The Subject Liaison's Survival Guide to Technical Services

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Introduction

This guide is intended to help subject liaisons, particularly those new to the profession, better understand the complexities of technical services as they relate to collection development. This idea originated from a single, long-ago presentation, experiences working together on a joint technical services/subject liaison collections committee, and our own conversations and experiences with veteran and new subject liaisons. We found that there was not only a need for liaisons to understand some of the nitty-gritty aspects of technical services as they relate to the collections aspects of a liaison's job but also no easy or practical way to cover all that ground when someone is brand new. We also found that although there is plenty of literature about technical services such as cataloging or acquisitions, the primary audience is not subject liaisons. And although much has been written about the collection responsibilities of a liaison, there is a dearth of in-depth information about technical services as it relates to liaisons and their collection responsibilities. This short volume is our attempt to address this lack of information and to provide subject liaisons with a starting point as they begin to build their understanding of technical services.

At this point, it behooves us to define what we mean when we refer to *technical services* and *subject liaisons* because these can be defined, named, and organized differently depending on the library. A *liaison* is an academic librarian who has three primary responsibilities: reference/research assistance, library instruction, and collection development. These responsibilities are subject-specific, meaning that the liaison provides these services to meet the needs of disciplines such as engineering, psychology, theater, education, and the like. Many liaisons have responsibilities in more than one discipline or subject area. *Technical services,* in this book, is a catchall term we use to refer to the units or departments responsible for collection development and maintenance, acquisitions, processing, and cataloging.

ORGANIZATION

In order to give subject liaisons a starting point for developing a more robust understanding of technical services, we organized our chapters into what we considered a logical flow that mostly follows the process of acquiring resources: developing the collection, budgeting, submitting orders, acquisitions ordering, receiving and processing, cataloging, and maintaining the collection. Each chapter is divided further into the main points of interest for the overarching chapter theme. These subdivisions provide a brief explanation about the importance of the topic for liaisons and some context for the topic. These discussions are followed by lengthy lists of questions we've titled "Questions You Should Be Asking." These questions are meant to be the true guide for liaisons by pointing them toward considerations of which they were unaware and by providing starting points for conversations with technical services colleagues. Liaisons shouldn't feel constrained to sit down with technical services staff and ask all the questions at once; in fact, we don't recommend that approach. Rather, these questions should be used to guide *ongoing* conversations and learning. Many of these questions will be excellent starting points for these ongoing conversations, but we also expect that some questions may be more useful after a liaison has gained a little experience and begun working in earnest with technical services colleagues.

One final note on organization: at the end of the book, readers will find a glossary of the jargon and technical terms we've used. We've tried to keep definitions straightforward and free of too many details. Some of these terms may not have a standard use across libraries, so keep in mind that the definitions we provide are within the context of this book.

EXCLUSIONS AND CAVEATS

Before you move on to the heady reading beyond this introduction, we would like to address a few exclusions and caveats. First, please be aware that this book is not comprehensive. It does not cover every eventuality or every situation, nor is it meant to. There was simply no way for us to include everything in technical services that may be important to a liaison, so we opted to include what we thought was most likely to be commonly experienced. You may also notice, if you happen to be a technical services colleague reading this guide, that some details are not quite as precise as might be expected were you discussing the same topic with your technical services colleagues. This is a result of writing for an audience who needs details but not minutiae.

We also readily acknowledge that what we have included does not speak to every situation or environment. We don't assume that every library is the same or like our own institution; there are numerous ways to organize a library and its workflows. Likewise, individuals, even with the same job title, may have different roles, responsibilities, or levels of authority depending on the library in which they work. This book does not attempt to discuss the myriad ways in which libraries, liaisons, and technical services units can operate. We wrote this book with the premise that every library is in some way unique and that the only way that you can find out about your particular situation is to talk with the librarians and staff in your library. Just as your library may not refer to subject liaisons by that particular moniker or the term *technical services* might not be in use at all in your institution, there may be situations we address in this book that don't occur in your library. Or perhaps these aspects in your library are similar to what we address but not exactly the same. Our questions are meant to be thought-provoking and conversation starters; we aren't expecting them to be the end-all-be-all to the dialogue you establish with technical services and neither should you. We hope that you use them or rework them, if needed, to address your particular situation.

