

Working across Divisional Lines

How One Large University Library Cross-Trains and Works As a Whole

Antonia Olivas and Henry McCurley

According to a 1986 article written by Gillian McCombs, “Public and Technical Services: Disappearing Barriers,” automating the library card catalog was just the beginning of a set of problems that added confusion and misunderstanding to an already tumultuous relationship between technical and public services departments.¹ McCombs painted a harsh picture of the differences between these library divisions and advised that we join the new age of the renaissance librarian: one who feels comfortable with public services, technical services, and structures of bibliographic control. Twenty years later, have we changed that image and become those new librarians? Recent studies show that although things are not perfect between the technical side of libraries and public services, we are growing and maturing for the benefit of our users.

Libraries, whether academic or public, tend toward functional specialization. While this division does seem to increase efficiency of operation, it can also lead to a variety of problems among units, such as miscommunication, less-than-optimal working relations, and even mutual distrust. Ultimately the library patron is the one who suffers, because these problems can lead to an interruption in the workflow of information retrieval. How can a department head or library manager handle these problems while maintaining a desired level of production and efficiency?

Literature Review

Several articles have been written on ways technical services and public services librarians can benefit from working together. Unfortunately most of these articles do not deal with public services librarians making the transition to technical services. Instead, these articles focus on technical services librarians; for example, catalogers venturing in to the reference librarian’s world, or significant training trends that have been implemented by different libraries. Some of those articles also deal with beneficial communication styles between departments that have helped them grow together.

Antonia Olivas (olivaap@auburn.edu) is Reference and Instruction Librarian at Auburn University Libraries, Alabama.
Henry McCurley (mccurhh@auburn.edu) is Cataloging Department Chair at Auburn University Libraries, Alabama.

Sandy L. Folsom, from the Clarke Historical Library and Park Library at Central Michigan University, wrote that catalogers are a great asset to the reference area because they understand how the catalog works and can take that technical knowledge beyond the library’s own catalog.² These knowledgeable librarians can be extremely helpful when applying their talents and skills to other information systems, such as online databases and Internet searches. Folsom correctly argues that a cataloger’s technical knowledge can benefit public services because catalogers have more of a behind-the-scenes view of the library’s functioning world. She states, “Knowing workflow and procedures can be very helpful in locating missing items or doing other problem solving for patrons.”³ In addition, according to Folsom, catalogers who participate in working at the reference desk several times a week experience a better understanding of their patrons’ needs.

Brian Flaherty, of the New England School of Law, echoes Folsom’s sentiments in a 1999 case study, in which he talks about his library’s successful integration of public and technical services.⁴ Flaherty, a cataloger who found part-time work in the reference department, contends that having someone familiar with the workings of both departments was essential to solving certain problems each department faced. Flaherty stresses that a person who works for two departments can better negotiate between them. The benefit for Flaherty was that, at the reference desk, he was able to hear first-hand accounts of praise for his library, including the collection and overall service. These are things he wouldn’t normally hear in the cataloging department.

Although most of these articles are generally positive, there are some instances in which negative aspects are discussed. These articles tend to focus on a lack of proper training and guidance when transitioning from one department to another. Ilene Raynes, a librarian at the Jerry Crail Johnson Earth Sciences and Map Library at the University of Colorado at Boulder, wrote that some of her colleagues in technical services told her that moving to public services would interfere with her duties as a serials and acquisitions librarian because she would “always be worrying if there’s someone available to cover the desk,” or she would “never be able to get anything done because [she’ll] constantly be interrupted” by patrons.⁵ While this may be true, Raynes handled her transition very well. Although it is important for technical services employees

to have quiet time to complete their necessary tasks, Raynes felt her experience at the reference desk allowed her to “feel like a part of the greater university community since [she was] connected to the students and faculty in a tangible way.”⁶

The experimental service desk at Rotch Library of Architecture and Planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology combines reference and circulation and is an excellent example of how cross-training between departments really works and benefits the patrons. Flanagan and Horowitz found that this particular approach allows “more options for follow through” on the reference librarians’ side.⁷ Although the circulation and reference staff were hesitant to adopt this change at first, they were involved in the planning and training process. Flanagan and Horowitz found that eventually both librarians and circulation staff encountered more fulfilling relationships with patrons.

