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Louise Feldman

*Colorado State University*

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## Subject Librarians in the Changing Academic Library

Louise Feldmann  
Colorado State University, USA  
[louise.feldmann@colostate.edu](mailto:louise.feldmann@colostate.edu)

### Abstract

This article overviews the literature and key topics surrounding the role of subject librarianship in the evolving environment of academic libraries. Subject librarians are looked at in the context of the broad trends affecting librarianship and in the context of the traditional roles they have held in collection development, instruction, and reference. The author opened a discussion on this topic entitled, "Subject Librarians: Viable or Vanishing?" for the RUSA-CODES Dual Assignments Discussion Group at the American Library Association Midwinter Meeting in San Antonio, Texas in January of 2006.

### Introduction

A perusal of library literature of late gives one the sense that academic libraries are changing significantly. One comes away from the literature thinking that the academic library of the future will be run exclusively by tech staff and MBAs. The literature discussion focuses on technological impacts, budgets, needs of users, and personnel issues, with little discussion focusing specifically on librarianship and the librarian's role in the future library. Certainly, as the future is examined, attention needs to be given towards the best direction for libraries overall by balancing the broader topics of technological advances and budget concerns along with specific discussions regarding the current workforce's talents and potentials and the role of "traditional" librarianship. Where will librarians be in ten, fifteen, or twenty years? Will librarians still be around? Should they be? These are the questions that should be examined by librarians and library administrators. One particular group of librarians whose future role needs to be examined is the subject specialist. Subject librarians have in-depth subject knowledge, teaching skills, people skills, and negotiating skills; talents that are valuable and could continue to be essential in the foreseeable future. This paper is intended to provide an overview of the issues and trends that may affect the subject

librarian's future role while also providing some justifications as to how and why subject librarians can continue to remain essential in the future academic library.

### **Changes in the Profession**

Unarguably, the academic library's future role is being discussed and questioned extensively in the literature (Campbell, 2006; Hisle, 2002; Sierpe, 2004; Taiga, 2006), but attention needs to be paid to librarians as well. This has been pointed out by several authors such as Eino Sierpe and Stephen Pinfield. Sierpe (2004) states that "...few authors have taken time to reflect on the nature of the changes affecting librarianship" (p. 177). He further states that librarians need to not only examine the direction of librarianship, but also need to rescue the values that have shaped the practice of what is now known as 'traditional' librarianship" (p. 178). Pinfield also addresses this issue and asserts the need to examine subject librarianship in order for these librarians to continue to play an effective part in the contemporary academic library (p. 33).

No look to the future of a profession is complete without taking a look at the broad trends occurring in and being forecast for academic libraries. Diane Zabel (2005a, 2005b) outlines many of the trends occurring in reference and public services librarianship in her excellent two-part series in *Reference & User Services Quarterly*. When one thinks of library trends, technology immediately comes to mind and its impact on collection development, reference, and instruction. But there are other issues besides technology, including the anticipated large number of baby-boomer librarian retirements, increased interdisciplinary research, millennial user's needs, and extreme budgetary constraints.

One trend that has received much attention is in library personnel and the changes in staffing of the academic library. The issues focus around three primary factors: librarian "supply," budgetary constraints, and library "needs." The difficulties in recruiting people to librarianship and retirements of baby boomers are contributing to a decrease in supply and are being discussed extensively in the literature (see Campbell, 2006; Lispcomb, 2003). The issue is of such concern that a comprehensive national research study examining the future of librarians in the workforce is being conducted by Jose-Marie Griffiths and the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS, 2006). In addition, budgetary constraints are forcing libraries to look at and consider new staffing models (Zabel, 2005a, p.8-9). Perhaps in large part because of these issues, libraries are beginning to employ many staff members with non-MLIS degrees (Neal, 2006). In his *Library Journal* article entitled "Raised by Wolves: Integrating the New Generation of Feral Professionals in the Academic Library," James G. Neal (2006) discusses how academic libraries are employing non-MLIS professionals in areas such as systems, human resources, fundraising, publishing,

instructional technology, and facilities management. Of course, with the amount of anticipated and current digitization, reliance on technology, and the need to market new services, it seems reasonable to employ IT people and marketing gurus. The Taiga forum (2006) takes this further and proposes that within five years academic libraries will be staffed exclusively with tech staff and MBAs. These changes, it seems, are an attempt to balance the changing needs of libraries with the decreasing supply of librarians. However, librarians need to reflect as to whether this is the best course of action or if librarianship is being compromised.

