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7-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Holley, R. P. (2007). Are technical services topics underrepresented in the contributed papers at the ACRL national conferences? *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*, 44(3-4), 259-269. doi: [10.1300/J104v44n03_07](https://doi.org/10.1300/J104v44n03_07)
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/slisfrp/31>

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This is the author's post print originally appearing in *Cataloging & Classification Quarterly*. V. 44 no. 3/4 (2007).

Available online at:

<http://catalogingandclassificationquarterly.com/>.

ARE TECHNICAL SERVICES TOPICS UNDERREPRESENTED IN THE CONTRIBUTED PAPERS AT THE ACRL NATIONAL CONFERENCES?

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Abstract

This study tests the hypothesis that the contributed papers at the 12 ACRL national conferences do not cover topics of interest to technical services librarians in proportion to their membership in ACRL. The analysis showed that 14.66% of contributed papers dealt with subjects that were part of the charge of ALCTS, the technical services division in ALA, and its five sections. This percentage dropped to 7.52% with the removal of collection development papers that are also of high interest to many public services librarians. Current overlap statistics indicate that 18.83% of ACRL members also belong to ALCTS—an indication of potential ACRL member interest in technical services topics. An unexpected discovery was that the contributed papers became much more holistic with the arrival of the Internet and electronic resources in academic libraries and, starting with the 1999 Detroit national conference, were much more difficult to categorize into specialized niches. The author speculates that the attendance at the national conferences by a high proportion of librarians from small to mid-size academic libraries discourages papers on technical services topics since technical services librarians are more likely to work in large ARL libraries.

Keywords

ACRL national conferences, publications in technical services, holistic librarianship

Introduction

The following paper initially set out to test the hypothesis that the contributed papers presented at the 12 national conferences of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) did not adequately cover topics of interest to technical services librarians and especially to catalogers, who most frequently work in large academic libraries. My concern was that they were an underrepresented constituency and were forgotten in ACRL in contrast with their public service counterparts.

While I will show that the subjects of the papers selected for presentation generally support this hypothesis, the review of the papers also uncovered an unexpected discovery that the arrival of the Internet, the growth of the World Wide Web, and the resulting increased use of online resources has led to a more holistic view of academic librarianship that has made it more difficult to place the contributed papers into well-defined interest niches. This change became evident starting with the Detroit national conference in 1999. Even before that time, I found some difficulty in neatly determining the audience for several papers because the themes of many papers would appeal to multiple academic constituencies; but the number of such papers has increased in recent years.

Methodology

I examined all contributed papers from the 12 national ACRL conferences from Boston in 1979 to Minneapolis in 2005. I excluded invited papers, panels, and any other type of presentation that did not fall into the reviewing process for contributed papers. Each conference has published proceedings except for the 8th conference in Nashville (1997) whose contributed papers are available on the ACRL Web site. (See Appendix I for a bibliography of the conference proceedings.)

I read the abstract for each paper and then the paper itself for those that fell into my sample as being of potential interest to technical services librarians. While many of the conference proceedings organized the papers by broad headings, I did my best not to let this pre-analysis influence my decision and read all abstracts no matter where they appeared in the volume. This was a wise decision because occasionally technical services papers appeared in other areas such as special collections when the subject matter was the acquisitions, cataloging, or preservation of special materials.

To structure my analysis, I used the organizational units of the ALA division, the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), that has responsibility for technical services concerns. The subject interest coding that I used was therefore:

- TS Technical services in general
- ACQ Acquisitions
- CAT Cataloging
- COL Collection development
- SER Serials
- PRE Preservation and reformatting

I put one article on indexing in Cataloging (CAT) and several articles on intellectual freedom in Collection Development (CD). If an article treated three specific areas, I counted it as a general article on Technical Services (TS). In a small number of cases, an article seemed so evenly split between two areas that I assigned two codes where each is given a .5 weighting in my analysis. In three cases, the second area was outside of technical services so that the final count includes a fraction.

