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A Fire to be Kindled

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A Fire to be Kindled

by **Matthew Landau** (Librarian, Remington College, Columbia SC) <Matthew.Landau@remingtoncollege.edu>

Remington College is a nationwide, for-profit, vocational college system. I work at the newest campus, in Columbia, South Carolina. We opened in May of 2009, and we now enroll just over 300 students. We offer programs in medical assisting, medical billing and coding, and cosmetology. Our motto is to provide “real skills for the real world,” and I can honestly say that we do much more than that.

Our curriculum goes beyond academics. We do our best to cultivate strength of character. Our career services department works to prepare our students to be confident in entering their chosen professions. Many of our students volunteer in local clinics, participate in mock interviews, and articulate their own attitudes regarding health and wellness. Furthermore, our faculty members regularly mentor their students in academic, personal, and professional decisions.

My role as a solo librarian is to guide students to not just to the right piece of information, but help them see that information in the context of what they want to achieve. I am also responsible for reference, circulation, acquisitions, collection development, cataloging, and outreach. Our director of education communicated the hope that our students would

become lifelong learners, and I try to express this through both word and deed.

The decisions I have made over the past half-year have been varied, and sometimes not about what to create, but about what to eliminate. I decided on my first day that I would drop the formality of “**Mr. Landau**” and simply introduce myself as **Matthew**. The result has been a lasting sense of goodwill among our patrons. And having a good relationship with our patrons can help them convey their information needs with confidence.

Our library functions as both a storehouse and a computer lab. The physical space is a ten-by-seven room adjacent to the main lobby. Shelving runs down the center of the room and allows fifty meters of shelf space. The perimeter of the room is lined with twenty computer stations. Large south-facing windows let in ample natural light, and floor-to-ceiling windows along an inner wall impart a fresh aesthetic.

Half of our collection is dedicated to providing information specific to the programs we offer. The other half provides a basic level of information on a range of subjects that supplement the main curriculum. Our electronic resources are managed offsite and include **ebrary** and **Gale's InfoTrac**.

Our collection was seeded by other **Remington** campuses, and many of the initial materials were not needed to support our curriculum. I weeded a large number of criminal justice materials, and I arranged to donate these materials to a criminal justice academy in our community. We were also very fortunate that the local public university donated a significant number of materials in areas that did need additional resources, such as gerontology.

Being a vocational college with a cosmetology program gives us an advantage over a typical cosmetology school because a typical cosmetology school does not maintain a library. The discipline of cosmetology can be divided into the specialties of hairdressing, makeup and skin care, and nail care. Many of our allied health resources overlap with the needs of our cosmetology program, especially works on communicable diseases, biochemistry, and anatomy. Our cosmetology curriculum also incorporates the subjects of biology, chemistry, anthropology, history, and business.

My method for developing our cosmetology collection is based around exhaustive subject searches on **WorldCat**. Conducting comprehensive searches is possible because cosmetology instruction is dominated by one publisher,

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Milady, and so the number of current works in the field is limited. Many of the non-**Milady** works are out of print, but there are many high-quality works that are still available. I have decided to make it a priority to acquire those works, new or old, that will lend more depth and/or a different point of view.

Collecting for our allied health programs presents a different set of challenges. The public and private sectors are invested heavily in improving access to medical knowledge. However, there are challenges in that medical texts can be expensive, frequently become out-dated, and often be quite dense. It is also challenging to cover all of the topics in the field because medical science is a vast subject.

I have opted to focus on breadth first, in preference to depth. For instance, I selected texts that offer information on a range of diseases, rather than information on a single disease. Focusing on general works first allows us to offer relevant information in the short term, and lets us collect specific works for specific needs over the long term.

Our curriculum includes a pharmacology component, and one recent project I undertook was to collect a number of *Physician's Desk References*. Having enough volumes for our students to check out was the main goal. I asked the librarians at other **Remington** campuses what their experience had been with collecting *PDRs*. I received many responses suggesting that electronic resources, such as **PDR.net**, **FDA.gov**, and **MedlinePlus.gov**, were effective sources for up-to-date information.

