

## **“They Didn’t Teach This in Library School”: Identifying Core Knowledges for Beginning Acquisitions Librarians**

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# “They Didn’t Teach This in Library School”: Identifying Core Knowledges for Beginning Acquisitions Librarians

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## Abstract

Library workers new to acquisitions or taking on new acquisitions duties can find themselves lost without appropriate resources. We often hear the refrain “they didn’t teach this in library school.” Basic introductions to issues confronting acquisitions librarians can be hard to find and out-of-date. Meanwhile, emerging issues are addressed in journal literature, but few reviews of the issues are available to provide background to newcomers. While professional development opportunities strive to provide sure footing to acquisitions newcomers, we can often fall short, leaving our new colleagues feeling adrift.

Through a positive and structured discussion we will explore the existing and emerging areas of acquisitions that new librarians, librarians new to acquisitions, and even experienced acquisitions librarians can feel unprepared to navigate. We will use several discussion formats to examine topics like: what new acquisitions librarians don’t (and do) know starting out; areas where we feel most uncertain and unprepared; what we feel is essential knowledge for starting acquisitions librarians; and best formats for delivering professional development in these areas.

Results of the discussions will be collected, synthesized, and widely distributed as an agenda for introduction to acquisitions professional development. We hope that they will encourage additional opportunities for professional development based on the expressed needs of new acquisitions librarians.

## Introduction

As the scholarly resources marketplace has become convoluted and intricate, academic library acquisitions work has become increasingly complex and political. The expectation of on-the-job learning for acquisitions work has, accordingly, become a more challenging demand. The scope of existing and emerging topics for self-instruction and professional development is increasingly broad. In this presentation, collaborators Lindsay Cronk and Rachel Fleming set out to engage participants in a positive and constructive examination of needs and desires for resources to help improve the process of learning through doing.

Acquisitions work in academic libraries has always been fluid to meet the changing environment. While shifting formats and platforms have complicated their processes, acquisitions workers have always remained focused on the outcome of access. That is to say that the work of acquisitions is what the work has always been but the workflow, in terms of checklists and tasks, have become increasingly complicated, with many stakeholders and technical requirements to be observed. Library acquisitions

work resembles most other library service areas in its increasing complexity, but like many technical services areas, acquisitions work has historically been less visible due to internal service priorities.

This lack of visibility and emphasis may play a role in the expectation of “bootstrapping,” or implied expectation that every practitioner is solely responsible for figuring out solutions in their library. Because of the ongoing transformations of scholarship, on-the-job learning has always been necessary to the work. However, the accompanying frustration, the difficulty and individual burden create a counterproductive barrier to innovation and excellence.

The driving purpose of the presentation was to begin to grapple with questions that can help inform collective resource development to support library acquisitions work. What are the resources that library acquisitions workers need in the course of their daily efforts? How can we work collectively to help create the sorts of resources, references, and support structures to improve our visibility, productivity, and experiences? What would those resources look like?

Structured as an exploratory discussion, the presentation progressed through topics including project goals, problem identification, and a series of participatory questions. This presentation, and the results of the feedback, are part of a greater project aimed at producing a reference resource for acquisitions library workers, *Everything Nobody Taught You About Library Acquisitions Work*. The results of the feedback will be shared widely and are intended to provide usable input not only for the potential creation of new resources but also for the improvement and adjustment of existing educational frameworks. This paper represents an iteration of sharing the feedback received.

## Goals

Three goals were presented to guide the discussion and group exploration. First, positive discussion, which was crucial for ensuring both a safe space for sharing knowledge and emerging needs. An emphasis on constructive approaches is crucial to avoiding the pitfalls of a critical discussion becoming unproductive criticism. In pursuing this presentation and the project as a whole, the collaborators are focused on collective empowerment. Participants in the discussion engaged in a positive and respectful dialogue, candidly describing needs and knowledges rather than devolving into complaint and blame.

Second, an aim of presenting pathways forward, using the session as a means of identifying clear next steps for the project and collaboration. Following from framing the discussion as positive and a supportive space for asking tough questions and sharing information, this goal focused on a crucial outcome for the research and efforts to follow. The discussion aimed not only at identifying unmet needs, but determining the best ways to meet those needs. The discussion scaffolded both practical needs identification and more esoteric brainstorming. Participants in the discussion supported the achievement of this crucial outcome.

