

Sudden Collections Coordinators: When You Don't Know What You Don't Know

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Abstract

As new librarians enter the profession with varying levels of education and experience concerning library collection management, they may find themselves suddenly assigned the responsibility of coordinating collection activities within a subject area or for their entire library. From understanding terminology to working with acquisitions departments and from communicating with vendors to assessing resources, there is much to be learned in a short period of time. This paper will provide perspectives from five librarians at the George A. Smathers Libraries at the University of Florida (UF): the senior associate dean responsible for collections, the chair of the Acquisitions & Collections Services Department, an experienced collection coordinator, and two relatively new subject librarians who were recently asked to coordinate collection decisions for their respective areas (Humanities and Health Sciences). As one of the new collection coordinators came to subject librarianship from a specialized academic background and the other from a degree in library science, both newly promoted collection coordinators will present the unique difficulties faced in coming to collection coordination from their different educational backgrounds. This paper will address the large learning curve required when suddenly promoted to collection coordinator, including the steps of building a strong connection with acquisitions, developing vendor relations, and tracking collection development at the department level, while making suggestions for learning more along the way.

Introduction

When new librarians from various education levels and backgrounds enter the profession, they can suddenly be placed in positions of responsibility for coordinating collections and budget centers from their specific subject areas to entire colleges or libraries. Rising to a new role as collections coordinator involves learning to work with acquisitions departments and administrators, more experienced collection coordinators, and vendors. In this paper, five librarians from the University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries will share their experiences with collection management from a variety of perspectives: the senior associate dean responsible for collections, the chair of the Acquisitions & Collections Services Department, one experienced collection coordinator from the science library, and two relatively new subject librarians with diverse educational backgrounds who were recently asked to coordinate collection decisions for their respective areas (humanities and health sciences).

Background

The University of Florida George A. Smathers Libraries

The George A. Smathers Libraries includes seven libraries serving the University of Florida, a large R1, research-intensive, land-grant university with a major medical center. The Libraries have an approximately \$13 million materials budget and 60 selectors making collection decisions across all departments and colleges; the collection itself consists of over 5 million volumes, with 1.5 million e-books and approximately 150 thousand ongoing serial titles.

Collection Coordinators and Administrators

The collections team at the University of Florida is comprised of a diverse group of individuals. Of the two newest members, one has a PhD in her subject area, and the other has recently earned an MLIS. Both are learning their new roles as collections coordinators with the guidance of their more

experienced colleagues. Mentors to the newer collection coordinators include one who has been a collections coordinator for 12 years, one who leads the department of collections and acquisitions, and one who oversees the entire process as the senior associate dean of the libraries. Each member of this subsection of the collections team makes a specific contribution, described below, to keep the collection management process running smoothly and to help other members develop their skills.

Basics for Success: An Administrative Perspective

What Collection Coordinators Need

For new collection coordinators to be successful, a few things are essential. First, one should have knowledge of the disciplines being supported, in other words, subject area expertise. Second, one should quickly learn and benefit from the organizational systems and processes for collection management already in place at the institution. To develop new skills, collection coordinators should attend trainings and meetings, learn and follow policies and procedures, become acquainted with the organizational structure, and tap into the flow of communication. Next, particularly as librarians new to the career, inexperienced collection coordinators should gain context for their work from being engaged in other liaison duties. Finally, and probably most important, collection coordinators should become comfortable in their new role by communicating regularly with their peers, cross-disciplinary colleagues, supervisors, and mentors. This regular communication outreach will help them connect with colleagues working at other stages in the collections process, such as fellow collection managers, faculty in the relevant disciplines, other librarians, and the acquisitions and collections support personnel. Finding a mentor with collections experience is also helpful for learning proven methods of collection coordination and troubleshooting common difficulties.

What Collection Coordinators Do Not (Necessarily) Need

It is not necessarily essential for a new collections coordinator to have an MLIS or prior collections experience to become a successful coordinator. Whether entering the role with a library degree and copious amounts of collections experience or not, everyone starts at square one when promoted to

coordinator of a selector group. With the right help and training, the proper experience can be passed down from other colleagues to put new coordinators on their way to success.

Evolving Collections and Evolving Librarian Roles

Not Your Father's Selection Process

Collections management has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Electronic resources now make up approximately 85% of total materials purchases for most institutions. Big deals and large multidisciplinary databases dominate the collections landscape, and shrinking firm order monograph budgets place significantly more importance on how those funds are allocated. UDA, PDA, EBA, and DDA models can be highly effective for addressing some of those shortages, but these models should still be used in conjunction with traditional selection practices by a collection manager. While there are variations in collection management between different disciplines, selectors in all disciplines have had to confront at least one, if not all, of these changing realities of collection management.

