Against the Grain

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Building Library Collections in the 21st Century-The Finer Points of Being an Acquisitions Librarian/Library Liaison

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The Grass is Often Greener — Newbie

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In July of 2010, after a period of unemployment occasioned by the corporate buyout of my former employer, I had the good fortune to be hired by a college library untroubled by my unconventional resume and imaginative enough to see the advantages of bringing a former sales rep into academia. After nearly thirty years as a commercial traveler for three different book vendors, I had learned a thing or two about the industry and the folks who inhabit it, and I was about to use that experience in the service of **The College of New Jersey**.

My plan in this series of articles is to reflect on my transition from an itinerant peddler to a stationary buyer, hoping to inform and even reassure others contemplating a move either to or from the commercial sector.

The Learning Curve

Despite occasional claims and experiences to the contrary, the vendor/librarian divide is not Manichean. It's not predator/prey; it's not just about buying and selling stuff. Players on both sides of the desk share a common focus and a common goal: to serve their organizations by facilitating the flow of information. But from the start of my involvement with **TCNJ**, I found the path to that goal decidedly unfamiliar. I was in a new culture.

The interview for my previous job at **Blackwell** was essentially a conversation with a sales manager in a coffee shop. Colleges, and I suspect public colleges in particular, take a rather different approach. The committee charged with filling my position at **TCNJ** was scrupulously formal and extraordinarily thorough. The process was carefully scripted and meticulously fair. I was impressed and a bit intimidated. Even more foreign to me, when I was offered the job I was given a contract and put on the tenure track. The nagging worry of job security, ever present in the vendor world, would soon be replaced by other anxieties.

My first days at **TCNJ** were a blur of new employee paperwork and logistics. I got a decal to park my car legally; I was issued my college ID. Easy stuff. Then I was introduced to budgets and accounting. Not so easy. I always understood fund accounting in a general way. I knew libraries had budget lines for books and serials and electronics and supplies and such. I knew that finer distinctions sometimes existed and that these distinctions were valuable as a way of approaching approval profiling, but I confess my main interest in budgets as a vendor rep was whether or not a customer had one. In vendor land, we never much cared how our bills were paid. That is, we never much cared what pot of money our payment came from. We were, however, pretty keen on getting these payments in a reasonable amount of time. But here in library land, I'm coming to appreciate the profound concern we have with allocating and tracking funds.

The reasons for this concern are multitude. First, and foremost, is the need for fiscal accountability to the institution and, in my library's case, to the state. Beyond this, as I've long known, but only recently internalized, every dollar allocated and spent represents a decision and usually a tradeoff. Do we buy this journal in electronic format, hard copy or both? Do we subscribe to this database because a professor wants it for her own research instead of another database that's part of a frequent class project? Do we buy a new fax machine to replace a broken one or do more staff people share the working ones? My role right now in acquisitions is to use my experience and contacts to find the best price for our options and present these dollar costs to those making the decisions.

The mention of decision makers leads inevitably to the topic of office politics. As a vendor rep posted away from corporate headquarters, I was pretty much a non-player in bureaucratic intrigue. I generally had good bosses who kept me out of trouble. But because I spent so much time in so many different libraries, I had occasion to see how destructive a hostile environment can be. In my pursuit of a new job, one factor of importance to me was finding not just a stimulating, but a congenial workplace. I wanted colleagues, not competitors and made a point of investigating the culture of **TCNJ**. I was told (and have since verified) that **TCNJ** is a generally happy, very busy, and very productive place. I have found the people here to be not simply supportive, but downright nurturing.

The Commute

A final observation as I begin this new life: commuting is boring! In vendor land, I drove (or flew) some rather long distances. I faced traffic miseries and the usual vicissitudes of that life. But the destinations changed all the time and each stop was a goal, a milestone along the way. I saw beautiful mountains in Vermont from country roads and slums in the Bronx from a jammed expressway — but not everyday. Now it's pretty much the same time and the same route daily. Some of the other cars are beginning to look familiar. I'm investigating audio books (any recommendations?) and already fantasize about moving.

