

Improving the Effectiveness of Librarian-Faculty Collaboration on Library Collection Development

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Abstract

Librarian-faculty relations are essential to library collection development. This paper discusses, first of all, the reasons for the customary disconnect between librarians and faculty in light of their different priorities, visions, expertise, and status. In an attempt to bridge the librarian-faculty separation, a horizontal strategy is proposed focusing on financial collaborations between the library and other academic departments on campus, such as adopting the balanced budget, fair and rotated resource allocation, and prioritized investment through providing a General Reserve Fund. A vertical strategy is also proposed defined as an organizational and professional partnership through three different vertical levels, namely, the university, unit (department/program), and individual levels. At the university level, while the collaboration needs to cover the areas of book selection, evaluation, preservation, weeding, and cancellation, it should also rely on campus-wide workshops as an effective way of improving collection development and professional training. At the unit level, in addition to the department liaison model, it is advisable to organize specific forums focusing on the special needs required by different academic programs and departments. Individual level collaboration is critical to achieving the proposed goals as all institutional strategies must rely on individual efforts. Librarians should provide individual, informal, and customized outreach services.

Author keywords: Collection Development; Librarian-Faculty Collaboration; Resource Allocation; Organizational Collaboration

Introduction

In an attempt to improve the effectiveness of library collection development, Kotter believes that “good relations between librarians and classroom faculty are a necessity, not a luxury” and “the key to success is cooperation, not conflict.”¹ Meanwhile, in light of a digital age, in Hahn’s view, liaison librarian is playing a more central role in carrying the library’s mission.² Needless to say, librarian-faculty relations are essential for collection librarians.³

Although there seems to be a consensus that an effective collaboration between librarians and faculty constitutes one of the key factors in improving the quality of library collections,⁴ it is helpful to understand why it is so difficult to build an effective librarian-faculty relationship and how librarians can take important steps in developing such a relationship. Following a discussion of some of the problems and barriers to librarian-faculty collaboration in the field of

collection development, this article will propose both a horizontal strategy focusing on cross-campus resource allocation and prioritization, and a vertical strategy aimed at constructing and reconstructing organizational and professional collaboration at individual, unit, and university levels between librarians and faculty.

Reasons for Separation between Librarians and Faculty

Prior to considering solutions to the problems of librarian-faculty relations in collection development, it is helpful to understand a variety of reasons for the lack of collaboration and connections between librarians and faculty. First of all, it is important to recognize that librarians and faculty representatives have different priorities and visions related to library collection development. One of the key differences concerns variant priorities in allocating financial resources. In light of budget constraints, it is understandable that librarians and faculty often

have to compete for a share of the financial pie.⁵ Obviously, the availabilities of solving such budget issues are limited and institutional priorities must enhance their roles in the financial decision-making process.⁶ Chu provides an example that one faculty member in a special field “complained that her department has 300 majors and less than \$5,000 budgeted for library materials.” Expectedly, this professor “feels no obligation to incur cuts so another department with about 30 majors can continue subscriptions to a group of journals at \$11,700 per year.”⁷

Additionally, both faculty and librarians have different perspectives on the priority of collection development reflecting rather specific and narrow areas of research and teaching focus. Wicksa, Bartolob and Swordsc offer, by way of example, that a library will have a fine Buddhist collection if a powerful faculty representative is an Asian philosopher. The effect of this can be long-term. The worst situation is that these faculty representatives “often are junior faculty who later move on to other schools, upon which their replacement will promptly skew the collection toward another -ism.”⁸ As a result, the library collection will suffer from the lack of consistency, comprehension, and a long-term plan.

Other problems pertain to inefficient communication and resulting frustration brought about as librarians wait for faculty recommendations on new acquisitions when patrons may have already asked for the items. This also concerns a tension between the faculty expertise that is needed and the mandate of the library to collect what in fact the patrons really want and that a wide scope of acquisition requests need to be considered, not only those of faculty. Yet another problem occurs when it becomes apparent that faculty make recommendations on past publications and a retrospective view of the literature in a subject area, while librarians tend to make decisions based on future needs of borrowers.⁹

In addition, faculty and librarians have different knowledge and specialties leading to misunderstandings. Teaching faculty often fail to be sympathetic, not because they conceptually oppose the changes their library is making but rather because they do not understand them. By the

same token, library staff members are usually knowledgeable about new developments within their areas of specialization but they can be ignorant when it comes to marketing their products and services to faculty.¹⁰ Further, librarian-faculty differences arise in terms of their different organizational subcultures because libraries “encourage a culture of sharing, cooperation, and collaboration, for the ultimate purpose of assisting students in their educational pursuits” while “faculty culture is generally more isolated and proprietary.”¹¹

