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Steven E. Smith, Deborah L. Thomas, and Alan H. Wallace, "Resolved, Every Librarian a Subject Librarian:
Implementing Subject Librarianship Across a Research Library" (2013). *Proceedings of the Charleston
Library Conference.*
http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284315292

Resolved, Every Librarian a Subject Librarian: Implementing Subject Librarianship Across a Research Library

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Abstract

Many academic research librarians are specialists—catalogers, data curation librarians, electronic resources librarians—and working with students is considered to be a job for public service librarians. The University of Tennessee Libraries is expanding subject librarian responsibility across the Libraries, and research librarians who may have never worked in public services are assuming liaison and collection development roles. Steve Smith, Dean of Libraries, will share his model of learning, research, and collections (LRC) librarianship and explain his rationale for starting the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Libraries down this road. And how is that concept working for us? Hear from a couple of the librarians charged with implementing the vision: a technical services librarian given new LRC subject responsibility and the public service librarian assigned to get that new LRC subject librarian up to speed. We will discuss organizational and implementation challenges and share what we have learned about training and mentoring new subject librarians.

The Vision

The thinking behind the learning, research, and collections (LRC) model focuses on ways to better leverage existing resources to reach more efficiently and effectively across the disciplines and departments to better support learning, research, and collections. Though the way we deliver services and support is changing and will continue to evolve, the fundamentals of what we provide as librarians remains the same. Those fundamentals focus on learning (both formal and informal), research (meaning traditional reference support, virtual reference, and evolving research partnerships such as systematic reviews and other forms of what might be thought of as "deep" support), and collections (building, management, development, interpretation, etc.). Faculty librarian lines have grown in recent years atUniversity of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), but so have the demands and expectations. The LRC model attempts to help meet these growing demands.

The LRC model was conceived against a broader backdrop of an increased emphasis on outcome-based budget models within the state for higher education. Tennessee was the first state in the country to move from an enrollment-based funding model to an outcome model focusing on a variety of metrics, most of which are focused on student success. Measures around retention, persistence, and the 6-year graduation rate are key to the state budgeting process for higher education. In 2009, then-Governor Bredesen challenged UTK to become a Top 25 public research institution. The current governor, Bill Haslam, has continued to encourage this goal. At about the same time as the Top 25 challenge and the move to outcome-based budget measures, the Tennessee legislature enacted the Complete College Act which seeks to bring the average number of Tennesseans with college degrees up to par with the national average.

These changes at the state level have had a profound impact on universities and colleges across the state. UTK drew up a new strategic plan, called the Vol Vision. In light of the University's new plan, the library also developed a new strategic plan emphasizing student success in addition to enhanced research support and community outreach. By allowing us to look for student success support across the organization, rather than in one or two particular departments, we feel this new approach helps us to directly support the strategic priorities of the state and the institution with the talent and resources at hand.

LRC is not a department or a particular job assignment. Rather, LRC is way of viewing ourselves and our efforts. Some within the library have likened this to an "Every Marine a Rifleman" or "Every Cook a Sous Chef" approach or philosophy. While acknowledging that one's area of emphasis can vary depending on job assignment, disciplinary focus, or other conditions, every professional should be capable of supporting activities associated with learning, research, and collections. Some librarians may spend all or most of their time in one or two of these areas; others are equally balanced between the three. The degree of emphasis is ideally balanced with one's interests and negotiated with one's supervisor, but the underlying idea is that we should all have the fundamental capacity of support in all activities and services associated with learning, research, and collections. Again, the intent is to focus on the overarching goals of the state and the institution by more clearly articulating the fundamentals of librarianship while also allowing the organization to leverage resources across department or organizational lines.

Reaction from the Trenches

Reaction from the public services/subject librarians was mixed. There was not really consensus, but there was a dose of skepticism. The skepticism was based on a strong desire to maintain excellent public service as well as various less than successful reorganization attempts from previous administrations. Earlier efforts to engage nonpublic service faculty as liaisons had largely failed, and usually the liaison efforts had been a second or even third priority among a (nonpublic service) librarian's responsibilities. Public service librarians were proud of the quality of service offered, and some librarians were concerned that part-time liaisons would not be fully integrated into the service philosophy. But, aside from history, whenever people have their organizations changed—even with excellent planning and communication—there is angst. Public services librarians did recognize that more subject librarians were needed. They hoped for success in this new venture, but they needed to be shown why this effort would succeed while previous efforts had not.

