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From Big Ideas to Real Talk: A Frontline Perspective on New Collections Roles in Times of Organizational Restructuring

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University of Guelph Reorganization (2009)

In 2009, academic libraries faced dramatic changes in higher education and uncertain financial conditions. The 2008 financial crisis, the rising cost of resources, and cuts to public universities created a stark budget reality. At the same time, technological and pedagogical changes created new demand—and new possibilities—for academic libraries. Interest from faculty to better integrate academic skills into curriculum, advances in educational technology, new possibilities for open access publishing, and the proliferation of digital scholarship were coming to the fore. These shifting tides meant that academic libraries were no longer able to meet changing user needs through a traditional liaison model. It was against this backdrop that the University of Guelph Library undertook a reorganization of its subject librarians in 2009, moving from a liaison model to a functional team model.

The University of Guelph (U of G) is a public research university in Guelph, Ontario, Canada with about 30,000 full-time students (Dickieson, 2013). All academic colleges are served by a single library, McLaughlin Library, which has an annual acquisitions budget of approximately $9 million (CAD). The reorganization of liaison librarians into functional teams at U of G was predicated on the logic that, rather than dividing librarian roles by subject, library work would be better divided by major functional areas. Within this model, librarians may continue to have subject responsibilities; however, these subject areas would be much wider, within a narrower set of functional responsibilities. For example, the past job requirements of a sociology librarian might instead be filled through several roles, such as an information literacy librarian for the social sciences, a collections librarian for the social sciences and business, and a scholarly communications librarian for open access.

A drawback to the functional team model is the dilution of close faculty relationships generally enjoyed by liaison librarians, who were accountable to a much smaller subject area, and who were faculty members' single point of contact at the library. The subject expertise and liaison work becomes secondary, and functional team librarians develop greater accountability to their team members than to their faculty members. However, this shift allows the library to devote "real resources—people and time—to open access, open scholarship, digital preservation" (Denton, 2019), and to other areas of emerging demand like open educational resources, digital pedagogy, copyright, or user experience. As Bill Denton, a librarian at York University in Toronto, Ontario (whose library is also pursuing a functional team reorganization) notes on his blog, "If we're going to change how scholarly publishing works . . . you can't do that by going to a committee meeting twice a month" (Denton, 2019). Rather, dedicated roles and teams are required to undertake the dramatic transformation we're seeking within the scholarly landscape.

At the University of Guelph, the reorganization exercise in 2009 culminated with elimination of the liaison team in exchange for the creation of four new functional teams:

1. Collections and Content
2. Information Literacy
3. Research and Scholarly Communication
4. Discovery and Access

A decade later, this model has created novel opportunities for collections work that are not generally possible under a traditional liaison model (we discuss these opportunities below). In Canada, Guelph was one of the earlier examples of an academic library

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pursuing contemporary organizational restructuring. However, in 2019, there are several Canadian academic libraries undertaking organizational restructuring and navigating the complexities that arise from reorganization. For a detailed exploration of a current organizational restructuring exercise, Carleton University's MacOdrum Library provides a useful case study in how an academic library can pursue reorganization efforts similar to U of G's, but toward a very different organizational structure.

Carleton University's MacOdrum Library Reorganization

Carleton University is a mid-sized institution in Ottawa, Ontario with a population of just over 31,000 students. MacOdrum Library is the single library serving the academic community, and its annual acquisitions budget is approximately $7 million CAD.

Prior to an organizational review and subsequent reorganization undertaken by the library, many aspects of collection development were under the purview of the liaisons in the Reference Services department. The department operated under the traditional liaison model and each liaison was responsible for teaching, research support, and collection development for their subject areas. The responsibility for monograph selection remained wholly within Reference Services. The monograph budget was broken down across faculties, and then further broken down into smaller pots of money for each discipline. All liaisons were responsible for the various fund codes for monograph selection in their subject area.

As with many liaison models, however, serials responsibilities lay outside of the References Services team. The head of Collection Development and Acquisitions managed the electronic resource budget—including all journals, database subscriptions, and major e-book subscriptions—with input and consultation from liaisons as needed.

In the fall of 2014, the library began its organizational review and the Public Services Review Group was formed. It was comprised of staff members from across the library, which included librarians and professional services staff. The University Librarian chaired the meetings, but was not involved in the assessment of services, nor in the forming of recommendations. After an initial assessment and research phase, the review group split into subcommittees to further examine and suggest recommendations for various services the library offers.

Public Services Review Group: Findings on Collections

After a phase of research, discussion, and consultation, the subcommittee on Collections found the following:

Uneven Monograph Spending Across Faculties

This occurred for various reasons and was often dependent on workload. Liaisons with a heavy teaching schedule were not able to spend as much time developing the collection as those with a lighter teaching load. This sometimes resulted in certain monograph funds being overspent, while others were underspent.

