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Bridging the Divide: Collaborating Across Departments to Improve Communication and Collections

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Abstract

Flat budgets, rising subscription rates, and the need to communicate the (bad) news to librarians and faculty are part of the academic library landscape. Additionally, the University of Vermont recently implemented incentive-based budgeting, requiring financial transparency and demonstration of value to community stakeholders. Collaborative efforts between liaison librarians and collection management departments are increasingly necessary as libraries work to support research, teaching, and learning with fewer resources. This article will focus on the venues and the mechanisms that facilitate a culture of librarians sharing information across departments about financial realities within the libraries and the university to promote cooperative decision-making in challenging times. At the authors' institution, the increased communication has resulted in:

- liaison librarians better understanding budget constraints, usage statistics, and collection challenges such as weeding for growth;
- collections/acquisitions librarians respecting their liaisons librarian colleagues' subject expertise and relationship with faculty; and
- data-driven decision-making tempered by knowledge of disciplines and faculty needs.

Introduction

As directors of two different but increasingly interdependent departments, Information and Instruction Services and Collection Management Services at Bailey/Howe Library at the University of Vermont, the authors decided to join forces to improve channels of communication and promote collection awareness. Through a variety of methods and opportunities, communication has become more consistent, awareness of the cost and scope of collections has increased, and collaboration and mutual respect between the two departments has increased. Engagement with faculty for targeted selection decisions and weeding has yielded cost reductions and much needed space for new collections.

This article will describe the process of engagement and the methods employed as well as areas of improvement and ongoing challenges. Building trust and strengthening the impulse to collaborate with colleagues and institutional partners takes time. Gaining familiarity with the collection landscape also takes valuable time from busy schedules. Given the pressures facing academic libraries to demonstrate

their value to campus constituents, bridging the communication divide to collaborate on decision-making cannot happen too soon.

The Situation

In this era of flat budgets, continually rising subscription prices, and space concerns, the importance of communication with colleagues and faculty cannot be overestimated. As the following quote demonstrates, the situation at many academic libraries follows a familiar pattern:

At the start of the 21st Century, budget crisis, structural change, and technological advances have created a veritable stew of cultures among librarians. The bureaucratic legacy persists—in silos divided along departmental and divisional lines such that one does not know what the other one is doing." (Conner, 2014, p. 53)

At the University of Vermont as elsewhere, silos exist between departments due to changes in positions, functions, and the resource landscape. Historically, many academic library collections were built through a combination of methods, including approval plans

for monographs, faculty requests for journals and monographic series, and reference sources selected by subject liaisons. Collections were developed piecemeal, and overall collection awareness was often lacking. The advent of e-resources further complicated the mix, as serials migrated to electronic versions and publishers consolidated their offerings into big deal packages on ever-changing platforms.

The question of who is responsible for overall collection quality is still open. The answer often reflects changes in organizational structures over time. Particularly in the area of collection development, there have been many transformations during the past few decades. Changes in liaison duties regarding collection development continue to evolve across academic libraries of all sizes. At the 2016 Charleston Conference, several presenters described recent changes implemented at their institutions. The discussions ranged from completely removing collection development from liaison duties to distributing selection across all librarian positions.

The ability to demonstrate the value of the library to community stakeholders takes on increasing significance as researchers commune in their own spheres, and new budget structures prompt administrators to question the high cost of resources. Rising collection costs and the need for data-driven decisions are drivers of functional collaboration as libraries face the need to reduce their expenditures while improving services.

Promoting widespread collection awareness and knowledge of resource costs has become an objective at the University of Vermont Libraries within and outside of the libraries. To understand the evolution of the situation requires a brief explanation of the evolution of collection management services and library liaison roles.

Collection Management and Models of Collection Development

Collection management units as organizational structures in academic libraries began to appear in large research libraries in the late 1970s and early 1980s. When budget and space constraints surfaced and collections librarians realized they could not afford to buy and store everything their patrons needed, collection management departments

evolved to address these issues (Johnson, 2009). Collection development functions tended to reflect collection size, from subject bibliographers at large research libraries to subject liaisons at smaller institutions. As these models changed, they demonstrated the inherent overlap between collections responsibilities and liaison duties.