On yet another front, there are psychological reasons for the librarian-faculty disconnect in that “many librarians are afraid of faculty and intimidated.”¹² In the view of some librarians holding Ph.D. degrees with rank and tenure, other university faculty members, as the case may be, may look down upon librarians. For instance, Malenfant indicates that “as a profession, librarians often feel faculty members have impressive credentials and are somehow superior. This mindset poses a significant challenge for creating an atmosphere of mutuality and shared action to change such a large system as scholarly communication.” As he suggests, the need exists for librarians “to think differently about themselves as partners with faculty in the research enterprise and not servants.”¹³

To explain this psychological aspect, Evelyn B. Haynes has identified such common faculty perceptions. These include “librarians ... more as subordinates than as academic equals; their involvement in student education is negligible; they lack adequate teaching and research experience; and their educational credentials are substandard.”¹⁴ Adding to the divide, as Christiansen, Stompler and Thaxton suggest, faculty members view their classes as their own territory where usually faculty do not want to consult with librarians in the process. Their research also indicates that, “faculty see librarians as a resource (in some cases, a last resort) for gaining access to materials, not as experts who may play a central role in the preparation and execution of a research project.”¹⁵ Another factor that may reinforce condescending attitudes towards librarians concerns their difference in standing in a university, librarians as “staff” and faculty as “scholars,” although many academic librarians

have tenured or tenure-track faculty status. Their research further shows that faculty members believe that librarians' work is service-oriented focusing on the access to knowledge and other resources while faculty themselves "see their own work as focusing on the production and dissemination of knowledge." Obviously, service-oriented work is perceived as the lack of production and innovation.¹⁶

In addition to differences in types of career and vision of the library, the quality of librarian-faculty relations is often "strained, unfriendly, and even acrimonious which are always highly dramatic and often intensely emotional."¹⁷ In light of the lack of mutual trust, it remains difficult to mount a proactive effort in collaboration. Faculty members do not trust librarians to make effective acquisition choices and librarians do not trust faculty to be responsible to make suggestions in the best interest of the university. "This brings out the effects of the relationship--a feeling of trust in each other and the need to be aware of each other's needs." As Chu suggests, such lack of trust highlights the importance of being aware and of understanding the roles and needs of each other.¹⁸ The Christiansen, Stompler and Thaxton report again bears out this finding, that "faculty do not have a solid understanding of librarians' work and are not seeking similar contact" and, similarly, faculty members "do not know about librarians' specific duties and projects."¹⁹ The situation is worsened by the fact that, unlike the librarians, faculty members don't believe it is an issue and it will cause any negative consequences arising from this meaningless disconnection.²⁰

Clearly, problems do exist between librarians and teaching faculty and solutions need to be found in the interest of better collection development and value added to the university. In what follows, the "Horizontal" and "Vertical" strategies will be discussed.

The Horizontal Strategy – Financial Collaboration

Although the division between faculty and librarians may be attributable to the reasons related to different priorities, variant psychologies, and mutual distrust, designing and implement-

ing appropriate and comprehensive strategies may help to minimize the differences and improve their financial and professional collaborations. As for strategies, it is helpful to divide them into two types -- the horizontal strategy and vertical strategy. The horizontal, considered first, can be defined as financial collaboration between the library and other academic departments on campus aimed at promoting library collection development. In dealing with conflicts pertaining to financial resources, the key issue is how to avoid a deepening conflict and create a win-win situation with clearly defined institutional priorities as well as effective negotiations and compromises. As Chu points out, creative librarian-faculty collaboration in collection development in a horizontal layer should be guided by shared goals of the institution.²¹

In an effort to reach a win-win situation, it is essential to design library collection mechanisms and processes within a balanced budget. As Chu mentions, that "balance" refers to "adequate coverage of all aspects of a discipline" within an approval plan. If resources were abundant, in Chu's opinion, the approval plan would be one tool that can be used to ensure potential needs are met through the library collection processes, but if resources are limited, it stands to reason, creating a balanced collection where all resource needs are fully met is not possible. The problem is compounded when, as Chu argues, "librarians purchase books in anticipation of needs that may never materialize. In essence, librarians, under the assumption of abundant resources, are placing solutions to potential problems into a garbage can, to be retrieved only when accompanying problems arise."²²