Increased Centralization

One of the key changes in collection management for academic libraries has been the increased centralization that has occurred over the past decades. The George A. Smathers Libraries are no exception to this centralization. The Acquisitions Department is now the Acquisitions & Collections Services Department; selector librarians are now liaison librarians serving the information needs and selecting materials for specific departments or colleges. While PDA, DDA, EBA, or UDA plans have reduced the time that librarians must focus on reviewing titles and submitting order requests, these user-driven acquisition plans also reduced their firm order funds, making their pool of discretionary funds much smaller. While most of these selectors retained control over a small amount of discretionary firm order funds for monographs, Big Deal journal packages removed control over most serial titles and smaller packages and other multiyear deals further erode the selectors' control. Most of the remaining individual journals and other e-resources are decided at the budget center level, but some of the budget centers also share discretionary firm order funds, across either the budget center or between related subject areas.

Growing into Your Role

Non-MLIS Perspective

Those who enter a collections coordinator position from an academic or non-MLIS background may find there is a lot to learn, but the task is not insurmountable. The collections coordinator for the humanities at UF started by thoroughly learning the selector's role in her subject area first, and after a few months of experience she inherited her predecessor's role as the Humanities Collection coordinator. She was mentored by the Social Sciences Collection coordinator in her department but also formed relationships with the head of the acquisitions department and other collections coordinators. She learned through them and also through attending every meeting related to collection development, even if she initially thought the meeting was only tangentially related to the work. She would always learn something new and these meetings provided opportunities to understand what was missing so she could ask questions and follow up with reading. It also helped her get more involved and connected with the collections process across campus.

Accidental Apprenticeship

With a moderate level of experience in collections management from her work in collections at a previous, though smaller, institution, the collections coordinator for UF's Health Science Center Libraries had two years of on-the-job training under the previous collections manager before her retirement. Once the previous collections coordinator left, the new coordinator quickly realized there was a great deal of institutional knowledge that had not been passed down. Subscriptions that were made accessible to users through the library but were managed and funded by different colleges were nearly lost when renewals were not promptly paid, and there was no centralized system for notifications between vendors, acquisitions, the selectors, the library director, and the collections coordinator, meaning information was occasionally not shared immediately with the appropriate people. The Health Science Center Libraries were also struggling with an overcommitted subscription list where renewals often meant cancellations of other resources, and many years of a non-existent monograph budget reflected an outdated collection. While some issues were quickly resolved with the help of the Acquisitions Department and guidance from more experienced coordinators, some remain ongoing learning opportunities.

Training New Librarians

An experienced coordinator knows that collections knowledge is built with on-the-job training. New subject librarians, such as a PhD coordinator without an MLIS or a recent MLIS graduate, start on the same page when it comes to collection management. For the collection coordinator at the Marston Science Library, training new selectors begins with a hands-on project in collections, either weeding, reviewing gifts, or assessing usage of collections. In comparison to training new librarians in public services, a process that can be condensed into an intensive month or two, collections training works better when trainers take a broad approach, offering specific projects for experiential learning over the course of 12 to 18 months. Training new librarians should cover everything from a basic overview of the acquisitions department, a timeline for the libraries' collection management cycle, and the libraries' budgets to more detailed training in ordering books and exploring e-book options, managing new journal and database requests, sharing resources between budget centers, using endowments, troubleshooting issues of resource access, reviewing gift policies and protocols, and reporting on collection development and usage statistics.

Modern Collection Management: A Few Approaches

Independent Selectors

The Humanities and Social Sciences Library approaches collection management with a team of 13 independent selectors that come together once a month to coordinate. Each selector gets their own set of budgets, which they can use at their discretion for materials in their subject areas throughout the year. The two collections coordinators for Humanities and Social Sciences communicate with the acquisitions department and oversee database and journal purchases, large or collaborative purchases, and the endowment fund purchases. The Humanities Collection coordinator then runs a monthly department-wide meeting to discuss current issues, procedures, reminders, and refreshers, and mediates collective decision-making. This meeting also allows for coordination with members of the stacks, cataloging, and acquisitions departments.

