

ALCTS Discussion Group:

The Role of the Professional Librarian in Technical Services

Discussion Topic: "Appropriate Role for MLS and Non-MLS Catalogers"

Minutes of the 2008 ALA Midwinter Conference Meeting

Pennsylvania Convention Center, Room 308 (Philadelphia, PA)

January 13, 2008, 4 – 6 PM

Recorder: Michael E. Rice, Co-Vice Chair.

Meeting began promptly at 4 PM.

Discussion Group Chairs and Invited Speaker Introductions. Ruth Fischer (RF) of R2 Consulting (Contoocook, NH) welcomed everyone, passed around handouts of the proposed meeting agenda and copies of the invited speaker's notes. Being the current chair of the Discussion Group (DG), RF began formal introductions by first introducing herself and then the immediate past chair, Martha Bace (MB) of the University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa, AL). RF then asked MB to give a very brief history of the DG. As was recorded in last year's DG report, MB pointed out that the DG has seen various ups and downs in attendance over the years. She also noted the meeting's very "competitive" timeslot, with The Creative Ideas in Technical Services DG and PCC, both having similar focus, being two primary examples. She was gratified to see the level of turnout for this meeting, especially since attendance is typically lower during Midwinter. She concluded by saying that the DG has had many lively discussions in the past. Next, Michael Rice (MER) of The University of Michigan's Kresge Business Administration Library (Ann Arbor, MI) was introduced as the current co-vice chair. RF noted that Angela Laack of Southern Methodist University (Dallas, TX), being the other co-vice chair, was unable to attend the conference due to her maternity. Invited speaker, Mary McKeown (MM) of the University of Notre Dame's Hesburgh Libraries (South Bend, IN) was then introduced and profusely thanked for accepting the invitation to give a sort of "kick-off" presentation that would help facilitate the meeting's discussion.

Meeting Agenda. RF reviewed the handout of the planned agenda for the meeting. After greetings and introductions, MM as the invited speaker, would deliver a talk discussing Notre Dame's novel cataloging strategy of pairing MLS and non-MLS catalogers together within subject/language based working teams. As MM's notes indicated, she would describe Notre Dame's cataloging environment in the 1990's, how the idea of such teams evolved, the breakdown of tasks components of staff members, the challenges and problems faced, and the eventual benefits derived; as well as, what was learned from the experience and concluding with current developments. This would be followed by questions and answers for MM and then an open forum, moderated by RF would commence. Finally, there would be a brief business meeting to deliberate whether the group would like to continue this topic at the 2008 Annual Conference (Anaheim, CA), or possibly "brainstorm" others that involve professionals in technical services.

Attendee Introductions. RF asked each person in attendance to introduce themselves, tell the group the name of the institution they represent and their position within it. And if they wished, to also mention any particular experience(s) they would like to share or

issues of concern regarding the role of professionals and para-professionals in Technical Services. As would be expected, the vast majority of attendees were from academic or research institutions, with a few representing the business sector. Regardless, many voiced their concerns with the blurring of the roles of professional and para-professionals and of similar grey areas found between the acquisitions and cataloging functions. Also mentioned was the difficulty in managing workflows and personnel, especially with the impact that electronic resources has had on the already complicated mix. [Recorder's note: Including officers and invited speaker, there were approximately 36 people in attendance midway through the meeting.]

Presentation by Invited Speaker. Mary McKeown, Head of Cataloging / Principle Cataloger at the Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame gave a 20 minute talk entitled: "Appropriate Roles for MLS and Non-MLS Catalogers." More specifically, she described the cataloging environment at Notre Dame in the 1990's and the reorganization plan for the department which included the development of subject and/or language based teams by pairing original [i.e. MLS] catalogers with one or two staff members. When MM arrived in 1991 as the Humanities and Medieval Studies Cataloger, work within the Cataloging Department was distributed solely based on the presence or absence of a full cataloging record without, among others, any analysis of the appropriateness of the available record(s) for Notre Dame's collections or taking advantage of the diverse skill set of various department employees when processing it. (As an example, German texts were not systematically given to a native German speaker on staff.) Original and complex copy cataloging was only done by MLS catalogers who worked in isolation, both physically and organizationally, from the rest of the department. Problems and frustrations arose when materials would be sent back to the department to fix errors that could have easily been prevented if a more careful analysis of the material had been done in the first place. To complicate matters, from March 1997 to July 2001 the department suffered from the lack of leadership and direction with the absence of a department head and other high level management changes that occurred during this period.

