Case Studies in Collection and Technical Services - Case Study Four: The Big Collection Assessment Project -- The Bane of a Selector's Existence, or a Beautiful Zen Experience?

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4. Tell us what you need to write a fund-
ing proposal. We understand that many li-
braries seek funding from a variety of sources
in their institution. If you need specific lan-
guage or descriptive materials, we will be
happy to supply them.

5. Give us clues about what you’d like
to see in training materials and docu-
mentation. Are there new formats you would
find useful? Should our user help be presented
in a different way? Is something not clearly
described? We may be too close to our own
products, even though we try to guard against
that problem by contracting some of the de-
velopment to consultants with an MLS de-
gree. It would be great if we could observe
one of your training sessions.

6. Help us understand the labyrinth of
holdings, Open URL, link resolvers, and
other technicalities related to using our
products in your environment. We want to
produce products that work most effectively
for you and that are the easiest for you to
acquire and deliver. We do attend sessions on
this technology, both at publisher and library
meetings; however, changes occur so rapidly
it’s not always easy to keep up with them.
Certainly, if you are having any difficulties
with our products in your new technology
environment, we want to know.

7. Help us teach users about what con-
stitutes excessive usage and inappropriate
usage. As a professional society, we need to
educate our constituents about appropriate use
of licensed, copyrighted material. Librarians
have always been superb guardians of rights
in the print environment. We need to work
together in the digital environment to forge
new standards that give users appropriate
access and that protect all of us. Both librari-
ans and publisher spend too much time deal-
ing with the users who set up processes to
download large numbers of books or issues
so that they’re available on their own ma-
chine, rather than returning to the product on
the library system. When we have to shut
down access, all too often the user has been
on the proxy server so it inconveniences many
users. And then there are the faculty mem-
bers who download and post articles on their
Website on the open Web for reading lists,
rather than using the electronic reserves or
coursepacks available according to the site
license. Most likely, we just need to offer
more education and reminders.

8. If you expect to find content in one
of our products and it’s not there, please
tell us. Or ask the user who identifies miss-
ing content to tell us. For reasons that may
always remain a mystery to me, sometimes
there is a hiccup; and a bibliographic record
that was released does not appear or an ar-
ticle in an issue is not findable. Our devel-
opers generally can fix the problem very rap-
idly, once we know it exists.

9. Point us to a URL for any informa-
tion we should be seeking out. We’re happy
to do the homework on institution required
language for licenses, your messages to us-
ers about appropriate use, how you display
terms and conditions, and anything else we
should know.

10. Tell us what you need to find on
our Web pages. We have a Librarians’ Re-
source page and would very much appreciate
recommendations for additional content, as
well as responses to how easy (or difficult) it
is to navigate. We welcome all suggestions
for improvement.

Case Studies in Collection and Technical Services

Case Study Four: The Big Collection Assessment Project — The Bane of a Selector’s Existence, or a Beautiful Zen Experience?

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"Argh!" Celine moaned as she reached for
the salt shaker. "How am I going to find time
to review my stack areas for the collection
assessment project. I can’t think of a worse
time. I know we have six months to complete the
project, but still, Argh!"

Tracy patted her friend’s arm in consola-
tion. "Is this your first big assessment assign-
ment?" Celine nodded.

"I remember my first, it felt so daunting. I
wasn’t sure how to start, didn’t know how to
plan for it!" Tracy said soothingly to her friend
and fellow subject specialist.

Celine and Tracy had just been served their
lunches. They ate quietly while deep in thought.
Right before lunch they had
tended an all subject librar-
ian meeting where a huge
collection assessment
project had been rolled
d out. Each of the librar-
ians had six months to re-
view their physical col-
lections, assess a variety
of things such as col-
lection breadth, depth,
strengths, weaknesses,
preservation issues, rela-
tionship to consortial partners, and more. This
was a Big Project. Both Celine and Tracy were
feeling overwhelmed. Celine, because as a first
time subject specialist she has never done a
collection assessment before, and Tracy, because
she has, but it has been at least five years
since she completed the work.

At the meeting, the project time-line and the
types of data they would have to provide were
discussed. Report format and types of support
they would receive throughout the project were
presented and described. And then the meeting
was adjourned and the room emptied amid the
hubbub of anxious voices.

What’s the best way for Celine and Tracy
to get through this Big Project? What
is the payoff, if any, for them?
And, for those PBS ‘The Elec-
tric Company’ fans where is
Naomi?