The structural changes that occurred in collection development corresponded with the following three models:

- Bibliographer/subject specialist model that existed at many Association of Research Libraries (ARL) members in the past. These selectors had few reference or teaching duties.
- Liaison model with limited collection responsibility. These librarians have reference selection responsibility but not departmental budget lines.
- Liaison model (subject liaison) with full budget responsibility. This model was common at smaller colleges but has recently been employed at larger libraries.

One common path to liaison roles was the transformation of format librarians into subject liaisons. In many smaller schools, academic librarians were organized by the collections they oversaw (periodicals or media) rather than by subject area. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Maureen Sullivan, a popular consultant, advocated for academic librarians to partner with faculty as liaisons to their subject discipline rather than coordinating collections by format.

At the University of Vermont, the liaison model is closer to the second example described above. Liaisons are responsible for the reference collection, and they facilitate faculty requests but are not assigned budget lines. General collection development is coordinated through a collections team with representation from liaison librarians. This structure facilitates the input of liaisons in decision-making while not obligating them to manage funds and approval plans or meet purchase deadlines. The collection management unit handles those functions.

The evolution of the collection development models described above has been documented in several sources. Johnson (2009, p.22), in her book

Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management, notes:

As the 1990s drew to an end, the concept of “pure” bibliographers, subject

specialists whose sole responsibility was collection development and management, began to fade as libraries of all types placed emphasis on outreach and liaison roles within the context of subject responsibilities. Conversely, many librarians (reference librarians and technical services librarians) who had not selected materials and managed collections were assigned these responsibilities.

Henry, in the article “Academic Library Liaison Programs: Four Case Studies,” concurs: “While historically rooted in collection development, today’s liaison programs have expanded and specialized in scope” (Henry, 2012, p. 485).

Furthermore, in the ARL paper “New Roles for New Times,” Jaguszewski and Williams (2013, p.5) report:

For example, some libraries are effectively eliminating or greatly reducing individual selection in some areas. They rely on approval plans and demand-driven acquisition of electronic books to automate collection development and more closely align purchases with expressed user needs and requests . . . Other libraries are centralizing collection development so that a selector works in concert with departmental liaisons and covers a much broader range of disciplines than the traditional bibliographer once did. In this model, two librarians may work with an academic department rather than relying on a single liaison to meet all needs.

The intersection between collections and liaison duties is evident in all the above models despite their variations. Collaborations are necessary to strengthen the connections between collections and liaisons librarians that will allow subject specialists to offer new services to support teaching, learning and research.

The Evolving Role of the Liaison Librarian

The evolution of the library liaison program was brought about by several changes in higher

education. New technologies, digital information, an increased understanding in how students learn, evolving research methods and requirements, and scholarly communications all brought about a need to rethink the traditional roles of public services librarians (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). There is also the pressure, experienced across the university community, to justify and articulate the cost of a college education.

Librarian responsibilities shifted from the trifecta of collection development, reference, and library instruction to an expectation that librarians be engaged in the full lifecycle of teaching and learning, and research. “An emerging issue with this model is the need to transcend vestiges of turf protection and work toward a collaborative model of scholarly support that acknowledges myriad expertise in addressing the changing nature of research and teaching” (Kenney, 2014, p. 5).

As librarians’ focus moves away from a collections-centric model to one of engagement, job functions increase. Responsibilities may include scholarly communications and campus outreach and engagement, in addition to supporting teaching and learning and collection development and management. This change requires improving or learning new skills and working collaboratively not only with library colleagues but also with teaching faculty and campus partners. Jaguszewski and Williams (2013, p. 14) emphasized two points to create and sustain a flexible workforce: First, the need to develop leadership skills. “Second, deep or radical collaboration needs to occur within libraries, with staff working across traditional silos such as department and divisional boundaries, across campus where we need to partner with faculty and other professionals, and across institutional boundaries, meeting a dramatic need for libraries to work together.”

