Against the Grain

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“They Didn’t Teach This in Library School”: Identifying Core Knowledges for Beginning Acquisitions Librarians

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"They Didn't Teach This in Library School": Identifying Core Knowledges for Beginning Acquisitions Librarians

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Lindsay Cronk and **Rachel Fleming** have more than twenty-five years combined experience in library acquisitions work, having both started their careers in that area. As mid-career professionals, they are well positioned to reflect on their experiences entering the field and hear about the experiences that other acquisitions workers had, both more senior and more junior.

Acquisitions work in academic libraries has always been fluid to meet the changing environment. While shifting formats and platforms have complicated their processes, acquisitions workers have always remained focused on the outcome of access. As the scholarly resources marketplace has become convoluted and intricate, academic library acquisitions work has become increasingly complex and political. The expectation of on-the-job learning for acquisitions work has, accordingly, become a more challenging demand. The scope of existing and emerging topics for self-instruction and professional development is increasingly broad. Additionally, within the field, there is an expectation of "bootstrapping," or that every practitioner is solely responsible for figuring out solutions in their library. Because of the ongoing transformations of scholarship, on-the-job learning has always been necessary to the work. However, the accompanying frustration, the difficulty, and individual burden converge to create a counterproductive barrier to innovation and excellence.

It is extremely common for acquisitions workers to express that they feel or have felt unprepared for the scope and nature of their work. Beyond this sense of under preparation, there is often a deficit of resources which can serve to improve preparation. Among those reasons that acquisitions workers feel unprepared for the work is that the scope of the work is rapidly expanding while visibility and understanding of the work is relatively flat. Many library acquisitions workers are isolated in small departments, or may be solo operators. A negative feedback loop can then occur, where an acquisitions worker encounters an unexpected challenge, struggles to identify solutions without formal resources, and is set upon by another unexpected challenge before being able to fully address the first. Creating a means to share our collective knowledge could help all of us do better work, especially where known issues are addressed by the community.

Surely, there are many instructive and useful resources available for reference, support, and training. Among these are **ALCTS** continuing education courses, coursework in **LIS** programs, textbooks and workbooks from an array of library publishers, and workshops or pre-conferences in many venues, including the **Charleston Conference**. Core competencies documents created by **ALCTS** and **NASIG** provide laundry lists of skills which are related to acquisitions work, but little guidance as to how to acquire or develop those skills. It is notwithstanding the existence of these resources that acquisitions workers are often unprepared, or feel unprepared, for their work. The scope of many of the resources are relatively narrow, and some may be cost prohibitive. As single operators, new acquisitions professionals or their supervisors may be unaware of the resources available. Further, it can be challenging to find the time to put aside for the research and reflection required to learn.

Having heard these concerns for many years and experienced them in our own practice, we wanted to begin to grapple with questions that can help inform collective resource development to support library acquisitions work. Instead of developing yet another resource in response to the needs we perceived, we wanted to engage the community in an exploratory discussion to examine our assumptions and gather input from a variety of perspectives. In the end we hope to develop answers to questions like "what are the resources that would best serve library acquisitions workers in the course of their daily efforts?" We also want to explore how to work collectively to help create the sorts of resources, references, and support structures to improve our visibility, productivity, and experiences.

In November we were pleased to be able to hold this discussion at the **Charleston Conference**. Our discussion progressed through topics including project goals, problem identification, and a series of participatory questions. This presentation, and the results of the feedback, are part of a greater project aimed at producing a reference resource for acquisitions library workers, ***"Everything Nobody Taught You About Library Acquisitions Work."*** The results of the feedback will be shared widely, and are intended to provide usable input not only for the potential creation of new resources but also for the improvement and adjustment of existing educational frameworks. This article represents an iteration of sharing the feedback received. Feedback from this forum should be helpful to all providers of training and education in library acquisitions work.

Three goals were presented to guide the discussion and group exploration. First, positive discussion is crucial for ensuring both a safe space for sharing knowledge and emerging needs. An emphasis on constructive approaches is crucial to avoiding the pitfalls of a critical discussion becoming unproductive criticism. Second, focus on pathways forward, using the conversations as a means of identifying next steps for collaboration. The discussion aimed not only at identifying unmet needs, but determining the best ways to meet those needs. The third and foremost goal was to gather information, gathered and synthesized both as a part of the group discussion and in analysis of the written responses to the discussion prompts. In designing the presentation, the collaborators sought to capture feedback, information and participation through as many channels as possible. In room participation, written responses on distributed handouts, and online survey response were all incorporated.

In pursuing this presentation and the project as a whole, the collaborators are focused on collective empowerment. Participants in the discussion engaged in a positive and respectful dialogue, candidly describing needs and knowledges rather than devolving into complaint and blame. The discussion scaffolded both practical needs identification and more esoteric brainstorming. In order to engage participants in in-depth discussions in a large group, we facilitated small group discussions and sharing using the "think-pair-share" model. Further, each prompt was prefaced with the encouragement that participants "think back" to when they first began working in acquisitions, remembering their early days and work. We hoped that this would ground discussion on the common mindset, while allowing for experiences and knowledges to be shared.

