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Interaction Between Departments: Strategies for Improving Interdepartmental Collaboration through Communication

Sever Bordeianu and Rebecca Lubas

Collaboration within libraries can be a challenge; with specific jobs and areas of expertise, it is easy to focus only inward. But collaborating with the staff in other departments may help librarians be more effective information providers. The University of New Mexico Libraries has tried to meet this challenge by instituting formal and informal communication mechanisms. One-time learning opportunities and groups that meet regularly were created between different departments. This chapter will describe the ways in which the University of New Mexico Libraries organized these events and groups, which methods met with the best success and participation, and advice on how to apply these suggestions in other libraries.

Typically, modern American libraries have a half dozen or more departments. Regardless of the level of direct need for cooperation between them, no department works in a vacuum.

Generally, the better the communication and understanding among departments, the better the library is able to achieve its mission and goals. Even though it is universally accepted that communication is a fundamental requirement for a successful organization, the reality is that implementing and maintaining good communication requires concerted effort and time. Good communication and its positive outcome, cooperation, don't happen spontaneously but need to be purposefully created, applied, and nurtured. Even though everyone's goal is the library's success, due to poor communication, departments sometimes unintentionally work at cross purposes with each other, thus hindering the final success of the organization. In part, this may explain the constant reorganizations that are very common. (A search in the library literature for the subject "Libraries-Reorganization" uncovered 110 articles on the topic, 93 of which date between 2001 and the present.) Ultimately, a library whose departments have good

communication and cooperation will be more successful and a more satisfying place in which to work.

Literature Review

A review of the library literature on the topic of cooperation, communication, or collaboration among library departments found few articles or books dedicated to the topic. The articles that exist describe cooperation between two individual departments which took place in order to achieve a specific project or goal, rather than how to make collaboration the normal operating mode.¹ In "Building Bridges: the Role of the Systems Librarian in a University Library," Guinea discusses the role of the systems department in coordinating activities within the library as well as with the University.² In this study, systems is the pivotal department that negotiates with other library departments as well as outsiders, both within the university and beyond. The aforementioned articles describe similar approaches and strategies of collaboration, such as learning each other's environment, clarifying terminology and concepts, and a common understanding of each other's rules, procedures, and practices. On a broader scale, vanDuinkerken and Mosley discuss the various aspects of organizational culture and human factors at play in libraries as a backdrop to change.³ In their book titled *The Challenge of Library Management: Leading with Emotional Engagement*, they make the point that communication between management and staff is essential, and they provide examples of both good and bad ways of communicating. It is of the utmost importance for management to create institutional support for optimal cooperation. These topics are addressed in more detail by Bordeianu and Lubas, in a chapter which covers collaboration among all library departments from the vantage point of a cataloging department and addresses, in addition to general guidelines for good

collaboration practices, specific aspects that need to be followed in each instance.⁴ For example, collaboration between Cataloging and Instruction requires learning different skills than cooperation between Cataloging and Systems.

The literature review highlights the need for more scholarly contributions to this very important topic, which, while universally recognized, seems to have received little attention as a research topic.

Multi-stream Communication

For successful interaction, good communication is essential. In the case of departments in a library, the interaction needs to go beyond mere informing to become proactive and collaborative. Traditionally, libraries have been divided between technical and public services. While technology is continuously blurring the line dividing the two areas, there are still distinct functions that need to be performed according to established rules and procedures. Even in modern libraries, librarians tend to self-classify as technical or public service librarians, holding a firm belief that their skills are not interchangeable. Communication, interaction, and ultimately cooperation require that departments understand each other's work environment, restrictions, rules, procedures, and timelines. For example, deadlines are paramount in Collection Development and Acquisition Departments, and daily schedules are just as important to Instruction and Access Services Librarians, for whom deadlines don't have the same meaning as order deadlines or end of fiscal year deadlines, while standards are the way of life for Cataloging Departments. Understanding these conditions and respecting each other's set of rules is the first step in successful interaction and cooperation. Interactions between

departments increase in complexity in direct proportion to the number of departments that are involved. While no cooperation is simple or can be taken for granted, interaction between two departments generally requires less effort than interaction between three or more. Even among these scenarios, in libraries today there are some areas which have closer affinities with each other where it is easier to cooperate, and others which require more learning, communication, and effort.