As for a balanced allocation of financial resources in support of collection development, this author believes that it is crucial to give close attention to the following approaches. First, in the interest of fair budget allocation between different schools, departments, and disciplines on a short-term annual basis, librarians must get faculty representatives involved in the process of discussion, consultation, and decision making. At Kent State University, for instance, a budget was administrated by the Library and was distributed to each department, but it was spent by the Departmental Library Representa-

tive and Liaison Librarian. Meanwhile, the budget allocation must take into account some important issues, such as number of undergraduate majors, number of graduate students, average monographic cost, and tier level assigned by the University.²³

Also, in the interest of fairness, a ten year long-term plan is recommended, designed to follow the principle of rotated allocation. For instance, the Department of History may receive the lowest allocation in year one or two, but in the span of ten years, it should have opportunities to increase its share. When dealing with budget cuts, the well-established departments that have a bigger percentage of nonessential journal subscriptions and which are involved in the ten year plan, would be likely better able to absorb cuts than newer departments.²⁴

In addition to the balanced budget allocation, the horizontal strategy also requires "prioritized investment" as opposed to equalitarian distributions of the collection budget that designates more funding for collections that support new departments, new programs, and new groups. To be sure, the fair allocation is not necessarily equalitarian in terms of the percentage of budget distribution. Instead, the fair balance should follow the university strategic plan addressing the specific priorities in the specific fields. This may involve understanding and responding to university-wide programs covering multiple schools, multiple disciplines and or interdisciplinary initiatives. Purdue University Calumet Library, for example, has added experiential learning as one of the academic priorities that is supported by internal and external funds for additional resources for its collections.²⁵

In creating prioritized investment, the library could set up a General Reserve Fund that covers, perhaps, 10% of the total collection budget for such special focuses and new faculty interests and research needs. These funds should, first of all, take care of the needs of the faculty involved in the new initiatives. As Horava, a librarian at the University of Ottawa, indicates, given a steady stream of new tenure-track faculty annually, librarians should reach out and engage professors in a partnership and regular communication with the library. Given the fact that these new faculty members will play a critical role in

shaping new culture and reshaping the new direction of the university, the library should provide effective services promoting their interdisciplinary, team-oriented and rapidly evolving research efforts.²⁶ Once the University of Ottawa Libraries, for instance, noticed that the library had never shaped the collection in terms of the needs of some new faculty working in new areas of research, the librarians began to consult those involved "to best determine what library materials would meet their research needs and as identified in the libraries' strategic plan."²⁷ This resulted in \$2,000 being allocated to support the library needs of new professors.

Needless to say, in light of the development of interdisciplinary studies, library collection development faces new dilemmas. For instance, typically, academic libraries have collection budgets based on a distribution model reflecting subject disciplines, models that may take into account costs, research output, curriculum requirements, number of students, and interlibrary loan activity. However, in the interest of good budget management and reflecting publishing patterns, it is increasingly difficult to acquire books for only one discipline.²⁸ Instead, interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary subjects covering the social sciences, humanities and natural sciences begin to dominate the library collections. To allocate funds for the purchase of books related to the history of technology, for example, faculty representatives from both the Department of History and the Department of Technology will argue that it is not fair to use one department's budget to take care of another department's needs. In this kind of conflict, the General Reserve Fund can be used to meet the needs of both departments.

Generally speaking, in setting the collection development budget, and in consultation with faculty representatives, librarians should follow the triple principle, of "fair, care and share." In other words, first of all, librarians should abide by all necessary guidelines for fair allocation to ensure equity in collection funding for all academic departments, groups, and disciplines. Fairness, though, is not enough given the complex nature and special cases of collection development. It is necessary also for librarians to consider the university strategic plans and institu-

tional priorities in providing support for new initiative through a General Reserve Fund. Thirdly, librarians should share the policies and procedures regarding collection budgets, acquisitions, and the decision-making processes in order to improve the transparency in library collection development. These three principles serve as effective ways of improving the horizontal financial collaboration between library and other academic departments across the campus.

The Vertical Strategy: Organizational and Professional Collaborations

In addition to the horizontal strategy, a vertical strategy can also be highly useful in promoting librarian-faculty collaboration on collection development. The vertical strategy unfolds as development of organizational and professional partnerships through three different levels, namely, the university, the unit, and the individual levels.