I talked with the instructor who made the request, and asked whether it was more important to have the newest edition or to have a larger number of volumes. He explained to me that the main goal was not so much for the students to have access to the latest information, which could be found elsewhere, but rather for them to know the nuances of how to use a *PDR*. I also conversed with several other instructors who would be using the books, and we reached a consensus that acquiring editions from the same year was important so that they could be uniform in their teaching.

I decided to look into purchasing a number of slightly older *PDRs*. I found that many used volumes were available on *Alibris.com*. The best balance of price, publication date, and availability was for the 2007 edition. The 2006 edition was not significantly cheaper, and the 2008 edition was not yet available in a sufficient quantity. Two weeks after recognizing our need, we were able to put these rather large reference books into circulation.

A faculty member mentioned to me that she had once seen a book that linked bizarre

images to medical facts. I delved into *Alibris.com* and *Amazon.com* and found a number of books on medical mnemonics that matched the description. I decided to acquire several of them, and we have found them worthwhile because they address medical knowledge from an unconventional angle.

Our situation allows collection development activities and reference services to be easily integrated because they are conducted by one librarian. My decisions on what to select are often the result of specific questions that patrons ask. I do not have all of the answers, and I certainly do not have all of the questions. Our patrons provide a great service by identifying topics that we should be able to address within our collection. I also like adding works in response to patrons' questions because it demonstrates that they have a say in our decisions.

Probably the most important decision I have made is in how to approach education. It is a common insight that teaching someone how to fish is better than giving someone a fish, and I believe it is even better to expect students to become teachers themselves. I want to inspire students to inspire each other. A quotation by Plutarch cap-

tures this view: "the mind is not a vessel to be filled, but a fire to be kindled."

A library might also be viewed in terms of fire. A fire is built upon combustible material, just as a library is built upon information. A fire needs oxygen, and a library needs patrons. A fire needs ventilation to burn cleanly, and a patron needs convenient access to relevant resources. A fire needs a spark, and a library needs curiosity. A fire needs to be stirred up every once in a while, and a collection needs to be evaluated and weeded regularly. And both a fire and a library should be accountable to their purpose. A campfire built to provide warmth should be monitored for signs of both conflagration and asphyxiation; a library built to support education should be monitored for signs of both overextension and irrelevance.

The knowledge we are building in this library will grow beyond the halls of **Remington**. Our students are doing their best to develop themselves, and so I do my best to develop our collection. The days when I see students working and studying beyond the requirements are the days when smiles come easily. I believe that we are doing more than providing an education. We are, I hope, lighting torches that will be passed on to future generations. 🔥

Author's Note: The views expressed in this article are my own, and not necessarily those of Remington College. — ML



Focus versus Breadth in Special Collections Acquisitions

by **Patrick Scott** (Director of Special Collections, University of South Carolina Libraries, and Distinguished Professor of English) <scottp@mailbox.sc.edu>

Everyone knows that Special Collections are (a) expensive and (b) different. Those two "facts" have largely determined the conventional wisdom about how to plan (and justify) expenditure for Special Collections acquisitions. Because the materials are (or can be) expensive, it is easier to accept that a library cannot buy everything. Because each library's Special Collections are, by definition, different, other libraries cannot be used as benchmarks in selecting what materials to buy.

Focus and Flexibility for Special Collections

In the conventional wisdom of Special Collections development policies, effort and money should be focused on "building to strength," identifying a few distinctive areas for saturation acquisition.¹ Much can be accomplished by following this conventional wisdom, yet it reflects too narrow, too inflexible, and perhaps too dated, a view of what Special Collections are for. Moreover, both the context and the market have changed since the mid-twentieth century, when the approach

became conventional. Special Collections are sometimes not unjustly stigmatized as smugly isolated from their home libraries and universities. Where this is the case, it is often not so much from inactivity or lack of outreach effort but from sticking to an irrelevant collection development policy. In the memorable phrase of one ex-library director, from an **ARL** conference blandly titled "Building to Strength," research libraries "have not sufficiently justified our investments in these offshore wells of oil and sludge."² If a Special Collections unit is to remain active and effective, having a range and variety of teaching-related materials may be more important than distinctiveness. Purchases for range may, even in the long run, prove a better use of money.

Older Ambitions: Checking off the Great Books

It is, in fact, only forty or fifty years ago that "building to strength" became the conventional wisdom. Before then, aspirant libraries in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries vied less for distinctiveness than for recognition.

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