The reaction from Technical Services was a little different. Mainly, Technical Services faculty and the staff who work with them were concerned about workload. How much time would subject librarianship take away from current jobs? The answer to that question depended, to a large extent, on the particular subject assignment; of course, some academic departments required more teaching and individual consultations than others. The concern was valid, however, because new subject librarians now had external customers—the faculty and students of their academic departments. Good service demanded that external customers be moved to the top of the list, and internal customers had to wait. That is why it is important that everyone in the organization—staff as well as faculty—understand and accept (if not endorse) the LRC concept. The LRC librarian vision created ripples throughout the organization, and it affected many more people than just new subject librarians.

Getting Started and Some Thoughts on Mentoring

UTK now hires most new librarians with subject librarianship as part of the job description—for example, we hired a data curation/architecture subject librarian and a head of library marketing and communications/journalism subject librarian. But a few existing nonpublic services librarians were given subject assignments for the next academic year. Some had never worked public services, and others had some public services experience in the distant past. These new subject librarians needed help–fall semester was approaching, and they would have classes to teach and collections to develop. New subject librarians were assigned mentors help them get started.

The choice of mentor proved to be important. Mentors and new subject librarians were paired within broad disciplines; for example, a social sciences mentor was matched with a new political science subject librarian. Mentors needed to be strong teachers, and there needed to be a good personality match between the pair. It was also imperative that expectations between the two were clear—did the mentor expect to be contacted if assistance was needed? Or did the

mentee expect that the mentor would check in regularly? Whatever the two worked out was fine as long as the understanding was the same.

Mentoring Teaching

Of all the responsibilities associated with subject librarianship, new subject librarians were most concerned about teaching. Many librarians outside of reference seem to feel the same way—a lot of people would be happy to do the collection development aspect of subject librarianship, but there are fewer takers for the teaching gig. And with good reason—teaching is hard. It requires mastering the discipline well enough to field questions in front of an audience. It requires a little showmanship and occasionally enough self-confidence to persevere when faced with restless undergraduates. Teaching is intensive in the fall semester, so it was important that new LRC librarians get up to speed quickly. They needed a structure for their classes, some help in determining what resources are appropriate for graduates and undergraduates, and some typical sample topics that would work well as demonstrations of search strategies. Luckily, their mentors could help. Having mentors provide this model meant a fast track to successful teaching.

The Public Services mentors had a long history of providing support and guidance for new librarians, and they were ready to support their colleagues as they took on new teaching assignments. The best approach was to let mentees observe a few sessions taught by the mentors and then allow mentees to get their feet wet by team teaching with the mentor. Gradually, the new subject librarian took over more of the class until the mentor was present only as backup. This proved to be an effective approach, and new subject librarians taught solo the second semester. The mentors' goals were to give an example, to let the new subject librarians become comfortable as teachers, and to provide support and encouragement as the new LRC librarians developed their personal teaching styles.

Mentoring Collection Development and Faculty Liaison Work

Collection development was new to some subject librarians, but getting started was not difficult. There was already training in place for new librarians, and they were shown standard things— how to select books on vendor web sites, how to interpret information in the acquisitions module of the ILS, and how to read their approval profile. A collection development librarian checked in with them regularly their first year and was available to explain local policies. Collection development was covered, but they needed their mentors to help them get started as liaisons. What was expected of them as a liaison? Of course they knew that they were expected to teach, to consult, and to develop the collection, but they needed some benchmarks. The mentors knew the services that other liaisons offered, and they knew what would be considered important by the organization. They also knew what level of service would be realistic to provide. An example: yes to teaching classes; no to maintaining Blackboard course sites. The mentors had received many, many faculty requests. They knew the standard, and they could also provide a "script" for the new subject librarian. For example: "I am sorry, Dr. Department Head, but I cannot provide you with h-factor reports for every faculty member in your department, but I can explain how to find h-factors to your graduate assistant—why don't you send her over?" Having this kind of advice available smoothed the way and took some pressure off new subject librarians. Knowing the general practices of an institution— written or not—and how to politely respond to sometimes demanding personalities is the hallmark of a successful liaison.