The third and foremost goal was to gather information, leveraging both the discussion for exploration and the steps identified as inputs. Both the first two goals supported the achievement of this third goal and all the collected inputs from the positive discussion and the identification of next steps was gathered and synthesized both as a part of the group discussion and in analysis of the written responses to the discussion prompts. In designing

the presentation, the collaborators sought to capture feedback, information and participation through as many channels as possible. In-room participation, written responses on distributed handouts, and online survey response were all incorporated.

## The Problem

The central problem, the collaborators posit, is that acquisitions workers are unprepared for the scope and nature of their work. Beyond this sense of under-preparation, there is often a deficit of resources that can serve to improve preparation. A reinforcing negative feedback loop can be created by the combination, where an acquisitions worker encounters an unexpected challenge, struggles to identify solutions resources, and upon completing the task through whatever method, moves immediately into other work. The expectation of a quick and seamless delivery of work product means that immediate solutions are most sought after, devaluing solutions that are more sustainable and support the larger community. Cronk and Fleming suggest that knowledge sharing could create a means of stopping this cycle, which causes acquisitions workers to encounter many of the same challenges of confidence and areas of difficulty in their daily practice. Sharing knowledge could create an aggregate efficiency for the work, where known issues are addressed by a community.

As outlined in the introduction, there are many reasons for and aspects of acquisitions workers' feelings of unpreparedness. Among those reasons, a crucial and central concern is that the scope of the work is rapidly expanding while visibility and understanding of the work is relatively flat. Many library acquisitions workers are isolated in small departments, or may be solo operators.

Surely, there are many instructive and useful resources available for reference, support, and training. Among these are ALCTS continuing education courses, coursework in LIS programs, textbooks and workbooks from an array of library publishers, and workshops or preconferences in many venues, including the Charleston Conference. Core competencies documents created by ALCTS and NASIG provide laundry lists of skills that are related to acquisitions work, but little guidance as to how to acquire or develop those skills. It is notwithstanding the existence of these resources that acquisitions

workers are often unprepared, or feel unprepared, for their work. The scope of many of the resources is relatively narrow, and some may be cost prohibitive. Cronk and Fleming reviewed many of the resources in preparation for their project and are particularly eager to share results with stakeholders including ALCTS, LIS programs, library publishers, and other online educational platforms. Feedback from this forum should be helpful to all providers of training and education in library acquisitions work.

Ultimately, as outlined in responses from many of the discussion participants, it can be challenging to find the time to put aside for the research and reflection required to learn. These factors all multiply and reinforce one another, reinforcing the feedback loop of challenge-stress-response that can appear insurmountable when confronted as only one part of a very complicated area of library practice.

There is a natural tendency to blame our lack of formal education for this lack of preparation. Acquisitions practitioners often say phrases like “they didn’t teach that in library school” to denote a sense of under-preparation, or nervousness about grappling with the large-scale challenges of library acquisitions work. In discussing this impulse, the collaborators asked participants whether they believed that a course or courses might have better prepared them for addressing the challenges of acquisitions work.

The answer from the room was resoundingly “no.”

When asked about that response, multiple discussion participants provided insights that varied from pointing out that problems and challenges are often the anomalies to the work, which are harder to identify and, in many ways, less teachable than the standards. Others noted that on-the-job and situational training and learning would be more productive channels for learning than a course.

With this general consensus in place, Cronk and Fleming challenged the participants to begin to engage with the topic as an opportunity to share knowledge and build professional capacity collectively. Fundamentally, they argued, the time had come to absolve library school and to build something better together. As a group, the participants were ready to engage in addressing five big questions.

1. What are the core knowledges for beginning acquisitions librarians?
2. How did you gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for library acquisitions work?
3. What worried you the most at the beginning of your work in acquisitions?
4. What did you feel most unprepared for?
5. What acquisitions duties most surprised you?

## Discussion

For the purpose of the in-person discussion, the collaborators facilitated small group discussions and sharing using the “think-pair-share” model on three major prompts. Each prompt was prefaced with the encouragement that participants “think back” to when they first began working in acquisitions, remembering their early days and work. This important grounding for the group conversation allowed for a lively and respectful exchange of ideas that put every participant in the same mindset, while allowing for experiences and knowledges to be shared.