Finally, missing from this book is a philosophical examination of technical services as it relates to liaisons. How should I perform collection development? What is the importance of cataloging for patrons? What are the best statistics to use for decision making? Though there is a lot of value in addressing those questions, we have chosen to steer away from them because other sources have addressed those questions more robustly and because the point of a book on the practicalities of technical services would be lost. Instead, we hope we have included some questions that help you obtain the information you decide you need once you've considered these weighty topics.

We trust that the conversations inspired by these questions will help you understand how technical services really works in your library and that they help you as you develop into an experienced and effective liaison. We also hope that as you have these conversations, you'll see that much of collection development is a team effort and that building your understanding of these mechanics can help you navigate these processes effectively.

1

Collection Development

Collection development may be *the* part of technical services in which most liaisons expect to be involved. In this book and in the workaday world, too, *collection development* is a broad, catchall phrase that applies to everything from the organizational unit and the individual(s) responsible for collections to the concepts, policies, and processes related to developing, selecting, and maintaining collections.

In this chapter, our focus is on the unit responsible for collection development in your library. We recognize that libraries may use different names or locate this unit in different places in the organizational hierarchy; in this book, when we use the term *collection development,* we refer to the unit whose primary responsibilities pertain to the development of the library's collections or resources, regardless of actual official title or organizational placement. Rather than focusing on the theoretical aspects of collection development or explaining best practices on how to develop collections, this chapter primarily addresses the functional parts of the collection development department that we think affect the liaison most: understanding the departmental structure and associated liaison roles, communication to and from the department, the official collection development policy, and data or information that the department can provide.

STRUCTURE

Because collection development is a main responsibility for subject liaisons, we think it is imperative to understand exactly who is involved in collection development activities and oversight within the library. Understanding this structure is directly related to who has authority and ultimate responsibility for performing collection development activities. You will find that different individuals have various levels of responsibility and that this arrangement varies widely by institution. Understanding structure helps you, as a liaison, understand exactly what your role is. Institutionally, a liaison's role can range from merely suggesting that the library purchase resources to making recommendations for purchase that are routinely accepted to actually having final authority over selection decisions. There are almost endless ways to organize a collection development department and delegate responsibilities. If you talk to liaisons who work in other institutions, you may find that in their library just one person coordinates all collection development activities while in other libraries, these responsibilities are divided among several people based on resource type (serials, electronic resources, one-time purchases, etc.). You may also find that some libraries use a committee—in addition to the individuals in the collection development department—to perform certain types of selection and decision making, perhaps for very expensive purchases or any item that requires a subscription.

There also may be outside players such as teaching or research faculty who have a role within the overall collection development structure, though the formality and prominence of their roles will vary by institution size, by library mission, or by both. We realize that this is very likely to seem like a confusing puzzle at first (for Thing X, ask Tom; for Thing Y, notify Lorenzo; for Issue Z, you'll need to consult with the Committee on All Things Print—and don't forget to include faculty!). If your library provides collection development training, the people responsible for many of the bigger aspects will become clear quickly. If not, start with trying to find an organizational chart with job descriptions for collection development and go from there. Absolutely ask questions of your technical services and liaison colleagues as you suss out exactly who is responsible for what, keeping in mind that what is written on organizational charts can be different in day-to-day practice.

STRUCTURE

Questions You Should Be Asking

Collection Development Department

- What functions does the collection development department perform?
- How many people are in this department?
- Are there any subunits (e.g., units responsible for particular resource types or subject areas) within the collection development department? If so, what are they, and what are their functions?
- Who leads this department, and is this individual the main decision maker?
- What is the collection development department leader's responsibility regarding selection, withdrawal, and other collection development decisions?

Collection Development Committees

- What functions, if any, do collections committees play in collection development? What is their responsibility regarding selection, withdrawal, and other collection development decisions?

- How many committees are there, what do they do, and what are they named?
- To whom do these committees report?
- Do liaisons serve on these committees? If so, what are the terms and responsibilities of the service?
- Who is the final decision maker—the committee (by consensus or vote) or the individual(s) to whom the committee reports?

Faculty

- What is the role of teaching or research faculty, or both, in collection development, particularly regarding resource selection and withdrawal? Does their role vary (e.g., do research faculty have more influence than teaching faculty)?
- Is the role of faculty in collection development formally recognized and documented? If so, where is this documentation?
- If the faculty's role is more informal, though still expected, what are the areas in which they should be included?

