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Random Ramblings: "What's Good for the Goose Is Good for the Gander"

Robert P. Holley
Wayne State University, aa3805@wayne.edu

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Survival for Public Services when Print Collections Disappear

Column Editor: **Bob Holley** (Professor, Library & Information Science Program, Wayne State University, Detroit, MI 48202; Phone: 313-577-4021; Fax: 313-577-7563) <aa3805@wayne.edu>

This column will take a more in-depth look at a topic that I mentioned in my report on the **2009 ACRL National Conference** for *Against the Grain*. I was surprised that the summary for the presentation on "Subject Librarian 2.0: Emerging Trends and Future Challenges for the Liaison Librarian" didn't even list collection development. Instead, the description in the conference program said that "[t]opics include interdisciplinary research, technology, scholarly communication, instruction and curriculum design, e-science and more." To be fair, I didn't attended this session so that the three presenters, **Jim Neal**, **Karen Williams**, and **Kara Whatley**, may have included collection development under the "and more"; but I doubt that they considered selecting materials for the faculty and students in academic departments as a primary liaison function.

What was good for the goose (technical services) is now happening for the gander (public services). This modification in liaison duties is one of the results of a drastic shift in public services that is equivalent to the major changes brought about by the arrival of **OCLC** for technical services. In the 1980s and 1990s, catalogers faced the consequences of radical changes in the creation and distribution of bibliographic records. The success of shared cataloging drastically reduced their numbers. In much the same way, public service librarians today need to justify their existence in a changing world. To avoid becoming as irrelevant as the print collections stored in their libraries, public services librarians are consciously or unconsciously refocusing on new tasks the will allow them to keep their jobs.

When I was newly minted librarian, I helped usher in the era of automated cataloging and the reuse of library records. I was excited at the promise of speedier processing, the elimination of backlogs, the reduction in mind numbing tasks such as typing catalog cards and filing them, and the many other promised improvements. I should have been prescient enough to see that the end result would be fewer catalogers though I doubt that knowing the future would have made it possible to change it. While catalogers have not entirely disappeared and are in fact much in demand since few students prepare for these positions, their numbers are much reduced. Only the largest research libraries have more than a few degreed catalogers. With my roots in technical services, I have read many articles over the last few decades on the continued importance of cataloging as a degreed librarian activity though I have doubts that these articles have had much effect upon the decisions made by library administrators to allocate staff. I agree with the current trend to use cataloging and metadata from multiple sources to process as cost effectively as possible common, published resources that are also easily accessible from other non-library sources such as **Amazon**. In fact, I plan to devote a future column to the laudable goal of using the savings from these efficiencies to make unique and rare resources, mostly archival, more readily accessible.

Before the arrival of the Internet, reference librarians felt secure in the knowledge that the access to information depended upon faculty and students coming to them for help in using arcane systems that were difficult to understand and seldom easily yielded their information riches. Knowledge was a scarce commodity that required librarian intervention both for purchase and access. With the arrival of the Internet and digital resources, scarcity has become abundance so that the library is no longer the only information resource for faculty and students. The function for library liaisons needed to change.

To speak of collection development first, the focus on digital resources and decreasing purchasing power have greatly reduced the need for librarians to consult with the faculty about collection decisions. Digital resources are taking a much higher percentage of acquisitions budgets. These resources require macro-decisions about a relatively small number of major purchases rather than multiple micro-decisions for individual orders. With the global nature of these purchases, the individual faculty member will have less input on purchase decisions than would be the case for discrete orders. Purchasing digital resources in packages, including serials, has made much less funding for individual orders plus the purchasing power of almost all libraries has declined in recent years and will most likely decline even more over the next few years on account of the current economic uncertainties. Gone are the days when faculty liaisons in the largest research libraries had difficulty in spending their yearly allocations and had to ask the faculty for additional suggestions. I have so little money left to purchase materials for the Romance Languages that I do little collection development beyond buying what the faculty requests.