At the university level, collaboration occurs, or should occur, between librarians and faculty representatives in the area of collection management as it pertains to five distinct areas: book selection, evaluation, preservation, weeding, and cancellation. In doing so, book and journal selectors must find ways to make the best use of faculty expertise, ways that may vary across the disciplines. For instance, the College of Charleston library developed a flexible process in which "the level of faculty involvement depends on the discipline, with maximum participation by the English faculty and minimal involvement by the Computer Science faculty."²⁹ Participation varies greatly from one institution to the next. For example, after interviewing 61 faculty members in three social science disciplines at the University of Michigan, the conclusion was that faculty actually would like to ask librarians to take leadership in managing scholarly resource collections.³⁰

On another front, both librarians and faculty should get involved in the process of collection evaluation. The Auraria Library in Denver, Colorado, with its collection that serves three independent academic institutions, for example, a few years ago conducted a review of its psy-

chology collection as it serves programs at the three institutions. In this process, faculty members were involved from the very beginning, with a library-oriented classroom faculty member heading the committee. Meanwhile, librarians provided a full explanation of the goals of the project and assisted with certain bibliographic details. The result was a newly crafted collection development policy reflecting subject expertise, curriculum needs, and research interests within this subject area.³¹

In regard to the matter of book preservation, there exists further opportunity for collaboration. At Columbia University, for instance, a group of humanity scholars became involved in the decision-making process on a preservation project in the humanities. Librarians reported that "the unmatched subject expertise and finely honed critical skills of these scholars proved to be invaluable."³² Librarians would do well to recognize and rely on faculty experts and to regard them as partners in matters of preservation.

Similarly, in weeding there are further opportunities for collaboration. At the University of the Pacific Libraries in Stockton, California, each academic department was asked to appoint a faculty member to serve as a "weeding liaison" for its de-selection project. This request was made following the interest expressed by some departments in having an opportunity to look at the collection before weeding decisions were made. Librarians ought to capitalize on such interest when it surfaces, since far too often ambivalence, disinterest, or other priorities mitigate faculty involvement. In this case, although the opinions on weeding differed on occasion, title by title, agreement was generally obtained and, in general, "the project was considered successful; the library met its goal and the classroom faculty seemed to accept the results." As Kotter suggests, "this example is compelling evidence that involving classroom faculty in weeding is not a fruitless enterprise; in fact, librarian-faculty relations may well be improved rather than damaged."³³

For the fifth area of serials cancellation, generally the most controversial, collaboration again is important, especially since this is the area tar-

geted for the biggest savings in times of fiscal constraint. In both theory and practice, the controversial fields in collection development require much closer collaboration and communication in order to minimize conflicts. As Kotter believes, "the appearance of positive anecdotes is clear evidence that faculty involvement in serials cancellation does not necessarily result in conflict. If conducted with due consideration for faculty concerns, cooperation in serials cancellation can have a positive effect on faculty attitudes toward librarians and the library."³⁴ Regarding serials, often the debate centers on format. Based on empirical studies at the University of Michigan, evidence shows that most faculty members prefer to acquire e-journals instead of print. Where budgets are limited, both e- and print usually are not acquired, and not to prejudge e- over print, librarians must listen "carefully to ... faculty before making decisions about format."³⁵

On the university-wide level, then, covering these five areas, collaboration should occur. One key mode of fostering collaboration is the campus workshop. At George Washington University, for instance, librarians designed and implemented campus-wide workshops on information technology. In light of the success of the workshops and their exceptional value as promotional tools, "the library administration decided to enhance its relationship with faculty by appointing a librarian whose primary responsibility was to meet their information needs." This led to the creation of a "faculty outreach librarian" position.³⁶ To further promote communication, the George Washington University Library publishes a quarterly newsletter, *Connect*, which publicized new services and products offered by the units of the library. The articles written by library staff educate readers about changes in the library's online catalog, recently acquired compact discs, modifications in its circulation and reserve policies, new resources accessible on its home page, and important cross-disciplinary Web sites.³⁷ While this is an old, 'tried and true' method of library communication, others utilize more intentional approaches such as Yale University's "Collections Collaborative Spring Symposium" that created a network for both librarians and curators in an attempt to identify

important sources for patrons' research in collections across the campus.³⁸

At the unit level, similar to Chu's sub-unit in a "loosely coupled system,"³⁹ the liaison model, well-established in many universities, is designed to "achieve greater outreach to academic departments and higher degrees of collaboration."⁴⁰ Department-to-library liaisons function largely as brokers for faculty requests for acquisitions, and much less as advocates and promoters of library instruction. As such, they serve mainly the interests of collection development, such as the case at Georgia State University. Thankfully, there is increasing interest among these unit level partners more widely to "collaborate with librarians on class assignments and ask librarians for assistance with new databases."⁴¹ Further expansion of the role of liaisons could include marketing library services to departments and addressing student and faculty problems related to library operations and services.⁴² While the focus of this article is on collaboration with respect to collection development, capitalizing on these achievements helps to create a wider scope of collaboration that overall enhances library resources and services.