Gaps in Collection Development When Liaisons Were on Leave

It was often the case that positions for sabbaticals or other extended leaves went unfilled. Duties for subject areas were taken over by other liaisons with an already full workload, and they were unable to devote the necessary time to collecting for the additional subject area.

An Excess of Time and Effort Being Spent on a Small Portion of the Budget

Only 7%–8% of the acquisitions budget is spent on print books and e-books, yet 20–25 staff members were responsible for managing tiny sections of this small budget. Despite the library having over 50 fund codes devoted to monograph selection alone, it was not providing an accurate depiction of what was being spent for each subject. As the university and the library moved to a more multidisciplinary environment, it became impossible to neatly place resources into these categories.

Lack of Central Oversight

There was no process in place to consistently train and mentor new staff on collection development processes, and not enough interaction with acquisitions and technical services staff. There was also a lack of central oversight for larger collection development projects.

Public Services Review Group: Recommendations for Collections

The original recommendation from the Public Services Review Group envisioned a collections team working as a unit comprised of both collections librarians and technical services staff working under the head of Collection Development and Acquisitions. The collection librarians would be exclusively focused on collections work and would be responsible for firm ordering, approval profiles, renewals, new subscriptions, weeding, quality assurance reports, and some assessment. With a reduction in the number of selectors, funding codes would be collapsed and reduced to facilitate flexible collections decision-making and simplified acquisitions workflows.

Implementation and Current Structure

During the implementation phase, the library established a hybrid model, in which the collections librarians are embedded within the same department as liaisons, who remain responsible for instruction and research consultations with students and faculty. The Reference Services department merged with the Maps, Data, and Government Information department and collectively became Research Support Services. The collection librarians still perform in-person and virtual reference shifts.

The department is organized into three broad subject area teams: the Arts and Social Sciences team, the STEM team, and the Business, Legal, and Public Affairs team. Job advertisements were circulated for a collection librarian for each team. Currently, the Arts and Social Sciences team and the Business, Legal, and Public Affairs team each have collection librarians established in their roles. However, at the end of 2019, the STEM collection librarian role remains unfilled.

Change and Change Management at Carleton

Carleton's collection librarians developed a questionnaire that guided one-on-one interviews with liaisons in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) and the Faculties of Business and Public Affairs (BFPA). A copy of the questionnaire was sent to liaisons responsible for STEM subjects to be completed in writing.

Liaisons were asked how they informed themselves of new publications in their field and their faculty's research areas; if their faculty preferred or remained reliant on print resources; their opinions on the library's DDA pilot; their methods for managing their funds; which aspects of collection development they thought worked well or not well under the liaison model, and what they thought could work well or present challenges with the new centralized collection development model. They expressed a range of opinions on these issues, but all spoke to a need for consultation, communication, and accountability from the new collection librarians. Liaisons wanted the reorganization to result in clearer workflows and delineation of responsibilities between the research support services department and the departments responsible for acquisitions, collection strategy, and assessment.

The first major transition occurred during the last six months of the fiscal year, 2019. During that time, the collection librarians became the primary points of contact for liaisons needing information about new acquisitions, assessment of existing subscriptions, and questions about the new fund structure. The collection librarians also launched a five-month deduplication weeding project, in which liaisons evaluated print serial runs against perpetual-access digital backfiles the library had purchased.

Channeling the liaisons' questions through the collection librarians fostered close working relationships between the collection librarians and technical services staff, which was one of the goals for the reorganization. Liaisons retained their selection functions for the remainder of the fiscal year while the collection librarians and technical services staff collaborated on new workflows to be implemented in the next fiscal year.

Following the implementation of new workflows, liaisons forwarded all purchase requests to the collection librarians for approval and transmission to the technical services team. The collection librarians would clarify format and platform preferences with the liaison as needed. Liaisons maintained read-only access to their profiles in the library's monograph acquisitions platform, which allowed them to see the newest publications in their subject areas, and facilitated recommendations for the collections librarians to approve for purchase. Collection librarians added the new faculty-based fund code information to the selected items and forwarded purchase requests to the acquisitions team.

Changes to the flow of communication made in the previous fiscal year were formalized, with the collection librarians newly responsible for soliciting input on the annual renewals list, weeding decisions, and other collection management tasks. Liaisons had previously communicated their decisions about their subject area's resources directly to acquisitions or cataloging staff, with no one liaison responsible for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary resources. As the new point of contact for liaisons and technical services staff, the collection librarians were able to solicit input on interdisciplinary resources from the liaisons and make decisions about resources that spanned multiple subject areas.

Results of the Reorganization

Six months after implementing the new workflows, Carleton's collection librarians have observed changes that suggest the new collection development model is meeting some of the goals articulated in the public services review report.

Spending across departments in FASS and BFPA has been steady, with just under half the total allocation for each faculty spent halfway through the fiscal year. The faculty-based fund codes have simplified the acquisition of interdisciplinary works, and the faculty-based view of collection development has made it possible for collection librarians to more effectively evaluate cross-disciplinary resources.

