

8-1-2023

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Recommended Citation

Buckenmeyer, E. (2023). I'm Responsible for What?: Selecting for Topics You Know Nothing About. *Georgia Library Quarterly*, 60(3). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol60/iss3/8>

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Cover Page Footnote

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I'm Responsible for What?: Selecting for Topics You Know Nothing About

By Eric Buckenmeyer

As librarians, we are frequently asked or required by circumstances to act as experts on some topic, process, or function for which we are not really trained or prepared. When I entered my previous position at Kennesaw State University (KSU), I was confronted with this problem almost immediately, and my hope is that each reader will be able to adapt my experience, in a macro sense, to their own experiences and draw lessons they may be able to use.

At KSU, each librarian is required to serve in a liaison role to a certain section of the campus community. In an academic library, liaisons are responsible for developing a relationship with a particular constituency, such as a teaching department or college. The liaisons advocate for the use of the library, develop collections, and implement services for their constituency. The option I was best suited to by education (bachelor's in history!), temperament, and interest was humanities, but sadly a colleague who started a month before me had been assigned to that liaison role. Instead, from a choice of two roles, I opted to take the mantle of collections liaison to the Southern Polytechnic College of Engineering, which is one of many colleges within the KSU system. Engineering was a subject of which I knew very little, yet I was now responsible for effectively selecting monographs for aspiring engineers and researchers. How can I select for something I know basically nothing about?

Environment: KSU Library System and Collegiate Liaison Program

KSU is a large, up-and-coming comprehensive institution. Though it is an R2 in the Carnegie

Classification System, it is new to that ranking and is developing its research programs while maintaining a strong emphasis on undergraduate student success. Most programs are for master's degrees or lower. Several years ago, the library was reorganized, which dramatically reshaped the liaison program. Before the restructuring, there was an undergraduate collegiate liaison program and a graduate liaison program, with the graduate librarians fulfilling the more traditional role of subject area liaison, in which all liaison functions for a constituency are concentrated in a single librarian. During the restructuring, the graduate liaison program was absorbed into the collegiate liaison program, which was in turn made responsible for all liaison services for graduate students, undergraduate students, and faculty.

Under the new liaison system, the university programs of study are grouped together into general subject areas, such as social sciences, humanities, arts, and engineering. A team of librarians is assigned to each liaison area, and each librarian fulfills one functional role. The specifics of these roles have changed and been clarified over time, but the broad contours remain the same. The academic engagement liaison serves as the primary point of contact for the various departments the team represents and leads the team members in group projects. The instruction liaison primarily teaches information literacy one-shots and performs one-on-one research consultations. Most of the instruction liaisons have their liaison duties as a primary job function, which contrasts with the other liaisons on the team, who may perform instruction, cataloging, acquisitions, collection development, or assessment roles as their primary job function.

The final role—which was my role at the time—is collection development liaison. The collection development liaison assists the Collection Development Unit in weeding projects, advising collection development on material needs in their subject area, and selecting monographs for acquisition in their collecting area.

There are a couple of challenges liaisons face under this system. Team cohesion is often difficult, particularly since many librarians already have full workloads due to their research, service duties, and primary job functions. Another issue is the fragmentation of subject knowledge across three or more liaison roles. Reference, instruction, and outreach could inform material selection when liaison duties were bound to a single person. Material selection could deepen knowledge of the collection and contribute to more effective reference, instruction, and outreach. While team cohesion varies greatly across each subject area, in my experience, the communication required to successfully implement this type of dynamic across a group has simply not materialized under the KSU collegiate liaison program. I believe this lack of communication is due to the aforementioned workloads, confusion as to what duties fall under which liaison positions, burnout in the aftermath of the pandemic, and a siloed division of labor between units and departments within the library that discouraged me from adopting a more collaborative mindset.

While team cohesion dampened my ability to learn how to be an effective selector for engineering, the problem remained that I—and some of my fellow liaisons—knew very little about the subject(s) for which we were expected to advocate.