As I write this, I've been a practicing librarian again for just under two months — still a newbie, I'm told. I know there are more revelations to come. Stay tuned.

Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — The Finer Points of Being an Acquisitions Librarian/Library Liaison

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First off, I am an Acquisitions Librarian. However, I am one who also has a foot solidly placed in Public Services. I am also a library liaison for two departments — Art History and Art, and Modern Languages and Literatures. I would like to say I wear two hats, but I really get tired of using that metaphor. I think I do a good job in both these areas, Acquisitions and Subject Librarianship, and. each helps me do a better job in the other.

I'm sure this is the case at smaller colleges, that is Technical Services people also handling the liaison duties. In fact I know it is so. But I am at a medium-size university where this kind of thing is less common. There was a trend a number of years ago where it was greatly encouraged to get "back room" librarians out on the reference desk and handling collection development for a subject area. I think that trend passed, if I am not mistaken. Being a liaison is not something you can really do as a part-time thing, or conceive of it as that — and I don't. Many of the Reference/collection development Librarians do several areas, and have special responsibility for a library program, like library instruction, so I feel I'm not very different than that.

How did I get in this situation? First of all, I did have some academic knowledge of both areas, no degree in art history but some academic preparation and ongoing learning. I do have a degree in Germanic Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature which stands me in good stead in working with the Modern Languages Department and doing collection development. There was a period too when we lost a lot of humanities librarians at the library. Those who had left had handled

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multiple subject areas, and those who were left were few. I think everyone who works in acquisitions is in a position to observe and discern who does a better job of being a liaison and collection manager than others, and this was a chance to try it myself.

We had a beginning librarian assigned to Art History who knew very little about it and was also not the most competent collection manager. Her major strength for our library was in reference technology and the Web. I would get frustrated because I, who also manage the approval plan, would help her decide what kinds of books to keep and which to send back. She didn't resent me, but appreciated the assistance. When she left, not long after she had come, I asked to be assigned that area as a collection manager. Coincidentally a humanities librarian who handled multiple areas retired, and everyone knew I was strong academically and well-suited to being the Modern Languages and Literatures liaison librarian. I speak and am conversant in several languages, and familiar enough to make my way through others. I knew many of the faculty members already through working with the collection managers on their approval plan profiles. I knew others through the retired librarian who had made a point of introducing me to some. I knew a couple already through other campus enterprises, specifically a Women's Center.

Most librarians, Technical Services, all kinds, have strong academic backgrounds. They work in universities and colleges, for goodness sakes. These days those who get PhDs in other subjects often turn to the library profession, out of true interest of course, but also because jobs in academia are scarce as hen's teeth. We have a terrific Head of Bibliographic Services and Metadata who also happens to have a PhD in English. His area is American Literature. Technical Services, particularly areas like Metadata and Digital Projects, are very attractive to scholars who leave teaching and research in their first subject. They get to work first-hand with important and rare primary sources, making these things accessible to the many.

Those who are in Acquisitions do see how collection development is done, have some contact with faculty regarding acquiring difficult titles, getting all the information about editions needed, and being the go-to person for getting single issues, and sometimes providing advice on contacting publishers for those wanting to get published. That is something that would happen to me, at least. Particularly as regards to foreign publishers about titles in all areas and anything requiring some translation, I was already involved with reference librarians doing that same thing.

So now it has been several years since I took over the duties of library liaison for these two subject areas. There were things to learn. A lot of it comes down to good communication. It has to be a two-way street, and it helps Technical Services people use the people skills many already have. Without much coaching I started attending every meeting or event I could lay my hands on including programs by faculty themselves, visiting scholars, and dissertation defenses. These out-of-the-library meetings are most beneficial in getting the communication going and in the librarian really getting to know the priorities and needs of the faculty and students. We have a Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities which puts on a lot of events every year, including a Humanities week focusing on one aspect, usually a broad one, like food in culture. I made sure I knew what was going on there, attended, and touched base profitably with my faculty. I also get to know other faculty in other departments with whom we in Acquisitions interact in second-hand ways.

