

Against the Grain

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Being Earnest with Collections — Prepping the Future: A Call for Today's Technical Services Librarians to Develop Tomorrow's Leaders



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Column Editor's Note: *I am pleased to feature Cara Calabrese for this issue of ATG. I met Cara early in her undergraduate career at the University of Central Florida. She worked first as a student employee and later as a full-time staff member in the Acquisitions & Collection Services department. She excelled at the work and showed great promise as a librarian. She has been focused on mentoring and has encouraged those above her to serve as mentors while also encouraging her peers to seek out mentoring opportunities. I had the opportunity to co-write a short article with Cara that focused on aspects of mentoring in technical services. I am happy that she has gained so much experience and mentoring from several professionals. This article speaks to the benefits she received from mentoring and I hope that it drives others to play a key role in the development of future technical services librarians. I am sure Cara would appreciate feedback from ATG readers who share in her desire to promote technical services to the next generation of librarians. — MA*

Introduction

Technical services inherently by the type of work and sometimes even its location in a library building does not make it a highly visible department, especially when compared to departments that regularly do instruction or outreach. In fact, if we are doing a good job neither patrons or librarians should notice anything is happening, like article level linking from a discovery layer, direct downloads of articles, or on trend topics being findable in any medium for use in a timely fashion. In some libraries, even our fellow librarians may not fully grasp the breadth of our work. If this is true of our fellow librarians, how are we reaching the next generation of librarians to show them how awesome our work can be and encourage them to join our ranks?

I see several ways to start working on getting technical services noticed by potential librarians and to give those that are interested the tools to get ahead and succeed from the start of their career. Based on my experience, I think this lies in working to provide a good foundation for exploration and skill building as a student and early career building through completion of relevant courses and opportunities to work with current technical services librarians. Follow that early preparation with mentoring throughout the technical services

librarian's career. The valuable early career mentoring then sets the stage for continuing to provide support for technical services librarians as they face almost continuous changes in the profession.

I graduated in 2015 with my MLIS. During my courses I cannot recall another student as focused and excited about a technical services path as I was. I also remember being frustrated that the curriculum had tracks for instruction and reference, web development, school libraries, and information organization. Few courses were available for collection development and management and virtually nothing related to electronic resources work, licensing, troubleshooting, vendor negotiations, or acquisitions.

Current programs have been very nimbly adding makerspaces, building and using technology, and data management into course catalogs, but electronic resources, collection development and management, and acquisitions still seem to be absent or limited in offerings. I recently checked the course offerings for five additional ALA accredited library schools and saw similar patterns among their course offerings.

This situation may exist because those with significant expertise in these areas who could actually teach others are currently busy being technical services librarians and supporting their libraries. UW-Madison is offering a continuing education course on licensing during this fall, though there does not seem to be a comparable course for their current Master's programs.

Mentoring & Early Career Support

I was grateful that I was able to continue working in an academic library environment during my Master's program. Continuing to build my job and interpersonal skills through my work helped to narrow the technical service gap present in my degree, especially since a practicum or internship was not a feasible opportunity for me financially. Applying the concepts taught in class helped me relate the content to real life situations and showed me how an idea could differ in concept versus application. Just as seeing a library's implementation of several projects, helped me build realistic expectations for my future projects.

The librarians I worked with understood and embraced mentoring and teaching along with my many questions about policy and decision-making. This was a highly benefi-

cial supplement to the courses in my MLIS program. They encouraged and pushed me to experience and understand how different areas of the library functioned, interfaced with each other, and what their needs were. The mentors I encountered during my graduate years were able to discuss, not only the conceptual ideas that I was currently being taught about the profession, but also explore the reasoning behind why a library functions and make the choices it does. Passing on such institutional knowledge, was valuable on both sides. We were able to have productive conversations over many topics, possibly implement new techniques that would benefit the library, and I became a better librarian.

Mentoring both informal and formal has had a big impact on my librarianship. ALCTS recently started a new formal mentoring program. ALCTS is very active in providing continuing education opportunities. I was pleased to hear that this organization built by and for technical services librarians, is working to connect mentoring pairs. Mentoring can happen between any two people. However being paired with someone who works in a similar area adds another layer to the relationship. Because of similar experiences, the pairs can engage and start building trust quicker and it may lead to accomplishing more in a given timeframe. Programs such as this are a good fit for early career librarians.

Mentoring is an amazing tool to support librarians. Yet, it can only reach so many, as even the best librarian only has twenty-four hours in their day. Maybe something with a bit more reach would be helpful. In my current system, spread across different campuses, there are several early career librarians and technical services staff who are new to the profession or their current positions. My system has an Electronic Resources Interest Group that brings all the ERM librarians together to discuss issues related to shared resources. Moving forward this group is working to incorporate educational opportunities into meeting agendas with a focus on supporting continued learning. The group will especially pay attention to areas that members have little or no experience or training in.