Results

	Number	% Total	% TS
General Technical Services	8	1.25%	8.56%
Acquisitions	10	1.57%	10.70%
Cataloging	19.5	3.06%	20.86%
Collection Development	45.5	7.13%	48.66%
Preservation	8.5	1.33%	9.09%
Serials	2	0.31%	2.14%
Total Number of TS Papers			93.5
Total Number of Papers			638
Percentage TS Papers			14.66%
Percentage TS Papers without Collection Development			7.52%

Table 1: Total Number of Papers for All Conferences

As can be seen from Table 1, the total number of technical services papers represents only 14.66% of the 638 contributed papers at the 12 national conferences. These figures undoubtedly overstate the number of papers that were intended for a technical services audience. The largest number of contributed papers in the chart above, 45.5 or 48.6% percent of technical services presentations, treat collection development issues. While collection development is represented in the ALCTS structure by the Collection Management and Development Section (CMDS), the

Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) also has a collection development unit, Collection Development and Evaluation Section (CODES), a fact that indicates that collection development is of interest to both technical services and public services librarians. In many organizations, collection development responsibilities reside primarily, if not completely, in public services. Without the collection development papers, the percentage of papers firmly focused on technical services drops to 7.52%. While less important in numbers, several of the papers put into the acquisitions category (ACQ) discuss the acquisitions budget, a subject that would be of interest to administrators and collection development specialists outside of technical services.

While cataloging has a respectable number of articles, 19.5 or 20.86% of technical services presentations, this number is most likely not in keeping with their percentage among technical services staff with degrees in library science. On the other hand, preservationists, a group known for their dedication to their area of expertise, may have more articles than their numbers in the profession would warrant.

I understand, of course, that many librarians have diverse responsibilities and may do a little bit of everything. While statistical evidence from the ACRL registration records would be necessary to support this claim, it is my impression from attending all the ACRL national conferences that the number of attendees from small to mid-size academic libraries is a larger percentage wise than this same group’s attendance at the national ALA conference where librarians from ARL libraries are much more common.

Year	Place	Percent
1978	Boston	15.2%
1981	Minneapolis	23.2%
1984	Seattle	27.7%
1986	Baltimore	23.3%
1989	Cincinnati	22.1%
1992	Salt Lake	15.4%
1995	Pittsburgh	11.1%
1997	Nashville	7.5%
1999	Denver	1.9%
2001	Detroit	6.8%
2003	Charlotte	7.1%
2005	Minneapolis	8.7%

Table 2: Percentage of Technical Services Papers by Conference

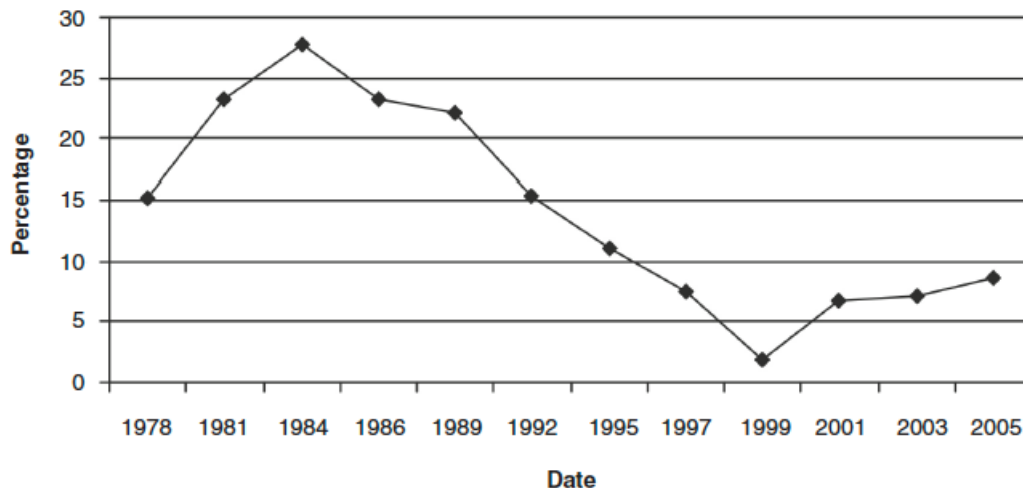


Chart 1: Percentage of Technical Services Presentations

Table 2 and Chart 1 indicate the percentage of technical services presentations at each individual conference. The most striking feature is the steep decline in the mid-1990's to a low of 1.9% for the 1999 Detroit national conference. From having looked at all the articles, I would attribute this decline to the increasing importance of the Internet, the World Wide Web, and electronic resources. I could have perhaps categorized a few of the papers on the electronic resources as collection development, but most seem to be more focused on the content of these resources and their uses in libraries rather than the collection development aspects of how to choose them. While the percentage of technical services papers has increased since then for the three subsequent conferences (6.8%, 7.1%, and 8.7%), this figure is still well below the percentages for the earlier ACRL national conferences.