Cooperation requires several stages. First, the library's overall organizational culture and environment need to support and encourage cooperation. Second, each department needs to learn the work environment, jargon, timelines, restrictions, goals, and missions of the other department. Once these variables have been identified and acknowledged, librarians need to look at areas of overlap and identify those processes which make their operations interdependent. For example, cataloging needs to be aware of acquisitions ordering and receiving cycles, instruction needs to be aware of ordering and cataloging turnaround time, and all units need to be in tune with budget cycles and academic or fiscal year cycles. Finally, librarians will need to identify the areas in which collaboration is essential and create projects that will produce a better and more successful organization.

What will be addressed here are the building blocks of cooperation with the purpose of giving professionals a model against which they can analyze the current status of their department's interaction with other departments, as well as giving the library's administration a tool to evaluate the level of interaction and cooperation among departments.

Creating the Right Organizational Culture and Environment

What are the requirements for creating an environment conducive to interdepartmental communication and cooperation? As seen from the examples and scenarios described in this chapter, an institutional culture that recognizes and supports cooperation is essential. This ensures that staff from various departments will be willing to collaborate and invest the time in collaborative projects rather than viewing them as a waste of time or as an impediment. Having institutional support also provides legitimacy to collaboration and gives staff the incentive to put effort into such ventures. By providing a nurturing environment, library administration can ensure that various departments work together without trying to protect their turf. Common goals must be acknowledged and promoted. This type of environment creates a more efficient organization and one which can adopt change more quickly. It also creates an environment with a better morale and provides a richer professional experience for its employees. The project planning method used at the University of New Mexico Libraries (UNM) helps build support and buy-in. Linking projects to the over-arching strategic goals builds an instant bridge to the library administration.

How to Speak the Same Language

In general, the library profession has its share of jargon, but it's actually more complicated than that – there are local dialects. Cataloging, circulation, reference, instruction, and technology workers all have their own vocabularies. The first step toward cooperation is learning each other's dialects. In order to do this, various constituents need to be brought together to begin

discussions. There are three kinds of encounters in which people from across departments can be brought together. One could be termed “educational outreach,” in which one department invites other departments to a general presentation about their work and their procedures. Another is to have standing committees of staff from different areas meet regularly to set common agendas and to address common issues. The third is to have working groups created to work on a common project in which there is an equal stake. All three scenarios have been used UNM over the years and have yielded various degrees of success. In all scenarios the willingness to meet, talk, and learn is the first step toward successful cooperation.

Discovery Through to Educational Outreach

As technical services became increasingly automated in the mid-1990s, it became apparent that there was a gap in understanding of the ordering process between technical services and the rest of the library. A training session was held, and the selectors were introduced to the new acquisitions module and shown various fields in the order record. As a result, acquisitions staff realized that selectors did not readily have access to the order module of the new system. It was subsequently discovered that the ILS had a “public” mode, which could be set up and accessed via generic password and allowed for viewing records by selectors. All of these discoveries came as a result of these meetings. Cataloging and Reference had similar encounters at UNM around the same time. Again, as a result of automation, it was now possible to track and identify books in process. As users became more accustomed to expect quicker turnaround times, reference librarians, as the intermediaries, were struggling with how to quickly identify where an uncataloged item could be found. Several educational workshops were conducted in which the Cataloging Department discussed and explained the catalog

records. Even though the specific focus of the sessions was to help public service librarians to find uncataloged books more quickly, the discussion evolved to cover such difficult access issues as uniform titles, alternate titles, and of course, subject headings. Public service librarians provided input into how they would like the public display to look, and as a result, the systems department was able to make changes that improved the display. Again, as in the previous example, issues were identified and solutions found for topics that had not been part of the original discussion.

The tradition of communicating and cooperating through educational opportunities has continued at UNM. There have been several cases of technical services personnel providing instruction for colleagues. Ideas for these sessions come through various channels. Some are inspired by the types of questions that are routed to the cataloging department through our internal request tracking system. Other ideas come from events such as changes in the cataloging code or a new discovery tool being implemented. In 2010, the current incarnation of the cataloging department, Cataloging and Discovery Services, organized and conducted an educational outreach session on the MARC record for public service librarians, called "How to Read a MARC Record." The session was repeated for reference, access services, and branch personnel. In addition to educating, the presenters also uncovered what the audience looked for in the online catalog. The exercise led to a better understanding of each other's work and needs. Cataloging personnel also presented training sessions when UNM chose to use OCLC's WorldCat Local as the default search on its home page. Catalogers had quickly realized that reference and instruction librarians would not automatically know what the differences between the OCLC record used in WorldCat Local and the customized local version of the

