Creating a Holistic Fabric of Services and Collections from the Inside Out: Exploring Convergences of Liaison and Special Collections Librarianship

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Introduction

The work of liaison librarians and special collections librarians could more closely mirror and support the scholarship process if the expertise of both specializations are holistically considered and, when relevant, cooperatively combined. Viewing and integrating collections and services with this approach includes providing a "full spectrum of information available to scholars and students and the technological capabilities, rights of use, and services necessary for full utilization of these resources. The holistic framework's raison d'être is knowledge creation—from inspiration to information, to analysis, synthesis and dissemination."[1] It is well known that, in the 21st-century academic library, there is a shift from being "collections-centered" to "learning-centered." By assisting users with the production of scholarly work, and by outwardly focusing library work toward more direct engagement with users, together, special collections and liaisons in academic libraries advance in their roles as facilitators, conduits, and partners in research. Outcomes stemming from these interactions increase the likelihood of building even more connections with users, further supporting their research and teaching.

This article considers benefits, advantages, and an overarching purpose of academic liaison librarians and special collections librarians working integratively to affirm and advance the libraries' role in the university community. The piece also proposes ways in which libraries can enact

this holistic model by improving interpersonal communication, changing organizational culture and structure, experimenting with staffing models, and identifying staffing intersections.

Commonalities and Challenges of Working Together

Both liaison and special collections librarians preserve, uphold, advocate, and teach the scholarly work cycle. However, due to organizational structures and, at times, approaches toward teaching and reference interactions, the organization and strategy of librarians' work may not resemble the research process itself. Silos and fragmentation of collections (primary sources/rare materials vs. secondary sources; analog vs. digital sources) and services ("esoteric" vs. "pragmatic," etc.) provide disjointed, inconsistent points of service and fragment collection viewing and use. These structures and work situations, unlike a pragmatic and pedagogically sound approach to research, lack the correlation of content synthesis and integration of information. This environment also does not allow for the outcome that all of these collections and services combine to make up the very structure and substance of the academic library. Scholarly output, and aligning all collections and services with an institution's mission, objectives, research, and teaching are intrinsic to an academic library remaining relevant, dynamic, and essential to its constituents and stakeholders.

Meeting the needs of users is a central, unifying objective across academic libraries as well as within individual library departments. In this context, it can be asserted that *all* work in academic libraries is a unifying endeavor that serves the very same constituents. On discussing a holistic collections framework, H. Thomas Hickerson wrote that, "regardless of the description methods or systems employed, we owe our users the capacity to find related materials within our holdings, whether published, unpublished, art, artifact, digital collection or new media. This unified, broadly accessible information is also essential to library colleagues who should be knowledgeable in promoting primary resources in their liaison roles along with the latest new

database licensed. And I will add here that, surprisingly, it is not just our archivists and special collections librarians who have trouble stepping across dividing lines."[2] Given the historical context of the special collections repository, the need to protect and preserve items, and the imposed physical limitations based on archival principles and practices, it is not surprising that both liaison librarians and special collections librarians and archivists find it difficult to promote each other's expertise. Further, they may find, even when it is most relevant, that it is difficult or impossible to work collaboratively.

There are numerous challenges that create and perpetuate a divide between liaison and special collections librarian work, such as:

- By emphasizing differences and distinctive needs, the commonalities that bind special collections and other areas of the library tend to be minimized.
- Distinct hours, access policies, technical processing, resource discovery approaches, and physical locations represent exceptions that require workarounds from mainstreamed operations.
- "Special" can convey a sense of superiority giving rise to misperceptions, distrust, rivalry, and jealousy.
- Different administrative reporting structures can exacerbate rather than minimize organizational divides. Senior leadership must signal the importance of working closely together.
- Emphasis on the physicality of special collections is increasingly contrasted with general collections as they become disembodied digital objects more valued for their informational content and ease of use rather than their materiality.
- The rise of liaison programs can lead to turf wars over areas of responsibility and the primacy of contacts with faculty.[3]

Acknowledging these challenges, and stepping back from them for a moment, it is useful to ask questions: What would a more synthesized style of working together look like? What means are necessary for moving this process forward, taking away constructs

and perceived hindrances such as physical, cultural, administrative, and psychological divides and boundaries? What might be some approaches to work toward making this cooperative model a reality? This is not to give an illusion that this is a simple undertaking, but by imagining how this synthesis might look on the ground, we can further develop how it could be achieved, why it's important, and what is needed to get closer to making such a model achievable.

