Stop sending those cards

Enhancing faculty-librarian collaboration using e-selection strategies

by Jordana Shane and Steven J. Bell

I nviting faculty to share in collection management responsibilities through participation in the materials selection process is a time-tested technique for collaboration to build strong, curriculum-based collections. At four-year liberal arts colleges, faculty in the humanities and social sciences often see themselves as shareholders in developing the collection, and they occasionally have some control of acquisition budgets. Encouraging faculty to participate in collection management is a greater challenge at an institution with a curriculum more oriented towards professional programs.

Philadelphia University is an example of this type of institution, and we have struggled to engage faculty as partners in collection management. The drudgery of using standard print selection cards or notes supplied by approval services and review sources created a formidable barrier to faculty participation.

This article discusses how our adoption of e-selection tools at Philadelphia University had the unexpected consequence of providing a means to achieve shared collection management and deepen true collaboration with faculty in general. Our initial decision to try the electronic alternatives was unrelated to our desire to engage faculty in the collection management process. Rather, it was simply an expression of our attempt to eliminate paper selection tools from the process as much as possible.

When two approval and review services we use offered Web-based alternatives, we immediately signed on for the e-selection option. Once we discovered the simplicity of e-selection tools, the power of e-mail for alerting us to waiting selections, and the advantages of e-managing selection reports on the Web, we realized we had a vehicle for inviting our faculty to immerse themselves more fully in collaborative collection management. All we had to do was stop sending those cards.

The move to e-selection tools

Our motivation to experiment with e-selection tools may be traced to three primary drawbacks of paper selection resources. First, professional staff time is required to sort and process the cards, and once distributed, subject specialists often find the cards quickly pile up. The sight of stacks of cards can make the time-intensive review that is necessary seem even more insurmountable a task. Second, except for *CHOICE*, the paper selection cards typically lack the detail librarians and faculty need to select wisely. Finally, paper cards necessitate persistent follow-up.

Librarians, having preselected items that should interest their faculty co-selectors, must then send the cards to faculty, seek out their opinions, and retrieve the cards in a timely fashion. Sending reminders to faculty, if not outright badgering them to return selection cards, takes time. Faculty co-

About the authors

Jordana Shane is electronic instruction librarian and Steven J. Bell is director of the library at Philadelphia University's Paul J. Gutman Library, e-mail: shanej@philau.edu and bells@philau.edu

selectors are typically individuals with whom the librarian has a good working or professional relationship, which can add to the discomfort a librarian might feel pestering these faculty to return selection cards.

In spring 2000, we learned that two of our selection sources, Blackwell's and *CHOICE*, were offering electronic, Web-based versions of their paper selection resources. After making the necessary arrangements to use the e-selection tools and then gaining familiarity with them, we discovered their potential for increasing the faculty's role in collection management. We began involving our faculty with a small group that combined those already using paper tools with some faculty altogether new to the process. Faculty already familiar with the print tools had previously expressed dissatisfaction with them, so it was easy to encourage those faculty to participate in our experiment.[1]

Advantages of e-selection tools

In terms of mechanics, both *CHOICE* and Blackwell's Collection Manager offer similar advantages:

• *E-mail alerts.* Once a selector's profile is established, he or she receives all selection notes or reviews directly via e-mail. The e-mail serves as a regular alert to remind selectors to attend to collection management responsibilities.

• *Enhanced information.* Compared to the print cards, Blackwell's eNotes provides tables of contents, dust jacket descriptions, and codes for other libraries purchasing the item. *CHOICE*, of course, provides full reviews. Additional information aids selectors, especially at small libraries who do not use approval plans and have few standing orders.

• *E-management.* Obtaining notes and reviews in e-format facilitates producing electronic lists for ease of saving, editing, e-mailing, and searching. The added detail, ease of processing, and ability to exchange selection e-lists with those involved in the acquisitions process contribute to wiser selections and speed the entire process.

In addition to these advantages, the introduction of the e-selection tools to the faculty produced unforeseen benefits that reached beyond mere mechanics: collaboration between librarians and faculty was reinforced, the collection was improved, and the information literacy initiative was strengthened. The e-tools paved the way for these deeper benefits to librarians, faculty, and student learning.