While library personnel changes are important to consider, it is also important in examining trends to look at changes in the needs of patrons and how these might impact librarian's work. How do faculty, students, and researchers use the library? Users and their perceptions of libraries are important to consider in what services and resources academic libraries offer and how they and librarians can continue to remain relevant and useful to patrons. OCLC recently released a report (2005c) entitled, *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* in which information users were surveyed in six countries. The survey was conducted in order to learn more about people's information-seeking practices and preferences. They found that "books" are the library's "brand" and that while patrons view libraries as places to get traditional resources such as books, reference materials, and research assistance, they are not seen generally as the first place to access electronic resources (OCLC, 2005b). While this begs that the contemporary library image needs addressed, attention also needs to be paid to the needs of different generations. A companion study to this was recently released, entitled *College Students' Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources* (OCLC, 2005a). One clear finding is that librarians are sought as a first source for help by college students. Of the respondents, 76% of those seeking electronic resource help indicated they would rather consult a librarian over 18% who indicated that they would consult the computer as a first source for help (p. 2-7). Results from these reports clearly indicate public service librarians, including subject librarians, remain valuable. Zabel (2005b) also discusses the millennial generation and the need for librarians to understand their needs and information seeking habits as we develop services, programs, and facilities. Certainly, generational differences in learning styles and perceptions of libraries need to be explored and addressed by libraries in their planning (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Thomas & McDonald, 2005).

Changes are not only occurring inside the library but within academia as well. Another trend noted in the literature is that academia is seeing an increased emphasis in interdisciplinary scholarship and research clusters. In the article entitled, "New Roles and Opportunities for Academic Library Liaisons," Glynn and Wu (2003), overview trends from 1991 to 2001 at Rutgers University. The most significant changes are moves to create interdisciplinary academic communities, budgetary

concerns, and the digital environment. As the authors point out, these topics have been of concern for more than a decade, but they are now becoming more pervasive and, thus, attention needs to be given to their importance. Liaisons need to work closely with other subject librarians on collections and educate faculty of budgetary constraints and scholarly communication issues. As Glynn and Wu point out, the liaison's role is more of an art than science and requires that subject librarians have the creativity, time, and patience to develop relationships with departmental faculty (p.128).

Undeniably, one of the largest impacts on the entire library profession has been technology. Several articles have addressed this issue and its impact on the subject specialist's role in collection development (Bodi & Maier-O'Shea, 2005; Manoff, 2000; Welch, 2002). These articles discuss how the online environment and electronic resources allow for less control of what we own, more interdisciplinary thinking, and the "morphing" of categories and formats of materials. The demands of the digital environment are at odds with traditional library structures, and large multi-disciplinary databases and consortial agreements may be reducing the role of subject specialists in collection development (Bodi, et.al., Manoff, Welch). Welch states that, "the increase in external and internal hands "stirring the pot" contributes to a steady decrease in the role of individual subject specialists [in collection development]" (p.284). Manoff questions whether "collection development" is still appropriate in this environment (p. 860). Clearly, the subject specialist's role in collection development is changing due to consortial agreements and large interdisciplinary databases amongst other factors. Whether they are no longer needed in this context is questionable and will be discussed later in this paper.

We've looked at the trends discussed in the literature. Now let's look at the subject librarian's traditional and current roles and see how they may adapt and be of value in the changing and newly emerging library environment.

## **Traditional Roles**

Subject librarians or bibliographers, as they are sometimes referred, emerged during the 1950's to late 1970's time frame when university expansion, academic diversification, print-based scholarship, collection-centered libraries and limited alternatives to local holdings formed the environment of libraries in higher education (Hazen, 2000). Subject librarians today provide reference and research services in their specialty field, work with faculty to provide information literacy instruction, and make purchasing decisions for materials in their subject collection area. Reference services include providing patron assistance via instant messaging (IM), email, and in person. Subject librarians often work with faculty to incorporate research skills into their courses, provide an overview of services and subject specific resources for a

class, and provide in-depth research assistance to students and student groups. Collection development involves negotiating agreements with vendors, assessing resources in various formats, working with departments for funding assistance, and ensuring the collection meets the needs of faculty and students. In many ways, the subject librarian is the quintessential librarian performing collection, organization, and dissemination duties. How can these traditional roles adapt to the broad changes occurring in academic libraries and how can subject librarians continue to be essential to the academic library?

