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# Being Earnest With Collections--The Importance of Reviewing Technical Services Operations to Promote Efficient Access and Enhanced Discoverabilty of Resources

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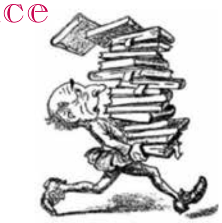
# Being Earnest with Collections — The Importance of Reviewing Technical Services Operations to Promote Efficient Access and Enhanced Discoverability of Resources



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I was recently reflecting back on the first six months of my new role at **The University of Alabama**. I was charged during the first year to undertake a complete review of work processes within the newly formed Resource Acquisition & Discovery Department. The previously separate functional areas of acquisitions, cataloging, and electronic resources were brought together just prior to my start in August of 2015. The analysis began within the first couple of months as I began to meet with everyone in the department. We discussed the usual things including what was going well and what could be improved. I learned about the transition period after the loss of department and unit heads over the previous year or two, and understood how the staff now had to face the uncertainty of a new manager. It became apparent that bringing the units together in proximity did not necessarily mean that there would be a logical move toward integration of workflow. ***Being Earnest with Collections*** focuses this month on raising awareness of the importance of workflow analysis. Hopefully I will provide some best practices for others who plan to take a good hard look at just where technical services is going. There is a new emphasis on moving away from traditional models of collection building and toward a focus on collection strategy, in line with providing content when and where it is needed rather than building collections across all disciplines. There is an opportunity to be more efficient while we transition spending and staffing from a traditional print based operation to one that will be able to address selection, procurement and access in the electronic environment.

## Workflow — An Idea Becomes Reality

The workflow analysis in the newly formed Resource Acquisition & Discovery Department at **The University of Alabama** began with discussions between **Dr. Millie Jackson**, Associate Dean for Research & Instruction and myself early in my tenure. We discussed how changes in staffing, and particularly the loss of key faculty librarian positions had left many questions about the current amount and complexity of the work that remained in the traditional technical service areas of acquisitions, serials, cataloging and gifts. Questions had surfaced about the need to continue providing some of the services that were traditionally handled while focusing more training and staff time on managing procurement and discovery for electronic resources. We were both interested in learning just how the work moved through the various areas within the department from the starting point until the materials were sent out of the department. Workflow analysis can be a lengthy process. It is important to undertake such an endeavor for the right reasons and to establish goals for the project.

## When is a Workflow Analysis Necessary?

- When a department head position has been vacant for an extended period of time
- During a time when there are several vacancies or shortly after filling vacancies
- After a retirement or departure of long term employees in key roles
- Following a merger of units or functional areas
- In conjunction with library or university strategic planning
- As part of a larger library initiative to pursue a new direction
- If it has been several years since the last analysis

After a decision is made to go forth it is important to develop initial goals for the workflow project. The workflow analysis will not answer every question. I tend not to focus on policies and procedures during this process and rather stick to identifying where problems develop as work moves through the department. Though during the process there will no doubt be times when problems are identified that bring the discussion around to policies and procedures. It is my feeling however that trying to include these areas in a review of workflow will get individuals mired down in trying to document complex operations in charts that are designed to be linear. We often talk about finding bottlenecks and searching for single points of failure where workflow goes through one individual who does not have a backup. These types of issues are easier to spot when just focusing on the transition of work throughout the department. For the current project we were in search of new efficiencies and eager to find out if a complete and lengthy workflow analysis would help achieve a number of goals. Provided here are the major goals we wanted to address.

- Highlight current strengths
- Identify areas for improvement
- Provide clear pathways for better integration between the formerly separate departments/units
- Provide faster delivery of content to library users
- Improve discoverability through better quality control in Cataloging and Electronic Resources
- Determine appropriate staffing levels
- Pinpoint areas for training
- Eliminate unnecessary legacy duties
- Develop new roles for the department
- Establish goals for the new department that align with library wide goals

With goals established the next hurdle is getting buy-in from the members of your team.