• *Improvement to the collection.* The use of e-selection tools by faculty ended the oft-heard complaint, "This library has no books about . . ." Participation in the process put the proverbial ball directly in the faculty's court, providing them a means to help fill perceived gaps in the collection. Faculty could see the direct result of their efforts reflected in the new acquisitions. Faculty also felt their opinions and input were valued by the librarians by being invited to share the librarian's "turf."

• *Benefit to the information literacy initiative.* Collaborative collection management with faculty gave librarians a window into courses and assignments. Regardless of the information literacy model being used on one's campus, the academic library's collections exist largely to support and enable student learning. The e-selection tools facilitated dynamic exchange by allowing librarians and faculty to easily share individual selection e-lists. A better understanding of what faculty want students to learn enables librarians to more effectively assist and support faculty as they prepare research assignments. This helps to ensure the library owns adequate and appropriate materials to support faculty assignments, and the various information literacy components targeted by those assignments.

• *Nurturing a spirit of collaboration.* E-selection tools can help librarians and faculty connect in ways that reach beyond collection management. At Philadelphia University, we reaped the important intangible benefits of goodwill and esteem that helped eliminate any "us and them" mentality in regard to collection building. Collection management is hardly a priority for faculty. The e-selection tools helped to keep collection management alive in the faculty's minds all year, as the ongoing priority that it really is for librarians.

Disadvantages of e-selection tools

We did discover, however, that the e-selection tools led to new problems and exacerbated some existing ones. Some of those encountered were:

• *Over-selection by faculty.* Because selection lists are delivered with regularity, containing enhanced descriptive information, and easing the process of getting selected items back to librarians, we have noticed a tendency for faculty to choose more books than they did with paper selection cards. Despite the increase in items to choose from, we heard no faculty complain of being overwhelmed by selection choices.

- **Timeliness of requests.** Faculty may tend to accumulate their e-mailed lists in an effort to achieve a critical mass before they begin reviewing them, a practice that leads to the likelihood of being overwhelmed and then hastening through the selection process in order to remove the lists from their e-mail inbox.

- **Some faculty just prefer paper cards.** About the only perceived disadvantage that e-selection tools may fail to overcome is their inherent electronic format.

Recommendations for migrating to e-selection tools

A successful outcome for an e-selection program will depend primarily on which faculty are invited to participate and how the new technology is introduced. These recommendations, based on our experience, should serve as guidelines for other academic libraries seeking to establish a collaborative e-selection program.

- **Think beta-test.** With any new technology, sudden change is generally not advisable. Initially, a small beta-test with a few interested and motivated faculty members is preferable to completely supplanting selection cards with an e-selection tool. The introductory phase should offer multiple demonstrations and hands-on instruction.

- **Seek out early adopters.** Every academic community has its early technology adopters. All faculty should have sufficient e-mail experience to easily adapt to that element of e-selection, but look for those who will understand and be able to take advantage of the tools' functionality for creating marked lists, saving them, and manipulating electronic lists.

- **Emphasize regular selection reports.** Faculty and librarians differ in their views of the acquisitions process. We have observed faculty seeking to be polite by withholding lists of selections until they perceive that a critical mass is reached and is therefore ready to ship back. Encourage faculty to follow the librarians' practice of expending the budget in a timely manner.

- **Choose by discipline.** When inviting faculty to participate, let the selectors' need for support be a guide. The e-selection tools may influence these choices. Blackwell's Collection Manager is more appropriate in some technology areas than *CHOICE*, and one librarian decided to partner with a faculty member strictly for computer science selections. Alternately, our selector in the humanities and social sciences knew that *CHOICE*'s reviews were es-

sential for her faculty, and she sought volunteers from across the liberal arts school to assist with collection management.

- **Clear articulation of collection management policies.** Some faculty might entertain heightened expectations that migrating to electronic selection will give them greater reign over the management of their disciplinary collection. Faculty should know that the librarians have final decision-making authority and that not all of their selections may be acquired. Making this clear from the onset can reduce bad feelings about spurned input into the process. Asking faculty to prioritize selections indicating the "must haves" from the "desirable to have" will help make this guideline clear. In this way, e-selection tools are more similar to their paper counterparts, but librarians should be mindful that their policies might require some rethinking as they and faculty migrate to electronic selecting.

