Charleston Library Conference

Three Heads Are Better Than One: Organizational Changes in Collection Management Leadership

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Barbara A. Bishop, Adelia B. Grabowsky, and Liza Weisbrod, "Three Heads Are Better Than One: Organizational Changes in Collection Management Leadership" (2015). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference.*
http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316302

Three Heads Are Better Than One: Organizational Changes in Collection Management Leadership

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Abstract

Financial pressures, shrinking staff, shifting user expectations, and advances in format access and availability mean that organizational change seems to have become a constant in today's academic library. The area of collection management has not been immune from change; the increasing emphasis on electronic formats, questions about access versus ownership, and the rise of open access have all required adjustment in managing collections. Even with all this change, most academic libraries have retained an organizational structure with a single person serving as a collection management coordinator or decision maker. This presentation details the shift in one academic library from a hierarchical model with a single collection manager overseeing all selectors to a collection management team composed of three peer selectors representing the major areas of humanities, sciences, and social sciences. The team is charged with coordinating the collection and liaison activities of all selectors as well as investigating new collections initiatives, serving as a bridge between reference and technical services, developing a culture of assessment in collection development, and working with the collections budget, the Libraries's development office, and administration. Benefits realized, challenges encountered, and "lessons learned" from this team approach will be discussed and suggestions for implementation in other libraries will be proposed.

Introduction

Collection management is defined by Cogswell as "the systematic management of the planning, composition, funding, evaluation, and use of library collections over extended periods of time, in order to meet specific institutional objectives" (1987, p. 269). Cogswell (1987) discussed six models of collection management which had various reporting structures and varying ties to library divisions but all were similar in being headed by individuals, specifically the library director, a coordinator of collection management, or an associate or assistant dean. More recently, Johnson discussed two models for collection management in academic libraries, a functional model comprised of librarians whose only duties are collection management and a geographic or client-base model with librarians who add collection management to other library duties (2014, p. 61). Libraries may utilize varying components of both models but organizational structure is not as important as "coordination of collection activities and their proper attention within the library's mission and priorities" (Johnson, 2014, p. 62). Johnson (2014) goes on to say that generally coordination is through a single individual who may have various titles. This paper reports on a different approach to the coordination of collection management in an academic library: coordination carried out by a team of three rather than a single individual.

Background

Auburn University is a research institution located in Auburn, Alabama. The University has 22,000 undergraduate students, 4,400 graduate students, 1,200 faculty, 140 undergraduate majors, graduate study in over 110 areas, and professional schools of pharmacy and veterinary medicine. Auburn University Libraries is an ARL library with a serials budget of over $7,000,000.

In 2000, Auburn University Libraries (AUL) underwent a library-wide reorganization and moved to a centralized model for collection management. An assistant dean for collection

http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316302

development was appointed who handled administrative aspects of collection management and managed between seventeen and twenty subject specialists. He trained new selectors, answered selectors' questions, monitored the approval plan, helped prepare the budget, negotiated with vendors and publishers, worked with library development, and handled gifts and donations. Although subject specialists still selected books and journals, the assistant dean was responsible for major decisions and overall management of the collection.

When the assistant dean retired in 2010, the serials acquisitions librarian took over many of his duties. In addition to her serials obligations, she assumed more collection management responsibilities and had greater involvement with the selectors. As time went on, however, it became clear that the serials acquisitions librarian could not take over every aspect of collection management and a different approach would be needed.

The dean of libraries decided to create a position with a larger collection management component, and the Libraries instituted a search for a collections coordinator. It was intended that the position would be based in the reference department and responsible for working with selectors, developing assessment strategies, exploring and implementing new initiatives, serving as an interface between technical services and the reference departments, and handling the many other aspects of collections management. However, after an extensive search, the Libraries were unable to find the right fit for the job.

In 2013, the dean of libraries decided to try a completely different approach. She would appoint a committee of three people to serve as the collections team for a one-year term. If the team approach turned out to be unworkable, or even a disaster, the committee could be dissolved after a year and another method adopted. The committee is made up of three people, all based in the reference department. One, representing the STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) sciences, is the health sciences librarian and relatively new to the Libraries and the profession. The communication and journalism librarian, with over two decades of experience, represents the social sciences. The humanities representative also has many years of experience and serves as the music and government documents librarian. All are experienced selectors, although none has any special experience with collection management.

