

Asserting our collection development roles

Academic librarians must take responsibility for the collection

by Ian D. Gordon

As academic librarianship rushes to reinvent itself in a digital and virtual world, there remains at least one constant—our deep-rooted love for the printed word. Print monographic resources remain an important and essential part of all academic libraries. Yet, as we enter the 21st century, too many college and university librarians seem content to allow faculty to control the acquisition of monographic resources.

Daniel Gore's classic paper titled "Something there is that doesn't love a professor" and other studies¹ speak to tenuous and, at times, strained working relationships with faculty. Most librarians have seen some faculty use library collection budgets to acquire books that often do not support the curriculum or meet the wider research needs of the academic community.

John Budd supports this assertion by stating that, "For at least the first half of this century faculty largely controlled selection in college libraries. To a lesser extent, faculty control still exists in some libraries. This means that faculty have (or take) responsibility for the selection of specific items and, so, have a substantial say in the shape of the library's collection. A common criticism of faculty activities in collection development is that they lack the broad vision necessary to build a collection of sufficient breadth that the needs of all

the academic community can be met."² Academic librarians recognize that faculty involvement is essential for effective collection development. However, librarians feel frustrated, ignored, and ineffective when not involved or excluded from this process.

Who is doing the collecting?

It is difficult to discern how many faculty have the responsibility for collection development. There are a wide range of collection development models. These models are usually dependent on the size of the library. On one hand, most larger academic library systems tend to have sufficient funds and approval plans to acquire most book resources. Faculty control of collection development in larger library systems is not an issue. On the other hand, smaller academic libraries may not have the expertise or personnel to acquire book materials in this way. Collection development in smaller libraries may welcome faculty participation.

Why does the library community continue to allow faculty and not librarians to control the acquisition of monographic resources in mid-sized and comprehensive universities? What are the underlying issues preventing academic librarians from taking back their libraries and control of collection development?

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With these questions in mind, a collection development survey was distributed to librarians at each of Ontario, Canada's, 17 largest universities in the summer of 1999.

The survey's preamble stated, "In a time of fiscal restraint and never-ending demands on academic library budgets, librarians are interested in knowing how you perceive your role in the acquisition of library materials, who should acquire these resources, and what role should faculty play."

These are interesting questions addressing critical and powerful issues as librarians assume academic status and assert their roles in an increasing number of university libraries.

When academic librarians were asked "Who has the primary authorization to acquire monographic resources in your library?" 41 percent of all librarians indicated that faculty, and/or faculty with librarian's input, acquire monographic materials within their libraries. Librarians were solely responsible for the acquisition of monographic resources in only 30 percent of all library systems. The important implication here is that librarians often do not play an active role in selecting library resources at many academic institutions. Indeed, many Ontario academic libraries continue to allow faculty to drive the collection development process when librarians are best suited to perform this function.

Librarians as collection development specialists

Academic librarians are trained professionals; they require subject-specific undergraduate degrees and an MLS to become librarians. Librarians serving in academic libraries are increasingly challenged to have a second-subject master's degree. These qualifications speak volumes to the abilities and competence of librarians to implement, conduct, and monitor collection development activities. Librarians, when working in a consultative relationship with faculty, are in the best position to shape and build library resources. The long-standing argument that librarians may not have the subject expertise to adequately perform collection development responsibilities is no longer accurate. Collection development is an important responsibility. As such, it is included in most academic librarian's job descriptions.

When librarians participating in the survey were asked to comment on how they felt about faculty having control of the selection of books, they provided a full range of comments including:

"I am frustrated with how little input we have—but the lazy part of me is relieved that it's the faculty who do the collecting."

"It is reasonably effective and works well when faculty are willing to cooperate."

"I think librarians have differing views . . . some librarians think that faculty input is absolutely essential and the only way to guarantee this is by giving signing authority to faculty, which makes them accountable for input to the library collection."

"As professionals, librarians have the skills to conduct collection development as an ongoing activity essential to the life of the university. Consultation with faculty is essential to build a library book collection reflecting and being sensitive to research, teaching, and curriculum needs."

