture from the reference desk and peer behind the proverbial curtain of librarianship? A review of the literature implies that a current graduate student pursuing a library and information science master's degree may have received instruction on such topics as collection development and its required departmental liaison work. However, the instruction was most likely limited in scope, theoretical and/or lacking in hands on practical application. This absence of hands on experience creates a need for supplemental support to a formal education before the emergence of new graduates into the workforce as MLIS librarians expected to know how to actively cultivate a collection using the newest tools and techniques and working within today's limited spaces and budgets.

In 2010, it was reported that approximately 16.8 percent of MLIS students taking core curricula courses have heard about the liaison component of librarianship which is often attributed to academic services librarians in charge of subject specialty and collection development (Torabi, 2010). In the same study, the author suggests teaching libraries and hiring institutions should develop new curricula and create training programs and manuals to help combat this deficit of knowledge. Some universities and libraries have begun to address this problem in conjunction with non-professional staff cuts as is shown in the intern program begun at San Jose State University (Sargent, Becker & Klingberg, 2011). In 2008, the San Jose State University Library lost non-professional library staff support after a reorganization and soon became in need of specialized help and began to seek out interns from their library school. Careful to only assign professional level projects to the interns, many of whom were gaining credit for their participation, the library subject teams began to incorporate the interns in not only reference and instruction collaborations but into collection development and management projects as well (Sargent, Becker & Klingberg, 2011). Upon completion of the program projects, interns reported an increased level of confidence in their professional abilities and projected their career trajectory to be more advanced post hands on training while in the internship program.

Additionally, graduate student assistants surveyed at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver reported three main advantages after being hired to work on collection development projects at the Science and Engineering Library. The activities undertook by the student assistants left them with a greater familiarity with subject heading and descriptor terms therefor improving the quality of their reference services due to their greater understanding of the topics at hand (Barsky et al, 2010). Greater confidence in utilizing budgets in managing a collection was also listed as a benefit that had previously not been discussed in library and information science courses.

Budgetary Incentives

There are three main ways that incorporating graduate students in the collection development process can have an impact on resource scarcity within an

academic library, namely, in terms of new program accreditation support, informed materials selection and de-selection, as well as training and support for discovery of current materials and the use of ILL. The latter is also particularly important for the PDA (Patron-Driven Acquisitions) environment.

Collection development has been tied to accreditation for new programs for some time, guided by ACRL (*Association of College and Research Libraries*) and its standards produced in the 1980s (White, 1999). In order for new programs to become officially degree-granting, they have to meet a certain qualifications, aimed at determining if the potential students will receive a quality education, which meets the expectation of being fully supported by the department, faculty, as well as university resources at large. The library's holdings play an important part in this. Departments look to librarians in their collection development areas to self-analyze the collection, in order to ensure that such support is evident. This collection includes core-collection holdings, as well as collection specialties particular to the department.

This kind of self-analysis or collection introspection is discussed in White's "Building Collections for Accreditation: A Case Study" (1999). The author discusses the various ways in which the process takes place, for example, by comparing a library's existing holdings with lists of core-titles in the subject area (p. 50). Another dimension of this analysis includes conducting peer or aspirant institution evaluation, to determine if there are any gaps in the collection. In the case study described by White (1999), the college library created a report, outlining a description of library services (circulation, access, instruction & reference, etc.), the collections, as well as types and methods of coordination between the department and subject librarians, for the purposes of purchasing materials. They also conducted a user satisfaction survey about the current state of the collection, targeting students and faculty. Finally, the report included a detailed budget of library acquisitions towards the subject areas and its trends over the years (p. 51-52). The author notes his organization's satisfaction with the results, in contributing to the timely accreditation of the program later that year.

Such comprehensive and exact collection analysis is undoubtedly effective. However, it is also expensive, time consuming, and laborious. Although White (1999) did not specify how the report was researched and generated, it is more than likely that various individuals were involved in its creation. It is easy to suspect that many academic libraries today struggle to devote the personnel, time, and effort into conducting these accreditation reports, as valuable as they may be to the overall recruitment and retention of students, leading to the general the financial stability of the university and organization. Although, as this paper has shown so far, graduate assistants have played various roles in services such as reference and instruction, the literature does not reveal that many organizations have taken the opportunity of allowing them to contribute to these accreditation efforts. Conducting program support analysis report will be an extremely beneficial exercise for LIS graduate students in understanding and practicing real-life collection management and analysis. They would also allow for the library itself to fulfill this important role for academic departments.