Defining the Collaborative Model

"Collaboration," a term widely used, is often perceived as synonymous to cooperation and sharing responsibility without a motive beyond the notion of working together. It is through the development of a "collaborative model," going beyond cooperation, that an interactive process with meaningful progress and fruitful outcomes can emerge. Through this ideology, librarians can provide more effective, consistent, and rich service and support to their users. Approaches to work and expertise in a shared, team-based manner, and the development of a shared understanding of work and resources, will increase exposure to and use of both general and special collections.

A collaborative model must center around the notion of permeating the silos that exist for primary and secondary source materials. The model begins with an overarching attitude that there cannot be an "us" and a "them," and while each member of a collaborative team has particular skills that they contribute, a suspension of this bifurcation is an integral starting point. How that work evolves is dependent on the structure and size of the organization, but the collaborative model must begin with trust and a shared understanding that access to and discoverability of all resources is paramount. Territoriality should be non-existent from all stakeholders' perspectives. That is not to say that librarians

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should not be mindful of the security and integrity of rare and unique materials or of teaching how to handle them, but that they should interpret the library's collections as interconnected.

The implementation of a collaborative model should lead to increased awareness of roles, strengths, and responsibilities within and throughout the organization. Combining perspectives can lead to more creativity in projects, including the promotion of all collections and services. Increased exposure of users to library services and resources can facilitate inspiration, learning, synthesis, and knowledge production, which may lead to more library partnerships with faculty and students. Librarians who recognize and use one another's expertise and experience provide users with a more well-rounded, consistent fabric of services with increased, cohesive exposure to both general and special collections.

For example, consider the exhibit as a vehicle for collaboration and the transmission of knowledge. Exhibits, in their curation, research, and dissemination, can serve as an excellent outreach and educational tool between colleagues within the libraries as well as the communities they serve. Traditionally, special collections librarians and archivists have exhibited archival materials to educate and share with others. Approaches vary and can incorporate collaboration with scholars outside of special collections, faculty, students, collectors, and others. Working with liaison librarians can enable a lively, vivid point of intersectionality of expertise through their diversity of perspectives and the pairing of primary and secondary sources in the exhibition medium. The physical and/or digital coupling of special collections holdings with general collections items—such as books, articles, films, other media, and current research—creates for the exhibit viewer, participant, or co-creator an opportunity to better understand the nexus of the scholarly process.

For a student, this can create a transformative learning experience in which they acquire a better understanding of the circuitous path

between the primary documents and the published or presented secondary source. Combining expertise could facilitate opportunities for students or other researchers to apply an integrative approach to exhibit creation. For instance, in an exhibit narrative, incorporating a variety of sources as part of the exhibition could illustrate the sources' interdependence and interplay. The research process, for example, could be explored via a professor's notes, a laboratory notebook, or other manuscript materials, coupled with published works and findings from those research notes and manuscripts, as well as criticism, interpretation, extrapolation, teaching notes, and student reinterpretation of that single original scholarly work. A collaborative approach to exhibition work can also lend itself to fostering digital scholarship projects and other multimodal scholarly expression, that include librarians as equal partners with faculty, students, and other researchers from outside the immediate academic community.

Envisioning Holistic, Integrative Special and General Collections and Services

In our vision, the services, collections, research, and teaching across library departments are integrated in a manner that represents and mirrors the process of and approach to academic scholarship. Users can more easily discover and access both general and special collections, facilitating their use in academic conversations and, paving the way for more creative, interdisciplinary connections. This seamless access leads to an increase in more creative course design, scholarly output, and professional relationships between faculty and students. These benefits might not occur without users experiencing a cohesive fabric of collections access, research consultation, instruction, and interdepartmental partnership.

Special collections librarians and liaison librarians as stewards of their respective collections have a shared understanding of what the other does in their day-to-day work. Being knowledgeable of each other's job responsibilities and practices allows them to,

when appropriate, practice complementary collection stewardship, intermingling primary and secondary sources in research guides, exhibits, and other outlets. Each possesses a firm sense of their own professional identity, while acknowledging each other's expertise both within the academic library and externally, through their broader constituents. Each makes appropriate referrals and works integratively on projects across library departments and together with faculty and students. This collaboration fosters a stronger sense of expertise and strengths within the library, both interpersonally, and to constituents. Further, each possesses an awareness of their greater objectives in the profession. They recognize that, although each librarian is responsible for specific collections, services, programs, departments, and other populations, no one "owns" those responsibilities, but rather they are the "go-to" person for their area.

