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Library Liasons and the Organization: An Open System View of Collection Development in the Academic Library

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Library Liaisons and the Organization: An Open System View of Collection Development in the Academic Library

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An enormous body of literature exists concerning collection development in academic libraries. Within this area, there is a respectable amount of research on library liaisons to user populations, especially faculty and, to a lesser extent, students in specific academic units or fields of study. This research includes guidelines, professional standards, assessment, communication, and case studies. One extremely useful way to view the role of the liaison within a library's collection development activities is through the open systems model of organizations.

Liaisons are those librarians who "involve the library's clientele in the assessment and satisfaction of collection needs."[1] In academic libraries, the liaison is often active not only in collection development, analysis, assessment, and evaluation, but also in reference work, research mentoring, bibliographic instruction, and other library outreach activities. Librarians serving as liaisons for the first time often require practical advice on how to succeed as liaisons.[2] Likewise, more experienced librarians may want to expand their liaison activities into areas such as creating Web-based subject guides, for example,[3] while administrators may want to assess their liaison programs.[4] In all of these cases, the open systems view of organizations is an effective model for viewing how a liaison's collection development activities operate within the library and the university. Because the open systems concept presents a model of the entire organization as a dynamic and holistic entity, as a model it presents opportunities for analyzing, evaluating, and effecting change within the process.

Organizational psychologists have discussed the systems concept of organizations for decades. Among the various theoretical types of systems by which one can view human organizations, the most interesting, and realistic, is the open system. **Katz** and **Kahn** define an open system as a system into the "input of energies and the conversion of output into further energic input consist of transactions between the organization and its environment."[5] In other words, in an open system, an organization interacts with its external environment, drawing upon the environment for energy, and transforming that energy into something different, which is then given back to the environment. In addition, a smaller organization, such as a library, may have this same relationship with a larger organization, such as its parent university. This seems like a natural way to model libraries and programs in early twenty-first century academia. The professional literature discusses the open system concept within library computer systems, information management, and similar topics.[6] However, this view also offers an interesting and useful model for analyzing collection development activities of liaison librarians.

In an open systems view, an organization exists in symbiosis with its larger environment. It is therefore necessary to identify what **Katz** and **Kahn** refer to as the "importation of energy,"[7] that is, those external environmental factors that feed into the organization and contribute to its ongoing existence, and the output, which is what the system exports to its environment. Since the library exists within a larger organization, the university, we can analyze this input and output between a system and its larger environment on several levels. At the level of the university as a system within its larger social, cultural, political, scholarly, economic, and technological environment, we can identify certain "energies" or inputs that impact the work of the university as a system. These include external factors such as these:

- the political and economic landscape, especially if the institution is heavily dependent on federal, state, or local funds coming into the system as grants, loans, or subventions;

- the scholarly environment, which is especially important to track because the curriculum is continually becoming more international and interdisciplinary, and because of the advent of new disciplines and methodologies, such as gender studies, queer theory, and the varieties of postmodernism;

- the social and cultural environment, which can shape how the university attracts students, faculty, and staff, as well as societal demand for new academic programs, such as homeland security studies;

- the technological environment, which can determine what technologies are available to the organization and its members.

Likewise, we can identify key "outputs" from the university back into the environment; these include:

- students, who then presumably contribute to society at large as productive members, paying taxes, providing goods and services to society, and in some cases feeding back into the university (or another university) as faculty or staff;

- research, both pure and applied, which then informs both the general society and other scholars, and provides not only social and cultural capital, but also possibly contribute to the political, economic, and technological development of the larger environment;

- economic and technological contributions, such as development of new technologies and products, patents, etc.;

- social and cultural contributions, including artistic creations, performances, social networking, and contributions to general education.

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6. scope — does it still fit in our collection?

7. how many other IU system libraries hold the same title

8. impact factor of the journal

9. availability of the title from our lending partners.