Methodology of a Failed Experiment

By definition, no one can know the future, and as such, I believe collection development is inherently a task of gut instinct and guesswork backed up by data analysis and anecdote. A

colleague of mine refers to this characteristic of collection development as “squishy.” You can only know what people have used in the past or what surveys, focus groups, conversations, and simple observation tell you patrons are interested in right now. The traditional subject specialist model faces a variety of criticisms: personal bias, inconsistent performance, a nightmare of personal idiosyncrasies disrupting consistent assessment, and a large amount of financial expenditure to retain the talent of experts in the field. Despite these valid criticisms, their primary job function typically requires that they know the field well enough to be able to bridge that gap between the collected data and the unknowable future.

When I stepped into the liaison role, I decided to run an experiment to capture collection usage before I started selecting. Then, I planned to capture it every year for the next three-to-five years as I selected to see if my methods made any difference in collection usage. I would inform my monograph selection by drawing on topics and terms I selected from engineering course titles, Library of Congress (LC) classification codes with heavy usage, and presentations of student or faculty research.

However, the deeper I dug into my experiment, the less feasible it seemed. The first issue was usage data, which can be exported from our integrated library system—Alma—based on LC call number ranges. LC call numbers typically consist of three components: an alphanumeric classification code that describes the subject assigned to the work by the first cataloger to work with the source; an alphanumeric designation representing the author; and the year of publication. I used the first component to define the ranges of materials for which I wanted usage data. The letter(s) in this classification code give a general topic, while the numbers give a narrower subtopic. Depending on how specific you want to get with a range of call numbers, you may use only the letters or both letters and numbers.

Because of routine circulation procedures, we have very good usage data for print books circulating outside the library. However, I wanted a comprehensive picture of usage, and so I investigated in-house print book usage data in my information request. Because we have no reliable system for tracking in-house usage, those statistics represent only a portion of an unknown amount of use. When I made this decision, I did not think it would impact the data very much.

My colleagues in the Systems and Online Services Unit very helpfully provided the data I requested: every recorded usage of technology (LC Class T–TS), industry technology and management (LC Class HD38.5–HD62.3), agricultural engineering (LC Class S671–S760.5), and naval science (LC Class V–VM) materials for the years 2019–2021. That is, I requested and received information on how many times each print book had been checked out or recorded as needing to be reshelved without circulating during a recent three-year period. I requested those ranges because they were the ranges used by my predecessor in the engineering collection liaison position.

However, our collection consisted of more than just print books, and, unfortunately, usage for our e-books was measured in a wholly different way that is not truly comparable to print usage. For one thing, access to e-books was provided by the Alma link resolver, which could only provide the letters of the subject classification code for a used material rather than the full alphanumeric code (i.e., only usage for all S-coded materials, not usage for S671–S760.5-coded materials). I was forced to abandon the HD and S classification code analysis altogether since no e-book usage could be collected to make it comparable to the print usage. This also meant that an in-depth review of T–TS and V–VM classifications would be impossible, even if e-book usage could be counted in an equivalent way to our print circulation.

Another issue was that the categories of e-book usage and print book usage are not identical. E-book usage in the Alma link resolver is tallied according to a proprietary system, which includes delineations of use like “clicked requests” (which requires the material be downloaded) and “requests” (which only requires the metadata record be viewed). In trying to get statistics as analogous to my print metrics as possible, I counted “clicked requests” as if they were print books that had been circulated. I conceived of “requests” as similar to in-house print book usage, but in-house print book use by definition would not overlap with external circulation numbers. When a book was checked out of the library, it was counted by being scanned and checked out. When a book was used internally by a patron, they would ideally place it on a reshelving cart placed at the end of the aisle to be counted and reshelved. But “requests” were typically counted as someone viewed the metadata record. After that, they could log a “clicked request” by downloading the content. That is, any “clicked request” could duplicate a “request” or vice versa. As a result, I had to effectively exclude the e-book equivalent of in-house usage from my data set.