Library administrators recognize the value of this work and encourage their staff to work across department lines as a means to further the strategic goals of the library and, in effect, the university. In concert with their supervisors and directors, librarians identify and pursue projects accordingly, with consideration to given time and workload restraints, while taking advantage of opportunities to work with and within their communities.

Faculty, students, researchers, and librarians continue to view the library as a place of inspiration, scholarship, creative and academic support, and as an incubator for envisioning the planning and implementation of scholarly projects in a broad manner of formats, media, disciplines, and perspectives. The university community sees the library as a place to exhibit, perform, program, and interact with scholarly work within and throughout their academic and creative communities.

Interpersonal Communication among Library Colleagues

Central to moving toward a more collaborative approach to providing services and facilitating access to collections, there must be a conscious

effort to build and further develop interpersonal communication among library colleagues, within and across departments. This communication development transcends librarianship, and while it does focus on the work, the need for improved communication centers around two fundamental components. First, an acceptance of meeting the constituents' needs first, and second, a recognition that interpersonal communication and shared understanding are based on trust and must be cultivated over time, with patience and complete buy-in from all parties. These components require a shift towards understanding and valuing the holistic approach to the work, and what that means on an individual level.

Beyond evolving roles, skill sets, and responsibilities, it is how colleagues interact internally that affects how they work with and relate to constituents. Critical to the development of these three areas is an examination, reflection, and evolution of interpersonal communications. In *Library Conversations: Reclaiming Interpersonal Communication Theory for Understanding Professional Encounters*, Marie Radford and Gary Radford "consider a view that sees conversation as a means of self-reflection, insight and behavioral change."[4] Approaching conversations this way creates cooperative opportunities to interactively contribute to the discussion, making the content and proceeding actions dynamic and shared. Upon examining several types of communication theory, Radford and Radford discuss a desired shift in focus from control and persuasion to communicating for feedback, moving the conversation beyond a transmittal of information to a receptive, interactive process.

All library staff are responsible for how they communicate with each other, and the way messages are conveyed and shared is just as important, if not, at times, more so, as the content: "As communicators in professional settings, our role is to be the custodian of the communication process. We need to initiate, sustain and transform patterns of communication with our workplaces."[5] Again, this is not easy in practice, but it can be argued that consciously or unconsciously,

how colleagues communicate ultimately affects the quality of service and work the library collectively gives to its community.

Viewing conversations as moving beyond telling to creating more interactive interpersonal sharing and responses,

> the appropriate metaphor would be guiding a small boat through rough seas, where the skilled sailor responds to the push of each oncoming wave and each burst of wind, coordinating her actions skillfully with the actions of the environment in which she finds herself. To succeed, she must work with the environment, and make her actions part of its actions. A conversation represents a similar kind of environment. It is a context that must be travelled and negotiated with a constant sensitivity to the ebbs and flows of the interaction, and where one must constantly adjust one's communication behaviors to successfully make that journey.[6]

This analogy addresses an agent interacting with external forces and emphasizes that the surroundings and context are not personal. In thinking about and practicing this participatory, mindful communicative strategy, it is helpful to consider the communication patterns used: "successful communication is not about changing the psychology of another person. It is not about using strategies to get what you want. It is not about controlling the responses of another person in ways that benefit the sender. It is about creating communicative conditions in which change becomes possible."[7] Internally, liaison and special collections librarians and archivists must see what they do as a cohesive, unified effort focused on meeting users where they are, partnering in their work. Librarians need to learn how to nurture interactive, dynamic conversations with each other in order to facilitate true collaboration.

Organizational Culture and Structure

Recognizing and valuing differences and strengths offer insights into the identity and organizational culture of the library. Within the library

as an entity or organization, "thinking about organizational culture therefore involves recognizing the inseparability of binaries—together and apart, general and unique, structures and agents, organizations and identities—in sum, organizational culture as a constraint and as an everyday accomplishment."[8] Diversity both within and between departments and positions is critical, as colleagues rely on one another individually and collectively for their respective areas of expertise and experience. Further, it is intrinsic to a collaborative model to distinguish varying cultures, identities, and structures with siloed work, services, and collections, because having divisions, departments, or other types of organization in staffing provides structure. It is vital to recognize that within all libraries, there is a centralized, overarching goal: that the library exists to serve their constituents. The vision and approach of each department on how to achieve the overarching goal may differ, but it is the responsibility of each group to determine how to work integratively among departmental (micro) cultures and the whole library (macro) cultures.