Each of these articles discusses how a certain camaraderie developed between departments and how each learned more about the other’s abilities and skills. Moreover, the areas—whether reference, cataloging, acquisitions, or circulation—experienced a heightened job interest and more flexibility in staff allocation.⁸

Background

Auburn University Libraries (AUL) consists of a main library, the Ralph Brown Draughon Library, and two branch libraries, the Charles Allen Cary Veterinary Medicine Library and the Library of Architecture, Design, and Construction. As indicated on the library’s Web page:

The combined collections of the Libraries contain over 2.7 million volumes as well as 2.6 government documents, 2.5 million microforms, and over 148,000 maps. The Libraries receive over 35,000 current periodicals, many which are available online. And the library provides access to over 227 electronic databases. Books are classified by the Library of Congress (LC) system and are arranged in open stacks by subject.⁹

The organizational structure of the library has varied over time. At present, there is a dean, who represents the library to the university at large, and an associate dean, who oversees all internal operations. In the past, however, there have usually been assistant deans who oversaw the two main divisions of the library: public services (reference, circulation, and interlibrary loan) and technical services (acquisitions, cataloging, and systems). Relations between the two divisions have traditionally been cordial

but distant. Nevertheless, the division of functions (and so of perspectives) has occasionally led to misunderstandings and disagreements about policies and practices within the greater library community. This kind of mutual incomprehension probably is endemic to larger libraries. If this division between public and technical services is perceived as a problem, it can be addressed in a variety of ways. We suggest that one particularly effective way is by having library personnel cross-train and work across departmental

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divisions. This suggestion is a result of experience gained through institutional practice rather than a systematic attempt to address a perceived problem. In a sense, AUL did not realize that problems existed between divisions until we saw that training and working across departmental and divisional lines were resolving many of our miscommunication issues.

In recent years, due to some restructuring and administrative changes, the Ralph Brown Draughon Library instituted an information desk near the main entrance of the building. This desk is located at the front door of the campus entrance and is staffed primarily by student workers and library staff (both paraprofessional and professional) from technical services. Many of those who volunteered for duty on the information desk not only enjoyed a break from their normal routine and the opportunity to interact with the public, but also found that it gave them a new perspective on their normal duties. Over the years, there have been a number of staff from the acquisitions department (including the department chair), the cataloging department (also including the department chair), and the systems department who have worked a regular schedule on the information desk. No formal request was made to these departments to share their personnel with the information desk, but a decent amount of training was required in order to provide adequate customer service to the patrons. All of the individuals involved found that the experience on the information desk had a positive effect on the performance of their regular duties.

Another service point that has traditionally been staffed in part by technical services personnel is the first-floor service desk. This is the desk for the microforms and documents unit, which is jointly administered by the cataloging and reference departments. The support staff in this area perform such technical services functions as copy cataloging, holdings maintenance, and check-in and claiming of materials. The staff also works a regular schedule on the

service desk and provides assistance to patrons using the microform equipment and materials in this area. Although it is viewed as a separate unit, the microforms and documents unit is not headed by a librarian but a library assistant VI, who reports to both the chair of cataloging and the chair of reference and instruction services. In many ways, this unit is a model for the blending of technical and public services functions because it masterfully combines the two areas by incorporating talents and skills from each department. Because the unit reports to cataloging and reference, the structure may be a bit difficult to draw on an organization chart, but it has worked reasonably well for all departments involved.

Cecilia Schmitz, a cataloging librarian who works part-time at the first-floor service desk, noted that users in that area already had a basic knowledge of what they needed, and her technical skills enabled her to help them further. Schmitz helped catalog several of the microfilm collections and, because she was familiar with some of those collections, felt she could better tell what patrons wanted “even if they don’t know what they want.” Cecilia said she would highly recommend working at the service desk because “it increases visibility . . . [and] produces good relationships between departments.”¹⁰

While it is more common for nonreference librarians to work at other service desks, in recent years, the presence of technical services personnel, mainly from cataloging and acquisitions, on the reference desk has become more formalized and more regular due to the increase in interest and need. At present, the music cataloger works a regular schedule on the reference desk in addition to doing bibliographic instruction, serving as the liaison to the music department, doing collection management for music, and attending reference meetings. Both the chair of the cataloging department and the serials acquisitions librarian work a regular schedule (about four hours per week) on the reference desk; they also attend reference meetings and serve on some reference committees. These individuals needed no formal, written permission from their departments or the chair of reference and instruction. They did, however, need to consult with the chair of reference and instruction in order to be fitted into the desk schedule, and they needed to participate in detailed, in-depth training to learn how to provide reference service to the public.