Mentors could also help new librarians negotiate the political aspects of their jobs. The mentors knew many of the teaching faculty that the new liaisons might encounter and were able to provide a few well-timed "heads ups" based on their experience. Mentors needed to be careful not to prejudice new librarians with their worldview, but departmental politics are important. Good advice from mentors saved new librarians from being blindsided.

Mentoring Reference

New subject librarians were hesitant to teach, but general reference proved to be the more challenging assignment. Liaison work requires mastering a single subject discipline, but working the reference desk means requires a passing familiarity with sources in all disciplines. On top of that, the reference desk is the "help desk" for the University—where can students go to get help with statistics or appeal a parking citation? The sheer amount of information required was bewildering. At UTK, the desk covers e-mail, phone, chat, and walk-in questions—and new subject librarians often had all of those going at once. It was stressful, and new subject librarians sometimes felt as if their 2-hour shifts lasted a long, long time. Actually, 2 hours of reference work sometimes stretched to 3 or 4 hours. When new librarians were not competent enough to handle multiple chats, they needed to take an e-mail or a phone number and finish the question after a desk shift.

Aside from inexperience, a few other problems surfaced. Technology proved to be a barrier. LRC librarians from Technical Services use a PC desktop because the ILS module does not work on Macs. The reference desk (and instruction rooms) had Macs. Librarians at the reference desk were expected to help students begin their research by using the discovery system; most librarians outside of reference use the classic catalog, not the discovery system. Librarians who knew cataloging were tempted to search by typing in valid Library of Congress (LC) subject headings with all the attendant subdivisions, but instead they needed to show the student how to start, which usually meant keyword searching. New subject librarians had a lot to learn about reference, and only the briefest of training had been provided. Fortunately, the "varsity team" came to the rescue.

The public service mentors have been called the "the varsity team," and the varsity team stepped up to the reference task. An attempt had been made to match newer liaisons with experienced reference librarians on the desk schedule, but this was not enough. There were many times when the veteran was busy, and as Murphy's

Law would suggest—that was when the newer librarian had a hard question. So, if possible, it was good to have a third person available, and the varsity team made a point of "shadowing" new people on the desk. Probably the single best thing that mentors did was to show up—unannounced and at their own behest—to support their new colleagues at the desk. Public services librarians wanted their colleagues to succeed and knew their success was in everyone's best interest

Although some new subject librarians had previous reference experience, it is important to note that general reference has changed a great deal. The number of questions may be down, but because of the web, the level of difficulty is not. If someone does not find an answer quickly—reliable source or not—they then turn to the library for help, and they expect instant results. Depth of knowledge and the desire and willingness to dig below the initial Google level is vital. The other aspect of general reference provision that has changed for many institutions is that people no longer spend hour after hour on the desk. In the mid-1980s librarians were on a desk for 20 hours or more a week. Today at UT, it is only about two hours. During that time, the librarian is responsible for walk-ins, the phone, e-reference, and chat. It is usually feast or famine. It is hard, even for the varsity team to master everything when desk hours are limited. Even experienced librarians rely upon each other, and mentors try to communicate to newer colleagues that it is okay, no—it is important to ask for help.

Lessons Learned

1. Spreading subject librarianship across the organization presents special challenges, and communication is the biggest of those challenges. Liaison librarians outside of public services miss out on those "water cooler" conversations, and "common knowledge" ceases to exist. Communication needs to be formalized, occasions need to be created to let librarians share experiences, and web pages have to be constantly perfected.

2. Formal training is essential, but it needs to go hand in hand with mentoring. There is no substitute for the tacit knowledge (all that stuff that is not taught in school, but is vital to success) that a mentor provides. Librarians can teach themselves search strategies, but what they really need is someone to tell them what to do when the projector bulb blows.

3. That "walk a mile in another man's shoes" thing is trite but true. LRC librarians from across the organization have increased respect for their colleagues who are public services specialists. And some policies are being reviewed based on public services experiences—explaining a policy to the public can be enlightening.

Topics to Pursue

1. Training, of course.

2. Performance evaluation: There is still no formal process to collect input and evaluate subject liaison work when an LRC librarian is not in public services. LRC librarians from outside public services are concerned that their work may be evaluated on the same standard as public services librarians who were recruited in national searches specifically to be subject librarians. Non-LRC librarians are concerned that so much emphasis is being placed on the LRC concept that their careers may suffer.

3. Concept evaluation. After a year's experience, it is time to step back and assess.