Besides, it is also helpful for the library to organize specific forums focusing on the special needs of academic programs and departments. For example, at George Washington University, librarians have begun to expand their scope of interaction through brown bag lunch meetings where more than just the usual technology issues are showcased and where the discussion is opened up to include the more, perhaps, mundane problems in circulation, in reserves, inter-library loan and collection funding are addressed.⁴³ In tandem to these informal meeting and workshops of one kind or another, the library created an electronic list called "INTQUERY" which also serves as a network for promoting information literacy and highlighting important internet features or resources. It was reported that this communication network has become "one of the library's most effective publicity devices."⁴⁴

Another approach to expanding collaboration and improving communication at the unit level involves providing Departmental Representa-

tives and Liaison Librarians with lists of monographs purchased through their departmental allocations over one or two year periods. In one case, such a list was “broken down into three categories: books purchased through the approval plan, slips selected through the approval plan, and requests for books originated by the department.” Circulation data were also made available that help faculty determine current instructional and research interests.⁴⁵ Rather than fostering complaints and gripes, sharing this information should be done in a way that highlights the fruit of collaboration and furthers discussion and communication.⁴⁶

The third level of the vertical strategy concerns personal connections, especially critical in achieving library-faculty collaboration since ultimately all institutional strategies must rely on individual efforts. As Chu and Scherdin maintain, “librarians and faculty are natural partners in academic endeavors,”⁴⁷ a partnership that depends to a great extent on the personality of the parties involved rather than on longevity, that is, how long people have been together.⁴⁸ Despite the misgivings and lack of confidence in librarians working with faculty, discussed earlier, in fact, empirical studies demonstrate that many faculty members welcome librarian participation “in relationships on an equal basis”; librarians represent a discipline, and faculty represent a discipline—it is “a mutual type of thing.”⁴⁹ Moreover, in a collaborative environment, librarians are not in an advising or mentoring role but, rather, are information providers for faculty members who are usually appreciative of regular and sometime customized information provided by librarians. As Whatley suggests, liaison librarians have always been connectors operating “between their patrons and the information that is collected in libraries”⁵⁰ In Dupuis’s view, librarians can be more solidly in partnership with the teaching faculty when “a deeper engagement of library liaisons with Deans, Department Chairs, and key faculty” helps to foster understanding of the “teaching focus, objectives, and challenges” of both entities and which then lead to the development of “mutually agreed-upon priorities.”⁵¹

Although faculty members are experts in their own research fields, some faculty, particularly

humanities faculty, are not necessarily familiar with information technology (IT) or the subject of collection development. Currently, there is a massive demand for the library to reorient its services by combining both library and information technology services.⁵² It is in this newly emerging partnership of library and IT that another opportunity exists for connecting in new ways to the teaching faculty. For instance, at Lafayette College, both librarians and computing services staff formed a team of campus Web experts called the “Web Support Team.” On a more personal level than the group workshops, the Team provided individual consultations and customized services for faculty having Web questions, and scheduled lunchtime brown bags, where faculty could learn from staff and other faculty members. These methods of supporting faculty proved “immensely popular because of their informality and the many topics that could be covered in single-hour sessions.”⁵³ In particular, this kind of individual, informal, and customized outreach programs made it possible to enhance networking and personal interaction among faculty members who are able to identify other peers and experts in building up their professional and academic collaboration.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are different issues and solutions in addressing collection development and in dealing with the lack of collaboration and communication between librarians and faculty. As presented in this article, however, the horizontal and vertical strategies warrant serious attention. As noted, bridging the great divide, to use Kotter’s image, includes these mandates: to clearly articulate the rationale for seeking improved librarian-faculty relations, to develop more effective methods to assess the quality of librarian-faculty relations, and to consider the potential impact on librarian-faculty relations of any program under consideration. More concretely, librarians would do well to consider giving priority to those programs that are most likely to contribute, directly or indirectly, to improved librarian-faculty relations, devise better methods to determine the effect of such programs on librarian-faculty relations, and evaluate these programs in terms of their benefits, costs, and effectiveness.⁵⁵ The horizontal and

vertical strategies discussed here show what can be done given this mandate for improved librarian-faculty collaboration in the interest of improved collection development.

According to Stephen R. Covey, the most effective librarians are those who have “moved beyond both independence and dependence to master the art of interdependence — of working as members of a team, of knowing when two or more heads are better than one.”⁵⁶ Indeed, in the digital age, interdependence is the new paradigm and the future model of librarian-faculty relationships. Academic institutions don’t have any choice but improve their horizontal financial collaboration and vertical professional coordination in support of library collection development.

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