This group will draw upon the collective strengths of all of its members, providing a platform for any member to lead discussions or give a presentation or tutorial on a relevant topic. A group like this may be a good middle ground between large-scale webinars and one

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on one mentoring, supporting and hoping to empower all skill levels to gain the necessary knowledge to become more proficient in their positions.

A Technical Services Resident

I worked in a supportive academic library environment throughout my MLIS degree. I left that position with confidence in the skills I developed as a staff member and started looking for ways to get more experience at a librarian level. Prompted by a mentor, I applied for resident librarian positions. Residencies are meant to provide recent graduates with the opportunity to earn a salary while developing professional skills in a real library environment.

I was successful in my application for a Technical Services Residency at **Miami University**. There are quite a few residencies located around the country, but I have only come across one other technical services resident not from my program. Even amongst **Miami University's** residents, my position was unique. I overlapped with five other residents during my time there, all of whom were based in Reference and Information Services. The Technical Services Residency at **Miami University** was structured a little differently. Other residencies may have the resident rotate through library departments before choosing one area or project to focus on, or help to support an emerging area for the library field, such as GIS or data management.

My residency gave me the experience of a true job. My department treated me as a continuing contract librarian minus tenure requirements, with lots of support and guidance, especially in my first few months. I had the opportunity to do the primary work of an acquisitions, cataloging, and ERM librarian over my two year period. Through this experience I was able to achieve a higher level of confidence in my new skills that I could not have built on my own while learning directly from three talented technical services librarians. Unfortunately, this residency program is now closed and, to my knowledge, no other residency's main focus is technical services.

Where Do We Go from Here?

For me, I have always seen my path as a librarian leading to technical services, but I have been very fortunate on that path. I've met great people at opportune times. I met one mentor very early in my undergraduate career, and was introduced to technical services work as a student in the Acquisitions & Collection Services department of my college library. Ever since, I knew technical services was my future. Other students or new professionals may not have been able to encounter similar experiences to discover their enjoyment and aptitude for this side of the library field. We should work together to establish opportunities that can train and empower the future of technical services.

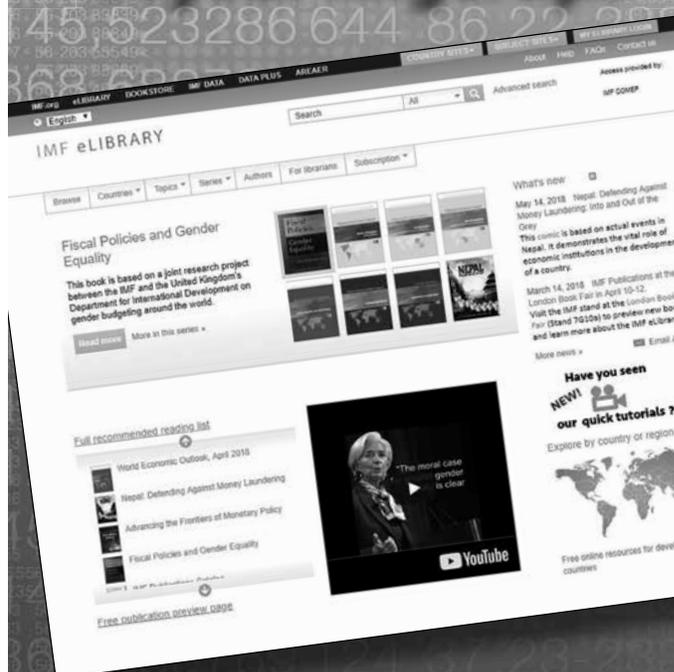
If you have the opportunity to share your technical services know how with library students or support a technical services resident or new professional, please do so. Mentoring is and can be a great first step. Mentoring can be all the difference to one person at any point in their career. There is such talent currently in our field and from what I have seen, not many ways to effectively pass that expertise on a wider scale. We also need to start engaging the next generation sooner. Provide new librarians with a chance to sample technical services while gaining their degrees, beyond just the information organization courses, and create opportunities for both students and new professionals to explore the role of a technical services librarian, while gaining valuable on the job training.

I personally hope to be in a position to effectively advocate and work with other members of our field to set up a Technical Services Residency. I also know there are librarians pushing for early career language in new position announcements, when they can. I hope our colleagues continue these practices in the future. I strongly urge organizations, like **ALCTS**, that support technical services librarians and bring us together, to start looking to the education of MLIS students. Help us band together to advocate for more classes related to licensing, troubleshooting, vendor negotiations, and acquisitions to be incorporated into the curriculum and "Core" courses. Help us give students a chance to explore technical services and give them a good foundation to build on. 🌸

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