In view of these conditions, and in an effort to save time professionals spent on cataloging tasks, the proposal was accepted to pair original catalogers with a staff member to create subject/language based teams. Other perceived benefits of this plan were to develop a greater understanding among the department's staff to be able to better handle important "premiere" collections (and to get the job done right the first time), provide the cataloging staff with development opportunities, and give catalog librarians supervisory experience. MM then described some of the cataloging tasks that were to be performed by the non-MLS staff members under this new arrangement. These included: call number and subject heading additions to incomplete copy, original cataloging that could be derived from existing full copy of a closely related title (i.e. different edition or a translation of original work), authority work in local system, establishing new literary author call numbers, and depending of the varying technical skills of the teams, original cataloging for such things as Notre Dame theses or for "formulaic" projects. Additional benefits were gained in para-professionals performing non-cataloging tasks such as website maintenance, collection development support, ILS upgrade testing, and service on library committees.

Such changes would not be without their challenges or problems. MM described the four primary issues Notre Dame's Cataloging Department faced: (a) large investment of initial training time which included many interruptions for MLS catalogers to answer questions and mentor the staff, (b) some staff members took considerable time in developing confidence in their abilities to approach their work in a different way (doing new tasks, exercising judgment), (c) it took 3-4 years to upgrade positions and salaries, one position at a time, and (d) the new system led to two levels of staff within the department which in turn created some tension, since those at the lower level felt that those above them were doing the same basic kinds of work for higher pay.

For all the initial investment of time in training, disruptions, and dismay within the department, MM feels in hindsight everyone would agree that it was worth all of the effort. She expounded on other benefits the department has derived from the move to team based cataloging. Primary among these is greater staff development, for which Notre Dame has made a high priority. Auditing classes in subject areas pertinent to their work, attending offsite workshops, and enhancing their technical skills beyond those needed to use OCLC and the ILS are just a few examples of staff member initiatives. The department is also better able to handle a large influx of materials that don't lend themselves to simple copy cataloging and, at the same time, is delivering better cataloging product to meet user needs. Within the past two years the remaining copy cataloging positions have been upgraded and have been given similar complex copy and some original cataloging for English language materials.

Questions and Answers for Mary McKeown. In summary, RF briefly characterized MM's description of the initial situation in Notre Dame's Cataloging Department as being one in which several major problems needed to be solved quickly, first of which was a management vacuum created by the exit of several upper level managers. Then when it was announced that a key vacant MLS cataloging position was not going to be filled, the assumption was that there would be no new MLS cataloging positions created to handle the increased workflow. On top of that, a greater influx of special project materials that needed a finer level of descriptive processing was being received in the department. Another observation was that the benefits to individuals and the department went way beyond the extra level of materials that the department was able to catalog. RF added that it was nice to hear that MM was able to "step-up" people's level of participation within the department across the board.

Open Discussion moderated by RF. RF thanked MM for her presentation and the floor was opened up for questions for MM, comments, or ideas to share from each individual's own experiences. The first question for MM asked what the different tasks were between MLS and non-MLS catalogers at Notre Dame. MM replied that the MLS catalogers were managers of the non-MLS catalogers, that there were quite a bit of difficult cataloging left for them to do, and as faculty members there were other roles for them to play within the University. She clarified that her description of these teams was for book processing and that retrospective buying of monographs was important to the research of Notre Dame's faculty and noted that the department is responsible for cataloging about 60,000 volumes each year. A request was made for copies of the job descriptions that resulted from the upgrades of the non-MLS positions.

An attendee then relayed her experience at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities in which teams were created about ten years ago in technical services and the arrangement worked for a while, as people bought into the concept and they liked being the “go to” people; but then in the last 2-3 years, management has decided to disband the teams and moral and work efficiency has suffered for it. RF commented that in many instances she has seen really good catalogers promoted into management positions without having any management training such as task assignment, evaluations, or productivity measurement. It seems to happen more so in cataloging, that the skill sets don't seem to fit with those people who are asked to manage.