## **Reference**

Subject librarians generally provide reference services at a central desk and/or to students and faculty, both individually and in groups. Technology provides numerous platforms for providing this service such as online chat and email but the reference transaction essentially remains the same regardless of format. The challenge is in not only staying abreast of new trends in information delivery but also in putting it to the best use for patrons whether in providing reference materials or as a reference transaction format. This is an important and conscientious challenge and it will continue to be so in the future with advances in information technology. Tied to this is a consideration for the technological habits of differing generations. How and when can tools such as VR, IM, blogging, pod casts and wikis be used by librarians effectively in providing a quick answer or an in-depth research query to accommodate all users? Subject librarians are essential in providing specialized reference to students and faculty in their subject fields and are particularly adept at determining these user's needs. A business student, for example, may be looking for information on a particular company, but may really need industry information. This is something that subject librarians, in particular a business librarian, would be adept at determining in a reference interview.

## **Instruction**

Some could argue that the availability of information in numerous formats has made it harder to find (Campbell, 2006). Company information, for example, is found to various degrees in numerous print publications, web sites, and databases. Which to choose? This certainly provides many opportunities for instruction by subject librarians. Information literacy initiatives on many campuses also will and already is creating numerous instruction opportunities. Subject librarians focus a significant amount of energy on creating easier ways for students to find information by creating tools, such as tutorials and subject guides; resources that are specifically tailored to subjects of study, such as business or education. Allowing the user to become more empowered to find information is what Diane Zabel (2005) calls "web self-help." Certainly, this is an area for continued development. We need to consider the

advantages of technology and making things just plain easy for patrons to find. As Wilder (2005) points out, students don't necessarily want to become librarians. Why should we teach them as if they do? However, it is important to note, and as Campbell (2006) points out, that it is still uncertain as to whether the move of more and more information to electronic formats will actually make information easier to find and, thus, a less complicated process or this will demand more of a need for instruction and assistance. Both avenues need to continue to be utilized in the meantime; subject librarians need to provide easier ways for patrons to find information and also continue to provide instruction. Additionally, instructional classes in not only Internet and database searching, but in using blogging, creating web pages, and contributing to wikis along with discussions of scholarly communication, copyright concerns and ethical issues surrounding this technology is also an opportunity. Again, subject librarians are attuned to the needs of users, their information seeking habits, and the formats of information distribution in their subject fields, and can work with tech staff to develop better ways for users to find information while keeping patrons informed of where and how to find information through being available for reference and providing instruction.

## **Digital Projects**

Another area in which subject librarians can play an essential role is in the development of digital projects and with institutional repositories, specifically with decisions regarding content matter and user needs. Subject librarian's instructional skills, subject knowledge, and unique and essential customer service perspective is invaluable in this context. Oregon State University has recognized the value that subject specialists can add to digital project teams. In "Going beyond Selection," Ruth Vondracek (2003) discusses how subject specialists bring value to the digital life cycle with scouting and identification, selection, digitization and description, providing context, interface design, and promotion. She states, "...the very skills that ensure their success as selectors also equip them to contribute throughout the creation of the digital library...with multiple benefits for end users" (p. 20). Stephen Pinfield (2001) also discusses how subject librarians can be effective in their role as an "intermediary" between patrons and the technical staff. Particularly with reduced staffing, libraries can certainly benefit by using librarians and staff with differing skills and talents and from a variety of departments to form teams that are efficient. Colorado State University (CSU) Libraries has successfully used departmental representatives in team formation. In February of 2006, a wiki implementation team (WIT) was formed with reps from several library departments. Each departmental representative's perspective was valuable in the process. Due to the subject librarian's experience with instruction, she helped train library staff in the use of the wiki. Additionally, the subject librarian provided substantial input as to user's needs and

perspectives in the design. The subject librarian's knowledge and perspective can be of significant value in these types of projects. Bailey (2005), in discussing the reference librarian's role in institutional repositories, articulates this well when he says, "reference librarians are a library's eyes and ears. They understand user needs and perceptions. They know what is working and what is not. They know how to help, inform, persuade, and teach users. For an IR [institutional repository] to succeed, it is essential that they be involved in its planning, implementation, and operation" (p. 266).

## **Collection Development**

Subject librarians are essential in developing subject specific collections. Content knowledge and being savvy in developing the right mix of databases and other materials is difficult due to the availability of materials in numerous formats and serials inflation eating up more and more of collection development budgets. Subject librarian's relationships with faculty and departments can provide an essential collaborative environment in which to obtain database funding. For example, recently the business librarian at Colorado State University negotiated a collaborative licensing agreement with the College of Business in order to get Value Line online; a resource that was un-obtainable without the financial assistance of the College of Business. This is an example of how liaison relationships are essential and perhaps even more important than in the past. In a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Dec 9, 2005) entitled "Information Anarchy or Information Utopia?" James G. Neal says, "my success used to be evaluated on my ability to effectively allocate resources, but now I am increasingly measured by how much money I've raised, how many grants I've obtained, and how many products I've sold" (p. 232). Pinfield (2001) also discusses the increased emphasis for subject librarians in "getting out there" and advocating the collection. While this potentially necessary new aspect of our job may seem somewhat distasteful in the non-profit world of librarianship, it may become more and more important and essential in light of tight budgets and limited resources. Subject librarians who are already savvy in dealing with vendors and faculty are particularly adept in this role.