Many university libraries, however, are finding that manual materials' selection is in itself not a feasible model. Increasingly, Patron-Initiated Collection Development is gaining ground and ultimately transferring collection management and selection from the traditional authority of librarians to that of users (Hodges, Preston, & Hamilton 2010, p. 208). Hodges, Preston & Hamilton (2010) show the shift from long-standing academic library practices that favored the "just-in-case" model of collection development, where materials were purchased for sheer quantity and the process of acquiring them was fairly linear: from bibliographers and subject specialists, to the Acquisitions' department, and finally, at least in theory, to library users. This model was conceivable because funding for collections was more or less unquestioned. When economic pressures worsened, so did the necessity of bibliographers to use more rigid criteria in order to exert caution and selectivity when choosing titles, which created "the potential for a gap between the collection building philosophy of librarians and the immediate information needs of freshmen, undergraduates, and other library users" (Hodges, Preston, & Hamilton 2010, p. 219).

What is the role of librarians and, for that matter, graduate assistants in an environment of growing e-book collections and where Patron-Initiated or Patron-Driven Acquisition (PDA) is competing with traditional manual selection? In fact, in some ways, the shift to a new model of materials' selection does mandate a replenished focus on traditional public services responsibilities, such as the importance of timely reference services and user-centered instruction, outreach, and consultations. This article has shown that these have long been established realms of both traditional MLS librarians and graduate assistants. The necessity for these public services in the PDA environment is chiefly due to the fact that if users do not have the proper training to use library OPACs and Discovery Tools in order to initiate the PDA request, the actual benefit of the system is lost and the voices of the users, as well as of bibliographers, are not heard. This mandates a necessity for librarians to work closely with graduate students in developing strong user instruction programs, in person as well as virtually, to make the PDA process effective.

Mentoring and Professional Development

In current programs utilizing graduate student assistants, also called student librarians, mentoring and professional development of students is a large, mutually beneficial part of the program. As more library and information science programs focus on distance learning, advising and mentoring relationships are more difficult to develop by chance and often force graduate students to seek out opportunities for these professional aspects outside of the official program (Thompson, Jeffries and Topping, 2010). At the University of British Columbia in Vancouver Science and Engineering Library, student librarians find support from the supervisory professional librarians who take a professional responsibility to ensure the students are provided with challenging responsibilities as to aid in the development of their skills as they pursue their degree and subsequent career in librarianship (Barsky, Greenwood, Sinanan, Tripp and Willson, 2010). Under the tutelage of the professional librarians, the graduate student assistants gain not only professional experience but the more subtle and calculated skills of communication and the cultivation of networks found through most mentoring relationships, thus opening them up for a wider range of opportunities post-graduation. Mentorship opportunities may also open up with other professionals in the workplace employing graduate student assistants that can help fill mentorship gaps that busy supervisor schedules might not be able to accommodate (Barsky et al, 2010). Additionally, professional librarians who take on mentor roles not only receive assistance for themselves but are contributing to the profession as a whole and specifically to their specialty in the library system (Barsky et al, 2010).

Learning by Teaching

Blakiston (2011) discusses the well-documented benefits of mentoring on professional librarians' own knowledge of a process, as well as their motivation in taking part in "lifelong learning," which is essential, the author argues, for the survival of an organization in a continuously changing user-centered landscape of the profession. Although Blakinston (2011) only explicitly addresses "peer-to-peer" teaching opportunities, it is easy to expand the idea to the mentoring relationship between collection development librarians and students. Such a relationship is necessary, not simply for better workflow, but in conducting mutual learning. Although librarians are knowledgeable about collection management processes, they may be less so about the subject area itself. Graduate students offer fresh and recent subject expertise that brings additional effectiveness to the process. As Blakiston (2011) and others have shown, continuous learning is not a luxury, but a matter of necessity in all aspects of library work.

Conclusions

Due to several internal and external changes in the field of librarianship and library and information science education, changes must also come to the area of collection development and the role of the student librarian in teaching libraries. With the decline in collection development courses required as a core to the curricula and the ever expanding responsibilities of today's library professionals, employing student librarians in hands on, professional level, collection development projects is a relatively simple and economical solution to the problem. Not only can professional librarians become teachers and mentors to fledgling librarians but they can also aid in alleviating their own staffing and budgetary issues with such hires. Additionally, with the preva-

lence of online learning, being a teaching library no longer requires being near a library school to gain access to such a population thus encouraging more and varied types of libraries to commit to employing student librarians in collection development.

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