Finally, I attempted to account for materials we didn’t have access to by counting interlibrary loan (ILL) requests, but this opened another bank of information that didn’t match well with the existing information. Because ILL requests identify where the faculty and students come from, the data revealed that my assumptions about our engineering community’s needs might be incorrect. Many of the ILL requests from engineering patrons were for areas outside the LC codes that I had decided to use. To keep things simple—a notion that felt increasingly ridiculous as my data set grew in complexity—I only used the data that fell within the T–TS and V–VM classification codes.

After tabulating the size of the collection (the number of books and e-books), I divided it by the

Classification Code	Description	# of ebooks	# of ebook downloads	# of books	# of book checkouts	# of ILL Requests	Total holdings	Percent use of collections
T	Technology	1967	1500	1402	132	5	3369	48.59%
TA	Engineering (General). Civil engineering	2775	1137	2175	415	25	4950	15.77%
TC	Hydraulic engineering. Ocean engineering	174	19	97	7	0	271	26.57%
TD	Environmental technology. Sanitary engineering	1033	253	468	52	0	1501	20.32%
TE	Highway engineering. Roads and pavements	100	26	1363	14	1	1463	41.70%
TF	Railway engineering and operation	40	2	199	30	0	239	13.39%
TG	Bridge engineering	72	8	92	4	0	164	12.20%
TH	Building construction	665	215	1104	211	7	1769	24.48%
TJ	Mechanical engineering and machinery	1339	330	963	259	8	2302	25.93%
TK	Electrical engineering. Electronics. Nuclear engineering	7536	1087	2369	471	20	9905	15.93%
TL	Motor vehicles. Aeronautics. Astronautics	505	121	1037	176	6	1547	19.65%
TM	Mining engineering. Metallurgy	253	33	507	9	7	760	45.80%
TP	Chemical technology	1018	201	275	22	6	1293	17.73%
TR	Photography	1863	149	516	39	9	2379	6.70%
TS	Manufactures	1099	250	1000	92	2	2099	16.39%
V	Naval Science (General)	29	8	84	3	2	113	11.50%
VA	Navies: organization, distribution, naval situation	29	2	87	3	0	116	4.17%
VB	Naval administration	6	0	21	2	0	27	7.41%
VC	Naval maintenance	14	0	1	0	0	15	0.00%
VD	Naval seamen	1	0	0	0	0	1	0.00%
VE	Marines	3	0	24	1	1	27	7.41%
VF	Naval ordnance	1	0	2	0	0	3	0.28%
VG	Minor services of navies	6	0	32	4	0	38	10.53%
VK	Navigation. Merchant marine	84	1	60	4	2	144	4.60%
VM	Naval architecture. Shipbuilding. Marine engineering	92	1	111	11	0	203	12.32%

Figure 1: A table displaying collection usage by LC classification code. "Percent use of collections" is color-coded based on a break-down of "strong," "medium," and "weak" usage.

number of uses. The number of uses was generated by simply combining the number of times each print book had circulated or been used in-house, each e-book was downloaded, and a book in the classification code was requested via ILL. I was unable to find statistics from other libraries to set a benchmark, so I set one based on the distribution of use I saw in the data: 20% and higher was "strong usage," 10%–19.9% was "medium usage," and under 10% was "weak usage." Out of the 25 codes that I had settled on, five had 20% usage or more in the years 2019–2021. Seven had 10–19% usage. The remaining 13 had usage of 9% or less.

The numbers provided a couple of avenues for selecting, but I realized that they gave me no direction for selecting within those classification codes, nor did it help me understand how to encourage greater usage in subject areas that seemed to me to be lacking, given our program's strengths. For example, I learned from KSU press releases that a team of students successfully engineered an award-winning autonomous electric vehicle. I figured that such impressive work reflect greater engagement with the electrical engineering (TK) and automotive engineering (TL) classifications. However, they only had 15.9% and 19.6% usage respectively.