Summary

For **IUSDL**, the results are well worth the effort. We have removed a total of 1,435 items, have regained over 100 linear feet of shelf space, and 13 of our 72 units no longer have books on the top shelf.

This project continues alongside all the rest of the work of the library. Our belief in the importance and value of weeding this collection has been a key factor in the continuation and success of the project to date. By refining the process, defining the criteria, involving the entire staff, and keeping our expectations realistic, we are shaping a significantly improved collection — one that is valuable to and valued by **IUSD** patrons. 🐾

Endnotes

1. **Hall, B. H.** (1985). Assessments for special purposes. In *Collection Assessment Manual for College and University Libraries* (pp. 69-80). Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

2. **Johnson, D.** (2003). Head for the Edge. *Library Media Connection, 22*(1), 130, 128.

3. **Lancaster, F. W.** (1993). *If You Want To Evaluate Your Library....* Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library and Information Science.

4. **Martin, M.** (2004). Good grooming: Basic issues in weeding and weeding policy in library collections. *Mississippi Libraries, 68*(2), 36-38.

5. **Slote, S. J.** (1997). *Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods* (4th ed.). Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, Inc.

The university similarly forms a larger environment in which the library operates as a smaller organization.[8] Some inputs influencing a library's collection development activities include budget issues, the curriculum itself, faculty research, student interest, human resources, the physical plant, and available technological support. Outputs from the library back to the larger organization include acquisition, organization, and access to information necessary to study and research.

Therefore, by creating models to show how liaisons fit into the complex and symbiotic relationships of the library, the university, and the larger society, we can create tools to gather and assess information about liaison activities, and then design policies that are both informed by the larger environment, and also support that environment's needs. **Table 1** shows the university as an open system and how it relates to its larger environment:

their liaison work by examining two frequently used tools of collection development librarians, the faculty interest survey and the collection development policy statement. Faculty interest surveys have been used for a long time by collection development librarians to gauge what subject coverage faculty require, what types and formats of materials are of interest to faculty, and similar issues. Librarians also have a long history of using collection development policy statements both to inform users about what the library collects, to plan and budget for future collections, and to justify acquisition decisions. These two tools offer us a constructive and practical case study in placing the library liaison within the open system. As we take a closer look at these two tools, our intention is not to provide comprehensive information on creating either surveys or policy statements, since the literature abounds with this information.[9] Rather, we are specifically concerned with developing these tools with the intent of viewing the liaison as an agent within an open system and multiple layers of organization and environment.

Faculty interest surveys are tools used to gather feedback from collegiate faculty for the purpose of assessing and evaluating library collections and services, and for identifying strengths, best practices, and areas in need of improvement. Typically, these surveys are distributed to the faculty within a specific department, college, discipline, or other group, and are conducted by the librarian who acts as liaison to those faculty members.[10] The instrument may be either print or online; by offering it in both formats, liaisons may receive a higher response rate since some faculty are more comfortable with one format or the other. The survey may be as simple as a few questions about subject coverage for curricular support, or may be more complex and inquire about formats, languages, datasets, and outreach services. Using the two open system models detailing the library's interaction with the university, and both of their workings with the environment, we can developed a more informed tool that gathers information that addresses such factors as curriculum change, faculty research, popularity of specific courses or subjects among

Table 1: The University as an Open System	
Environmental Inputs into the System	**System Outputs Back to the Environment**
Economic (gifts, grants, loans, subventions)	Students
Scholarly (changes in disciplines and curricula)	Research
Sociocultural (students, faculty, staff, societal demands)	Artistic and other creative accomplishments
Technological (available infrastructure and support)	Economic and technological developments

Table 2 shows how the library operates as a smaller open system whose environment includes both the larger organization and the general environment as a whole:

Table 2: The Academic Library as an Open System	
Environmental Inputs into the System	**System Outputs Back to the Environment**
Budget	Acquisition of information
Curriculum	Organization of information
Faculty research	Access to information
Student interest	Curricular support
Human resources	Research support
Physical plant	Instructional services and other outreach
Available technology	