The Experts Speak:
First off Celine and
Tracy need to stop with
the whining. They have
actually been given a
gift. They now have a
reason to get to know their
collections intimately, physically, thoroughly.
Let us step back for a moment. We want to
emphasize that the worth of doing collection
assessments is really two fold: first, the library
gets a vast amount of collection information that
can then be used for multiple purposes such as:
budget requests, external reviews, promotional
materials, etc., and second, the librarians gain
a strong visceral connection with the materials in
the library for which they are responsible. This
wisdom will stay with them and will help them
make decisions, talk knowledgeable about their
collections in various venues, and increase their
professional worth.

So, How Should They Begin?
First, they need to put time slots in their work
calendars to go into the stacks and start look-
ing. If it isn’t in the calendar, it won’t get done.
Everyone has their times of highest output, some
are morning people, others thrive at different
times of the day. Whatever time slots are their
most productive, this is when they need to
schedule these review periods.

Once scheduled, how ought they prepare for
the sessions? First, dress comfortably, and ex-
pect to get dirty. While some parts of every
collection are well used, others will be dusty,
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Little Red Herrings — Reading at Risk

by Mark Y. Herring (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

The National Endowment for the Humanities released a shocking study (Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literacy Reading) barely two years ago showing a rapid and sharp decline in reading over the last 20 years. Most of that decline has occurred in the last ten years. The percentage of adults who read literature has dropped in the year of the study, 2002, to 46%, down from 57% just twenty years earlier. The drop in reading among 18-24 years olds is even more dramatic. According to Dana Gioia of the NEA, “Literacy reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated especially among the young.” Gioia goes on to point out why they are turning to libraries if it isn’t already obvious: “Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice.” Years of education and practice. When we lose this in our culture, we lose the desire for places to house books, places in which we can engage our minds in a progressive fashion.

Some might argue that literary reading is a different kind of reading and so should not be too alarming. Who really wants to read Wuthering Heights, Brideshead, Vanity Fair, or any number of other “boring” books? But it is the very interconnectedness of reading that requires this to be important. One puts down a book as too troublesome and he will later put down a newspaper that may be too challenging. With the newspaper gone, so go newsletters and any other intellectual substance that cannot be digested quickly, easily and in sound bite fashion. Indeed, the NEA survey found that “total book reading is declining significantly.” Just how far is this decline? From almost 60% in 1982, to 2002’s abysmal 43%, young people have all but quit reading. While one cannot say with certainty why this is, the most obvious reason for this decline are that students simply cannot read well, combined with an increase in both television viewing and Web surfing. Mark Bauerlein, project manager of the NEA report, blames “the proliferation of Internet, email, iPods, and Blackberries.”

Meanwhile, if all of this were not bad news enough, studies of college-age students reveal similar findings: students do not read, do not want to read, and find reading a labor when they have to do it. Although sure to be discounted as anecdotal, informal surveys I’ve conducted with faculty who teach honors students reveal the same sad findings even among the putatively more literate of students. This concurs with the honors students I have taught. Require more than 30 pages a week and one is certain to endure a riot. When combined with the now known fact that the college-aged watch more than three and a half hours of television a day, the recipe for both disaster and illiteracy is very high. When they aren’t watching television they are blogging, or at least most are. Estimates of the almost 32 million blogs on the Web contend that nearly 60% of them are run by 13-19-year olds. Read any 100 of them and literacy, or even budding Jack Kerouacs (about whom, if I may remind, Truman Capote said, “He’s not writing; [he’s] typing.”) do not come to mind. Natives, Gen-Xers, students of hover news if we could call them now, are a vocal, often self-absorbed group but they are not readers or writers in the traditional sense. Before someone argues that’s just the point — they are meant to be unconventional — bear in mind that these unconventional habits are drawing them away from literacy. We live in an age where the culture that built libraries and cherished them has been inherited by one that does not like them and does not care to learn how to use them. That some are seeing libraries as pointless should come as no surprise. Add to this Google’s enterprise to put ten million books online and you have a recipe for vanishing libraries.

Nor is it just reading, or its lack, that should trouble us. Many of these same young people are not volunteering, not involved in or with anyone or anything else, and are not well-versed with the real world going on around them. For example, among high Internet users in the young adult category, only 11% use it to keep up with the news. The remaining numbers (82%) said they watch television. About 20% still read a newspaper everyday compared with their peers in 1972, cf whom almost half did. Of incoming freshmen at UCLA, only 34% see keeping up with politics as important, about half what it was compared to their hell-no-we-aren’t-go peers in the 1970s. This might come as good news if only we could call them now, for they do get is not entirely limited to The Jon Stewart Show or others like it.

Should we think that this loss in reading is not so big a deal, that same NEA report indicates that declines are present in what many would consider related activities: museum visits, visits to historic sites, or volunteer work? While 96% of the adult population surveyed watch at least one hour of television a day, (and almost half watch three hours or more) only 45% have ever read a play, 17% ever seen a play or an opera, and not even a third have seen a live performing arts activity.

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