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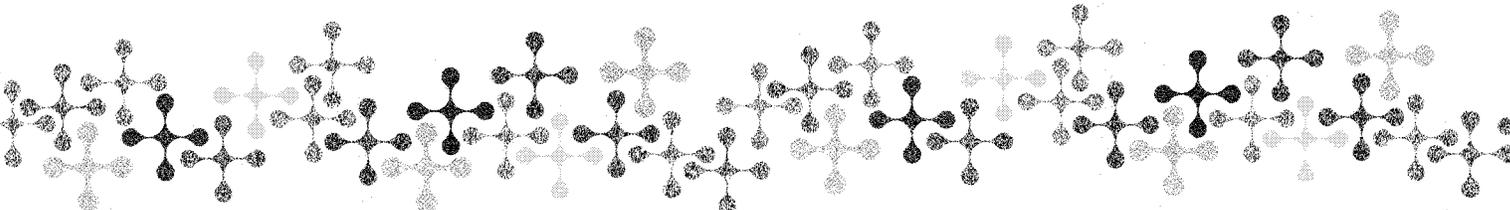


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Technical Services IS Public Service

Or how I got out of the back room and why you should too

By Linda Barrette

Recently, while pondering an acquisitions question, I grabbed my dog-eared, tabbed, and mangled technical services textbook from my office bookshelf. My question concerned a function performed by our public services department, so absent-mindedly I searched the index for “public services.” Finding no entry, I looked for “faculty services” and, again, found nothing.

“How can that be?” I asked myself. Without question the one thing I recall most vividly from my library school technical services class—the finer points of cataloging having long since escaped me—is that “technical services is public service.”

That statement, made the first day of class, resonated with me. Entering librarianship following stints in law practice and publishing, I had long seen customer service as a professional way of life. Now, as an acquisitions librarian in the technical services department of an academic law library, I also spend time doing traditional “public services” tasks: acting as faculty liaison, researching faculty questions, editing faculty writing projects, giving library tours, creating displays, and circulating and delivering resources to faculty. I’ve been backup for reference, taught legal research, and provided support services to departments, programs, and projects throughout the college. In short, like most librarians, I wear many hats, but my public services hat is always nearby.

My first baby steps into public service were more intuitive and self-preservationist than premeditated. In fact, they were probably more “all about me” than all about the customer. Nevertheless, they were effective steps and, in retrospect, laid the foundation for how I work today.

Is my situation unusual? Literature about blended or hybrid positions is slim for law libraries. Some technical services librarians have faculty liaison

responsibilities, but most liaison programs use public services and reference personnel. Catalogers are cross-trained for reference in university libraries, but data for cross-trained catalogers in law libraries is scant. Perusal of Association of American Law Schools (AALS) member library websites, however, does show that many law libraries have broken away from the traditional organizational structure that, based on job functions, favored departmental divisions between public services and technical services. Certainly, more law librarians work outside traditional job descriptions than they did before library automation.

The more important questions you should ask are:

Why should you, if you work in a traditional technical services department, get out of the “back room?”

How can you venture into the library and the academy in ways that add value to your library and to your job?

Why Should You Get Out of the Back?

After all, it’s been said before, and said recently by Sonia Luna-Lamas in her technical services chapter in *Law Librarianship in the Twenty-first Century*, that technical services is the “heart of the library.” Working in technical services, I can hardly disagree; it is that place from which all else follows. It’s where orders are placed and materials arrive, are processed, and become accessible to the public. Without these services, there were, traditionally, no resources or, at least, no ready access to them. On the other hand, if technical services is the “heart,” then it could be said—and has, by Anne Klinefelter in her chapter in the same text—that public services is the “face of the law library.”