COMMUNICATION

In this book, we talk a lot about the importance of understanding how communication flows in and among departments. Because collection development responsibilities may be spread widely throughout the library, getting a good handle on the manner in which formal and informal communication flows to and from the collection development department is critical for success—as well as for avoiding frustration. Find out what kinds of communication you can expect to receive from the collection development department—such as policy updates and changes, deadlines, and guidelines—and what information staff members expect you to convey to their department, to faculty, and to vendors.

One of the first things about which a liaison can ask is the communication structure: who is responsible for relaying information about collection development? Although it might seem obvious that the communication structure should reflect the structure of collection development in general, you may find that only one person is responsible for relaying certain types of information—for example, policy updates, structure changes, collections decisions. You may also find that both formal and informal communication channels exist, as is the case in most departments. Collection development documentation may outline these channels, but don't forget to talk to your established liaison colleagues. They can offer their opinions and experiences on what you can expect and on effective approaches for relaying information to the collection development department through both channels, as well as alerting you to any unwritten rules or expectations (yes, these often exist!).

Liaisons will also want to determine how collection development–related communication with faculty and other key constituencies works, particularly the roles and expectations of the liaison versus the roles and expectations of the responsible parties in collection development. Ask about expected communications or reports to these parties from you or the collection development department or both, as well as how you are expected to report information or feedback from external partners to collection development. Communication with external-to-the-library constituents is critical in times of budget cuts and collection reviews. Because those situations tend to be touchy, it's crucial for liaisons to understand to whom and how cut/review processes are to be communicated to external partners. Be sure you clarify what information, if any, will be released by collection development to the external audience and what information should be disseminated by the liaison. For example, you may find that you want to include more information or context, or both, for the cuts than the minimum required by the collection development department, or perhaps you want to tailor the wording of a policy change message to make it more department-specific. We also urge you to recognize that there are times when the collection development department expects liaisons to disseminate a unified message with little to no deviation from the prepared script.

Liaisons should also consider the question of how communication works with resource providers or vendors. You will probably receive many, many calls and e-mails from vendors. And there will be times when you will want to ask vendors for specific types of information, including title lists, coverage, subscription or purchase costs, and so forth. Obviously you cannot control when vendors contact you, but be sure to check with the collection development department staff about their expectations for your conversations with vendors. There also may be times when collection development wants to be the main point of contact or to initiate contact with vendors—for example, to negotiate price or set up trials. You might find that the reasons in your library include a desire to convey consistent information or the need for formal record keeping. This doesn't mean that you can't or shouldn't participate in conversations with vendors along with collection development; rather, you need to recognize and understand when it is better to let the collection development department lead.

COMMUNICATION

Questions You Should Be Asking

- Who is the primary point person for general communication coming from collection development? If those responsibilities are divided, how is overall communication managed?
- What kinds of formal departmental communications can I expect to receive? How frequently does collection development send out various communiqués?
- What kinds of information am I required to report to collection development and how often? Are there formal reports that collection development expects liaisons to complete, or is reporting a more informal process?
- How is communication to teaching or research faculty regarding collection development issues handled? Are liaisons the primary communicators of information, or is the collection development department the primary issuer?

- If the collection development department issues most faculty communication, when will I be expected to either participate or lead?
- If collection development has a discussion with a faculty member or another department, am I automatically included in the conversation even though I may not be expected to be an active participant? If not, how can I make sure I'm informed of discussions that include my subject areas?
- If I, as the liaison, lead most of the faculty communication, in what situations will the collection development department need to assist or lead?
- Under what circumstances does the message from collection development need to be unified and unchanged by liaisons? Can I indicate that this message is from the library as an entity and not from me as an individual? What is the best wording for that circumstance?
- In communication with faculty about collection development issues—changes to policies, cuts, reviews—how detailed should the information be? Do we have any baseline information we are expected to include? Are there any guidelines for specific situations?
- Does most vendor communication happen between liaison and vendor or between collection development and vendor?
- When I communicate with vendors, what kinds of information should I be passing along to the collection development department? Should I be including the collection development department in my communications? If so, every time? Also, what individuals within collection development should I be notifying?
- Under what circumstances should I ask collection development to obtain vendor information for me rather than ask for it myself?
- When collection development talks to vendors of interest to my subject areas, will department staff include me in discussions? If this inclusion is done case by case, in what kinds of conversations do liaisons usually participate?

POLICY

Almost all libraries have an established collection development policy that serves as guidance for both virtual and physical collections. Although the text might not be riveting, it's important to read and develop a solid understanding of your library's policies because they contain a lot of institutionally specific information that you'll need to know for decision making. Policies provide guidance by outlining criteria for selection and deselection, indicating collection levels arranged by subject or classification, and identifying and prioritizing the collection's primary audiences (undergraduates, graduates, research, etc.). Expect the policy to specify the scope and breadth of the collection as well as set clear boundaries in specific areas.