Discussion

ALA and Its Divisional Structure

An issue for ALA members is the fact that they can choose divisions according to their type of work (technical services, systems, reference) or their type of library (public, academic, school). I believe that a case can be made that technical services librarians have generally made the choice to focus their professional participation in ALCTS rather than ACRL, perhaps in part because ALCTS is mostly a division of academic librarians and larger academic libraries are most likely to have a significant mass of technical services librarians. I am aware from my long participation in ALCTS that the number of public librarians who actively participate in the division is relatively small.

For whatever reason, ACRL members seem to have felt the need to create “type of work” sections (Distance Learning Section, Instruction Section, Rare Books and Manuscripts Section) and “subject sections” (Arts Section, Law and Political Science Section among many others) in addition to the sections that focus on subgroups of academic libraries (College Libraries Section, Community and Junior College Libraries Section, and Universities Libraries Section). The “type of work” and “subject sections” have a strong focus on public services activities and provide few opportunities for relevant committee appointments for technical services librarians.

Another interesting statistic for this article is the strong member overlap between ACRL and ALCTS as can be seen in a report prepared for the 2006 Midwinter Meeting in San Antonio.¹ On the ALCTS side, 2,301 members also belong to ACRL for a 50% overlap. Thus, half the ALCTS membership also belongs to ACRL, which is a strong indication of technical services librarians’ interest in academic libraries. The issue is less clear on the ACRL side with its higher membership, but the same 2,301 overlap members make up 18.83% of ACRL’s total membership. The issue could be how many of these dual members actively participate in none, one, or both of the divisions. Some may join for the publications since both divisions publish high quality journals. Some may join either division, but more likely ALCTS, from having past ties with the division even when job duties or type of library has changed. Nonetheless, it is clear that many ACRL members, 18.83% percent, indicate some interest in technical services through their membership in ALCTS.

Reasons for the Lack of Papers on Technical Services Topics, Notably Cataloging

There are two main possible reasons for the lack of papers, especially those on cataloging, though a detailed analysis of historical records, if they even exist, would be needed to “prove” the relative merits of the two choices. The two reasons are not mutually exclusive.

1. **Technical service librarians have not submitted papers for the ACRL national conferences.** To test the validity of this reason would require looking at all the submissions and analyzing their subject content. If many were submitted, the next issue would be the quality of the papers as discussed below. If few papers were submitted, the next step would be to try to understand why. Did potential writers not want to attend the ACRL conference? Did potential writers not consider the ACRL conference as a good outlet for their publications in comparison with other publication opportunities? Did the lack of technical services publications at the early conferences, especially on cataloging topics, discourage potential writers from considering the ACRL national conferences?

2. **The review panels rejected a higher proportion of technical services publications.** This hypothesis is also difficult to prove or disprove because it would require access to the deliberations of the review panels, which are by their very nature secret, and also an indication of the subject matter of rejected papers. I did consider looking at the make up of these panels, but ALA records give only the names of the panel members and peer reviewers.² The difficulty in discovering position titles over the past 25 years for so many librarians would be a more formidable task than warranted by the importance of this topic. Rejection can also occur for a combination of two reasons. The first would be the poor quality of the submitted paper. The second would be the perception that the paper, though of high quality, would have limited appeal to the attendees of the conference. Thus, a decent paper on information literacy, a topic of high interest within ACRL, might have a better chance of being accepted than an excellent paper on a narrow “niche” topic in technical services. A final consideration might be the level of prior knowledge required to understand the presentation. For papers on technical services subjects, the audience might be required to have more specialized knowledge while more general papers would be accessible to a higher proportion of conference goers.

This process could become a vicious cycle as few technical services librarians submit papers because they get rejected and the review panels select fewer papers because technical services librarians do not attend the conference.

Concluding Remarks

If the goal of each national conference is to encourage member participation and involvement with ACRL, perhaps the topic of this paper is irrelevant in any case because the ACRL national conferences have been wildly successful whether or not there are contributed papers that appeal to technical services librarians. Attendance set a record at the 2005 Minneapolis conference. “Close to 4,000 attendees from every state and 15 countries joined the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) at its 12th National Conference in Minneapolis, April 7 to 10. About 3,490 people attended the 2003 ACRL conference in Charlotte.”³ I find it hard to argue against such success. If my perception that a high percentage of the attendees come from smaller libraries is correct, this audience may be less interested in technical services because acquisitions and cataloging are normally less complicated in smaller libraries and are more often handled by library support staff who are probably less likely to attend an ACRL conference.