The first prompt, “What worried you the most?” led to active conversation around areas of anxiety including the fear of making mistakes, particularly because of the budget implications. The choice of the word “worry” was deliberate, as Cronk and Fleming had identified anxiety as one of the central issues confronting library acquisitions workers. Anxiety around budget and finance responsibilities deserves a more comprehensive address, as the money management of acquisitions work is unique and a crucial preparation for library leadership. Likewise, and connectedly, discussion also turned to negotiation and the power dynamics of vendor relationships. A participant discussed her fear of the unknown, explaining that without documentation of her predecessor’s process, she felt pushed to pantomime efforts without understanding why the approach was in place. Many in the room verbally agreed with this point, and it was echoed in many of the written responses as well.

In written responses to the first prompt, themes of lack of experience with the assumption of experience were clearly another expression of this general anxiety, the crucial driver of the development of this presentation and the greater project. It is interesting

to counterpoint these responses with the written responses to the corollary question, “How did you address worry in your career?” as those answers often centered on working through anxiety by learning, doing, and finding mentors. These responses are of interest as they suggest the solution for preparation may not be a written resource at all, but rather a collective commitment to providing mentoring and sharing knowledge informally.

The second prompt, “What were you most unprepared for?” provoked lively discussion of a variety of tools, techniques, and practical realities including data analysis, licensing, budget projection methods, and institutional process. Moving from the emotional effort and toll of acquisitions work to the practical and logistical discussion of process provided a necessary juxtaposition and counterpoint. One participant related the story of their first day of work, which happened to fall immediately before the deadline for submitting a budget to university administration. While the participant couldn’t recommend writing a budget in one day as an experience, they did say that it could be a useful learning exercise.

In written responses to the second prompt, common responses highlighted being unprepared for considering and pivoting to see the “big picture” of library acquisitions. This is an intriguing line of reasoning, which can be plumbed more deeply. Responses indicated that acquisitions workers find themselves unprepared not only for the daily work of acquisitions, but also for asking the more fundamental questions, like what is the big picture for acquisitions? How do we remember and align our activities to strategic goals and research missions? How can we make our work, which we know to be invaluable, visible to those who need it? Taken together with responses from the first prompt, the emergent need is for resources that engage and support acquisitions workers holistically.

The third prompt, “What acquisitions duties most surprised you?” also led to a lengthy in-person discussion. A participant joked, “I’m not a lawyer or an accountant, how is this the job?” Many in the room echoed this sentiment, which speaks to the multifaceted and evolving role of acquisitions librarians. The scope of the work, the mechanics of the work, and the many stakeholders (donors, reference and outreach librarians, vendors, and administrators) all amplified a sense of being unprepared, returning the discussion to the first prompt, briefly.

Written responses to the final prompt show that communications work might actually be the most demanding area of acquisitions work. Acquisitions workers find the need to translate university accounting processes to vendors, vendor contracts to university council offices, and copyright to faculty and librarians, all without tools or resources that could make the work easier. However, respondents noted that within the room of acquisitions workers, many of our collections and resources overlap. Can we share approaches to ease the effort?

In terms of identified core knowledges, written responses included a wide-ranging collection of thoughts, the top 10 most frequently occurring consolidated and summarized below:

1. Change Management
2. Relationship Management
3. Systems Management
4. Ordering/Invoicing/Records Management
5. Assessment Skills
6. Finance Understanding
7. Licensing Practice
8. Negotiation Skills
9. Critical Thinking
10. Institutional Knowledge

Many of these are elusive concepts, and largely contextual or at least partially situational. Deeper investigation and work will be required to clarify and plan for resources and tools that would begin to address these areas of knowledge, skill, and understanding. For instance, institutional knowledge is entirely contextual. Successful ways to approach gaining institutional knowledge, however, might be a useful area to consider for resource creation or support.

## Conclusion

As Cronk and Fleming move to continue to explore and code the feedback and findings from this initial engagement, focus will shift to a deeper investigation of needs and a plan for future exploration. Future activities and opportunities for participation will be detailed at Everything Nobody Taught You About Library Acquisitions Work.

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