As responsibilities add up, there is a question as to what liaison job functions can be lessened or eliminated. Moving away from a focus on collection development is challenging, especially for some librarians, because it is the activity that has defined their professional identity, and they are now being asked to do little or none of it (Jaguszewski & Williams, 2013). As liaison roles shift away from collections, librarians should still be able to communicate to faculty and other stakeholders’ information on how the collection is acquired,

evaluated, and deselected (Montgomery & Kinder, 2001).

The University of Vermont

The University of Vermont is the state's land-grant institution located in Burlington on the eastern shoreline of Lake Champlain. The school's acronym, UVM, does not stand for the University of Vermont but rather *Universitas Viridis Montis*, Latin for the University of the Green Mountains, a nod to the institution's beautiful surroundings. It was founded in 1791 and is the fifth oldest institution in New England. The university is one of the original "public ivys" referred to in Richard Moll's 1985 book *Public Ivys: A Guide to America's Best Public Undergraduate Colleges and Universities*. The term refers to institutions that provide an Ivy League collegiate and academic experience at a public-school price.

UVM has approximately 10,000 undergraduates and 2,000 graduate students along with a medical school, and 70% of the students come from out-of-state. The university has a 62.1% four-year graduation rate, while 76.6% of students graduate in six years. (University of Vermont, 2016). Programs of note at the school are environmental studies, complex systems, food systems, and neuroscience.

Incentive-Based Budgeting

An external factor driving change at UVM is the adoption of a new budget model: Incentive-based budgeting (IBB) or, as it is commonly known, responsibility-centered management (RCM). The IBB model was fully implemented at UVM during the fiscal year 2017. The degree-granting schools and colleges, the revenue generators, are called responsibility centers (RC). Other campus units such as the Library, Information Technology, Human Resources, and Student Services are considered cost centers. Each unit has its own algorithm governing budget resources. RCs regard cost centers as a tax and are concerned with lowering costs. Cost centers present their needs at annual budget hearings and must demonstrate their value to each RC. With annual cuts to the library operating budget and three years of flat increases to the acquisitions budget, the libraries are hard-pressed to maintain subscriptions, which inflate annually. The new structure presents an opportunity to engage with faculty to demonstrate the value of the libraries and

ensure our collections and services meet their needs.

Collection Management Services and Library Liaison Program at UVM

Collection Management Services (CMS) at UVM consists of several units: Collection development, acquisitions, cataloging and serials, coordination of e-resource troubleshooting, and space management. For decades, the collections culture reflected a strong relationship between the collection development librarian and the acquisitions librarian. Librarians in these functions co-coordinated the first approval plan, solicited faculty requests, negotiated big deals, conducted journal reviews, and investigated preservation needs. This independently structured collection management model preceded the liaison model, which was introduced in 2007.

The University of Vermont Libraries liaison program was introduced in 2007 with the goals of supporting research and learning and increasing the use of library resources and services. It evolved from a traditional reference model where librarians staffed the reference desk and engaged in one-shot instruction. They had responsibility for the collection development and management of the print reference collection but no direct involvement in the development of the rest of the collection, such as managing the approval plan or journal selection.

The change to a new model created a structure that supported and encouraged effective and ongoing communication between the libraries and the colleges and programs. The original group of liaisons consisted of both librarians and professional staff and expanded beyond Information and Instruction Services (I & IS). They had to submit a formal application and were assigned colleges and departments to work with based on their experience, education, and interests. The new structure also emphasized a move toward research consultations and instructional and curricular support. With no formal collection development responsibilities, librarians had the time to focus on these efforts.

In the past, budget and usage information was not routinely shared with liaisons. Liaisons were expected to meet the needs of their academic departments, yet overall collection awareness was

limited, and there was no mechanism for communication or collaborative decision-making. The inherent overlap between the collection responsibilities of CMS librarians and the departmental relationships liaisons cultivated created tension, which led to the creation of the collections team in 2008. With the advent of a collaborative group to address collection development, liaison librarians were now in a position to identify, analyze, and communicate collections needs in their disciplines. They worked with the collection development and acquisitions librarians to improve the collections in their areas and participate in collection management issues.