Reading the library's collection development policy should be one of the first things that a new liaison does. You'll need to ask your collection development colleagues where policy documentation can be found and when it was last updated. You should also find out who maintains the policy—a person or a group—and with whom you should consult if you have any questions regarding the policy. We also strongly urge you to seek out the history and rationale of the policy because that information can provide valuable context regarding policy decisions contained within the document.

As you become familiar with the policies guiding collection development, the scope of said policies is another important aspect to investigate. By *scope,* we mean what information the policy includes and what it doesn't. For example, are collection development processes (e.g., physical handling of gift items, reporting dates and deadlines, etc.) addressed in the policy document itself, or are they dealt with elsewhere, if at all? As you read the policy and talk to colleagues, you may find that forming a complete picture of the policy and how it works requires other documentation in addition to the policy itself. We encourage you to find out who is responsible for maintaining and disseminating that type of information and then availing yourself of it.

Collection development policies are meant to be flexible and adaptable, but they may also need modifying from time to time as the library's mission, community, and resources evolve. As with other policy aspects, determining the *who* and the *how* should be on a liaison's short list of things to do: who can ask for modifications, who approves changes, who actually updates the document with modifications, how often changes are made, and how often routine reviews are conducted. Familiarizing yourself with those *whos* and *hows* will help you navigate the change process more effectively. Don't be afraid to ask about the history of past modifications because the changes and the reasons for them may give you some context for how decisions are made or why certain policies still exist (even when they don't necessarily make sense to you).

POLICY

Questions You Should Be Asking

- Where can I find the library collection development policy? How up to date is the policy? Are past versions available for review?
- Who is responsible for maintaining the collection development policy?
- If the procedures related to collection development policy are not contained within that document, where can I find them? What other supporting policy documentation exists?
- What is the process for suggesting changes to the collection development policy? Can these suggestions be made at any time, or is there a formal schedule for review and revision?
- Who makes the final decision regarding suggested changes, revisions, or additions to the policy? If this is done by a group, rather than an individual, are liaisons represented?
- When do policy changes go into effect? Is there a specific date that all policy changes go into effect, or are they effective upon approval?

DATA AND INFORMATION

The collection development department is a veritable font of information for liaisons and is an essential partner for acquiring, producing, and interpreting collections data. Typical types of data compiled and issued by collection development generally include usage and other statistical data—such as turnaways, average age, and so on—or cost information, and even resource analysis (e.g., coverage overlap, etc.). Collection development employees are also likely to have collection evaluation tools and other resources at their fingertips. These tools, when used with statistical data, can help liaisons identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps by subject area or compare their collections with those of peer institutions. We recommend liaisons ask about other user assessment data, including results of recent user surveys, focus groups, and the like, particularly if those assessment data are captured regularly.

The collection development department can be a valuable resource for non-data information, too. For new liaisons, collection development staff may be familiar with teaching and research faculty who are actively interested in the library's collections and may then provide introductions to these faculty. In addition to helping identify potential faculty partners, collection development staff should be able to direct liaisons toward the course catalog and other sources of information about the current curriculum in their disciplines, including new and proposed courses or programs. All this information can usefully inform the liaison's selection activities.

DATA AND INFORMATION

Questions You Should Be Asking

- What are the main types of data collected and disseminated by collection development to liaisons? Is this regularly scheduled, or do I need to request it as needed? What is the procedure for requesting such data?
- What other resources, if any, are available to me for collections analysis? How can I use these resources? Is training available?
- Does the library participate in collections-related assessment activities, such as patron surveys, focus groups, and the like? Does assessment occur regularly, and, if so, how is it scheduled? If not, what determines when assessment happens?
- How can I get access to assessment data?
- If I need help interpreting and evaluating data I receive from collection development, who can help me?
- Does collection development track changes in programming and curriculum? If so, does the department disseminate that information to liaisons or must it be requested?
- If collection development doesn't track changes in programming and curriculum, where can I get that information? Can I find information about proposed, new, and existing courses and programs in one place?
- How can the collection development department staff help me find out about faculty members who have been active participants in collection development (policy, selection, weeding) in the past?
- Can collection development also educate me about faculty who may have special issues or concerns about the collection or about library processes?

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