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Jacks Of All Trades

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Acquisitions Librarians - - Jacks of all Trades?

A Book Does Not a Widget Make ...Roles, Rolls, and More Roles

by **Richard Brumley** (California Polytechnic State University)

A program of the 92nd annual conference of the California Library Association (held November 1990) bore the title: Bookman, Business Manager, Librarian or Clerk: Emerging Portraits in Acquisitions and Serials Activities. Upon first seeing the program listed in an announcement prior to the conference, I automatically and immediately revised the title in my mind to read Bookman, Business manager, Librarian and Clerk. On some unconscious level, the revised title felt closer to the truth.

I gave the matter little thought - until a few weeks later when I was asked to participate on the program, addressing the topic from the perspective of an academic acquisitions librarian (someone else would speak on behalf of public acquisitions librarians). Once committed, I was obligated to explore not only the reasons for my autonomic revision of the program's title but also to assemble a portrait of academic acquisitions librarians. Thanks go to Lisa Peterson for providing the impetus and opportunity for this endeavor.

The essay that follows is the result of one librarian's exploration into the nature of his work in acquisitions. It is offered here for two reasons: 1) to allow other practitioners of the trade to assess the validity of my perceptions and, 2) to describe the work in a fashion that may grant some small preview to those considering entering the trade. The ideas presented are my own. I have done neither a literature review nor a survey of my peers. Gathered here are the thoughts germinated by the introspection and experience of someone who has worked in academic acquisitions departments for 17 years and who has held positions from Library Assistant to Department Head.

Bookman, Business Manager, Librarian and Clerk

The portrait of academic acquisitions librarians that emerges from my examination encompasses all of the above - and a few things more. My approach to fleshing

out this portrait has been to focus on the skills and attributes that I believe are desirable for acquisitions work. Many of these skills and attributes are universal; they are important for acquisitions librarians in all types of libraries. However, each type of library puts a somewhat different twist on them and imposes different demands upon their application. My task has been to view them within the context of college and university libraries.

Skills

First, **skills**. By skill I mean the ability, gained from one's knowledge, practice or aptitude, to do something well. Effective acquisitions work brings into play several skills, which in my view, can be grouped into three types. The first two types that I address may seem obvious. I do not intend to spend much time on them but it is important to mention them. They are what others think about - when and if they think about - acquisitions. They are basic but they tend to get forgotten these days. They are the reasons many of us chose acquisitions work. We may have had these skills and wanted to apply them or perhaps they represented the kind of experience we wished to gain. The first of these I am calling **library skills**, of which I see three.

Bibliographic Control. Bibliographic identification and verification begin in acquisitions with pre-order search routines. It is not uncommon for acquisitions librarians to have gotten their starts as bibliographic searchers. There is a sense of discovery and orderliness to this work that attracts many of us.

Book and serial trade. By this I mean knowledge of the publishing industry and the wholesaling business. What is the publishing output this year? What proportion of the books and serials published might be suitable for the library? What is their cost? What determines their cost? What the devil is going on with serials publishing? What factors should be considered

in selecting and evaluating vendors? Where do you get that out of print collection of music scores published in Belgium in '32 or that unpublished dissertation submitted to the University of Exeter in 1975? These and similar questions are the kind that engage acquisitions librarians.

Computer literacy clearly is a library skill now. Acquisitions departments have been automated for years. Those skills related to the selection, implementation, and use of automated systems have become important for us.

The second type of skills relate to **business**. An acquisitions department is a business operation, after all, and there are some skills and practices that are essential here. The kinds of skills I am referring to include the following four.

1. The general business practices associated with the **purchasing functions** of ordering, receiving, claiming, invoicing: record keeping, accuracy, attention to detail. Establishing the paper trails that auditors look for. Monitoring the performance of suppliers.

2. Establishing and maintaining **ethical, professional business practices**. Dealing fairly with vendors and publishers. Honoring the purchase order as a contract. Expediting payment. Abiding by verbal commitments - sending the promised volume of business, keeping approval returns within agreed upon limits. It is remarkable the number of our business relationships that are conducted without contracts. This aspect of our work is especially important for it may well set the tone for all of the library's business dealings.