Meanwhile, I struggled to find a way to measure the effectiveness of my efforts to learn more about what students and faculty were studying. Since it was not my primary job function, it was

hard to get to faculty lectures and student symposiums on a regular basis. I maintained a list of topics and search terms from press releases and events relating to the engineering college, but my efforts to make connections within the college were rebuffed or met with silence, a challenge the engineering liaisons have faced for some time. While writing this paper, I realized I could have attempted to team up with the academic engagement liaison, who has significantly more experience with the engineering college, but that did not occur to me at the time.

Eventually, I settled into doing the best I could to select books I felt were useful, but I increasingly became aware that my data was irreparably flawed. The data didn't really provide a useful guide to future selecting, and my attempts to ascertain current and future interests were incomplete. The final nail in the coffin of my experiment came after one year of selecting. I was offered and accepted an interim position within the library that would put my selecting duties on hiatus, thus disrupting the process while I was trying to measure its effectiveness.

Lessons

What did I learn about selecting for something I know nothing about? The answer is: quite a bit. I've listed a few of the lessons below to assist other selectors that may be new to their subject area.

Simple data and information can contribute a great deal to your ability to select.

Even a basic understanding of usage and demographics can help librarians select outside their areas of expertise. I learned from working with the usage data at KSU that e-books had a much higher rate of usage than print books in the LC classification codes I selected. I therefore only selected e-books. My method of searching for monographs in the GOBI acquisitions platform tended to turn up highly technical works with advanced academic content. Yet KSU has a heavy focus on student success, so having a higher proportion of popular and generally academic titles would be a better bet. While I cannot prove either empirically or anecdotally that either of these changes would improve usage, it seems likely that they would contribute to a more suitable collection than what I actually selected. Finding out basic information like patron demographics, contours of the collection, and usage can reveal useful yet unexpected insights to inform selecting.

Your efforts to learn aren't useless.

As an extension of the previous point, it can feel like your efforts to support collection development are pointless or useless, especially if you are trying to learn some of those basics about your collection and patrons. I very much feel that my early efforts could be described as "fumbling," but if I had not made the attempt, I would not have learned the lessons I discussed in the previous point. Even if you are never satisfied with your own selecting, remember that you are always improving as you try, try, and try again.

Listen to the (accessible) experts.

If your library doesn't have access to the knowledge of an expert, then you can rely on tools provided by the supplier or the purchasing platform. GOBI has its spotlight lists, which has EBSCO subject lists, subject-focused lists, core

titles, and undergraduate curriculum lists. One of the EBSCO subject lists is Energy and Green Technology, which may contain books useful for the KSU students who build electric vehicles. I had no knowledge of this subject area, and when you don't have subject knowledge, it can be helpful to fall back on some of the tools designed to narrow the options for selection or ask a more experienced selector at your institution for help.

Sometimes you just have to select something.

Early in the project, I tried to set up all my data and have a plan for selecting. I tried to select "perfectly." I imagined that I was going to select my way to a very successful collection based on the data. Why hadn't anyone else tried this? It seemed so simple. As I wrote above, I learned quickly that my data didn't narrow my choices down much, nor did my efforts to learn about the engineering college. But I had to spend the funds allocated to me, and I simply didn't have the ability to wait while I developed the knowledge I needed. There's no way around it, but that doesn't mean you can't learn and improve your selecting and connections to the patrons as you go.

Collection development is "squishy." There's no way to know the future.

If you can't know the future, then there's no reason to worry too much. Try to make good selections, but once a selection is made, it is made. Try not to second-guess yourself. It will not make your collection better to worry if what you bought is "good enough" or if people will use it. Either they will or they won't, and you have no control over that. Every collection is always a work in progress trying to be ready for a future we cannot predict, so simply do your best and keep working to improve!

Conclusion

With all of this in mind, the main takeaway is simply: do your best, adapt as the situation and

your understanding of the situation changes, and keep trying to learn and assess what your collection is, how it is changing, and how it could be better. No collection can ever be perfect, so let's not aim for perfect. Rather, let's aim for growth and potential.

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