bibliographic record would be and how that would affect searching. Catalogers were in the best position to explain these differences, and making this information available contributed to the successful launch of a new search tool. This information sharing also helped reference and instruction know when to refer a patron to the “classic catalog” with specialized local notes, such as in the case of archival collections. In addition, an upcoming session, “Understanding how RDA works,” is planned for public services personnel, which builds on the same concept that technical and public services personnel need a common language to understand how new developments affect services. The sessions will be held when RDA records begin to appear in significant numbers in the catalog, so library personnel unfamiliar with cataloging will understand what they are seeing.

Evolving Collaborative Groups

By the early 2000s, UNM created joint cross-departmental groups which consisted of managers of technical and public services. These groups met regularly and set the working agenda for the library. Over the years, they had interesting names such as TSMT/PSMT (Technical Services Management Team and Public Services Management Team), and later Joint Services. These groups provided the forum for planning, discussion, implementation, monitoring, and resolution of most of the Library’s activities. Today it has evolved into a Dean’s advisory group, which uses project management methodology to identify and keep track of all active projects in the Library. This method requires a project announcement stating goals and how the project supports strategic directions. After the announcement is distributed to the whole staff and volunteers have the opportunity to join, a project agreement is complete, with detailed

timeline information. A key component of the project management process is the communication of the project's goals and progress to the whole system.

Cooperative Projects or Working on a Common Cause

Once the library has a culture of cooperation, when opportunities arise, it is easier to create ad hoc groups working on a common project. The culture of cooperation ensures that everybody involved feels vested in the project, has the willingness to collaborate, and is ready to invest the time and effort to make the project successful. This section will highlight several cooperative projects in which various constituents at the University of New Mexico Libraries have worked together successfully in accomplishing some ambitious goals.

One informal project was to create a group for anyone who works on aspects of record maintenance in the Integrated Library System (ILS). This idea sprung from challenges faced with a large serials inventory and holdings project. There was frustration and misunderstanding as there was no centralized set of standards nor centralized workflow and procedures. As a result, people in the front lines and patrons had difficulty interpreting the Library's serials holdings. Most personnel were not eager to join yet another committee. So, the Libraries called it the *Informal Database Maintenance Group*, with the major goal being to get all the parties into a room at the same time. Keeping the tone informal was the key to success. Staff had a place to bring their questions, and there were a number of "ah ha" moments. Just talking helped break down the jargon and get everyone on the same page. As a result, people from across public and technical services have worked successfully to standardize the serials holdings in an agreed upon and easily understood format.

Cooperation is also critical to the success of new initiatives. When UNM decided to create a Digital Initiatives Unit to manage, promote, and grow the University Libraries' digital collections, cooperation between special collections, technical services, and information technology was required in addition to the new personnel hired. Each unit needed to work with others to pool the expertise required.

There are many factors and constraints that directly affect our work, such as fiscal years, government reporting years, and semester schedules. We may have requirements about serving the public depending on our institution's mission, or we may be open only to specific communities. University of New Mexico Libraries is a participant in the Federal Depository Library Program as a regional depository. This participation comes with responsibilities to the public and for the care of the collection. Due to loss and realignment of staff, it was no longer feasible to have a department devoted strictly to the government documents collection, so it needed to be "mainstreamed" into Acquisitions and Cataloging. This was accomplished through training and workflow integration. The Libraries needed to have several meetings to walk through processes and tour the collection to understand how items were shelved. One result of this was a better understanding of how materials transition between departments. Taking on a new workload was a good reason to re-examine processes that had been performed on auto-pilot. This collaboration gave the library the opportunity to address a long-term need in government information: improved access to the pre-1976 documents. The government information librarian, catalogers, and access services staff all cooperated to develop a "Quick Start" cataloging guide for non-catalogers to do the simplest cataloging of these documents during "down time" on service desks or other slow times, with step-by-step instructions and

specific decision points to determine what material needed cataloger expertise. Since the Quick Start process was invented, access services staff and students contributed to cataloging our previously uncataloged government posters and pamphlet collection. The government information librarian can now add documents quickly when helping a patron rather than waiting for the title to be returned on a temporary record.

Projects that involve a number of departments are a great way to get to know colleagues in other departments. A well-designed project with a clear goal and an end date gives participants a sense of accomplishment that daily and ongoing duties do not always provide. Interdepartmental projects also foster good will and cooperation.