3. Some of our work does involve **contracts**. Acquisitions departments may have responsibility for several functions that are performed under contract: periodical binding, commercial book repair, automated system maintenance, microfilming dissertations, theses and senior projects. Knowledge of the bid process, preparing contract specifications and monitoring vendor compliance are useful skills.

4. We may not need to be CPA's but

knowledge of **basic accounting functions** and facility with numbers and statistics are valuable skills. Preparing and explaining budget reports, monitoring and projecting expenditures are integral aspects of acquisitions work.

As I mentioned, there are skills of a third type that are important for acquisitions librarians in academic libraries. The necessity for these skills seems obvious to me now but I was not even aware of them when I was applying for my first acquisitions job. I now find this ironic since the application — or more rightly, the attempted application — of these skills is the most difficult and time consuming thing I do.

Because, even in fairly large academic libraries, there is often only one acquisitions librarian, that librarian normally is head of a department. I think it is fair to say that most acquisitions librarians became department heads because of their acquisitions skills, not because of any application of this third type of skills. I suspect few of us have had any formal training in these skills. Our learning and training have been on the job. The skills I am referring to, of course, are **managerial skills**. For the sake of this discussion I would like to divide managerial skills into two sub-categories: **personnel** and **administration**. Granted this is an artificial separation. The two sub-categories overlap and blur. Nonetheless, there are some distinctions and it may be helpful to look at them separately.

Personnel includes several functions: interviewing, hiring, training and supervising department staff; evaluating department staff — we do an awful lot of this; rewarding, as best we can, the productive employee; disciplining the unproductive employee; resolving personnel and personality conflicts. These are the things, especially the last two, that have a way of devouring time and building ulcers. Maintaining fairness and objectivity is an ever-present demand.

The **administrative** skills that first come to mind are those you would expect of someone managing a department: formulating policy, establishing priorities, developing procedures, routines and work flow, acquiring supplies and equipment, creating a suitable work stations. There is, however, another element to administration. As a department head, the academic

acquisitions librarian often also contributes to library administration by serving on the library's governing body. This body goes under many names but it typically includes the library director, associate or assistant directors, department heads and perhaps a staff representative. Participation in library administration normally takes the form of committee assignments, lots of them in my experience. Acquisitions librarians can rightfully expect themselves to be involved in such things as budget allocation, collection development, serials reviews, preservation and other acquisitions related activities. But also may find themselves devoting a great deal of time and energy to concerns somewhat further afield, such as: staff development, library hours, long range planning, space utilization, OPAC selection and implementation.

The managerial skills I have mentioned are difficult enough in and of themselves. As we all know, however, given the institutions for which we work, these skills must be applied within the confines of some fairly bureaucratic and cumbersome settings.

To review, then, these are the skills I see as being important to an academic acquisitions librarian: library skills, business skills and managerial skills.

Attributes

I would now like to look at acquisitions librarians from a different perspective and focus on some **attributes** that allow us to perform our jobs effectively. By an attribute I mean a quality, character or characteristic.

I believe acquisitions librarians bring a unique perspective to library affairs. This somewhat different way of looking at things I am calling the "**Acquisitions Perspective**;" and by that I mean the following: knowledge of books and serials and their importance, coupled with an efficiency expert's acumen. Given that these materials have value in their own right and that they have special significance to your library — what is the best way to acquire and process them? This requires the ability to set aside the intellectual importance of the materials and assume a production line mentality; the ability

to stand back and take an objective look at routines and work flow. The bookman must become the industrial engineer, and see books and serials as widgets.

Acquisitions librarians require the ability to deal with **work that is never complete**. While there may be the occasional project with beginning, middle and end, acquisitions work is an on-going process. We repeat many tasks over and over again.

Tolerance for **aberration** is a third attribute. While we repeat many of the same tasks, the materials and processes have a way of changing, of becoming different, often just enough to cause headaches. The changes wrought by automation may be the easiest examples to think of but also recall that the size, shape, format, quality of construction and publication and distribution patterns of library materials change as well. Tolerance of things over which we have no control is a desirable attribute for an acquisitions librarian.