Recent Initiatives

The situation outlined previously was decades in the making, and much has changed since implementation of the liaison program and the collections team. Several recent developments are described in the following section, and much of the success of these initiatives is due to the dedicated and innovative librarians in both departments. As opportunities for enhanced communication and collaboration presented themselves, the directors of both departments noticed a momentum and receptiveness to explore our interconnectedness, particularly around the need for raising collection awareness and developing respect for the subject expertise of liaisons.

Collections Team

The Collections Team is a representational committee with membership from many departments including collections, acquisitions, instruction services, and external relations. The Directors of Collection Management Services and Information and Instruction Services are also on the team. Historically, the team was created to spend end-of-year-funds; however, the group had difficulty in evaluating and canceling resources due to a lack of process and criteria. In fiscal year 2015, after the first flat budget in several years, the newly hired collection development librarian established monthly meetings and proposed data-driven criteria to assist in making purchasing and renewal decisions. The group now evaluates requests above \$500 in all formats and takes responsibility for decisions rather than automatically renewing resources without carefully considering ongoing costs and usage data.

Sharing Renewal Information

Another new area of communication is sharing renewal information with liaisons. Automatic renewals can be a costly and easily overlooked expense. This had two benefits: Resources were evaluated for their current relevance to teaching and research, and liaisons took responsibility for decisions and were made aware of what we currently subscribe to and the recurring costs. Many serials in the reference collection have collection decisions attached to them, such as keeping only the latest edition or transferring older volumes to the circulating collection. A possible next step that would assist in the management of the collection would be to have all reference serials have a collection decision attached to them. This is a stepping stone to collection awareness.

Monthly Meetings

For the past year, the collection development and acquisitions librarians have visited the Information and Instruction Services' department meeting once a month. It is a planned visit; topics are arranged beforehand and are included in the agenda. The ensuing discussion is detailed in the departmental minutes. Common and ongoing topics include collection budget updates, deselection projects, space constraints, and approval plans. The advanced planning allows the librarians to prepare for the discussion and come equipped with usage statistics, budget outlines, and information on approval plans, if needed. These monthly meetings are safe spaces to discuss sensitive topics from the varied perspectives of collections, acquisitions, and liaison librarians. The result has been an increase in communication between the departments and an increase in mutual respect for and understanding of each department's contribution to the library.

Database Ranking by Liaisons

The collection development librarian created a survey for liaison librarians to rank databases, on a scale of 1 to 3, by relevance and importance to teaching and research. A level 1 indicated that the resource was not essential to their disciplines, and cancellation would have minimal impact to faculty. Level 2 was relevant, but there may be an alternate resource. Level 3 was an essential resource, and its cancellation would severely impact research. These

rankings continue to inform renewal processes throughout the year.

Collaborative Outreach to Faculty

Liaison librarians have also begun to work with the collection development librarian to reach out to faculty to gather information on their use of resources and knowledge of library services. One librarian worked with his collection development colleague to do a needs assessment of the mathematics and statistics faculty. The results emphasized the importance of one key mathematical database, a finding that was also backed up by use statistics. The survey also identified library services and collections that would benefit from greater communication, such as e-books on mathematics and course reserves. They also gained further insight into the faculty's use of print and electronic resources. For example, while they value electronic journals, they consider print resources important for in-depth reading.

The life sciences liaison collaborated with the collection development librarian to survey faculty and graduate students in the life sciences to determine e-resource usage. This feedback led to a decision to cancel one database and migrate content from one provider to another. Both of these experiences allowed us to make data-informed decisions and identify areas that would benefit from liaison outreach.

Assessment of Statistical Resources

Another interdepartmental collaboration was the creation of a task force consisting of the collection development librarian and select liaison librarians to identify and review resources that provide statistical information. Each resource was reviewed for content and data coverage, features and functionality, and areas of overlap with other resources. This data informed the recommendation to the collections team on whether to continue to subscribe to the resource, discontinue, or continue to assess. As with previous initiatives, the emphasis was on gathering data to inform our collection decisions rather than relying on emotion or nostalgia. The group also investigated resources that are not subscribed to in order to better support the teaching and research needs of the university.