By creating an environment that is flexible and culturally accepting of experimentation, new avenues of collaboration and cross-training can take place. The organizational culture of an institution can either foster experimentation and innovation, or in turn, it might work against those principles through continued siloing of expertise and compartmentalizing of departments, collections, or services. It is noted

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that "unlike hierarchical bureaucracies, the ability to innovate is most frequently associated with an open, entrepreneurial mind-set in an organization."[9] Anytime innovative projects are implemented, there is always a risk of them not working out. Cultivating a culture open to innovation needs to happen across departments, not only with top-down approval but horizontally in departmental and individual librarian practices. "For librarians...to risk that possible failure, there must be a culture where they first feel valued, secure and respected."[10]

Organizational culture and institutional culture, like organizational and institutional politics, can be as much myth or attitude as reality. Whether a complete restructuring of staffing and duties is necessary, or small experimental approaches to integrating staff from diverse areas into shared roles, there are helpful case studies and scholarship in management, business, and academic librarianship journals.

Staffing Models

One possible staffing model to foster collaboration is to develop a test or pilot project that would allow for cross-training and cross-staffing, specifically between liaison librarians and special collections librarians. At its most basic level, and based on interest, librarians can implement a small-scale staffing experiment, where librarians serve scheduled time in another department to participate in the work that takes place there; a newfound and deeper understanding is inevitable. Cross-training, shadowing, and observation in a test project such as this should center not just around materials and procedures, but should take a look at the interpersonal interactions between the librarians and the end users they are working with, and how the users are engaging with the resources and information.

Conversations and assessment of these cross-departmental interactions can be observed and noted during and immediately after the experience. Librarians can use what they learn and take it to the next level by creating and implementing plans to improve their work. Pursuing this approach will lead to greater understanding among librarians of each other's jobs and the ability to make appropriate referrals and to better assess needs library-wide.

The emphasis here is not on specialized training but rather on observation and shared communication and needs assessment on the ground. Asking the fundamental questions, "What can I contribute to this experience?" and "How does my work and expertise complement and possibly shape this interaction?"

This is a balance of sharing expertise, deferring to colleagues, and presenting this needs-based, scholarship-centric and progressive approach to meeting the needs of the library user.

Smaller archival repositories or special collections departments housed in smaller academic libraries are often staffed, by necessity, by individuals who may have other responsibilities that rest well outside of the archives. Smaller institutions are often compelled to staff the repository with a position or positions that are split, perhaps fifty percent "outside" of the archives, and fifty percent "in." Additionally, some special collections libraries have limited hours and user demands may dictate that several staff outside of special collections need to be able to provide service for rare and unique materials after regular special collections hours. These scenarios represent not a challenge, but an opportunity to expand the role of the librarian into a new area of expertise and to further mirror research and scholarship by allowing a greater connection between "general or regular" and "special or rare." For the end user, this holistic framework not only demystifies the "special" but also the "general" in terms of identifying, finding, and using resources.

This cross-departmental model has the potential to lead to more purposeful ideas for projects that would serve the campus community, and would in turn improve the quality of library work. A cross-departmental staffing model can facilitate the recognition and impact of connections with what we do and what we have in our collections, as well as a deeper understanding by the people in our community who could potentially work with us. At the most basic level, library services and work should mirror research and scholarship processes that take place in an academic setting. The integrative access and use of primary and secondary sources, both digital and analog, results in new scholarly contributions as well as a melding of the myriad areas of expertise that all librarians possess and foster. This improves service to constituents and allows academic libraries to evolve as an integral component of the scholarship process. A shared understanding and dissemination

of services and collections will lend itself to greater advocacy for and recognition of the role of the librarian in the research process.

All academic librarians should seek out ways to deliberately intersect areas of expertise, to try new services, events, projects, or programs that combine these intersections, bringing forth high levels of expertise in different areas into juxtaposition. Implementing these practices can facilitate the discovery and production of more scholarly output and projects with greater impact on the university community: "In fact, many times there is a pivotal moment in our encounters with library patrons or colleagues that hinges on the possibilities that are opened by this collaborative moment."[11] It is in these moments that librarians build further connections and improve the work everyone does.

Staffing Intersections

Administrators, supervisors, and department heads should work together in synchronizing and sharing their departmental goals, examining how these goals complement and intersect with each other. This will facilitate more collaborative work in a meaningful way that feels sanctioned, and will help move departments, and hence the entire organization forward. Shaping departmental goals that are both aligned with the larger library and the academic institution as a whole, as well as across departments, will also help cultivate this holistic environment.

Naturally, there are times when there is no need to collaborate but, even in recognizing this, it is beneficial to observe and listen to the type of request or work that needs to be done and what might make it more complete and helpful for all stakeholders. Drawing upon and using connections between what liaison and special collections librarians *do* and what they *have*, regardless of budgetary constraints, helps fortify how they assist and partner with their community.