The **ability to take on new tasks and responsibilities** seems to have become more and more important. Library budgets and staff get reduced but the work does not. The work gets redistributed, and acquisitions departments have a way of getting their fair share of this work — sometimes for logical reasons, sometimes for capricious reasons. In the library where I work the Acquisitions Department was given the responsibility for having senior projects microfiched because it fit in reasonably well with some of our other routines. We were also given responsibility for sorting library mail primarily because we are close to the mail room.

The **ability and willingness to become a clerk or library assistant** is a requisite. Budget cuts, frozen positions, resignations, vacations and illnesses can all lead to vacant positions. It is remarkable how frequently a department of 10 can have three vacancies. The technical processing work flow begins in acquisitions and when it is interrupted, slowed or stopped the entire library suffers. The job must be done, and sometimes getting it done means doing it yourself. Over the years apparently I have done "the job" enough times for this concept to have

become embedded deep within my brain. There can be no other explanation for my revising"...Librarian **OR** Clerk" to Librarian **AND** Clerk."

Being **tactful and diplomatic** is a plus for anyone, acquisitions librarians included. It seems within the library world there are a multitude of situations custom-designed to test an acquisitions librarian's tact and diplomacy. Being polite when, for in third time that week, you are offered a garage full of assorted issues of *National Geographic*. Appearing grateful when 300 gift books are delivered to your loading dock — in paper bags. And it is not only dealing with donations that require these skills. The daily interactions between acquisitions and cataloging, acquisitions and collection development and technical and public services all are made easier if they are conducted with tact and diplomacy.

A **service orientation** is needed. We may not staff busy reference desks but acquisitions librarians can and do provide public service. Acquisitions departments do a steady business with faculty and students who are seeking information on the cost and availability of books, publishers, addresses, specialties of OP dealers, where to get books repaired or periodicals bound or the status of their orders or senior project. And let us not forget that without the efficient acquisition and processing of library materials there can be no effective public service.

A **strong back** is certainly not essential for an acquisitions librarian but it doesn't hurt to have one. The ability to drive a flat bed, wield a hand truck and heft 40 boxes of books from a donor's garage has come in handy on more than one occasion.

That is a brief review of some attributes that I believe are of value to acquisitions librarians. I have looked at attributes and I have looked at skills but the portrait of an academic acquisitions librarian is incomplete until two additional elements are considered. These elements, **collegiality** and **professional development**, are responsible for some special rewards and benefits but they also present some unique challenges that can call upon all of the skills and attributes I have already discussed, and a few I haven't.

Academia implies **collegiality**, and collegiality, by and large, is a nice thing, much to be preferred to confrontation, for example. But the one thing collegiality does not imply is efficiency. Collegiality does not encourage unilateral decisions. Consultation and consensus are the orders of the day. It is not my intention to disparage the concept of collegiality. Rather, I would like to illustrate with a few examples what the reality of collegiality can mean to the work of an academic acquisitions librarian.

Finding a meeting time for six or seven librarians or staff with different assignments -- public and technical services for example -- is not a simple task. If a decision requires the involvement of the teaching faculty the difficulty is magnified. If it is during the summer months, the decision making process may come to a halt. For those who take an "acquisitions perspective" in which a steady, uniform work flow is to be preferred, this can be maddening.

More and more it seems we are **managing approval plans by committees**, often large committees. Librarian subject specialists, teaching faculty representatives, collection development officers and acquisitions librarians may all be involved in establishing and monitoring approval plan profiles. Involving many people in the process may result in the best decision but, at best, the process is slow and cumbersome. Making profile changes because of sudden budget stringencies can become problematic. Of equal concern, given "committee management," is the risk of not communicating with our vendors in one clear and consistent voice.

