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Gifting, Funding, Innovating: An Acquisitions Transformation

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Introduction

Within the library, Technical Services has long been a hidden segment of the library that handles acquisition, cataloging, and processing of all physical library materials. This mysterious department is considered quiet, locked away, and even unsocial. In fact, I once shared this opinion myself; as a paraprofessional working in public services in the early days I never saw anyone that worked in technical services, let alone had any grasp on what it was they did all day.

Background

When I first embarked upon the role as Head of Technical Services after working in the department for less than two years, I was ill prepared for all that was going to be thrust upon me. As a young librarian I was both excited and apprehensive about the future. A change in the tide was clearly evident.

We all knew that a great transformation was underway in technical services that had been transpiring for years. With the advent of new technologies, the days of the traditional library position was fading. Studies have been done on how technology has changed what we use, how we use the library, and do research. It is my experience that people will use information that is easy to find, even unreliable information, if it requires little effort on their part. And despite all the information literacy classes that librarians instruct at our library, students and other patrons rarely get enough exposure to the library information systems, such as the Web catalog and database collections. Today, instead of using the library, many of our potential users — including myself and my colleagues — often search Google. So it is an uphill battle. (Well, in reality the battle is over.) And in light of this dire situation, our technical services department with little to do and minimal opportunity to showcase our worth. Over the last two academic years our library has experienced a budget reduction that has eliminated our ability to acquire new print materials. Working with a smaller materials budget and no “soft” money (end-of-year funds given to the library which are used to pay the university) our technical services department with little to do and minimal opportunity to showcase our worth.

Changes in Technical Services

The evolution of the library and budget shortfall due to the economic downturn has left our technical services department with little to do and minimal opportunity to showcase our worth. Over the last two academic years our library has experienced a budget reduction that has eliminated our ability to acquire new print materials. Working with a smaller materials budget and no “soft” money (end-of-year funds given to the library which are used to pay the upcoming fiscal year invoices early) from the university has reduced our budget by twenty-eight percent. The normal allocation for print is completely depleted and it became apparent rather quickly that it is gone for good. With no new print materials to select, order, catalog, or process, we were forced to think about the immediate future for our own livelihood.

In an attempt to carve out another niche for ourselves, we have ventured into our dark storage rooms to uncover and evaluate our historic gift collection that over the years had grown to immense proportions.

Our gift collection is stored in specific areas throughout the library. Although valuable because of their age and content, the idea of managing these materials was not met with great enthusiasm. The books are older, dusty, and unattractive. Working in acquisitions during...
more prosperous times meant that you saw new books everyday; the smell and the feel of new books is intoxicating. It was like Christmas all the time, opening boxes with surprises of new intriguing books, along the way. Being the first people to see the books and even check them out was great, but mulling through these historic materials was not as appealing at first glance.

Once we began to discover what we had, we were able to provide the cataloging department with materials to catalog and processing work for the acquisitions department as new books were diminishing, but we knew that in a short time all the books would be completed.

So then what?

Gifting Model

With the advent of our Institutional Repository (IR) it became obvious that we needed to corner the market on our in-house valuables as well as expand the number of these valuables. Being a Historical Black University, many of our archives contain treasures of African American History that we wanted to hold on to. Some treasures include collections from the 1960 sit-in at the Woolworth’s lunch counter by four NC A&T freshmen, First Lady Michelle Obama’s commencement materials, and artifacts of famous alumni such as politician and activist Jesse Jackson and Astronaut Ronald McNair. Using our archives as basis for discovery, we have formulated new projects to create collections for digital preservation.

While centering our focus on the historical and research value of our archives collection, the idea dawned on us that we should solicit similar items from our alumni, faculty, and our surrounding community. We are now in the preliminary stages of doing just that. We are creating promotional materials to distribute to alumni and engaging faculty to add to our collections. It is our goal that in the coming months and years our gifting will increase in size and quality. In the past the library has always received gifts but they were outdated, damaged, or already-owned works. Occasionally, we received gems, but those were rare when gifting was seen as a way to unload unwanted books onto the library — in some instances for merely a tax exemption. We are attempting to change that commonality. We want our user community to see the library as a place to store donors’ valuables, not their refuse.

So, how do you make this happen, presenting the library as new and innovative? Our library now advertises the collections of our institutional repository and uses our display cases for expositions of our historical collections highlighting the legacy of the institution. Doing these two simple tasks initiates the transformation of the library. In the last few months these changes have resulted in more visitors venturing into the library, which is remarkable since the hardest undertaking is getting bodies in the physical library building.

Additional digitization projects and exposition proposals have transitioned technical services to focus more on outside sources of funding that will see these projects through to fruition. Thusly, we librarians are more dedicated to grant writing to bring new resources to the library and the university. We are involved in several funded projects to digitize significant historic materials such as slave advertisements, historic university newspapers, and other legacy materials with partner institutions in the state. Several grants are being pursued at this time, which will help us work to increase the value of the library’s collection.

Conclusion

There is a hard road ahead for technical services as we work to reinvent ourselves in the ever-changing world and find secure footing amidst constant advances in technology. By focusing on gifting opportunities and external funding sources, acquisitions is transforming its model and workflow. No longer do we spend our days selecting and ordering books. Our transition toward archival curation, preservation, and exposition makes us different, yet the same: we still provide access to materials, but in a more progressive format. We believe this transformation will allow the library to forge and strengthen relationships with the university community, revitalize and build on our archives and special collections, and amplify the breadth of our collection.