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“But That’s the Way We’ve Always Done It”: Shifting From a Liaison to a Centralized Model of Collection Development

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Abstract

This session discussed the shift away from a subject liaison model of collection development to a centralized model in a small academic library from the perspective of a newly centralized Collection Development Librarian. The session addressed the limitations of the subject liaison model, the challenges faced during transition, and the functional realities of centralized collection development. I discussed outreach, selection, and assessment as the three major areas where the change to centralization has required new policies and approaches to communication.

Background

Keene State College is a public liberal arts college in Keene, New Hampshire with approximately 4,800 students. One way in which Keene State differs from many libraries is that the librarians have faculty status. This means that Mason Library’s eight tenure-track librarians are required to demonstrate teaching, scholarship, and service to the College in addition to their roles within the library. All of the librarians teach instruction sessions as well as full courses within the information studies minor.

Until July of 2014, the librarians utilized a subject liaison model wherein each librarian served as liaison to four or five departments and was responsible for outreach, instruction, and collections work in those areas. There were several issues with this model; namely, the fact that being assigned as a liaison to a department did not necessarily mean that a librarian had any expertise in that subject area. Librarians were not hired with particular liaison areas as part of their qualifications, and most of the librarians had similar backgrounds in the humanities.

Additionally, as job titles, because more specialized the available time and level of interest in collections work, varied among the librarians. No longer were “reference and instruction” librarians being hired, but instead one position became the academic technology librarian, another became the undergraduate experience librarian, and so on. The result from a collections standpoint is that the amount of time devoted to

selection, deselection, and assessment manifested in an unbalanced collection.

Shifting the Model

Under the subject liaison model coordination of collections work fell under the access services librarian, as just one of her many and varied responsibilities. The librarians decided that an open position would become a collection development librarian in order to facilitate a shift away from both the subject liaison model and the jack-of-all-trades access services librarian position. The model adopted was a functional liaison team model, which created a collections team and an instruction team. The collections team consists of the collection development librarian, the head of technical services, and the archivist as the three positions that deal most directly with collections. Under the new model, the members of each team are responsible for outreach and for coordinating work in that area.

However, in practice this shift centralized collection development (outside of the archives) under the collection development librarian position. All assessment, acquisitions, deselection, collections outreach, and projects are managed by the collection development librarian position. While all of the librarians are consulted and their input and assistance with collections work is solicited and appreciated, there is no requirement for them to participate. This meant that I needed to streamline processes and prioritize collections work when I arrived on July 1, 2014.

Selection

Prior to my arrival, selection decisions were passed directly from each librarian to the acquisitions manager. This often consisted of a catalog left in her mailbox full of sticky notes or circled entries, or e-mails containing links to resources. This meant that there was very little organization, guidance, or, most importantly, record keeping, and the librarians interested in selection work continued to do so in this manner after the shift. Since part of my responsibilities involve tracking, assessing, and directing acquisitions, as well as managing the budget, I sought a system that would provide a better, more complete view of selection. The head of systems created an internal purchasing database to facilitate this. The front end is a form that librarians complete to suggest an item for the collection, with required fields such as Title and ISBN. On the backend, the suggestions are arranged in table format, contain all of the information necessary to locate the item, and can be exported to Excel.

The database was not immediately well received, mainly because it asked more work of the librarians than their previous way of selecting materials. However, streamlining this process has been extremely beneficial both with regard to time spent on acquisitions and on data management.

Assessment

I was told upon my arrival that a comprehensive assessment of the full print collection had not been conducted, so I embarked upon that project almost immediately in order to approach further changes with a complete understanding of the collection's condition and our needs. I used several different measures: circulation statistics, syllabus analysis, program size analysis, peer library and list comparisons, and the age of the collection. The collection analysis and reporting of the data took approximately eight months to complete, work that I mostly completed myself with the assistance of a support staff person. Under the subject liaison model this workload would have been shared, so this was certainly a

challenge under the new model wherein it was mainly my project.

However, the results of the assessment have been invaluable in demonstrating how old the collection is, how drastically circulation is dropping, and how program needs are changing. I used the assessment results to identify four priority areas to focus on each semester over the next three years, beginning with those fields wherein up-to-date information is most important (such as health science).

Outreach

These priority areas are being addressed through outreach to those departments. Under the functional liaison team model, outreach work is meant to be shared among the team members; but in practice it does not make sense for the archivist to meet with the health science department, for example. Thus when one person is managing outreach to 36 departments, it is important that outreach efforts be manageable and purposeful. During the fall of 2015, I met with four departments to share the results of the assessment with them, learn more about their curricula, and solicit their input on acquisitions work. Additional outreach efforts, such as targeted outreach for new resources, has been sidelined in favor of this outreach initiative because there simply is not enough time to do everything.

Deselection

Prior to the collections shift, deselection was handled in what was determined to be the best way possible to promote transparency and avoid political headaches. Approximately 2,000 books would be identified for deselection at a time, and an Excel sheet of titles would be sent to all of the faculty on campus asking for their input. It is no surprise that some people would copy and paste entire sections of the list, if not the whole list itself, and send it back with a message saying that the library must keep those volumes.

Part of targeted outreach to priority areas was shifting this process to a method of targeted deselection as well. I explained the need to

conduct deselection to the departments I met with in the context of the assessment data (namely age and circulation). After identifying items for deselection, I invited the faculty members in only those departments to come to the library and review the physical volumes. They could then speak with me about volumes they identified as necessary to keep in the collection. Only a few faculty members did come to review the books, but those who did often had no objections after seeing the condition and obvious age of the print books on the shelf.

Reflections and Future Directions

I have completed a number of projects this year, including a reference weed and shift, video streaming workshops, weeding the bound periodicals and initiating their shift into the main collection, hiring and training a new subscriptions supervisor, and improving budget and spending documentation. This is all in addition to the faculty responsibilities of teaching courses, writing and presenting, and serving in professional organizations and on campus committees.

Centralized collections work is clearly a full-time job, and that can be problematic at Keene State where the librarians are 50% faculty and 50%

librarian. It is not possible to be half a collection development librarian, and it therefore can be difficult to juggle administrative and faculty responsibilities. Centralized collection development may be a preferable model for institutions of the same size where the librarians do not have faculty status. When librarians do have those extra responsibilities, having a small centralized collections department or two collections librarians might be preferable.

There are many benefits to the system of centralized collection development, however, particularly at a liberal arts institution where the collection should be considered as a whole instead of in pieces. When one person is overseeing all of this work, the right hand always knows what the left is doing. Additionally, having in-depth knowledge of the resources available is an advantage when providing instruction to students.

Priority areas have been identified for each semester for the next three years so that the print collection can be systematically improved. During this time I also plan to conduct more thorough assessment of electronic resources and further develop some other initiatives that are currently in the early stages of conception.