By modeling the university and the academic library within their environment, and by identifying the diverse ways in which these complex open systems interact with each other and with their environment, we then have a clearer portrayal of the many and complicated functions that library liaisons perform as part of their collection development duties. By identifying these relationships and investigating how they mutually influence one another, libraries can then apply this knowledge in order to:

- create informed tools for collecting data about liaison collection development activities;
- perform necessary assessment and evaluation of collections and services;
- identify areas requiring improvement;
- develop programs to improve targeted areas; and
- create institutional policies and procedures that take environmental influences into account and address how the library will participate as an organic component of larger organizations and environments.

We can now investigate how librarians can use this open systems model to inform

students, and the like. **Table 3** shows outlines key elements that a liaison could incorporate into a faculty interest survey.

Table 3: Elements for a Faculty Interest Survey
Personal information, including name, primary department, other departments or programs of affiliation
Addresses and contact information, including e-mail, instant messenger, social networking, physical address, telephone, fax, and preferred mode of communication
Current and future teaching areas within the curriculum
Current and future personal research areas
Coverage of both teaching and research areas, including specific geographical regions, historical periods, or methodological approaches
Additional areas of student interest, including both undergraduate and graduate students
Publishers, vendors, or organizations whose materials are especially useful
Types of materials, including conference proceedings, electronic resources, maps, microforms, statistical data, technical reports, working papers, or other (with option to specify)
Languages besides English that are important to research and teaching (may include a list to check with option to specify, or may permit faculty to write in languages)
Follow up questions requesting overall impression of current collections, provision of bibliographic instruction and other library services, and other outreach; for example: Does the existing Libraries collection adequately support your needs? Are you interested in having a subject librarian in your discipline offer library instruction sessions to your students? Would you like to be informed of current library acquisitions, events, and other information?

These elements address the external factors that may influence collection development, some directly, others more circumspectly. For example, by inquiring about current trends in curriculum and methodology within a particular discipline, the liaison is able to collect information about such external environmental factors within the discipline at large, such as the internationalization of a subject area, new methodological approaches within the field, and other issues within the discipline on much larger scale than within the home institution. Likewise, by asking about faculty interest in other, related services that the library may provide, the liaison not only gathers useful information for designing and delivering complementary services, but also reminds the faculty that the library operates within vital and dynamic open system of which the collections are one key component. Thus, the environmental input regarding library collections may lead to an output of improvement in not only collections, but other library services as well.

The collection development policy statement offers library liaisons a similar opportunity to create a tool that identifies the library, and its collections and services,

as an open system within the context of both its parent organization and the larger environment. In this case, the collection development policy statement is a tool for disseminating rather than collecting information. As a formal policy, it should be supported by the full weight of the organizations within which it operates, both the library and the university. This therefore makes the collection development policy statement an authoritative instrument to convey the scope and extent of library collections for a specific area. In addition, an official collection development policy statement can serve as a master document for the creation of other, more targeted communications geared toward specific audiences within the system and its environment, such as the faculty within a discipline, the library administration, or the general public.

Table 4 (see page 38) shows the elements that a collection development policy statement should address in order to present an open systems view of the academic library:[11]

against the grain people profile

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BORN & LIVED: Born and raised in Wisconsin. Grew up in Milwaukee, WI.

FAMILY: Second youngest of five brothers. Life partner **Gary White**, been together 22 years. Three cats: Erik the Red, Xander the Great, and Eddie.

EDUCATION: Master of Arts, History, **The University of Akron**, 1997. Major field: ancient history. Minor field: renaissance and reformation studies.

Master's thesis: Priestly Propaganda: Sacerdotalism under Caesar Augustus. Master of Library Science, Kent State University, 1989. Master's paper: Formation of Reference Service Policies in an Academic Library: A Case Study.

Bachelor of Arts summa cum laude, **Youngstown State University**, 1988. Major field: philosophy and religious studies. Minor fields: art history, Latin, history.

