Uri Toch

What academic librarians can learn from public librarians (and vice versa)

The benefits of working in two library environments

There is an academic library Web site that I use that has a page entitled "Academic Versus Public Libraries" to explain when to use each kind of library. This implied adversarial relationship (*versus* as a competitive verb) reinforces some of the real or perceived differences between the two types of libraries. Indeed, we are often taught in library school and beyond that the career paths should be treated as separate and distinct.

Although there are obvious differences between the missions, collection development strategies, and service foci of the two types of libraries, this type of adversarial thinking masks some of the great commonalities between them and overshadows ways that librarians can learn from each other. Indeed, it is my feeling that academic and public librarians can learn a lot from increased exposure to the methods, work environments, and resources of their sister organizations.

A central challenge is how can we better facilitate communications between the two types of libraries. One strategy is to have academic librarians work in public libraries and vice versa, and thereby learn and exchange information. I have been doing just that for two years, and this article will describe how we can take elements from each type of institution and better meet the future needs of our users and our profession.

Learning from the academic environment

I have a full-time job at a large suburban public library about 25 miles northwest of Chicago. My part-time job is at a community college in the same general area. One of the chief advantages of my part-time gig is that I get to go to free training sessions at the college. The larger number of employees at the college level means there are more training opportunities—some of these are technology related, such as courses on Microsoft Office products, and others are on managerial functions, such as problem solving.

Since I have a supervisory job at the public library, I go to these classes. It is a win-win situation, as I get access to free training by virtue of working at the community college and the public library gets the benefits of my learning. My direct supervisor at the public library has been very supportive of my attending these training opportunities.

Another advantage is the academic emphasis on bibliographic instruction. At the college, I am preparing Webographies and leading classes on using electronic and print materials. I have used these skills to develop similar pathfinders at the public library and the experience has also helped me in my teaching to small groups at the library. Teaching is vital to all types of librarianship, and the emphasis on this skill at the academic level is directly applicable to the growing need to teach public library users.

Learning from the public environment

At the public library, there are more diverse users and subsequently there is a wider collec-

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tion (both of print and electronic resources). Using this collection has helped when students at the academic library come with assignments that can not always be met with the college collection.

This is important as curriculum change to be more market responsive and as more academic libraries use part-time adjunct professors who are not as familiar with the college library and may make assignments based on more "popular" holdings. For example, I worked with a student who had an assignment requiring a sports biography. The college's collection was not as expansive as the one at the public library so I was able to give alternative titles.

Working at the public library, there are more choices for interdisciplinary databases, such as those on Gale and EBSCO. I know that academic libraries have interdisciplinary databases as well, but budget-strapped academic libraries often focus on databases geared towards specific disciplines.

The ability to refer academic users to specific public databases, rather than just "go to the public library" and to illustrate how to use these databases by calling them up on a Web site and accessing them with my password, enhances the research experience for the students.

Since public libraries attract students from numerous area colleges and universities, librarians get exposure to different academic assignments. This "competitive intelligence" can help with interaction with faculty when it comes time to suggest curricula enhancements and build collections.

Challenges of working in a dual environment
Working in two environments presents certain challenges. The importance of communicating changes in policies and procedures is always a big issue and this is magnified across institutions, as academic and public libraries have different cultures and procedures. Web-based interfaces like Web CT and Blackboard have added in effective communications.

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The dichotomy between the roles of part-time and full-time can also be a challenge in terms of who does what and when. I have learned a lot about work distribution relating to full and part-time workers (desk responsibilities falling on part-timers, for example) and this has helped me in my role as a full-time supervisor of part-time employees at the public library. I feel I have become more sensitive to the professional development needs of my part-time workers, for example.

The future
This article is not meant to glorify or encourage part-time work, but to suggest ways of prospering in such a work situation or mimicking it with job shadowing days and the like. By working in both an academic and public library, I have been able to take away a number of lessons that highlight how academic and public librarians might cooperate and learn from each other.

As librarians, we don't know what specific job titles or job responsibilities there will be in the future, but we do know that there will be both academic and public libraries. It behooves us to hang together, or to paraphrase Benjamin Franklin, we may well hang separately.

To facilitate this working together, I suggest the establishment of a roundtable within ALA of like-minded librarians who have an interest in working in both a public and academic library. Perhaps we can call it the Coalition of Librarians in Academic and Publics (CLAP). I guess the acronym reminds us that we need to put our hands (and heads) together on the future. ✏