While their subject backgrounds were varied, they also brought differing strengths to the team. The science representative demonstrated a natural affinity for working with numbers and the budget. The social sciences representative enjoyed working with spreadsheets and charts, an invaluable skill in collections. The humanities librarian drew on her twenty years of service in technical services to provide translation and negotiation services between technical services and the reference department.

Duties and Responsibilities

When the Collections Team was formed in late 2013, they were charged with responsibility in six areas: coordinating collections activities, investigating new collection initiatives, acting as a bridge between selectors and technical services, cultivating a culture of assessment, managing the collections budget, and working with development. The collections team began their assignment by establishing suitable methods of communication. On the Libraries's intranet, there was already in place a collection development page that contained usage statistics, journal price histories, and a blog for meeting minutes. The team decided to maintain the intranet page for private or proprietary information but to also create a LibGuide (http://libguides.auburn.edu/collections) to use as a gateway and to host public information. The Collections LibGuide includes information about meetings and deadlines, policies and guidelines, and links to files on the intranet. The team also worked with the Libraries's systems department to establish a team e-mail account and an additional blog for the team's internal use.

A basic responsibility of the team is to coordinate collection activities. An important part of this task is to conduct regular training sessions and provide opportunities for selectors to learn about new resources. The first workshop was conducted by Peggy Johnson (2014), author of *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management*, on collection development basics. Since then, representatives from YBP have provided training on the approval plan, and the team has conducted in-house training on such topics as interpreting the Voyager acquisitions module, reading the YBP GOBI screens, and working with statistics. Vendor representatives are regularly invited to discuss new products and services. Another aspect of coordinating collection activities involves working with selectors to take advantage of unexpected opportunities. A university hiring initiative provided the opportunity to put together a proposal for electronic backfiles. The collections team polled the selectors for suggestions, worked with the electronic resources librarian to get price quotes, and quickly developed a proposal linked to the initiative.

An important role for the collections team is to act as a bridge between technical services and the selectors. Before the establishment of the team, selectors, especially less-experienced selectors, often did not know who to approach for help and information. Technical services, on the other hand, did not always understand the sort of information selectors needed or the responsibilities of subject liaisons. The team spent (and still spends) time in negotiating, interpreting, and coordinating between the selectors and technical services. Examples include negotiating decision deadlines for journal and database price increases in order to allow selectors time to work with their faculty, coordinating changes in packages, overseeing the approval plan, and managing changes in subject areas. Other areas, such as gifts, also require collaboration between technical services and selectors. The team developed a gift policy so that everyone knows what to accept as well as how to process both the added and discarded material. An upcoming construction project will require weeding the collection, reclassifyng some material, and removing part of the collection to offsite storage. To facilitate this process, the team is acting as the bridge in coordinating the efforts of the technical services, circulation, and reference departments.

The team is also tasked with cultivating a culture of assessment. Working with the assessment librarian and the acquisitions librarian, the team collected data on journal, database, and e-book usage and made them accessible on the Libraries's intranet page along with price histories for databases and journals. The team conducted training on how to calculate cost per use and encouraged the selectors to use this information in collection decisions. The team is currently working on interlibrary loan statistics for selectors' use and to guide the purchase of journal backfiles and packages.

The team is charged with working with library development. One example of working with development is having selectors write thank you letters to donors with stories about how their support provides materials for faculty and students. The team also solicits "wish lists" from selectors and provides that information to the development officer so he is able to inform donors of the cost and value of library material and services. Finally, the team has been called upon to contribute to presentations for donors and faculty representatives.

The last responsibility for the team is to investigate and implement new collection initiatives. Since its creation, the team has implemented patron-driven acquisition programs for e-books and for articles. AUL also joined several open access initiatives for journals, e-books, and digital collections. The Libraries now participate in the SCOAP3 open access physics journals project, Knowledge Unlatched open access social sciences/humanities scholarly books project, and the Reveal Digital underground press crowdsourcing initiative, Independent Voices. The Libraries has introduced a pilot project for one section of the video journal JoVE (*Journal of Video Experience*) and will assess its usage after a year.

