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The Grass is Often Greener — Newbie



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In July of 2010, after a period of unemployment occasioned by the corporate buyout of my former employer, I had the good fortune to be hired by a college library untroubled by my unconventional resume and imaginative enough to see the advantages of bringing a former sales rep into academia. After nearly thirty years as a commercial traveler for three different book vendors, I had learned a thing or two about the industry and the folks who inhabit it, and I was about to use that experience in the service of **The College of New Jersey**.

My plan in this series of articles is to reflect on my transition from an itinerant peddler to a stationary buyer, hoping to inform and even reassure others contemplating a move either to or from the commercial sector.

The Learning Curve

Despite occasional claims and experiences to the contrary, the vendor/librarian divide is not Manichean. It's not predator/prey; it's not just about buying and selling stuff. Players on both sides of the desk share a common focus and a common goal: to serve their organizations by facilitating the flow of information. But from the start of my involvement with **TCNJ**, I found the path to that goal decidedly unfamiliar. I was in a new culture.

The interview for my previous job at **Blackwell** was essentially a conversation with a sales manager in a coffee shop. Colleges, and I suspect public colleges in particular, take a rather different approach. The committee charged with filling my position at **TCNJ** was scrupulously formal and extraordinarily thorough. The process was carefully scripted and meticulously fair. I was impressed and a bit intimidated. Even more foreign to me, when I was offered the job I was given a contract and put on the tenure track.

The nagging worry of job security, ever present in the vendor world, would soon be replaced by other anxieties.

My first days at **TCNJ** were a blur of new employee paperwork and logistics. I got a decal to park my car legally; I was issued my college ID. Easy stuff. Then I was introduced to budgets and accounting. Not so easy. I always understood fund accounting in a general way. I knew libraries had budget lines for books and serials and electronics and supplies and such. I knew that finer distinctions sometimes existed and that these distinctions were valuable as a way of approaching approval profiling, but I confess my main interest in budgets as a vendor rep was whether or not a customer had one. In vendor land, we never much cared how our bills were paid. That is, we never much cared what pot of money our payment came from. We were, however, pretty keen on getting these payments in a reasonable amount of time. But here in library land, I'm coming to appreciate the profound concern we have with allocating and tracking funds.

The reasons for this concern are multitude. First, and foremost, is the need for fiscal accountability to the institution and, in my library's case, to the state. Beyond this, as I've long known, but only recently internalized, every dollar allocated and spent represents a decision and usually a tradeoff. Do we buy this journal in electronic format, hard copy or both? Do we subscribe to this database because a professor wants it for her own research instead of another database that's part of a frequent class project? Do we buy a new fax machine to replace a broken one or do more staff people share the working ones? My role right now in acquisitions is to use my experience and contacts to find the best price for our options and

present these dollar costs to those making the decisions.

The mention of decision makers leads inevitably to the topic of office politics. As a vendor rep posted away from corporate headquarters, I was pretty much a non-player in bureaucratic intrigue. I generally had good bosses who kept me out of trouble. But because I spent so much time in so many different libraries, I had occasion to see how destructive a hostile environment can be. In my pursuit of a new job, one factor of importance to me was finding not just a stimulating, but a congenial workplace. I wanted colleagues, not competitors and made a point of investigating the culture of **TCNJ**. I was told (and have since verified) that **TCNJ** is a generally happy, very busy, and very productive place. I have found the people here to be not simply supportive, but downright nurturing.

The Commute

A final observation as I begin this new life: commuting is boring! In vendor land, I drove (or flew) some rather long distances. I faced traffic miseries and the usual vicissitudes of that life. But the destinations changed all the time and each stop was a goal, a milestone along the way. I saw beautiful mountains in Vermont from country roads and slums in the Bronx from a jammed expressway — but not everyday. Now it's pretty much the same time and the same route daily. Some of the other cars are beginning to look familiar. I'm investigating audio books (any recommendations?) and already fantasize about moving.

As I write this, I've been a practicing librarian again for just under two months — still a newbie, I'm told. I know there are more revelations to come. Stay tuned. 🌱

Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — The Finer Points of Being an Acquisitions Librarian/Library Liaison

Column Editor: **Arlene Moore Sievers-Hill** <axs23@case.edu> <arlenesievers7@hotmail.com>

First off, I am an Acquisitions Librarian. However, I am one who also has a foot solidly placed in Public Services. I am also a library liaison for two departments — Art History and Art, and Modern Languages and Literatures. I would like to say I wear two hats, but I really get tired of using that metaphor. I think I do a good job in both these areas, Acquisitions and Subject Librarianship, and each helps me do a better job in the other.

I'm sure this is the case at smaller colleges, that is Technical Services people also handling the liaison duties. In fact I know it is so. But I am at a medium-size university where this kind

of thing is less common. There was a trend a number of years ago where it was greatly encouraged to get "back room" librarians out on the reference desk and handling collection development for a subject area. I think that trend passed, if I am not mistaken. Being a liaison is not something you can really do as a part-time thing, or conceive of it as that — and I don't. Many of the Reference/collection development Librarians do several areas, and have special responsibility for a library program, like library instruction, so I feel I'm not very different than that.

How did I get in this situation? First

of all, I did have some academic knowledge of both areas, no degree in art history but some academic preparation and ongoing learning. I do have a degree in Germanic Languages and Literatures and Comparative Literature which stands me in good stead in working with the Modern Languages Department and doing collection development. There was a period too when we lost a lot of humanities librarians at the library. Those who had left had handled