For technical services staff, a major reduction in both fund codes and contact points within Research Support Services has simplified operations, saving time previously spent on communication between departments.

Having a wider view of collection development has enabled the collection librarians to identify publishing trends that were not apparent when collecting in a single subject area. The collection librarians are also well positioned to evaluate and monitor any future demand-driven or evidence-based acquisition models the library may consider.

University of Guelph Library's Collections and Content Team

The benefits of functional roles observed by collections librarians at Carleton University are also apparent at the University of Guelph. On the Collections and Content team, collections development work is undertaken by three collections librarians, each responsible for a broad subject area: arts and humanities, social sciences and business, and science and engineering. Collections librarians are responsible for managing monograph and serials collections, approval plans, firm orders, patron requests, weeding projects, and assessment of their subject collections. Collections librarians work closely with the head of Collections and with each other to manage collections.

A notable strength of the functional team model is the ways in which it facilitates more direct collaboration between collections librarians and teams who work directly with the acquisition, implementation, discovery, and maintenance of collections. At the University of Guelph, the Collections and Content team is comprised of all the library teams who have some responsibility for managing information resources:

- Collections librarians
- E-resources management
- Collections management (print management)
- Acquisitions
- Course reserves
- The Annex (our off-site high-density storage facility for low-circulation items)

Each of these teams reports to the head of Collections and Content. By creating a structure in which collection development is now closely aligned with the other content-focused teams, collections librarians have opportunities to engage more fulsomely with the people, systems, and workflows that impact collections access, discovery, and management.

Working Within the TERMS Workflow

There is a particular elegance to this organizational structure, as it ensures that all the stages of the TERMS workflow are represented within a single team. TERMS (Techniques in E-Resource Management) was first developed in 2008 by librarians who, faced with increasingly complex electronic resource packages that demanded new, labor-intensive workflows, sought to develop common best practices and approaches for better coordination and consistency across libraries (Emery, Stone, & McCracken, n.d.). The stages of the TERMS workflow identify each step in the full life cycle of an e-resource:

1. Investigating new content for purchase
2. Acquiring new content

3. Implementation and troubleshooting
4. Ongoing evaluation
5. Renewal, cancellation, or replacement
6. Preservation

While this workflow was developed to grapple with e-resources challenges, it is a useful model for thinking about the management of library resources regardless of format; both print and electronic collections require consideration at each stage in the TERMS life cycle.

At the University of Guelph, each TERMS step is represented through the work of the Collections and Content Team, allowing them to approach collections development in a more strategic, holistic way. Traditional liaison librarians might work across organizational structures to engage with colleagues in e-resources, technical services, and collections teams to influence the investigation and evaluation of content, and to provide input on cancellation decisions. However, collections librarians working on a functional team have the opportunity to influence and collaborate on collection development issues directly within their teams, through both formal and informal means. By being co-located to these teams, collections librarians engage with the collection throughout the TERMS life cycle in greater depth than a traditional liaison model might afford. Examples of this type of work include:

- Having the budget autonomy to make large e-book package purchase decisions, and then working with the e-resources team directly to ensure access and discovery.
- Applying subject expertise to improve access points on the authoritative Databases A–Z list, which in turn informs the content for library guides.
- Working with acquisitions and collections management staff to develop a special circulating collection of print books, including the creation of new acquisitions workflows, physical processing specifications, and records changes to support this collection.

Looking Ahead

Today, the University of Guelph library is going through a 10-year review of its reorganization to assess whether it met the goals articulated a decade ago, and to determine whether it is well positioned to meet its clients' needs for the next 10 years. Guelph is still in the nascent stages of this review, but has already identified some interesting issues to explore throughout 2020. For example, while the functional team model has been an improvement over the liaison model, there is still an overarching challenge: transcending rigid organization structures to allow for more flexible, nimble teams, facilitate more project-based work, and respond quickly to shifting demands and opportunities within organizations. How do libraries implement a process that provides the space to prioritize, innovate, and confidently say no, as demands increase and diversify?

At Carleton University, collection librarians will conduct another series of one-on-one interviews with liaisons in the winter of 2020 to assess changes to collection development practices so far, and to identify what further changes need to be prioritized. Although the next steps haven't been completely mapped out, Carleton's collection librarians remain keenly aware that their liaisons remain the "face" of the library and are the first line of contact for students or faculty with questions about the library's collection. With that in mind, collection librarians are committed to ensuring effective internal communication about collection development processes and decisions to liaisons, and to the library's users. Consultation with liaisons is ongoing, and their feedback will continue to guide the change process.

Conclusions

Our intention in writing this article is to share two experiences with library restructuring, each at very different junctures in the reorganizing process, and each pursuing very different organizational structures. Reorganizations are a major trend today, and many academic libraries are grappling with complex questions of how to organize themselves to respond to the dramatic changes facing libraries and higher education. We hope that sharing our own experiences as collections librarians in these processes will inform the decisions and perspectives of others facing these same challenges, as we all strive to understand the ever-changing nature of our work.

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