Looking forward, there are two areas the collections team plans to concentrate on; the first could be termed macro collection management. AUL selectors do a great job with selecting, evaluating, canceling, and weeding subject-specific resources, but selectors are not able to evaluate large packages or databases which span multiple subject areas. One of the responsibilities of the team is to solicit input from relevant selectors and examine cost and use to determine if other resources or groups of resources supply sufficient access at a better value. The second area of focus is fostering interdisciplinary collecting. Auburn University (AU) has several interdisciplinary programs as well as interdisciplinary research centers. There is also a new initiative at AU which seeks to hire additional faculty with the intent of increasing interdisciplinary research and grant funding. Although some selectors have tried to reach out and form collaborations with one another for interdisciplinary areas, this is an area which needs strengthening, and the collections team will be working on ways to increase communication and collaboration among selectors, faculty, and researchers.

Benefits

One question which should be answered is: why a team? What benefits does a team have over an individual coordinator? The first benefit experienced with a team approach to coordinating collection management is balance. Each member of the team is a liaison to a different subject area, and each also serves as a representative of one of the broader areas of the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. So whether deciding on new pilot projects or allocating gifts or one-time money, each of the three team members holds the others in check so that things don't get too skewed toward one broad area or even one subject area.

Each team member also brings differing strengths to the mix. Coordinating collection management requires many skills. A significant portion of the job involves working with numbers—analyzing use and cost per use and working with the budget. However, just as essential is the ability to communicate information about the collection and collection management needs and activities to audiences which range from selectors to library administration to the provost to potential donors. Deciding what information to present and how to present it effectively is crucial. Finally, coordinating collection management requires facilitating communication between all departments of the library, which requires still another skill set including, but not limited to, an abundance of tact and diplomacy. Each collection team member has different strengths among these various skills, and together the team is more versatile than any individual would be alone.

Another benefit of this team is that members were chosen from the current liaisons/selectors at AUL and thus each possessed an inside view of things that selectors found frustrating with collection management and things they wished were different with the current setup. Additionally, one team member had previously been a cataloger working in technical services, so she had an established relationship with that department and an inside view of their frustrations and desired changes. The collections team is not considered to be a part of public services or a part of technical services; instead the team overlaps both departments and answers ultimately to the dean rather than to either department head.

The final benefit of the team approach is that team members are able to share the load. Before taking on these new duties, each team member had a full-time job that included collection and liaison tasks for assigned subject areas as well as instruction and reference desk responsibilities. Adding in the collection team means sometimes things can get a little crazy. But when one team member is swamped with other duties, the other two can take up the slack for a few days or a week. In the same way, having three team members means that it is very rare that all team members are absent from the library at the same time. Even with conferences and vacations, at least one team member is usually there to answer questions and provide assistance. Sharing the load also means that there is always someone to bounce ideas off of, someone who can argue the other side or point out a differing view; all of which is very helpful in trying to move the library forward.

Challenges

There are challenges as well as benefits to working as a team to coordinate collection management. The first challenge the team faced was how to divide responsibilities. Sometimes, there is a natural division by subject area; for example, the team member responsible for science met with all the science selectors to discuss setting up a pilot project with JoVE. But from the beginning, for most responsibilities, the team has functioned as a team and has not divided up projects along hard lines. Instead, things just seem to get done by the members who have the inclination and the time; everyone pulls their weight and things are completed as a team. What the team did not consider until well into the initial pilot was that each member would need to have individual accomplishments to list on vitae for evaluations, and in the case of one team member, for third year review and then tenure. So although pleased with the way things were working, the team is now more careful to carve out individual responsibilities when possible.