Extreme Democracy

For the Health Science Center Libraries, every decision about budget allocations is reached

unanimously by all selectors or at least discussed with a majority. That means that every major increased renewal notice will be reviewed by all relevant selectors and cancellations will be approved by all selectors. This system of coordinator and selector partnership means that every selector is fully aware of collection decisions and participates in the transparent sharing of information about the libraries' collections. However, this extreme democratic system also means that collections decisions do not happen quickly, as consensus can take longer to reach with all the selectors involved.

Centralized Oversight

In the Science Library, the more experienced collection coordinator approaches collection management with centralized oversight. One collections coordinator oversees 12 librarians and manages three main funds, plus the endowment funds. The collections coordinator takes care of most of the collections work and so approximately 40–50% of her position is allotted to this while individual subject specialists only allot about 5–10% of their position to collection management. The three large funds are shared among overlapping subject areas. This eliminates the model of using smaller pots of funds only for specific subject areas and allows for more collaborative spending for interdisciplinary materials. The coordinator is not an administrator or supervisor and rarely makes command decisions, but instead builds consensus for joint decision making and provides the subject librarians with the information they need to make date-driven collection decisions. An example of how this works is when a journal renewal comes in at a higher percentage than the allocated amount. The acquisitions department alerts the science collections coordinator when a title has been “flagged” and the coordinator then gathers data for the subject librarian. This data can include the price history, electronic usage, print usage, publisher changes, and previous communications with the publisher. This is then presented to the librarian who can combine the data with their knowledge of the subject and needs of the affected departments to make a quick, but informed, decision on whether to cancel the journal, find additional funding for the price increase, or start new negotiations.

Connecting and Communicating

Working with Administration

Administrators have the big picture view of the library system and what lies ahead, and so the

administration plays a key role in connecting the dots in the collection development system and promoting communication. Administrators, of course, must monitor where the collections fall within the overall budget and juggle competing priorities. They oversee endowment funds and utilization as well, which can be complex due to reporting requirements, restrictions on spending, accounting procedures, and so on. Most importantly, as the top of the chain of command they have the responsibility of making sure that the complex machine of collection development is running smoothly at all times.

Working with Coordinators

Because new selectors and coordinators don't know what they don't know, it is imperative that administration and acquisitions teams connect and communicate clearly and regularly with them. Selectors and coordinators don't necessarily deal with collection development day in and day out and, since it is usually only a small portion of their jobs, they have many other responsibilities not related to collections to handle. Collections development is now inherently collaborative and so to help with the collaboration process among units, frequent two-way communication should occur through keeping an e-mail list active and staying in touch in person through regularly scheduled collections committee meetings. These modes of communication can aid in refining systems and processes, providing training and support, and establishing roles, expectations, and boundaries among units and positions within them.

Working with Acquisitions

When a new collections coordinator begins working with acquisitions, a good first step is to learn who is who within the department and who does what. An organizational chart can help with visualization of the hierarchy and duties, and so can personal meetings with each member of the team. This way when the coordinator has inevitable questions, they know who the appropriate contact is. Being familiar with the department may also help clarify which questions should be directed to the acquisitions department in the first place, and which should not. Furthermore, in order to prevent questions from being repeated, the acquisitions members can create helpful handouts or LibGuides with written instructions and diagrams or screenshots so new coordinators can begin to learn how to work through processes on their own.

Managing Vendor Relations: Who's Talking to Whom?

Internal Coordinator

When managing vendor relations with an institution, communication between collections coordinators and the acquisitions department about expectations and roles is key. It's important to discuss who will talk to vendors, when and under what circumstances, who handles what issues that arise regarding new subscriptions, on-going access, and renewal negotiations. Acquisitions personnel can offer advice on what is appropriate to communicate to vendors, and selectors can offer input to the acquisitions department and vendors on what is the appropriate method for communicating to stakeholders and departments.

Positive Vendor Relations

For new collection coordinators, developing an approach for maintaining positive vendor relations is an ongoing learning process. Collection coordinators should view vendor relations as a partnership, but

remember that the libraries are still the customer. As customers, acquisitions and collection coordinators should feel comfortable asking vendors for discounts, extensions, or license modifications during initial negotiations and renewals. As partners, it is important for coordinators and selectors to communicate early and quickly with vendors and set clear expectations and boundaries for communication between selectors and vendors and between vendors and stakeholders. As part of that clear communication, coordinators should become comfortable saying "no" or being transparent about their limits to vendors. This transparency will save both the coordinators and the vendors time and disappointment in the future.

Conclusions

Collection coordinators can come from a variety of educational backgrounds and experience levels, but with the support of administration, the acquisitions department, and more experienced coordinators, new collection coordinators can be quickly brought up to speed in managing and developing their collections.