Tightening Criteria for Faculty Requests

There was an increasing need to honestly message the budget situation to academic departments and tighten criteria for new requests. To this effect, the criteria for collection requests were revised. Faculty requesting new purchases were asked how the resource supports their research or teaching needs and to name other departments that might benefit from this resource.

Currently, the criteria for renewals and new purchases are being revised to implement data-driven decision-making. In addition to usage data, the collections team considers interlibrary loan and turn-away data, impact factors, and prior purchase information. New purchases are vetted via a series of rubrics that assess factors such as information need, content and scope, and ease of use.

Messaging and Development of Processes for Deselection Projects

There was a need to develop talking points for liaisons to refer to in their conversations with faculty. This is a sensitive space for liaisons, as they are the ones who have the most opportunities for communicating with faculty but are not the ones driving the decisions for budget cuts and weeding projects. The importance of this messaging necessitated collaboration at the administrative level. The Director of Collection Management and the Director of Information and Instruction Services worked with the external relations librarian and the Dean of Libraries to develop communications for topics such as budget realities and deselection projects.

Deselection projects can be particularly sensitive for faculty relations. In preparation, a communications group met to plan various methods to communicate with and engage faculty in the process at an appropriate level. Whether planning a monograph or government documents weed or a print journal deselection project, the need to clarify the criteria used to identify candidates for inclusion and provide mechanisms for faculty input are particularly important.

In the most recent remote monograph weed, faculty were invited to information sessions where the criteria for deselection was carefully spelled out:

Items in remote storage with zero circulation, 100 U.S. holdings of the same edition, and published at least 15 years ago. In response to concerns about retaining certain titles, a database was created for faculty to request to retain titles of interest by certain criteria: Classic work, important author, or is needed for accreditation. In addition, meetings were held with some individual departments to address specific concerns about their materials and clarify the purpose of the project.

Areas for Improvement

These intentional initiatives and collaborations are beginning to show their effect. There is a much better understanding of the skills and responsibilities that are involved in the respective departments. Liaison librarians understand the important roles the collection development and acquisitions librarians play in the building and maintenance of our collections, while they understand the importance of liaisons' subject knowledge and relationships with the teaching faculty and students within their disciplines. During the large weeding projects and review of reference renewals, it has become apparent how interdependent the work is.

There are areas of communication and collaboration that still need improvement. "As we navigate in the new era, we are often taken out of our comfort zone" (Horava, 2010, p. 143).

There are still questions about responsibility that need to be clarified. Liaisons can give input into what resources are needed but not what budget line pays for them. Furthermore, long-standing departmental perceptions still exist regardless of examples to the contrary. The Information and Instruction Services faults Collection Management Services for its lack of transparency and unilateral decision-making, while CMS perceives liaisons as too busy to investigate

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alternatives, with a lack of interest in cost and uncomfortable approaching faculty about lack of funds.

Additionally, the collections team would benefit from a broader representation of liaison librarians. There is currently a humanities liaison in the group but no one to represent the unique needs of the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. The team would also benefit from having rotating positions and set term limits to give committee members a break from this service commitment and bring a fresh perspective to the group.

Conclusion

Building awareness of the overlap in the collection responsibilities shared by our departments and turning tensions into trust is essential to the future of our services. Horava (2010, p. 143) confirmed the importance of this: "How we reformulate our practices of selecting, acquiring, and disseminating a collection is one of the most difficult issues we face." As intersections between our departments evolve and improve, we look forward to increased functional partnerships and further exploration of various mechanisms to support the institutional goals of the libraries and UVM. The lofty goals of academic excellence and increased student retention begin with a deep understanding of the academic disciplines gained through engagement with faculty. Liaisons and collection management librarians at UVM are well positioned to contribute to these endeavors and recent collaborations demonstrate this commitment. As we move forward, we are mindful that credit for our recent accomplishments and process improvements is also due to our teams of dedicated and innovative librarians.

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