I have developed very close working relationships with a number of my faculty. There are always those who are less interested in the library no matter what you do. Like all library liaisons I make it a point to meet with each new faculty member individually. Our new faculty members have an amount of money that is granted them from the university, as a kind of start up sum earmarked for library materials in their areas. This is an important matter to talk about early, because we in acquisitions know you can never start too early spending money for books if you need the money spent by a particular time, and this money has to be.

I enjoy all meetings with faculty, and I also love it when I get to go beyond those barriers and learn what the new trends in the department and the field are, such as building up Caribbean Studies, or Landscape Architecture, or whatever it may be. Several of my faculty have included me in social events with visiting scholars and other luminaries, such as writers and artists. A professor of French, a native of Cameroon and the Head of Ethnic Studies, included me in a small group meeting and discussion with a revolutionary African writer and introduced me to dance and theater of his region. I've met visiting film directors as well.

So how do the two jobs intersect? I do not play favorites in getting "my" faculty orders put ahead of those of any other department. I do use my expertise in knowing vendors and being able to contact them to help when it is necessary. But I would do that for anyone. I love being able to meet their requests for materials and I am in an excellent position to track their rush-for-class-reserve materials and alert them immediately when they are there for them and their students. We have something called Library Opportunity Grants, grants from the library for proposals put forward by a partnering librarian and faculty member to select and acquire materials on a specific subject. As an acquisitions librarian I know a lot about out-of-print books and the uncertainty of getting everything you put forward to buy. I always have a number of items waiting in the wings when it is obvious not everything can come in for these grants by the grant deadline.

I don't sit at the reference desk, but I do any reference that is referred to me. Usually those are the requests and questions of graduate students and faculty rather than undergraduates. A lot of them contact me directly because they get to know me through an orientation class I hold each year for the incoming graduate students.

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Library Perspective, Vendor Response

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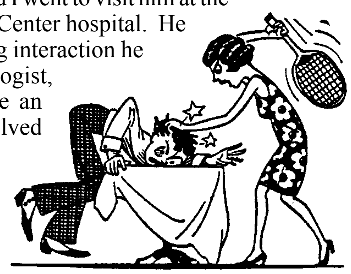
and **Steven Carrico** (Acquisitions Librarian, University of Florida Smathers Libraries, Box 117007, Gainesville, FL 32611-7007) <stecarr@uflib.ufl.edu>

Column Editors' Note:** This column for **Against the Grain** is devoted to discussing issues affecting library acquisitions, library vendors and the services and products they supply to academic libraries, and the publishing marketplace as a whole. It is an ongoing conversation between a book vendor representative, **Robin Champieux**, and an academic librarian, **Steven Carrico**. — **RC** and **SC

Robin: **Steve**, for this month's column we wanted to discuss the end user and specifically if and how libraries should aim to make visible the work and cost of providing resources. This has been on my mind recently because of the diverse approaches I see in working with libraries at **EBL**. I was hoping you could start us off by describing the approach at **UF** and your particular views.

Steve: I'll use a story that occurred this past summer which might illustrate the problem of visibility for libraries. One of my close colleagues was ailing and I went to visit him at the **UF** Health Sciences Center hospital. He told me an interesting interaction he had with his cardiologist, who happened to be an avid researcher involved in many grant projects. When the cardiologist found out my colleague was a library professional they got to talking about libraries, online resources, and research; at one point the doctor said something about how much he was paying for journal articles from one of the leading publishers. My colleague replied, "But why are you paying for those articles? You can access that publisher's journals through the library." The doctor was stunned and said something to the effect of "Why didn't they tell me?" When word of this conversation got back to the Health Sciences Center Library the librarians there responded, "But we do tell our faculty and researchers about the resources available through the library — all the time." To be fair, the librarians at **UF** do meet regularly with faculty at departmental meetings; offer ongoing classroom instruction and Web tutorials; and give presentations at faculty orientations and other campus functions. This story of the cardiologist is hardly an isolated case, so despite all these efforts, clearly the library does not market itself as effectively as it should.