FIRST JOB: First library job was circulation attendant at **Maag Library**, **Youngstown State University**. I had been working as a parking deck attendant during the winter, and I was freezing, so I applied for an indoor job in the library so I could get warm. The librarians talked me into graduate school in library science, and I've been in libraries for over two decades now.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: As a graduate student in library school, I cataloged for a research collection. I've been in academic libraries for most of my career, with a detour into corrections librarianship. Every librarian should work in maximum security for a few years, if only for the assertiveness training. Active in the **American Library Association** and its division the **Reference and User Services Association**, and currently serve as editor of its newsletter *RUSA Update*.

IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO: Read, listen to music, and cook. I collect incense burners and martini shakers.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Ursula LeGuin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*. **William S. Burroughs**, *The Place of Dead Roads*. **Philip Pullman**, *His Dark Materials Trilogy*. Anything by **J.R.R. Tolkien**, **H.P. Lovecraft**, **Virgil, Horace**, or **Ovid**.

PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD: Chronic tardiness. Everyone is late sometimes, and sometimes you can't help it. However, when someone is late all of the time, it shows both an inability to manage time and a lack of respect for colleagues. Being constantly late to meetings doesn't make you look busy, it makes you look sloppy.

PHILOSOPHY: Service, service, service. Mission, goals, policies, procedures, planning, budgeting, and training should all be focused on service. You can have the most comprehensive collections in the world, the best bleeding-edge technology, and the finest new facilities, but if you don't have people and programs to provide services, what's the point?

MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT: Being awarded sabbatical leave for six months in 2008, during which I will conduct bibliographic, philological, and archaeological research in Rome as groundwork for a digital reference work on the early Roman Empire.

GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW: Final digital publication of my online reference work on the early Roman Empire (see previous question).

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I see the industry continue to create models for scholarly communication. This will require innovation in all steps of the process, including peer review, publication, distribution, and access. I predict new and closer collaborations between universities, scholarly and professional societies, publishers, and vendors. These stakeholders will begin to develop a clearer vision of how research, publishing, copyright, licensing, and access work together in the post-information age.

As we saw with the faculty interest survey, by keeping in mind the open system model by which we view the academic library, we can include elements that place both the collections and the liaison within the organic context of the open system. By providing details about disciplinary overlap, chronological or geographical limits, or other factors, the policy statement explicitly acknowledges external factors and their place within collection development policy. By highlighting current trends in the collection as well as spacing and annexing issues, the policy statement places collection development within the framework of the overall organization and its external environment, and creates an opportunity for the liaison to address these increasingly important concerns. Policy statements are directly useful in a number of ways. Liaisons can use them as marketing tools to inform collegiate faculty about collection strengths and weaknesses. For example, if candidates for faculty positions meet with the interviewing department's liaison librarian during the interview process,[12] the university can use collection strengths as a recruitment tool to attract desirable candidates. It can be useful to point out collection weaknesses to administrators and collegiate faculty who participate in university governance, such as an academic senate, to make a case for better collections funding. Policy statements are also valuable instruments for defending decisions about selection, retention, and exclusion of materials within the collection. No library can afford to collect or store everything, and carefully crafted statements can help librarians justify their choices. In this capacity, collection development policy statements can function as important tools for academic and intellectual freedom.[13]

An open systems view of the academic library, then offers us a unique, convenient, and practical way to view the work of library liaisons and how they interact within their larger organizations and environments. By determining inputs and outputs between organizations and their environments, librarians can better focus on important issues such as how to assess and evaluate collections and services, and how to create policies and programs that address the results of such assessment and evaluation activities. This model immediately opens up several other interesting avenues for exploration, such as the development and assessment of librarian mentoring programs, bibliographic instruction, library services to target audiences, and other programmatic endeavors of the library. ✍

