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Op Ed--Random Ramblings

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Op Ed — Random Ramblings

Don't Forget About Small Libraries

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To paraphrase the late comedian **Rodney Dangerfield**, small libraries don't get no respect. This became very clear during a recent meeting of the **Wayne State University** School of Library & Information Science Advisory Board. The afternoon discussion turned to the skills that library science graduates needed; most involved specialized functions and high tech. I finally raised my hand to ask about small libraries. Librarians in small libraries need broad expertise in almost all library areas but not as much depth for any one task as their large library peers. Very often, one librarian answers the reference questions, selects the materials, catalogs them, builds the Website, produces the library newsletter, implements technology, balances the accounts, and deals with the press. I know from my experience teaching at **WSU SLIS** that many students want to work in small libraries whether rural, urban, or suburban.

The **Institute of Museum and Library Services** provided the best statistics that I could find about small libraries and then only for public libraries. "Small libraries in the U.S. provided 29,329 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions, 21.4% of all FTEs offered by public libraries in FY2011.... Librarians comprised 13,604 of the total FTEs, 40.7% of whom held an ALA-MLS degree."¹ Almost by definition, most school libraries are small except in the largest schools. Economic constraints have caused many school districts to require the school librarian to manage several school libraries and to run the school library with little or no help from support staff. The end result is the school librarian must perform the full range of library tasks including clerical duties. Finally, while I wasn't easily able to find statistics for academic libraries, I grew up in Ohio where almost every city and town had a college, some of them quite small. On the college libraries discussion list, I see many job postings from small academic libraries with one or two librarians. Collectively, the number of librarians in small libraries is too large to be overlooked by either library schools or, of more importance to this column, library vendors.

The standard library textbooks favor large libraries. Teaching collection development effectively to students who wish to work in small libraries is different and requires simplifying many points, not because they are too difficult

to understand, but because tasks are less complex. When I give my weekly discussion questions based upon the readings, I often have to add that such or such a question makes no sense for small libraries because the complexities of the textbook and the outside readings apply only to larger libraries.

For collection development, the first major difference is that small libraries have very little money to spend. A question on my final examination asks students what they would do if the library received a special 50% budget increase for only one year. I now designate a minimum amount of \$2,000 after one student, who had a position in a school library, told me that his budget was \$1,000 and that \$500 would buy 40 titles in support of the school's reading initiative.

I had to give him all the points for the question because his answer made sense for his library even if he didn't have to show an understanding of the core concepts of the course. The small budget also means that these librarians don't need to reach out to find materials to select but instead are forced to eliminate many worthwhile purchases to focus only on the best choices. Further, these librarians can avoid consulting multiple reviewing sources. Key patron requests and starred titles in *Library Journal* and *School Library Journal* will most likely exhaust the collection development funding for the year. Most small libraries also don't face the problem of ordering titles automatically, the main challenge for larger libraries. Very few small libraries have approval plans; most have only a few standing orders to update essential resources. The librarian annually reviews a small list of serial subscriptions. The overall goal is to avoid making "mistakes" as the costs are high. My high school librarian spouse is unhappy if any book doesn't circulate at least once during its first year in the collection.

Unlike their colleagues in larger institutions, librarians in small libraries can also skip the chapter on the acquisitions department. The person who selects the item is also the one who decides upon the vendor and assigns the library fund though this step may not even be

necessary if all the money resides in one pot. In many cases, the librarian can log into the vendor's ordering system, find the record, read the reviews provided by the vendor, and then immediately order the item in one seamless process. Some students have told me that their small libraries don't order their own eBooks since the consortium handles this function and makes the eBooks available to all members. One problem for many small libraries is being forced to use cash accounting instead of accrual

accounting. While cash accounting is simpler, not being able to use encumbrances or to transfer funds to cover books that arrive in the next fiscal year means that the librarian must order materials early in the fiscal

year to make sure that they items arrive and the invoices get paid before the fiscal year's close.

The librarian in the small library knows the collection intimately because it's small and because the librarian ordered all or a high percentage of these materials. This knowledge also makes weeding easier. The small library has less of a need for an information needs assessment/community analysis since the librarian has a smaller community to serve and knows many patrons on a first name basis. The danger of this apparent familiarity is that the librarian will pay less attention to those parts of the user community that don't use the library either from not finding materials of value, little publicity on the library's part, or a perceived lack of need. One task that I still highly recommend to students in small libraries is creating a collection development policy. Especially in a one-librarian library, the librarian may have a good grasp of collection development policies without needing to write them down; but the danger is that a new librarian could take over without an overlap. What if the current librarian wins the lottery and immediately decamps to a Greek island?

Vendors for the most part recognize the collective importance of small libraries. While they may have small individual budgets, their aggregate purchasing

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power is too big to overlook. I've created the categories below by combining comments from my students with an analysis of the list of vendors at the recent **Michigan School Library Conference**. I'll note that I've included only an example or two for each type of vendor and that the categories often overlap. I also don't consider publishers who market directly to libraries. My apologies to those vendors that I've left out and for any naiveté on my part in making these distinctions.

The largest vendors such as **Baker & Taylor**, **Ingram**, and **YPB** sell to all types of libraries including small ones. These vendors have to be efficient to stay in business and are able to process relatively small orders profitably. They are known for their low prices but may not market as heavily to small libraries and may be less interested in providing individualized services to their smallest customers. My second category is made up of those general vendors who are somewhat smaller but still provide access to all types of materials albeit with a focus on certain types of libraries. For example, **Follett** focuses on schools, though they also have a higher education group. Similarly, **Emery-Pratt** markets to smaller public and academic libraries. Vendors in this group

most often compete with the larger vendors by offering more personalized services and by being willing to work more closely with smaller libraries. Prices may be somewhat higher but still competitive. The fact that smaller libraries are interested in a limited range of materials allows a third type of bookseller to stay in business. These vendors most often have an inventory focused on popular items and maintain a physical bookstore. They come to local conferences with their wares and sell the physical copies directly to the librarians. Their advantage is that librarians in small libraries can physically examine the books to make selection easier and take them away without paying shipping. Finally, publishers' representatives have the greatest interest in small libraries because they achieve a competitive advantage by saving time for small library librarians. In this business model, publishers like **Enslow**, **Chelsea House**, and **ABDO** have independent representatives who receive a commission on their sales to libraries. The advantage for the library is that the representative knows the collection, suggests materials that match previous purchases, and offers the best pricing. The disadvantage is that any representative can provide materials only from the limited number of publishers that they represent. Most publishers' representatives stay in business by building strong bonds with the librarians that they deal with.

My final observation from the school library conference is that the major eBook platform vendors were all there. For some, eBooks were part of a broader array of services and not the only focus of their marketing efforts. Nonetheless, **OverDrive** put in an appearance, perhaps to reaffirm its dominant position in the eBook market.

My final comment is that small library librarians are often forgotten because they don't write many papers for publication and tend not to attend conferences outside their home states. I'm quite sure that an analysis of the papers and attendees at the **Charleston Conference** would support this point. In many ways, this is a shame because the group collectively is very important within the profession and has much to say about providing grassroots-quality service to large numbers of library users. The vendors and state library associations don't forget about them; neither should library schools, national library organizations, and the librarians who work in large libraries. 🐼

Endnotes

1. Swabm, D. W., Grimes, J., and Owens, T. (2013). *The State of Small and Rural Libraries in the United States*. Washington, DC: Retrieved from http://www.ims.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Brief2013_05.pdf.