Not only does technical services staff work the reference desk, but occasionally reference personnel train in other departments as well. For example, one of the reference librarians worked in the systems department on a regular schedule as a part-time metadata librarian for the online Alabama Corporate Extension System (ACES) project AUL has put together. The transition from working in reference to working in systems was difficult at first because this reference librarian had no technical training. Once again, with the proper training and support from the reference and instruction and systems departments, this librarian was able to bridge a gap between the departments.

Benefits

The benefits derived from these various forms of cross-divisional undertakings have been many and varied. While some primarily benefited the immediate participants, others benefited the library as a whole. Communication between public and technical services departments has always been a problem in libraries large enough to maintain these divisional units. The problem becomes even more acute in the era of electronic information. When someone on the reference desk encounters a problem with an electronic resource, it is not obvious to which department in technical services the problem should be reported. It could be a cataloging problem, a licensing problem, a server problem, or any one of a number of other possibilities. Several years ago, the head of the serials maintenance unit worked regularly on the reference desk. He noticed that reference librarians were often baffled about to whom they should report certain kinds of problems, especially those involving databases and electronic journals. In response, he proposed a simplified form of communication for problem reporting via e-mail. Now, if reference librarians (or indeed, anyone who works in the library) encounter a problem, whether in the catalog or with the databases, and are not sure who is qualified to deal with it, they simply send an e-mail to lib_cathelp. The message goes to a number of people in the cataloging department (the department chair, the catalog maintenance librarian, the serials maintenance unit, the cataloging information technology unit, and the cataloger for electronic resources), to the serials acquisitions librarian, and to the library’s Web manager. As might be expected, most of the problems reported involve either electronic resources or serials. Someone will claim the problem and follow up on it until it is either resolved and reported back or found to be unsolvable.

While the availability of a simple form of communication encourages the reporting of problems, it probably takes more than that to ensure that public services personnel let technical services people know when something is wrong. There also has to be a sense among all parties that this kind of reporting is a good thing. Library personnel in cataloging or acquisitions need to have the sense that problem reports are not complaints that they are doing their job badly. More importantly, in their response, they need to convey their sense of appreciation to the messengers. And public services staff who report problems need to have a sense that, rather than being regarded as nuisances, they are helping technical services tremendously. The cataloging information technology unit has put in place dozens of automated routines that search the catalog for common errors (incorrect nonfiling indicators and so on). But the cataloging department still relies heavily on reports from the reference librarians of errors or problems that slip past the radar system. In a sense, some of the reference librarians have become virtual members of the cataloging department’s catalog maintenance unit. But their reports would not continue to be forthcoming

were it not for the rapport that has developed between public and technical services.

Joint Projects

This kind of interaction between the two divisions, one in which members of one division become virtual members of another division, has led to a number of joint projects. For example, one of the reference librarians collaborated with the head of the cataloging department's information technology unit to develop a clickable floor map based on the call number. Clicking on the link opens a map of the floor in a new window. The map was created in Adobe Acrobat and allows easy navigation of the floor on which the item is housed.

A more complex project that in some ways exemplifies the possibilities of interaction between public and technical services involves a problem with journal title abbreviations. Journal titles are rarely cited in their full form; rather they are cited by often cryptic abbreviations. To complicate matters further, there is no standard abbreviation for any given title, and the same title may be cited by different abbreviations in different sources. This situation is a source of confusion, especially to undergraduates. Often they attempt to search the online catalog using the abbreviation given in their citation source. Unfortunately, these abbreviations do not usually appear as title-added entries on serial records, as catalogers are not in a very good position to be aware of the various abbreviations for the title they are cataloging. Catalogers and reference librarians share a common concern that the online catalog be as user-friendly as possible, and at AUL, their close interaction has led them to collaborate on a way to alleviate this problem posed