Table 4: Elements for a Collection Development Policy Statement

General statement about the subject of collection
Specific funds, grants, or endowments that support the area under discussion
Programmatic information and environmental scan including majors and advanced degree programs supported by the collection
Coordination and cooperative information, such as overlap with other disciplines that rely on the collection under discussion, or other collections with ancillary materials
Chronological and geographical limits
Languages collected
Formats and media collected
Levels of coverage, from basic to comprehensive
Specific exclusions and special considerations
Current strengths
Future directions
Space and annexing issues

Endnotes

1. Liaison with Users Committee, Collection and Evaluation Section, Reference and User Services Association. Guidelines for liaison work in managing collections and services. *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (2001): 107, RUSA Guideline 3.1.

2. **Richard A. Stoddart** et al., "Perspectives on...Going boldly beyond the reference desk: practical advice and learning plans for new reference librarians performing liaison work," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 32, no. 4 (2006): 419.

3. **Tammy S. Sugarman**, and **Constance Demetracopoulos**, "Creating a Web research guide: collaboration between liaisons, faculty, and students," *Reference Services Review* 29, no. 2 (2001): 150.

4. **Tom Glynn** and **Connie Wu**, "New roles and opportunities for academic library liaisons: a survey and recommendations," *Reference Services Review* 31, no. 2 (2003): 122.

5. **Daniel Katz** and **Robert L. Kahn**, *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (New York: Wiley, 1966), p. 17.

6. Some notable examples include **Richard W. Boss** and **Mary H. Casey**, "Operating systems for automated library systems," *Library Technology Reports* 27, no.2 (1991): 123-210; **P. H. Lewis**, "Why linux works for libraries," *Computers in Libraries* 22, no. 10 (2002): 28-30; and **D. Mukjhopadhyay**, and **B. Dalezman**, "Designing open systems with CASE." *Information Systems Management* 12, no. 1 (1995): 26-34

7. **Katz** and **Kahn**, p. 19.

8. Academic libraries may also interact with systems and environments outside of the university, including non-student library users, library consortia and networks, and professional organizations.

9. Good examples of research in interest surveys include **Irma F Dillon** and **Karla Hahn**, "Are researchers ready for the electronic-only journal collection?: Results of a survey at the University of Maryland," *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2, no. 3 (2002): 375-390; **M. F. Earl**, **L. G. Adebonojo**, and **J. S. Fisher**, "Creating and using a faculty interests database." *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association* 81, no. 1 (1993): 66-68; **E. B. Richmond** and **M. T. McKnelly**. "Alternative user survey and group process methods: Nominal group technique applied to U.S. depository libraries." *Journal of Government Information* 23, no. 2 (1996): 137-149; and **R. E. Stelk**, **P. Metz**, and **L. Rasmussen**, "Departmental profiles: a collection development aid." *College and Research Libraries News* 54, (4) (1993): 196-199. For a variety of studies on collection development policies, see **Rose Anjejo**, "Collection development policies for small libraries," *PNLA* quarterly 70, no. 2 (2006): 12-16; **Andy Corrigan**, "The collection policy reborn: A practical application of Web-based documentation." *Collection Building* 24, no. 2 (2005): 65-69; **Frank W. Hoffman** and **Richard J. Wood**. "Library collection development policies: academic, public, and special libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32, no.3 (2006): 335-336; **John Kennedy**, "A collection development policy for digital information resources?" *Australian Library Journal* 54, no.3 (2005): 238-244; and **Daniel C. Mack** (ed.), *Collection Development Policies: New Directions for Changing Collections* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth, 2003).

10. **Peggy Johnson** presents an excellent overview of faculty interest surveys in *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management* (Chicago: ALA, 2004), p. 187-190.

11. See ibid., p. 72-84, for a discussion of collection development policy statements. Several professional organizations also have standards and guidelines; **Johnson** discusses these.

12. If candidates do **not** usually meet with liaison librarians, the institution needs to reexamine its entire liaison program.

13. **Johnson**, p. 75-76.