## Building Support within your Team

I was not always a fan of workflow analysis. I recall when I managed my first workflow analysis at **Old Dominion University (ODU)** I was reluctant to take on such a project. I was of the mind that workflow analysis was a waste of time. Luckily I had a couple of colleagues to help me through it. The results were positive and resulted in enhancements to operations and major changes to staffing. I, along with a colleague from **ODU**, highlighted the process and results in an article in Serials Review and later during a presentation at the **Charleston Conference**. A similar process at the **University of Central Florida** a couple of years later built the foundation for how operations were handled there for the next several years. With this in mind I set out to convince the librarians and staff at **The University of Alabama** of the value of workflow analysis.

## Keys to Successful Workflow Analysis

I have found that upon hearing of a workflow analysis project the natural reaction is to question why it is necessary. Usually a number of the staff have been through one or more in the past, and have found them to be onerous. Their experience may have been that there is little follow-up after the project or nothing changes as a result. When you add in turnover at the management level and the impact of changing user expectations and new directions in the publishing and scholarly communication landscape I think it is understandable that librarians and staff will feel as though a workflow analysis will just take them away from their duties during a time when they are already feeling the impact of staff reductions and ever changing responsibilities.

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In effort to address these concerns it is recommended that librarians and staff at all levels within the department be brought in early to discuss the project and begin to build as much support as possible. In order to do this I like to have a department meeting where the following points are covered.

- Encourage staff at all levels to actively participate
- Show examples of successful workflow charts
- Stress that recommendations will be made following the project
- Focus on identifying strengths and areas for improvement
- The analysis is focused on functional areas not individuals
- Prep everyone that the result may be a change in priorities and services
- Aim for integration of workflow – units working together to address problems
- Final project is workflow charts with analysis and recommendations

The success of any workflow project is tied to the level of motivation and active participation by the team. To that end it is important to include staff at all levels as much as possible from the beginning. Staff should be given examples of workflow charts and, if available, evidence of analysis and how it was previously used to influence positive change. When the project began here at **The University of Alabama** I provided the team with a copy of the 2006 *Serials Review* article I co-wrote about our project at **ODU** so they could see charts and highlights from a project that produced positive results.

### Successfully Managing the Process

During the development of workflow charts I have found it to be advantageous to meet with either individuals or units depending on the type of work being performed. Before the first meeting to begin the chart process it is important to determine how the charts will be developed. They can be drafted on flip charts which often promotes brain storming and then one person is assigned to build the charts using a product like Visio. I have also tried leading a discussion so I can ask questions and really get into the current process. This can result in a combination of notes and charts that are useful during the analysis phase. Some people will choose to do the charting where they have access to Visio and instead of spending time doing them the old way, the charts are done electronically from the start. However, I have found that the process of actually building the charts often results in many changes along the way and some will find it easier to build them the old fashioned way on flip charts and then go to a computer later. Another step I have found helpful is using a systematic way to identify on the charts examples of where work within the department is held up while someone waits on decisions or processes outside the department. I often use background colors to provide clarity. I also add notes in each chart that reflect issues or concerns that were brought up during the discussion phase. These often form the basis for making recommendations to enhance efficiency, to explore the elimination of existing processes, and to identify potential new services.

The focus of this article was to provide some best practices that can be used to help make the workflow analysis project run smoothly with positive results that meet the initial goals and objectives. The project just completed at **The University of Alabama** resulted in several internal changes, better integration between the units and recommendations for new services that will help shape the role of Resource Acquisition & Discovery as we move forward with strategic planning at the university and library level. When we think of being earnest with collections that tends to bring up discussions about spending less and looking for ways to maximize the materials budget. I hope that this column will bring attention to the importance of being efficient within traditional technical services operations. Eliminating unnecessary work, being more efficient at what we do, and adding new and exciting roles for technical services contributes to being *earnest with collections*.