The issue of outside training was brought up and MM noted that there weren't many local opportunities, besides those offered from their local OCLC regional provider; otherwise staff would have to travel to either the east or west coast to attend workshops. MM mentioned the cooperative program between the PCC and ALCTS that provides cataloging documentation (such as LCSH training, LC classification, name authorities, and integrating resources) through the Cataloging Distribution Service. The cataloging department of Notre Dame is hoping to be able to use these materials to develop an in-house core-competency program within the year. Another participant described her institution's professional catalogers' responsibility of providing library-wide in-house training on various cataloging and acquisitions functions and tasks of interest each month. MM commented that she had also done library-wide training and with the purchase of the materials mentioned, it is hoped to “level out” the cataloging work that takes place in several disparate areas of the library (i.e. special collections, government documents, and serials).

RF then directed a question to Jim LeBlanc, the non-MLS, Head of Database Maintenance at Cornell University. She was interested to learn his perspective on how best the work can be divided and in a more general sense; do people believe that the MLS has anything to do with what makes a great cataloger. Taking the second question, the response was that in his opinion, a MLS doesn't necessarily make for a good cataloger, especially if the person starts out with the MLS. Cataloging is a particular acquired skill. For the past 15 years, Cornell has been moving in the direction, in light of economic pressures to make staffs smaller and as the information world continues to explode, of taking considerable effort in getting the right people with the right skills into the right jobs. If a person fits with the job requirements, then the question becomes “How are we going to compensate the person for it?” At Cornell, it is not required to have the MLS to be a librarian, but it is a University rule that someone with an academic position must have a masters degree or higher. He continued that it seems to him the way the information world is going and the way the cataloging world is going, there is going to be more pressure on getting people to do cataloging, and they may not even be in the Library. As a profession, we need to be thinking continually “We are librarians, what does that mean?” “What distinguishes someone who is a librarian and one who isn't?” And it isn't original cataloging; if that is all, then it is not sustainable. “What is it that we do as academic staff that make us different?” It may mean going to conferences and publishing... things that go beyond the day-to-day operations.

MER agreed that you do not need a MLS to be a good cataloger. However, what the MLS degree does give the person is a broader perspective on what they do and what role they play in their institution. In his experience he has seen many people who are perfectly content in doing just on small set of tasks, day in and day out. These people don't see or aren't concerned or interested with the bigger picture and the MLS helps give a broader picture to those who are. He also mentioned how important communication is for smooth working conditions, both within the technical services department and between others in the Library.

A question was posed to MM concerning the level of commitment on the part of library administration for the upgrading and salary increases of the non-MLS catalogers during her cataloging department's reorganization. MM's response was that there was this commitment, but that it took one position at a time and sometimes a year between upgrades to achieve; however, with the last round of upgrades, the administration supported all three at one time. MM indicated that it is important to present a strong case to administration and she feels that this was done in the last round of upgrades, as they went through the University's HR very quickly.

Discussion then continued with a participant asking the group what other ways, besides monetarily, can be used as incentives to upgrade much needed staff positions. How can staff be motivated and asked to step-up without offering higher pay? RF agreed that this was a very legitimate question to ask. Another person relayed the story of their unionized staff being upgraded to the highest level of library technician within the library a few years ago. Now with the work environment changing, they are being trained to do more, but there is no means of promoting the staff since they are currently at the highest level. Within the restrictions of the union, the library is having difficulty in providing incentives to do more work. The importance of an up-to-date job description was mentioned by another as being vital to have on hand if and when funds become available, because it can readily document the current level of work being performed.

RF: (Question): How about the idea of acquisitions, formerly strictly acquisitions staff members, being asked to consider the best catalog record either at point-of-order or point-of-receipt, who has done that? (Asking non-catalogers, people who aren't catalogers or who don't even want to be catalogers, to engage in cataloging type activities.) MB said that this had done at the University of Alabama about four years ago by moving a portion of copy cataloging to acquisitions, in an effort to streamline the whole process of getting shelf-ready books processed. To facilitate this, job descriptions had to be vastly updated. She added that the administration supported the advancement of staff members if three conditions were met: the person had been in their current position for 2-3 years; that they have proven that they could do that level of work, and that there is and will continue to be a consistent, on-going amount of higher level of work available for them to do. In her library's case, there was quite a bit of resentment from the acquisitions staff being asked to do cataloging type work. They felt that they weren't catalogers and didn't want to be catalogers.