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by journal title abbreviations. The cataloging department agreed that, in principle, it could incorporate the addition of title-added entries for journal title abbreviations into its workflow. Using *Periodical Title Abbreviations* and similar resources, the serials maintenance unit could begin adding 210 fields to serial records when handling title changes, cataloging titles new to the collection, or resolving serial problems. However, starting from scratch would require years of work before many beneficial effects were visible in the catalog. It would be much better if the catalog could somehow be seeded at the start with as many title added entries for abbreviations as possible. The reference librarian who had proposed the attempt to make it possible to search by journal title abbreviation was able to find an

online list of journal titles, their abbreviations, and the ISSNs of the journals, but the list covered only journals in her field. However, several other reference librarians were able to provide similar lists for their subject areas. The key requirement was the presence of ISSNs, because they provided a match point for serials records in the catalog. With these lists in hand, it is possible to program the creation of 210 fields containing the title abbreviations and associate them with the right records.

While the actual implementation of this seeding project is still in the planning phase, it will definitely be attempted. Such a massive undertaking, involving the automated addition of thousands of journal title abbreviations as 210 fields to serial records, could not have even been contemplated had it not been for the active involvement of the reference librarians. They not only came up with a good idea for improving the catalog, but also provided some of the key elements in bringing the idea to reality. This project developed informally, in the course of the regular interaction between the catalogers and the reference librarians. It did not require any elaborate negotiations between the two departments.

An Experiment That Works

As indicated above, this collaboration between public services and technical services has been an experiment for AUL—an experiment that has worked very well thus far. What has made the experiment both possible and successful is the support of the library administration; the willingness of the various unit and department heads to allow work across administrative lines on an informal basis; and, most of all, a library culture that caters to and nurtures experimental working environments. It is a culture based on mutual respect; willingness to teach and learn; and an implicit understanding that, while administrative units may be necessary, they should not be allowed to get in the way of devising ways to improve service.

This kind of collaboration between technical and public services has been a positive experience for AUL. While in smaller libraries it has always been necessary for an individual to work in several areas, such collaboration may become a necessity in order for larger libraries to survive. As the article, "Cross-Training Public Service Staff in the Electronic Age: I Have to Learn to Do What?!" notes, "The new reality for staff demand(s) that they recognize the new environment and evaluate the impact of their actions on the users. Former style and content of staff-patron interactions [are] no longer valid. Staff [has] to learn both new tasks and new behaviors."¹¹

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Cross-Train continued from page 84

Many large university libraries have been and are currently facing reductions in staff; therefore, cross-training will be increasingly necessary to ensure patrons are not inconvenienced by these reductions. Even if staffing remains level, libraries are being called upon to provide more diverse services. As a consequence, staffing resources shrink (either absolutely or in relation to demands for services), and larger libraries may find themselves pushed into the cross-training of employees.

In addition, electronic resources seem to make the distinction between public services and technical services somewhat murky. Public services librarians increasingly have to learn more about access provision, licensing restrictions, and server problems. These are matters that, in the past, would have largely been the concern of technical services personnel. At the same time, catalogers are witnessing some fundamental changes in the nature of the catalog. In addition to its more traditional function of serving as a surrogate for the collection, the catalog is now assuming, at least in part, the role of portal to resources in the collection. As the discussions connected with the revision of AACR2 show, catalogers are becoming increasingly sensitive to the varied needs of users. There is no better way to gain an understanding of the user needs than by working directly with them. Of course, the reference librarians themselves may be the heaviest users of the catalog, so working closely with them at the reference desk is the ideal solution. This is not to say that we will all become holistic librarians. But it does seem likely that, for one reason or another, our jobs may require more crossing of traditional division lines and more collaboration across the divisions.

Conclusion

Is working across divisional lines the answer to all communication problems in a large research library? No, but sharing responsibilities and learning to work together to solve problems is a great way to start. AUL is among the pioneers

of larger research institutions breaking barriers of specialized divisions by encouraging cross-training opportunities for its employees and supporting formal and informal communication endeavors among departments. With proper training and the support of departments and unit heads, the library has found that breaking down the walls to successfully integrate departments is a great way for library employees to experience the library world through their peers' eyes and change attitudes toward the work environment in a positive way. As a result, patrons are the ones who benefit from our working across divisional lines.

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