Communication is another challenge faced by the collections team. For communications from others requiring a reply, the team must confer to craft the response which means that sometimes replies are not as quick as they would be when dealing with an individual; however, once this was pointed out, others changed their expectations of response time. The team has also dealt with this challenge by modifying guidelines for decision making and responses. When the pilot began, the team would not make a decision or respond to a question until all three members had time to discuss it. Although that method is still preferred, in the interest of time, as long as two members are able to confer and agree, the decision is made and communicated. There was also initially a problem with communication overlap. When making a decision that needed to be communicated (particularly to selectors), one team member would see the person in the hall and tell them, while another team member might e-mail the decision. Unfortunately, sometimes selectors were being told the same thing two or three times. To solve that problem, delegating which team member will communicate the decision is now part of the decision-making process.

One of the hardest aspects for the team to grasp initially was the collections budget. While each team member had her own collections fund, the collections budget in its entirety was a mystery not only to the team but to all the selectors. There was confusion about where money for various funds came from, what constituted one-time money versus continuing money, and why the former head of acquisitions would start budget discussions with “Well, we have money for books this year . . . but next year looks grim!” One team member compared the collections budget to a bunch of puzzle pieces where the picture was lost and the corners appeared to be missing. Although the team has a better idea of the budget picture and has probably uncovered at least three of the corners, understanding the budget is an ongoing process. The more the team understands, the better able they are to help inform selectors why certain decisions are made regarding spending trends.

By far, the biggest challenge to working as a team is time. Coordinating collection management is a more than a full-time job, and it was taken on by three people who already had full-time jobs. Unlike an individual who would be responsible only for collection management, each team member must decide how to apportion team responsibilities with other individual job duties. Each team member received some reduction in other responsibilities with the expectation that each would be spending about 13 hours a week with collection management; however, that turned out to be overly optimistic. Most weeks, each team member spends more than one-third of their time working on various collection management duties, and how to balance team versus individual responsibilities is a work in progress.

Lessons Learned

Although each team member was an experienced selector and came into the project with an understanding of the basics of collection management, it didn’t take long to realize that the bigger picture (especially the budget) was less clear. So the first priority was to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible. All team members found that individual reading followed by discussing what was read was very helpful. Each team member also tries to attend relevant workshops and presentations at conferences whenever possible. The collections team is very fortunate to have a great mentor. AUL Dean Bonnie MacEwan was assistant dean for collections at Penn State before coming to Auburn and she is a wonderful resource. In fact, the team meets with her every other week in order to ask questions and discuss problems.

The second lesson learned is to never assume, especially when dealing with different departments. When the team was formed, it was felt there was a disconnect between public services and technical services. Information was often provided by one department to the other without enough background because those providing the information assumed others understood. Part of the team's job is to insure that communications contain enough background and context for everyone. It is also important to realize that collection management and acquisitions are complicated issues and that mistakes happen. A culture of blame helps no one. A much more helpful approach is to focus on how the mistake can be fixed or prevented from happening again.

Another lesson learned involved transparency. Over the last 20 years, there had been varying levels of transparency regarding the budget at AUL, and each end of the spectrum involves problems. Too little information leaves colleagues wondering why they are being kept in the dark, while too much information can be confusing or off-putting. It is important for the team to decide what level of information is sufficient and also to present information in a consistent and professional manner. Budget information should not be presented in an overly alarmist or overly optimistic manner; instead it is best to just present the facts.

A final lesson learned is the importance of being flexible when coordinating collection management. A selector for political science may need to approach things differently with faculty than the pharmacy selector, so each may need different information or information presented in a different way. It is also important to be flexible about the time selectors are asked to spend on collection duties because they have many other responsibilities.

Conclusion

The use of a team to coordinate collections at Auburn University began as a one year experiment, but before the year was up, the team was asked to make the assignment permanent. Feedback from administration was that they were very happy; feedback from selectors was that they were mostly happy; and feedback from technical services was that progress was being made. Along the way, the team members have learned a great deal. There have been moments of great satisfaction—increasing access for patrons, helping a selector make a more informed decision, putting the Libraries's money to better use, but there are also moments of great frustration. There was an extremely steep learning curve in working with the budget and understanding how it works. There were many times team members left budget meetings asking one another, "Did you understand what that meant?" There were also times when team members felt the bridge being built between reference and technical services was collapsing around them. But overall the team would say that when it comes to collection management, "we are glad we took on this challenge, we think we are making a difference, and most of all we may be tired a lot of the time but we are never, ever bored!"

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