Another attendee said that she had experienced quite the opposite. Her acquisitions staff was a well trained group and had been given a restrictive list of records, called "Fast Cat." They don't exactly catalog, but can look at a large amount of records to speed up processing. In some cases, others felt that their cataloging staff didn't want

to give up that level of control; while others added the benefit that shifting this type of work freed up cataloging staff to tackle large back logs (in one case, 75,000 volumes!). But the backlash of doing "fast cataloging" in acquisitions, in one person's experience, had the ripple effect of causing a backlog of acquisitions ordering and that this "fast cat" function was then further pushed down to the student level. RF commented that she had seen this phenomenon happening more and more. Finally, one person commented that their institution didn't have separate cataloging and acquisitions departments, that both functions were performed in tandem, which provided some level of streamlining in itself.

RF: (Question): How about electronic resources? From her experience, it seemed to RF that there was an earlier perception that it was harder to do electronic cataloging, but now people are beginning to think that it is not really harder, it is just different. Many agreed saying that it is just like serials versus monographs, or possibly handling different formats. – An electronic book is the same as a book, just in a different format, with the only difference being certain fields that needed to be added to the record.

RF: (Question): So who has a nice line in their library for what is appropriate work for an MLS and a non-MLS cataloger? Or am I (RF) just hearing "blur": it depends on the person... it depends on the backlog...it depends on the management structure, etc. – Is it just a blur? Because if we can't, as a group of professionals, differentiate these levels within the cataloging department the way we have them in our organizations, how can we get support for more MLS catalogers? How can we defend the need for a professional cataloging department, if we don't know the difference?

A barrage of responses included: it's not about the cataloging component, it is about other things. Part of it is the leadership component; you have to have somebody that can lead that cataloging team, train them, and also go out and talk to the reference librarians. You need somebody who can make contacts outside of the department, to be able to communicate between them. You definitely need the para-professionals; they are doing valuable work, but that the leadership component is really vital. It may be that you do not need the MLS to have leadership, but that having the recognition it brings and being able to see that "big picture" when you go outside your department and when you are going to research faculty... you need that professional view. Another person added that the MLS brings a higher level of status with it. You are still expected to meet the same criteria for tenure and promotion as a reference librarian. You are still called upon to do instruction for acquisition liaisons and the general public. You do need the MLS for your own collegial respect, equality, and so forth as the public librarians for faculty status.

One person noted the big difference she saw in her own experience, in just five months, from having received her degree and going from a non-MLS to a MLS position within her library. She felt graduate school not only taught you knowledge, but also where to look for knowledge – the big picture sort of things. Her expectation was once she got the degree and was hired as a cataloger, that's what she would be primarily doing... just cataloging. But that has not turned out to be the case. More of her time has been spent on training, reorganizing, thinking about new standards and how to implement them, and planning for the future. RF: So you have become a manager rather than a cataloger and that is hugely important for the library to have that in place. The person

added, some support staff would rather be guided and have procedures to follow, than have to make their own decisions.

RF: Yes, but I am going back to what MM said that her staff had to overcome that and learn that it was ok to exercise some judgment and become comfortable with that; instead of being spoon fed the answer and given templates to follow. MB: I feel that depends on the department itself. If you have a department that turns over fairly quickly you might be able to do that; but if you have people who have many years invested in their current job, they might have the mindset that "you don't pay me to think." – "I'm here just to do my job." RF: Yes, I have heard that. Another person from the University of North Carolina (UNC) commented conversely, if you don't have policies and procedures in place and you have high turnover, new employees won't know what they should be doing. – It might be a little too "organic" for them.