Relationships with departmental faculty that have been developed over months or years are invaluable. The wide range of factors involved in choosing e-resources is complex and include issues of content, functionality, interface, authentication, archiving, technical requirements, etc. Subject knowledge plays an important part in this evaluation. For instance, a librarian with limited knowledge of the differences between industry and marketing reports or without an intimate knowledge of business courses and faculty research may not be able to assess the content and need for a particular database as well as a business subject specialist who works daily with students, faculty, and classes and understands their needs for projects and research.



One cannot deny that this is a valuable attribute. For the foreseeable future subject librarians should continue to play a role in collection development and, in particular, with database selection.

### **The Human Element**

One would be remiss if we didn't look at the human element involved in librarianship and in particular with the work of subject librarians. Glynn and Wu (2003) point out the importance of subject librarians in contributing to a user-driven, rather than technology-driven, library. Subject specialists are needed to train patrons on finding information effectively on the web and in databases. They are also, again, essential in their knowledge of user-needs and thus can be effective in collaborating with digitization projects. Glynn and Wu recommend that liaisons attempt to humanize the digital library to the greatest extent possible and state, "we should strive to make the academic library's sometimes intimidating bureaucracy and its vast array of resources as accessible and humane as possible" (p. 128). Sierpe (2004) also points out his concerns with the library profession becoming technology-centered rather than user or human-centered. He argues that rather than focusing on a human-centered organization, administrators are focused on technology and being driven by it in their decision making to the destruction of traditional librarianship [cataloging, collection development, and reference] and are consequently abandoning "...the ideals and values that have sustained librarianship" (p.178). Subject librarians are "out there" meeting with faculty, students, vendors, and community users. They need to be recognized as being the face of the library and a key marketing force.

### **Conclusion**

Subject specialists are a valuable resource, regardless of the changes occurring in academic libraries. The digital age has brought about numerous changes to the library workplace including such things as virtual reference, database resource licenses, digital repositories, search engines, blogs, instant messaging, and wikis. The changes we are seeing in the organization and administration of libraries is the result of numerous factors including the economic downturn and resulting tight budgets as well as the significant advances in technology and the resulting digital environment. However, attention should be taken to utilize and nurture the current talents of our workforce, rather than alienate them. Subject librarians offer much in the way of customer service, interaction and relationships with students and campus departmental faculty and staff, a strong user-conscious perspective, knowledge built over time of faculty needs and concerns, intimate knowledge of the resources covering a discipline, instructional skills with an ability to teach to freshman, graduate students, and faculty, as well as experience with virtual reference, creating tutorials, web page design, etc. The skills and traits of subject librarians are of use for the foreseeable future.

Hopefully, this paper will spark a discussion to keep and develop the talents of our current subject librarians.

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## Suggested Further Reading

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Bibliography from well-received conference program at ALA Annual Meeting in Chicago, June 2005. Excellent source for further reading.

Chavez, V. (2005, May). Subject Librarians in Digital Reference. *WebJunction*, 2005. Retrieved November 3, 2005,

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Discusses how the virtual environment has changed role of subject librarians. Questions what role subject librarians will play in the future.

Level, A. (2001). Biocomplexity and the Reference Subject

Specialist: Interconnectedness and Change. *Colorado Libraries*, 27(2), 25-27.

Interesting comparison of subject librarianship to biocomplexity. Discusses the changing roles of subject librarians and ways to stay relevant.

Manaka, P. D. (2005). Are Subject Librarians an Endangered Species? *College & Research Libraries News*, 66(8), 575.

A brief article describing the highly successful program sponsored by the Anthropology and Sociology Section (ANSS) of ACRL at the ALA Annual Meeting in Chicago, June 2005, entitled "Are subject librarians an endangered species?"

McAbee, S. L. and Graham, J.B. (2005). Expectations, Realities, and Perceptions of Subject Specialist Librarians' Duties in Medium-Sized Academic Libraries. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 31(1), 19-28.

Article discusses changes in reference models/differing reference models and impact on subject specialists and what they actually spend their time doing. Study surveyed 138 librarians in 21 medium-sized academic libraries to identify time and value on tasks.

[http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v07n03/feldmann\\_101.htm](http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v07n03/feldmann_101.htm).