Even greater tests of collegiality are **serials cancellation projects**. A library's subscription list is generally considered to be more sacrosanct than its approval profiles so any decisions regarding changes to the list -- most especially deletions -- are notoriously more agonizing. Further, there tend to be more players involved in serials cancellation decisions. In addition to the four constituencies involved in the approval profile changes -- librarian subject specialists, teaching faculty representatives, collection development officers and acquisitions librarians -- add the following: a library committee charged with gathering cost, use and other data on the

serials, academic department heads and the library director. Compiling a "hit list" and getting it past all those with such diverse and passionate interests is no mean feat. And just to keep things from becoming too leisurely and simple this elaborate decision making process must be reconciled with faculty's summer vacations and the subscription agent's annual serials renewal cycle. Collegiality complicates the life and work of an academic acquisitions librarian. Patience, tolerance, and a high frustration threshold are requisites for dealing with this aspect of academia.

Professional development is the other element of our professional life. Many **academic librarians hold faculty rank**. In the system in which I work we have taken to faculty status with a vengeance; we are even in the same collective bargaining unit as the teaching faculty. Along with increased status and higher salaries has come the adoption of the teaching faculty's more rigorous criteria for retention, promotion and tenure (RPT). As a result, academic librarians are spending more and more of their time on research, publication, university governance, community service and other professional development activities. Not only are we spending more of our time on professional development because of the more rigorous standards to which we are held but there are greater demands placed upon us because of the formalities of collective bargaining. Librarians have been evaluating each other from the beginning but collective bargaining has mandated more frequent and more structured evaluations. There is a rigid calendar for RPT actions that, for us, runs from October until June. Probationary librarians are evaluated annually. Each year there are librarians seeking promotion and tenure. Tenured librarians who are either at the top rank or choose not to seek promotion must undergo periodic "peer post-tenure reviews." Each RPT action requires a peer review committee of fellow librarians. It seems we are in a constant state of either preparing our own "personnel action files" or reviewing those of our colleagues.

The increased emphasis on professional development brought about by faculty status and collective bargaining is burdensome to all librarians. Many of

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my colleagues take exception to what follows but in my opinion the burden falls harder on librarians with managerial responsibilities or librarians whose assignments are integrated into an interdependent pattern where their work directly and immediately effects the work of others. Both situations usually apply to acquisition librarians.

A greater and greater proportion of an academic acquisitions librarian's time is now spent on activities other than acquisitions. What I find even more worrisome is that the activities for which academic acquisitions librarians are rewarded are not necessarily beneficial to their departments. What is good for them is not always good for their departments; it quite often can be detrimental.

Fundamental, effective acquisitions work is needed more than ever in academic libraries. Yet the environment in which this work is practised is becoming both more complex and diffuse. Academic acquisitions librarians face ever-growing managerial responsibilities, in-

Rumors *continued from page 1*

"yet"), the *Newsletter* is still free and is available on bitnet, among other locations. However, the *Newsletter* will no longer be distributed on Faxon's courier system because of the necessity for the editor to rekey the entire newsletter for courier.

And Karen Muller (ALCTS) has announced the creation of a new electronic newsletter, *ALCTS Network News* (or *AN2*). *AN2* aims to provide timely and comprehensive coverage of items of concern to librarians engaged in collection management, acquisitions, cataloging, serials, preservation, and the reproduction of library materials. For further information, contact Karen or ALCTS.

Bob Houbeck has been appointed Director of Libraries at the University of

Michigan, Flint. His appointment is effective July 15, and he and his family are already looking at real estate.

Word is that NASIG (The North American Serials Interest Group), AAUP (The American Association of University Presses), and SSP (The Society for Scholarly Publishing) are having their meetings together in Chicago in June of 1992. Sounds like the place to be.

The death of George Delacorte, a publishing giant, occurred in May (see *Time*, 5/20/91 p. 64).

Faxon has announced the formation of a current awareness, document-delivery service, Faxon Research Services with Thomas J. Michalak of Carnegie Mellon as President. ☛

creasing professional development requirements and the idiosyncrasies of collegiality. Confronted with these burgeoning demands, the skills and attributes most important are those that grant us the ability to make time for and focus on our acquisitions work.

Were I now to revise the title of the program that inspired this review, thusly would I describe the academic acquisitions librarian: BOOKMAN, BUSINESS MANAGER, LIBRARIAN, CLERK, INDUSTRIAL ENGINEER, STEVEDORE AND STATESMAN. ☛

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