On the other hand, the lack of technical services papers may reinforce the perception that ACRL is a division for public services academic librarians with much less appeal for academic

librarians who work behind the scenes in cataloging, acquisitions, and systems. From my dealings with students, I can confirm that the stereotypes about catalogers being “different” still persist and that they perceive a “gulf” between public and technical services. I would hope that ACRL, as the division for academic librarians, would do all that it can to minimize this “gulf” and speak for **all** academic librarians. At the very least, ACRL should assure that the selection panels and peer reviewers for contributed papers include a fair proportion of technical services librarians if this is currently not the case.

¹”Division and Round Table Overlap Prepared for Midwinter 2006 San Antonio.” <http://www.ala.org/ala/pla/plaorg/reportstopla/2006.23.1.xls> (Accessed August 2006)

²”On the lists of contributed papers readers, there are no affiliations given, so you’d have to know the players.” Email from Karen Muller, ALA Librarian, September 20, 2005.

³Association of College & Research Libraries conference draws record-breaking attendance in Minneapolis. (2005, April 11). *Press release*.

APPENDIX I:

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ACRL NATIONAL CONFERENCES

1st National Conference, Boston, MA, 1978

“New Horizons for Academic Libraries : Papers Presented at the First National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Boston, Massachusetts, November 8-11, 1978.” Eds. Robert D. Stueart and Richard David Johnson. New York: K.G. Saur Pub., 1979. (Print version)

1st National Conference, Boston, MA, 1978

“New Horizons for Academic Libraries : ACRL 1978 National Conference : Contributed Papers” Eds. Martha J. Bailey. [Chicago]: American Library Association, 1978?. (Microfiche Version)

2nd National Conference, Minneapolis, MN, 1981

“Options for the 80s : Proceedings of the Second National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries.” Eds. Michael D. Kathman and Virgil F. Massman (Foundations in Library and Information Science; v. 17). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1982.

3rd National Conference, Seattle, WA, 1984

“Academic Libraries : Myths and Realities : Proceedings of the Third National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries.” Eds. Suzanne C. Dodson and Gary L. Menges. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1984.

4th National Conference, Baltimore, MD, 1986

“Energies for Transition : Proceedings of the Fourth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Baltimore, Maryland, April 9-12, 1986.” Ed. Danuta A. Nitecki. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1986.

5th National Conference, Cincinnati, OH, 1989

“Building on the First Century : Proceedings of the Fifth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Cincinnati, Ohio, April 5-8, 1989.” Ed. Janice C. Fennell. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1989.

6th National Conference, Salt Lake City, UT, 1992

“Academic Libraries : Achieving Excellence in Higher Education : Proceedings of the Sixth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Salt Lake City, Utah April 12-14, 1992.” Ed. Thomas Kirk. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1992.

7th National Conference, Pittsburg, PA, 1995

“Continuity & Transformation : The Promise of Confluence : Proceedings of the Seventh National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, March 29-April 1, 1995.” Ed. Richard AmRhein. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1995.

8th National Conference, Nashville, TN, 1997.

“Choosing Our Futures : Nashville, Tennessee April 11-14, 1997.”

<http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrl/events/nationalconference/conference8.htm>

9th National Conference, Detroit, MI, 1999

“Racing toward Tomorrow : Proceedings of the Ninth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, April 8-11, 1999.” Ed. Hugh A. Thompson. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1999.

10th National Conference, Denver, CO, 2001

“Crossing the Divide : Proceedings of the Tenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, March 15-18, 2001.” Ed. Hugh A. Thompson. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2001.

11th National Conference, Charlotte, NC, 2003

“Learning to Make a Difference : Proceedings of the Eleventh National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, April 10-13, 2003, Charlotte, North Carolina.” Ed. Hugh A. Thompson. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2003.

12th National Conference, Minneapolis, MN, 2005

“Currents and Convergence : Navigating the Rivers of Change : Proceedings of the Twelfth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, April 7-10, 2005, Minneapolis, Minnesota.” Ed. Hugh A. Thompson. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2005.