When UNM decided to close its separate Education Department Library and to transfer their collection to the University Library (UL), the UL found itself having to transfer, receive, and make a selection decision for about 15,000 titles, and then needed to catalog those items that were kept. This project involved subject specialists, access services, acquisitions, and cataloging. UNM's regular cataloging staff by itself wouldn't have been able to turn around this project in the desired one year timeframe. Enlisting the help of volunteers from other departments enabled the library to meet that goal. "Volunteer" catalogers, consisting of staff from public and access services with some library background, were trained to do the straightforward titles (such as those with Library of Congress copy). These volunteers were trained in the basics of cataloging in WorldCat and in the local system. Each was set up with appropriate macros that streamlined the number of repetitive keystrokes required, as well as ensuring quality and consistency. Volunteers were also trained to identify titles that needed expert cataloging, such as assigning a call number or creating an authority record. Books that needed specialized

attention were passed on to an experienced cataloger. Once the project was set up, three catalogers and six volunteers worked on cataloging the books. The physical processing section hired additional student employees to work on this project, so that the physical processing would not create a delay. Two catalogers also performed selection duties, making decisions on which titles to keep and which to reject. When the project began, the library set an ambitious goal of finishing in one year. Before long, trucks of the books were shuttling all over the system and quickly reaching the shelves. The project was completed within the desired timeframe, and many staff had opportunities to work with colleagues with whom they did not normally interact.

Creating the Right Environment

So, what are the requirements for creating an environment conducive to interdepartmental communication and cooperation? As seen from the examples and scenarios described in this chapter, an institutional culture that recognizes and supports cooperation is essential. This ensures that staff from various departments will be willing to collaborate and invest the time in collaborative projects. Having institutional support also provides legitimacy to collaboration and gives staff the incentive to put effort into such ventures. This legitimacy is important, because it enables staff and managers from various units, who normally are not in the same reporting lines, to establish lines of authority and responsibility without interfering with the established reporting hierarchies. Collaborative teams, like any other teamwork, require clearly defined lines of authority, responsibility, and leadership. By providing a nurturing environment, library administration can ensure that various departments work together without trying to protect their turf. Common goals must be acknowledged and promoted. This type of

environment makes for a more efficient organization and one which can adopt change more quickly. It also creates an environment with a better morale and provides a richer professional experience for its employees. The project planning method used at UNM helps build support and buy-in. Linking projects to strategic goals helps to connect staff efforts to library administration.

Conclusion

With some effort, in a proper institutional environment, different departments can start cooperating if they follow these common sense steps of learning about each other's environments, each other's jargon, and each other's goals and objectives. In a well-run organization, most of the infrastructure for cooperation will already be in place. For less integrated organizations, this discussion should provide the basic framework necessary for implementing cooperation among departments, especially creating an environment in which people don't feel that they're competing with each other but rather working for a common goal. This will minimize turf battles and confusing reporting lines, which can be very detrimental to cooperation. While institutional support is important, it is only the first step in encouraging successful cooperation. The practical aspects of cooperation consist in departments identifying common projects and following good project management techniques to bring them to a successful conclusion. The projects will create the opportunities for different departments to work together, to feel vested in each other's success, and ultimately to contribute to the overall success of the library.

Notes

1. Nancy Chaffin Hunter, Kathleen Legg and Beth Oehlerts, "Two Librarians, an Archivist, and 13,000 Images: Collaborating to Build a Digital Collection," *The Library Quarterly* 80, no. 1 (2010): 81-103, doi: 10.1086/648464; Christine Rigda, "Implementing ILLiad: A Successful Collaboration of the Systems and Interlibrary Loan Departments in an Academic Library," *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserves* 20, no. 2 (April 2010): 77-82. doi: 10.1080/10723031003640364.
2. Janet Guinea, "Building Bridges: The Role of the Systems Librarian in a University Library," *Library Hi Tech* 21, no. 3 (2003): 325-32, doi: 10.1108/07378830310494508.
3. Wyoma vanDuinkerken and Pixey Anne Mosley, *The Challenge of Library Management: Leading with Emotional Engagement* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011).
4. Sever Bordeianu and Rebecca L. Lubas, "Collaborating with Other Library Departments," in *Practical Strategies for Cataloging Departments*, ed. Rebecca L. Lubas (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2011), 73-82.