The Confluence of Collections at Johns Hopkins's Sheridan Libraries

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Since the creation of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library in 1964, Special Collections at Johns Hopkins University (JHU) has been housed in the main library and has been a part of the daily flow of overall library operations. As with many other special collections departments, this department was securely sheltered behind doors where the staff performed similar activities to other library departments such as collection development, reference, and instruction. Over the past four years, the Sheridan Libraries have been making deliberate efforts to remove the metaphorical silos that separate Special Collections and other library departments. In particular, the libraries have done this by looking at how collection funds are used and by blending positions to work in both Special Collections and the Academic Liaison Department.

Disciplined-based Collecting Teams

JHU's collections-funding model is fairly complex. In the simplest terms, 95 percent of the libraries' annual collections budget comes directly from the four schools that fund the libraries. These funds are designated as "general collections funds" and are further subdivided by format (print, electronic, etc.); then along broad discipline lines (engineering, science, humanities, social science, etc.); and finally, for print only, by department (sociology, mathematics, English, etc.). It is within the general collections fund structure where the libraries allocate funds for special collections purchases. The remaining 5 percent of the collections budget comes from endowed funds, of which some are specifically designated for special collections.

Overall responsibility for all collection budgeting, allocation, and strategy resides with the associate director, scholarly resources and special collections. Individual subject specialists or curators manage departmental-level funds (sociology, mathematics, English, etc.) and discipline teams manage the broader discipline funds and some of the endowed funds. The libraries have been using the discipline-group model since 2006. In allocating for special collections, the goal is to ensure that the funds available for special collections purchases are approximately 4 to 5 percent of the total collections budget (both general and endowed funds). This percentage is based on the libraries' own internal commitment to special collections in a science- and engineering-heavy environment. The amount that is designated for special collections purchases in the general funds is split between four separate funds that support specific collecting areas: the George Peabody Library (a 19th-century collection), 19th- and 20th-century American literature, archives, and rare books (pre 1801) and manuscripts.

Integrated Decision Making

Three of the four general special collections funds are managed fairly informally by small discipline-oriented teams: the George Peabody fund, the 19th- and 20th-century American literature fund, and the archives fund. These teams are made up of the curators and liaison librarians whose expertise matches the particular collecting area. Usually their work is conducted via e-mail or informal conversations. Everyone on the team has authority to spend on the fund and so far there have been no complaints about someone overspending.

The rare books (pre 1801) and manuscripts fund is managed by the curator for rare books. However, the curator is expected to actively solicit input and suggestions from other curators and liaison librarians. Due to the cost of rare books, a collecting strategy was developed that requires items acquired from this fund to have a direct tie to current teaching and research. To accomplish this, a process is in place that calls for proposals with an explanation of how the item will be used in current scholarship. Based on the funds available, the rare books curator has final say on the purchase.

The last group of funds designated for special collections purchase is endowed funds that fall into what the libraries call "general humanities" funds (excluded from these funds are those that have specific donor requirements, such as "to be used for rare economic books," etc.). These general humanities funds are managed by the Humanities Discipline Group. The chair of that group, which rotates every two years, is the designated fund manager for those funds. The group uses a proposal process to choose items for purchase. Anyone in the Humanities Discipline Group can submit a proposal. The proposal provides the details of an item and how it supports a specific collecting area, teaching, or research. Group members weigh in on the appropriateness of the purchase. Proposals have time limits on the comment period; the libraries operate on the principle that a proposal is automatically approved if it receives no comments in the time allotted.

Holistic Results

The Humanities Discipline Group members include all curators and any liaison librarian with humanities departments or interest. The libraries allow liaison librarians to participate in as many discipline groups as they like, but they are required to choose one group as their primary affiliation. Broadening the team membership allows for some interesting cross-disciplinary discussions. The discipline-group model was originally conceived to manage electronic-resource acquisition decisions. The model has evolved into a very effective way to manage special collections funds, which extend across all the humanities sub-fields. It seems like a simple model now, but seven years ago moving from a model where everyone had their "own" money to a model of collective decision making was not always smooth. There were discussions about how much should be designated to various funds, why one fund had more than another fund, and general issues of "fairness" that often needed to be addressed both collectively and at an individual level. One practice that the libraries put in place that has had surprising benefits is a meeting of the associate director for scholarly resources and special collections with each discipline group collectively before the annual budget allocation process. Those meetings are used to discuss how well the funding worked in the past year and what might be needed in the coming year. Curators and liaison librarians present their collecting strategy for the coming year, where they see growth, where they are pulling back, and how the last fiscal year's funds either can or cannot support their strategy. This process is very transparent and allows fund managers to help make decisions on which fund gets more or less. In this way, the fund managers help determine what is fair.