Outcomes and conclusion

What began as a simple effort to streamline a process unexpectedly became a means to deeper, truer faculty-librarian collaboration. A definite result of this foray is that participating faculty are more aware of the importance of collection management and the willingness of librarians to seek out and respond to their input. We now obtain more voluntary faculty input from traditional paper forms, such as publisher catalogs and journal reviews. Given our past track record of extremely limited faculty participation, this surge in acquisition requests is most welcome. Our repeated verbal and e-mail requests for faculty input received nowhere near the level of response that our offer to use e-selection tools did. Faculty were given technology tools to help remedy their negative perceptions of our collection, and they got positive, recognizable results.

Discussion about faculty selections enabled the librarians to gain deeper insight into actual course content and assignments. Such insight is not generally gleaned from reading a course syllabus. Conversations with faculty concerning their material selections allowed librarians to obtain details about the course for which the faculty sought the material. Sometimes the material is for a faculty member's own research, and such revelation can also allow for improved relationships with faculty. This collaboration provided new insight that aided the campus-wide information literacy initiative.

Just as important, the e-selection tools proved to be good marketing and public relations mechanisms for the library. Our library is perceived as a campus technology leader, a place where the staff continuously explores new tools and technologies to improve existing resources and services to better serve our constituents. The benefits from using the tools are both tangible and intangible: wiser selections leading to improved collections, improved faculty-librarian communication, greater understanding, and deeper collaboration.

E-selection tools can yield a high return with a minimal investment for an academic library of any size or collection scope. Having fewer or no paper selection cards to deal with is an added bonus about which few librarians or faculty can complain.

Note

1. Operational details, screen shots, and descriptive notes are provided at staff.philau.edu/bells/eselect.htm. ■

("Taking Immersion home," continued from page 588)

• Focus on the long-term goal while celebrating successes along the way.

• Begin with a small group of people and work toward incorporating a variety of ideas and talents from a variety of groups.

• Build on the expertise and strengths of veteran librarians and draw upon the enthusiasm and new ideas of new librarians.

• Keep your focus on students and on their learning.

• Share your experience with others.

I wish each of you well with your information literacy initiatives on campuses large and small. Students will benefit from your creativity, caring, and perseverance.

Thank you to the Immersion faculty[8] for your commitment to creating quality educational experiences for librarians who teach. Thank you to ACRL for sponsoring this national program each year and to the Wisconsin Association of Academic Librarian's Information Literacy Committee for sponsoring the 2001 regional program. Immersion '01 provided a learning experience well worth taking home.

Notes

1. For more information, see www.acrl.org/immersion.

2. Association of College and Research Libraries, "Competency Standards for Higher Education," *Teacher Librarian* 28.3 (Feb. 2001): 16–18.

3. Visit the University of Tennessee's information literacy Web site at www.lib.utk.edu/instruction/infolit/infolit.html.

4. Based on Debra Gilchrist's presentation, "Improving Student Learning."

5. From Angelo, Thomas A. and K. Patricia Cross. *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers.* 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 1993.

6. Mark Battersby and the Learning Outcomes Network, "So What's a Learning Outcome Anyway?" Vancouver, B.C.: Centre for Curriculum, Transfer, and Technology. Available at www.c2t2.ca/page.asp?item_id=394&path=.

7. Patricia Iannuzzi, "Faculty Development and Information Literacy: Establishing Campus Partnerships," *Reference Services Review* (Fall/Winter 1998): 97–102, 116.

8. The Immersion faculty: Craig Gibson, George Mason University; Debra Gilchrist, Pierce College; Randy Burke Hensley, University of Hawaii-Manoa; Beth S. Woodard, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; and Anne E. Zald, University of Washington. ■

("Criminal . . ." continued from page 593)

 position papers, the NAME newsletter, links to journal sites, legislation information, death investigation images, and a list of medical examiner and coroner offices, which as of September 1, 2003, only offers four sites. *Access:* www.thename.org/.

Notes

1. Madeleine R. Nash and Richard L. Faraino, "Internet Resources in Legal Medicine and Forensic Science," *Medical Reference Services Quarterly* 18.1 (Spring 1999): 59–68.

2. Cynthia Holt, "Forensic Science Resources on the Internet" *Issues in Science and Technology Librarianship* 37 (2003) [cited 1 September 2003]. Available on the Web at www.istl.org/03-spring/internet.html.

3. Ibid. ■

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