Robin: So, are you saying that marketing and discoverability go hand-in-hand? And, do you mean marketing should focus on the resources or that marketing should focus on the library and the resources it makes available? My apologies for the semantic exercise, but I do think it is an important difference. Your story also brought to mind the **Ithaka S&R** 2009 Faculty Survey; it found that scientists were the least likely to use library specific discovery portals for research. This was presented in the context of an overall decline in usage of library-specific discovery points across faculty. So, if that's the case, how do you get the resources in front of them and how do you make sure they know the library is the provider?

Steve: Yes, marketing and discoverability must go hand-in-hand, or better still be joined at the hip! Maybe that wasn't true for libraries in the pre-Web days, when walk-in patrons knew who was responsible for providing the library materials — you were in the library, duh! Discoverability then meant finding sources in the card catalog, the vertical files, or shelf browsing. It's all changed now with the online environment. Half the time users are unsure where the resources are coming from or who is providing them, until they have to fork over money to pay for something. Our cardiologist recognized that the journal articles he was paying for came from the publisher, his credit card statement reminded him of that; but library marketing fell through because he didn't realize he could go through the library portal and access those same journals for free. In addition to marketing themselves and the resources they offer, academic libraries must make clear how the library is responsible for providing many of the online journals that users are accessing, and that these online resources require a large budget. Sometimes it seems that the administration and faculty don't really recognize just how much of their university libraries' budgets are spent on paying for online resources and journal packages. Of course, our cardiologist has a better idea, because he has personal experience in paying for articles individually for a long period of time — although I'm sure he can afford it. So my answer to your question is this: the marketing should focus on the library and the resources it makes available but also on the expense. Heck, why not brand each item but also state what every item costs, in big flashing neon lights if that's what it takes: "this journal article is brought to you by the good folks at the **UF Library** and would have cost you $37.50." You know, like **PBS** does, only with a price tag.

Robin: Great idea, **Steve**. Maybe you could also incorporate a couple drives per year. Users could still access resources, but you would have a librarian standing by explaining the ins and outs of obtaining and maintaining that resource; always gets me with NPR. But, seriously, given the importance and the library's role as buyer and organizer of an institution's research materials, what are your thoughts on publishers and content producers skipping the library, marketing and selling directly to faculty and students?

Steve: Jeeze, **Robin**, I feel like I'm at an interview with all the questions you're throwing at me ... just don't ask me to list my strengths and weaknesses. I don't have the slightest problem with content being sold directly to the faculty and students — why would librarians have a problem with that? Let's return to our favorite M.D., the cardiologist and his direct and out-of-pocket purchase of a publisher's content. The only problem I had with that acquisitions model is he was wasting his money when he could have received the content through the library portal for free. But if a **UF** person wants to purchase content directly from a publisher let him or her do so; I would hope that he or she checked to see that it was content not already available to them via the library. By the way, I love the idea of the NPR telethon. Perhaps we can have a has-been, big name celebrity perform while we beat the drum to "support your local library."

Robin: I think quite a few librarians would have a problem with that, but let me elaborate and draw from a recent article **Rick Anderson** of **University of Utah** contributed to *Educause Review*, "If I Were a Scholarly Publisher."[1] **Rick** described the four survival options he sees as available to scholarly publishers as they

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I attend the reference meetings and the collection development meetings at the library. The collection development ones I would attend anyway as the Head of Acquisitions. Another case of wearing two hats — hard to break the habit of using that phrase. The reference meeting keeps me up-to-date on new databases and services that might be of use to my faculty, and I can pass all that relevant information along.

I've got to say that the best parts of the job of Library Liaison are the relationships I build with faculty and students. Whatever you can do for them, render a service, get a book or video in on time, help with building the collection in their area of research, or alerting them to new books and databases that come in of relevance to them, you get a good payback. In Technical Services we are often shielded from that direct contact and the heartwarming praise that is so frequently the reaction of those we help is the greatest benefit of being a Public Services Librarian.