She then put RF's initial question into a broader context: the way we work in the United States is that we have been devaluing apprenticeship as a skill and we have been valuing a more formal education. This is why college degrees have become more important. There are probably a lot of jobs out there that can be done without a college degree, but people are going to get passed over by people who have college degrees because their on-the-job training is not considered as valuable. There are some professions that this argument would be harder to make; like the way we do medicine now. We all expect our doctors to have degrees. Could there be a good doctor, who could have learned on the job? Probably. RF: Yes, if you talk to the nursing staff. [Much laughter] They would say the line is pretty blurry. To a certain extent, these degrees are needed to protect a profession. She continued, what do you go to library school for? You don't go there for training, per se; you go there to learn librarianship, to learn theories of librarianship, theories of information; to get the broader picture. What are all the pieces that form this profession? You get some training, too. So you get this hybrid. She agreed with an earlier statement that as a librarian, you do provide some level of leadership and involvement in special library projects and in creating useful systems that meet the needs of various constituencies.

Another told of her experience of moving from a para-professional to a professional position that did not have a supervisory component and how hard it was to find a level of "fit" within the institution. RF: How does one advance as a professional, if you don't have or don't want to be a manager? Where do you advance to? As it seems that is the most popular way for MLS catalogers to advance within a library is into a managerial position. Another commented that his institution, Columbia [University] has a system of 3 or 4 ranks within the same position. So you can move up within the same position over time. The person from UNC added you can also provide leadership even if you are not in a managerial position and can always be looking for ways to improve your own job by asking "What impact does what I am doing have on other parts of the library?" "What committees could I be part of where my experience would be valuable?" Another summarized the situation as one needs to be constantly thinking creatively and making oneself visible.

Discussion then moved to the differences of working in a union versus a non-union workplace. How does one work within union guidelines to get them (union members) to move forward with the library's own changing needs? Another issue was tenure versus

non-tenure track positions. RF concluded from one attendee's comments, that the prevalence of third party cataloging providers may be a threat for the para-professional staff, especially if they don't "step-up" and do more things. So it would be in their own best interest to move forward. And the question of a MLS versus a non-MLS cataloger becomes a pressure point, if you have implemented shelf-ready solution from your vendor. So you need to push people there, too.

The final point of discussion was a follow-up on the topic of leadership. One person summarized it well: We all work in environments where there is a mixture of librarians and non-librarians and one thing that should distinguish us and be a part of our job descriptions, never mind for advancement, is that if you are a librarian and you are working with non-librarians, you are automatically in a leadership role, just because of that hierarchy. And it is incumbent upon us to do those simple things that define leadership: encouraging, mentoring, and giving support to your staff. Not necessarily to stand upon the status difference, but to come to the realization that we are all of us in this together and come to some mutual respect. My job as a professional has other extra components, and your [para-professional] job is important, too and to keep that in mind. At this point, MER wanted to interject one of his favorite quotes from Peter Drucker: "Management is doing things right. Leadership is doing the right things." And that comes back to RF's original question of what is the difference between a MLS and non-MLS cataloger. – As a manager you are doing the day-to-day things correctly, but as a leader you must also be looking forward and asking such questions as: "Is there a better way to do things with the resources we have?" "What direction should we be headed in?" "What new things can and should we be doing?" And at the same time providing support and direction for your staff. And these are the leadership aspects of MLS catalogers; which are intangibles that won't necessarily show up in a job description, but are valuable marks of a professional.

Business meeting. RF concluded the open discussion, commenting that it was generally agreed to be a great one, and asks DG attendees their opinions of possible topics for discussion at the 2008 ALA Annual Conference. She posed the question as to whether the DG wanted to continue the same conversation; and if so, how they thought it could be shaped or directed with a more specific question or presentation; or should another topic related to the role of the professional librarian be chosen? Suggestions that were brought forward included: Succession planning and how libraries are working now for the wave of retirements in the near future and how to promote lower level employees to move up in skill level to replace retiring catalogers. Another was how to enrich a job position or add non-monetary incentives to induce staff to stay and to continue a high level of work while maintaining a positive moral. Or perhaps a combination of these should be the next topic. However, no clear consensus was reached before the meeting's close.

Closing remarks and adjournment. RF thanked everyone for attending and the meeting was promptly adjourned at 6 PM.