If acquiring book resources for academic libraries is a balancing act, then what hinders librarians from tipping the scales in their favor? Changing past practices and historical administrative policy decisions can be difficult. Changing faculty and administrator's positions involves a strategic plan backed by the support of all librarians within a library system. Wrestling collection development responsibilities from faculty is too often a political, rather than a library-related issue. Librarians owe it to their profession to assert their normative collection development roles.

Reclaiming our collection responsibilities

As mentioned earlier, librarians have the subject expertise, skills, resources, and a familiarity with collection development issues. Acquiring books is part of what an academic librarian does. Librarians participating in the survey from institutions where faculty select books were asked to comment on why they had not assumed their collection development responsibility and professional role.

The range of replies included comments such as, "It has always been this way"; "The university librarian and administration will not support this initiative"; "Too political of an issue to tackle"; "We don't have the time, en-

ergy, expertise, nor resources to perform this task."

If ownership of collection development is indeed driven by political or jurisdictional turf battle considerations, then academic librarians need to develop a strategy to reclaim their collective responsibilities. A plan that includes learning from the experiences of other institutions that have successfully moved through this process. A plan that incorporates gaining the support of all librarians, faculty, library, and academic administration.

Donald Riggs, in an editorial on academic library leadership, stated that, "Generally speaking, academic libraries are conservative organizations. They normally operate on insufficient budgets, and are doing more and more with less and less. Followers and leaders must work together in questioning the status quo, revisiting the library's assumptions, and clarifying/refreshing the library's values."³

Librarians are not generally perceived as radicals or risktakers. Moving forward to claim collection development responsibilities from faculty can be viewed as a collective risk. This need not be so. Herbert White paraphrases our historical reluctance to shy away from taking risks concerning professional issues by stating that "I remain dismayed at our failure to take stands on professional issues, even as we eagerly take stands on sociopolitical ones."⁴ It is clearly a time to take a stand on this collection development issue. It is not just a librarian's issue, but an issue of importance that affects all members of the academic community.

Carla Stoffle indicates how we should address change. "The needed library organizational changes on the radical level required will not take place if left in the hands of middle-level management alone. Transformational change will not emanate from the people who have the most at stake in the status quo. Transformational change can come only from senior management support and promotion of groups composed of all ranks, classifications, and levels of faculty and staff making decisions."⁵

Taking back responsibility for collection development can be difficult. However, most faculty are indifferent to library collection development issues. Changing past practices is based on logical arguments, sound administrative practices, and the collective experiences of aca-

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demical librarians. The most important element in this equation is the willingness of librarians to assert themselves as equal partners.

Building a case to change the process by which books are acquired in academic libraries need not be considered a challenge to the status quo. Changing past practices need not be a political or difficult decision. Most faculty are willing to relinquish their responsibility if they are given an opportunity to remain active and equal participants. Librarians are resourceful, creative, and talented. Reclaiming our collection development responsibilities can be a positive and liberating exercise. As the role of academic librarians continues to change, collection development should be an important part of our professional practice.

Notes

1. Daniel Gore, "Something There is that Doesn't Love a Professor: The Mismanagement of College Libraries Revisited," *Library Journal* 107, no.7 (April 1982): 686-91.

Pam Cenzler, "Library/Faculty Relations in the Acquisitions and Collection Development Process," *Library Acquisitions: Practice and Theory* 7, no.3 (1983): 215-19.

Larry Hardesty, "Book Selection for Undergraduate Libraries: A Study of Faculty Attitudes," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 12, no.1 (March 1986): 19-25.

Charles A. Gardner, "Book Selection Policies in the College Library: A Reappraisal," *College & Research Libraries* 46, no. 2 (March 1985): 140-46.

Dennis W. Dickinson, "A Rationalist's Critique of Book Selection for Academic Libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 7, no.3 (July 1981): 138-43.

2. John M. Budd, *The Academic Library: Its Context, Its Purpose, and Its Operation* (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1998), 235.

3. Donald Riggs, "Academic Library Leadership: Observations and Questions," *College & Research Libraries* 60, no.1 (January 1999): 7.

4. Herbert S. White, "Where is the profession heading?" *Library Journal* 124, no.19 (November 15 1999): 45.

5. Carla J. Stoffle, Robert Renaud, and Jerilyn R. Veldof, "Choosing Our Futures," *College & Research Libraries* 57, no.3 (May 1996): 223. ■

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