I also suspect that faculty are finding more of what they need without consulting the library. For many faculty, the main reason for the library's existence may be to pay for access to electronic resources. They can now find monographic publications beyond those sitting on library shelves. I suspect that the ease of online ordering and the ready availability of materials in primary and secondary markets such as **Amazon.com**, **Half.com**, **Alibris**, and **Abebooks** are tempting faculty to build their personal collections rather than sending their requests to the library. The perverse result may be that academic libraries are no longer purchasing some of the common books that would be heavily used while getting faculty requests for esoteric items that faculty consider too expensive to buy with personal funds.

Now that a glut of easy-to-find information has replaced the former scarcity, faculty and students also have less need to come to libraries for help. The Internet has killed ready reference and has undermined the need for reference help even for difficult questions. What remains are often technical questions on database use rather than questions relating to the underlying information or search terms. While librarians claim that their users often don't find the best information or may take too long to do so are most likely true, many potential library patrons are quite content with what they do find. In fact, I find it paradoxical that librarians now claim the need to meet with students in class to teach them to use relatively friendly online resources when they didn't try nearly so hard in the past when navigating the library required a broad range of esoteric and difficult-to-learn skills. An obvious answer is that librarians can now bring the library to the classroom or computer lab and that discussions of online search strategies may have enough relevance that students have less inclination to develop the glazed look of total indifference that accompanied instruction on using the card catalog and print indexes.

To avoid the fate of catalogers, public services librarians are staking out new territory that fundamentally moves the liaison function away from building collections and answering reference questions. Now that faculty and students have less need to come to the library, librarians are reaching out to involve themselves more directly in faculty teaching and research. As indicated by the topics in the first paragraph, these **Web 2.0** liaisons can help faculty better understand how the new library technologies can improve their course design, supplement their teaching, and allow students to access more easily a broader range of resources. Librarians can also explain why the database they used successfully last week suddenly has a new set of features. The embedded librarian is only a click away on course software such as **Blackboard**. The librarian can also advise the faculty on new structures of scholarly communication such as institutional repositories though doing so is another step away from dependence on the library. Librarians may also help with technology and e-science but only if they have made the substantive effort to keep up with these developments. The final topic on

the list, interdisciplinary research, is one area where I believe public services librarians have always excelled. As a faculty member myself, I seldom need help in the disciplinary areas where I am an expert but seek out reference support when I stray into other disciplines for my teaching or research.

Before giving my conclusions, I'll add that I'm consciously avoiding any extended discussion of trendy **Web 2.0** areas such as **Facebook**, **Twitter**, **Second Life**, and similar popular Web destinations. Reaching out to faculty is the key factor in liaison activities. With exceptions, faculty have been shown to be more conservative in the use of technologies than the students they teach. I suspect that some of the new sites will be replaced relatively quickly by even newer ones. If I have any suggestions for librarians, it would be to use their expertise to make a more reliable resource.

Will these efforts to reach out in new areas keep public services librarians from having their gooses cooked? Perhaps. The key will be to show that such efforts benefit the faculty in the same way that faculty who responded to liaison efforts for collection development were more likely to find what they needed in the library collection. The faculty who invite librarians to participate in their teaching must see tangible benefits such as happier students who learn more and do so more easily so that the faculty member gains a sense of accomplishment and receives better teaching evaluations from students and superiors. If faculty follow library recommendations on scholarly communication, they should expect to see their research have greater impact. They should also be rewarded during evaluations for tenure, promotion, and salary increases.

I'll conclude by pointing out two dangers. First, the new liaison model must be designed so that most, if not all, public services librarians can be successful. I have no doubt that the proponents of the new model can make it work. Average librarians must be able to do the same. Libraries must develop effective training modules and include this skill in their requirements for hiring. In addition, policies must be in place to take into account that liaison librarians take vacations, become sick, or leave for new positions. While a brief absence was normally possible for collection development, the same might not be true for an untended button in **Blackboard** whose clicks are not answered. Second, academic libraries should worry more about success than failure. Taking on these additional responsibilities doesn't guarantee new funding. What if the new model succeeds beyond the library's wildest expectations? How much "success" could the library support before the self-limiting factor of lack of resources kicked in? Could the librarians deal with demand from more than a small percentage of the current full-time and adjunct faculty?

Creating a new model for liaison work with faculty is better than guaranteeing obsolescence by doing nothing. Will the new model keep public services librarians relevant? I don't know. I intend to live long enough to find out whether the gander will continue to thrive on the library farm. 🦃