In the end, the discussions and collective decisions on some of the special collections purchases mean that there is more communication about what is being purchased and how it can be used for research and teaching. Also, because most of these discussions are happening within the discipline-group meetings, the connections among what is being purchased for the whole collection provide all the curators and librarians a greater understanding of what the libraries are collecting holistically rather than just their small portion of the collection. Given the interdisciplinary nature of research and the complexity of some of the resources available now, this understanding helps develop more informed staff, which hopefully serves the patrons better.

Blended Liaisons

That holistic vision of the collection is also reflected in the libraries' blended librarian positions. The model started quite simply: in 2007, the liaison for history left and the libraries engaged the current manuscripts curator, who happened to have a history degree, to be the interim history liaison librarian. This redefinition of one position proved to be a successful blend of responsibilities for special collections and general collections. The blended position was able to provide instruction not just in relevant databases, but also in introducing special collections material, to provide a "one-stop" experience. Given the success of the interim position, a new way of thinking began. While the humanities liaison librarians had often worked with special collections, in both managing aspects of the collection and teaching with rare books, never before had the day-to-day activities of both positions been blended to this degree. While day-to-day activities vary based on subject area, common activities include instruction (both one-off and semester-long courses), collection development, outreach, exhibits, donor stewardship, and identifying material for conservation, to name a few activities.

Since that first interim position, the libraries have been consistently looking for ways to blur the lines between the Academic Liaison Department and the Special Collections Department. Today three positions are blended librarians: (1) curator of 19th- and 20th-century rare books and manuscripts and academic liaison for history, African studies, and Latin American studies; (2) curator of literary rare books and manuscripts and academic liaison for the Writing Seminars; and (3) special collections outreach coordinator and academic liaison for philosophy and English. Each of these positions operates differently based on the needs of the departments involved.

Organizationally, the blended positions raised many questions. Who pays for what? Who does the blended position report to? What percentage of time should be devoted to each activity? How do the libraries create equity within each of the departments? Some of these questions were even more challenging at JHU because the special collections are housed at multiple locations throughout the city of Baltimore—which means these positions are often roving between locations. The libraries worked on answers to these questions using a common-sense approach. Bottom line, the key to making this model work lies in the working relationship between the two managers of the blended position; they must agree on the value of the model and be willing to be flexible and open to experimentation.

Collaborative Leadership

Rather than splitting salaries, benefits, and other expenses such as travel across two budgets, the libraries determined which department would be the primary for that blended position and all expenses for the position would then come out of that budget. This allows the libraries to avoid a lot of unnecessary cost transfers within the organization. As far as reporting goes, rather than have the blended position meet separately with each manager, all three people meet together. In addition the libraries developed quarterly "touch base" meetings with all the blended librarians and their managers. The meetings help the staff involved understand overall workloads, any scheduling issues, and ensure continued improvement of the model. Also, these regular meetings ensure that priorities can be reevaluated and issues can be resolved quickly.

The libraries learned rather quickly that having a set percentage of a staff member's time devoted to one department or the other **does not** work. These positions must be highly flexible and scheduling should be based on the departmental needs, the liaison's department activity level, the skill set of the librarian, and the developmental interests of the librarian. Any workload and prioritization conflicts must be resolved without putting the blended librarian in the middle.

One question that remains is what might happen if someone in a blended position were to leave. While this has not happened, the libraries would likely do the same thing they do when anyone leaves—reevaluate the position in light of the skills needed and the skill set of the remaining staff, determine any shifts that may need to happen, and then hire for the best role to support the libraries' constituents, even if that means reworking job descriptions.

Having a blended position also means that the department heads need to address overall workloads across the two departments. One thing the libraries have learned as this model has grown is the importance of flexibility, not just for the blended positions, but also for all the staff in the departments. There needs to be a strong understanding that not everyone's job should or will be structured the same way, not everyone will do the same work or have the same number of desk hours, and, if one position's collection is spread over three locations, that person will likely not be in their office the same amount of time as someone else and that has to be acceptable. Surprisingly, the concept of varying workloads and perception of what is "fair" was one of the more challenging and unexpected issues for the libraries to resolve. In the end, it takes time and a lot of communication across the departments to find the right blend and balance. Much of the libraries' success can be attributed to hiring the right people to fill these pivotal experimental roles.

Transformative Change

So what does all this mean in terms of broader organizational transformation? Libraries know that the roles of librarians have to change. Libraries know patrons are not interested in understanding the arcane internal structure of the library in order to do their research. Finding ways to blur or eliminate the boundaries between two departments that are providing similar service is a great way to move away from a siloed environment to a more holistic user-centered environment. Libraries need human-resources systems that allow for flexibility and blendedness. Libraries need managers thinking more about the work to be done than the lines between departments. Libraries need librarians and curators who are interested in collaboration and teamwork. And overall, if libraries are to remain relevant, they need to be thinking much more about how they organize and manage new ways to engage with their community and show their value.

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