Liaisons and special collections librarians share the challenge of making collections more discoverable. For liaisons, it's facilitating access to e-resources and items in the stacks, so they will be used to advance and promote research and learning. For special collections librarians, it's increasing exposure and discoverability of archives and special collections, while also preserving and caring for the materials, to ensure that they can be used for research and learning. Stakeholders are at times reluctant or unwilling to take the time to access analog items or other collections. How can liaisons and special collections librarians team up to work on this challenge?

In order to make shared appointments successful, administrative support and facilitation is critical. Dual reporting, from an external perspective, may be less intimidating and confusing for the end user, who, understandably, is only concerned with having their needs met and not the organizational structure of the library. Approaching shared or dual appointments programmatically, rather than focusing on identification and implementation of boutique projects might be a direction and approach to consider. Recognizing that beyond the work, collegiality and growth stem from shared understanding and can be rooted in a collaborative environment that focuses on the end user. While this may be a daunting task for library leadership, this approach has the potential to reinvigorate the work and processes that take place in academic libraries.

Working together is not revolutionary, but approaching this outside of the work itself, and focusing on the notion of mirroring research could significantly alter the way that librarians reach and help their users. "For that reason, new organizational structures may prove essential in bringing humanities librarians and archivists together to pursue common outcomes. With the growing need to evolve policies and functional support for acquiring, managing, and supporting the use of society's born digital record, differing aggregations of technology and archival staffing will be necessary."[12] It could also be argued that beyond collaborating with humanities librarians, the increase

of interdisciplinary research may elicit more collaboration as well with liaisons with functional or disciplinary roles such as digital scholarship, social sciences, and natural sciences responsibilities. Further, expanding liaison librarians' knowledge of their libraries' rare books and special collections holdings and handling procedures while broadening special collections librarians' knowledge and experience of general collections and services, would help with convening individual and collective expertise, collections, and services.

Conclusion

A mindful and creative approach to collaboration—focusing on interpersonal communication, organizational culture and structure, and staffing models and intersections—could potentially transform services and resources for users. Distinguishing collaboration from cooperation, it is important to a library's organizational development and culture to notice and reflect on the way colleagues interact with each other (or not) in their daily work and responsibilities. Is a project's work shared in the process of planning and implementation or are both parties working separately, to the extent of simply not opposing each other's work? How do both parties discuss and communicate with others on their collaborative work, acknowledging responsibilities and roles while fulfilling outcomes? In particular projects, why is interdepartmental collaboration needed and what potential benefits will come from it?

While it is essential to consider the time commitments required as a fundamental component of embarking on collaborative projects, it is also critical to focus on how approaches to collaboration could better meet users' needs. Understanding what is possible to accomplish given realistic schedules and deadlines requires not only an awareness of what both our potential collaborators do and are responsible for, but also an awareness of one's own needs, requirements, and barriers. An academic library is a hive of activity, with competing priorities, activities, and demands, and "libraries must work to connect the

ongoing emphasis on engaged librarianship with the need for supportive organizational strategy, structure and culture."[13] With a mix of administrative support, shared goals, and a shared understanding of why, how, and for whom the work is for, together liaison and special collections librarians can help each other keep the focus on a project's purpose and objectives. Developing a collaboration of any kind also requires a comfort with ambiguity, as, with a variety of perspectives, outcomes may not turn out as originally anticipated.

Every librarian brings their own expertise to bear on each experience and interaction. To best serve constituents, department and position responsibilities should not be an obstacle to working collaboratively. Looking internally at their work in a holistic way and making strategic connections among colleagues to combine expertise, services, and collections can help librarians "create agile systems for translating encouragement into ideas and, in turn, transforming those ideas into scalable, sustainable, and replicable services."[14]

These challenges are not unique to liaison and special collections units within academic libraries. As in other organizations, fragmentation of work, responsibilities, communication, mission, goals, and other pieces of organizational culture creates similar conflicts. Thinking of the library as a whole, "organizational culture is hence the specific set of patterns that are materialized within one institution. These patterns are materialized...as action, technology, institution and so on."[15] How do liaison and special collections librarians develop and institute patterns to more closely reflect the research process and scholarly work cycle? It is highly recognized that working collaboratively is important to the success and future of academic libraries. It is in considering the nature of this work and why it is important that helps academic librarians ascertain how to do it that will help advance their work and, in effect, their institutions' objectives.

Endnotes

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