We started the discussion by confronting our natural tendency to blame our lack of formal education for this lack of preparation. How often have acquisitions workers heard (or said) phrases like "they didn't teach that in library school" to denote of a sense of under preparation, or nervousness about grappling with the large scale challenges of library acquisitions work. We asked participants whether they believed that a course or courses might have better prepared them for addressing the challenges of acquisitions work. The answer from the room was resoundingly, "no." Diving

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deeper, the individual nature of acquisitions workplaces and workflows, along with the need to be skilled trouble-shooters were main points underlying the response. Discussants noted that on-the-job and situational training and learning would be more productive channels for learning than a course.

With the general consensus in place that "they didn't teach that in library school" doesn't reflect our situations or serve our purposes, we challenged the participants to begin to engage with the topic as an opportunity to share knowledge and build professional capacity collectively. Fundamentally, we believe time has come to absolve library school and to build something better together. As a group, the participants were ready to engage in addressing five big questions.

1. What are the core knowledges for beginning acquisitions librarians?
2. How did you gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for library acquisitions work?
3. What worried you the most at the beginning of your work in acquisitions?
4. What did you feel most unprepared for?
5. What acquisitions duties most surprised you?

The first prompt, "What worried you the most?" led to active conversation around areas of anxiety including the fear of making mistakes, particularly because of the budget implications. The choice of the word "worry" was deliberate, as **Cronk** and **Fleming** had identified anxiety as one of the central issues confronting library acquisitions workers. Anxiety around budget and finance responsibilities was very common, ranging from finance workflows to negotiation and power dynamics of vendor relationships. A lack of clarity about existing practices also emerged as a concern. A participant discussed her fear of the unknown, explaining that without documentation of her predecessor's process, she felt pushed to pantomime efforts without understanding why the approach was in place. Many in the room verbally agreed with this point, and it was echoed in many of the written responses as well.

The second prompt, "What were you most unprepared for?" provoked lively discussion of a variety of tools, techniques, and practical realities including data analysis, licensing, budget projection methods, and institutional process. In written responses to the second prompt, common responses highlighted being unprepared for considering and pivoting to see the "big picture" of library acquisitions. Moving from the emotional effort and toll of acquisitions work to the practical and logistical discussion of process provides an interesting counterpoint. Responses indicate that acquisitions workers find themselves unprepared not only for the daily work of acquisitions, but also for asking the more fundamental questions. Taken together, the expressed need is for resources that engage and support acquisitions workers holistically.

The third prompt, "What acquisitions duties most surprised you?" led to a discussion of the multifaceted and evolving role of acquisitions librarians. Acquisitions librarians must be knowledgeable in finance, university operations, library collections, publishing, electronic resources, and more. The scope of the work, the mechanics of the work, and the many stakeholders (donors, reference and outreach librarians, vendors, and administrators) all amplified a sense of being unprepared. Written responses indicated communication might be the most important skill in acquisitions work. Acquisitions workers must translate needs and demands across disparate groups, often without tools or resources which could make that work easier. Throughout the discussions, we see that many of our information and training needs overlap, as do our collective experiences. How can we share experiences and approaches to ease the transition into acquisitions work?

In terms of identified core knowledges, written responses included a wide and ranging collection of thoughts, the top ten most frequently occurring consolidated and summarized below:

1. Change Management
2. Relationship Management
3. Systems Management
4. Ordering/Invoicing/Records Management
5. Assessment Skills
6. Finance Understanding
7. Licensing Practice
8. Negotiation Skills
9. Critical Thinking
10. Institutional Knowledge

Many of these are elusive concepts, and largely contextual or at least partially situational. Deeper investigation is needed to plan for resources and tools that would begin to address these areas of knowledge, skill, and understanding. For instance, institutional knowledge is entirely contextual. Successful ways to approach gaining institutional knowledge, however, might be a useful area to explore.

As **Cronk** and **Fleming** move to continue to explore and code the feedback and findings from this initial engagement, focus will shift to a deeper investigation of needs and a plan for future exploration. Future activities and opportunities for participation will be detailed at ***"Everything Nobody Taught You About Library Acquisitions Work."***

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provenance, subject, target audience, licensing, accessibility, adaptability, content quality, pedagogy, interface design, ancillary materials, and competing works. A set of standardized rubrics accompany these elements, along with text boxes for more detailed analysis.

It is important to recognize that course materials are evaluated and adopted by the instructors themselves, who care first and foremost about the quality of the instruction they offer. If they are advocates of open education, they have become so only after a thoroughgoing assessment of its value for their students. For OER to become accepted as alternatives to commercial works, it is essential that instructors have confidence in them, meaning, specifically, that their quality be judged equal to or better than that of their commercial counterparts. Rigorous, objective reviews, written not as advocacy but as analysis, can play an important role in this process, creating quality benchmarks supporting the enormous creative energies liberated by the open education movement.

Endnotes

1. The results of our study are summarized in a **Choice** white paper written by **Steven Bell**, Associate University Librarian at **Temple University**, available on our website at *http://www.choice360.org/librarianship/whitepaper*.

2. The **Choice** review template is available at *https://choice360.org/content/1-open-choice/choice-oer-review-template.pdf* and is published under a CC-BY license. Please use freely and share your suggestions for improvement with us!

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odologies; the traditional textbook publishers will bring these ideas into their offerings; and many of those textbooks will find their way into inclusive access programs as librarians take charge. OER, in other words, though likely to hold only a small share of the market, will emerge as the shaper of new instructional materials offered under all business models, triggering a wave of investment in innovations in the college market, which the good lord knows badly needs it.