With apologies for mangling the authors’ metaphors and taking them out of context, the heart is invisible to the naked eye while the face is, arguably, that which makes the first, the strongest, and

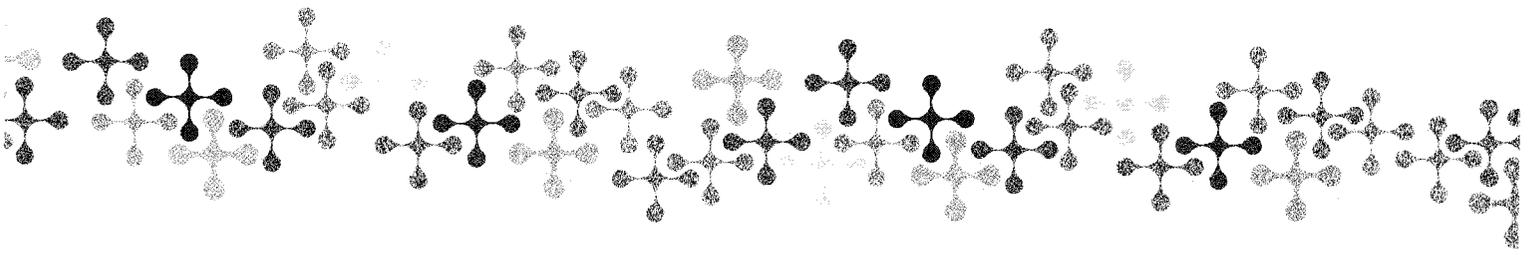
the most lasting impression. Invisible versus visible continues to play out through traditional technical services references like “back room,” “back office,” and “behind-the-scenes,” and “front room,” “front office,” and “front desk,” for public services.

Whether you appreciate the “heart” or the “face” metaphor, most would agree that, but for our patrons—the public—we would not have jobs. So, no matter what we call our services—public, technical, access, or something else—and no matter where we perform them, they are all “public services.”

Breaking Traditions

It’s old news that library traditions are rapidly being broken. Job descriptions, organizational structures, and managerial styles are in flux against a backdrop of stunning advances in technology, the explosion of information and formats, and shrinking budgets. The traditional library structure that divvied up tasks and people into technical services and public services groups is being modified, enhanced, or altogether replaced in many libraries. Administrators are reallocating personnel and restructuring into less bureaucratic, less hierarchical organizational models in order to re-address functions, activities, tasks, and workflow.

Traditional technical services functions, in particular, have come under the budget knife. Paraprofessionals are performing copy-cataloging and other tasks previously assigned to librarians while other libraries are outsourcing cataloging, authority control, processing, and preservation. Deans and directors are re-assessing collections, streamlining or reassigning tasks, outsourcing, and eliminating redundancy all while under increasing pressure to enhance, demonstrate, and market the library’s value to the rest of the institution. Dwindling budgets, and sometimes staff, necessitate accomplishing more with less.



Additionally, we've seen a paradigm shift away from ownership of materials toward access and patron-centered service. The model of access over ownership affects collection development, acquisitions, cataloging, and other technical services work functions as budgets and tasks are reallocated to accommodate increased use of electronic resources and resource sharing.

Nearly 80 percent of the law librarians responding to a 2003 survey had already experienced some kind of reorganization. The two most frequently reported tasks affected by reorganization were cataloging and acquisitions—traditionally services performed in the heart of the library. The most frequently cited outcome of reorganization was enhanced user services.

What's In It for You?

Will we see an emphasis on the “face” of the library over the “heart” as we focus on user-centered services? That's a question for another day. But we can't ignore the way that access over ownership affects our patrons' relationships with the library. Many people feel they no longer need to visit the library because information is accessible, 24-7, from almost anywhere. This development is worrisome if you agree that, but for our patrons, we wouldn't have jobs. If we're to stay relevant in academia, our patrons must see the library as an integral part of the entire learning process. It's crucial that all members of the library work to establish a meaningful presence for the library, as an integrated and essential part of the institution. We must continually provide and market services that enhance the value and accessibility of available information.

With so much at stake, it follows that it's crucial that you establish a meaningful presence for *yourself* within the library and the institution as well. No matter how integral your position is to your organization, it's more difficult to be seen as an essential part of the institution and to make a strong and lasting impression if you're tucked away in the heart of the library.

There are other reasons for getting out of the back room. If your library employs a small staff, opportunities for

advancement and for supervisory experience within the organization are limited. You'll enrich your skills and resume for advancement opportunities outside your institution by taking on tasks beyond your immediate area. You'll be in a better position for advancement when and where opportunities arise if you demonstrate that you're flexible, have varied skills, add value to your institution as a whole, are committed to library and institutional missions, and have made service a priority.

Additionally, demand for accountability is increasing. If your contributions are varied, administration and colleagues will see you as an indispensable part of the team. The broader your experience and the more you're perceived as an integral part of the library and the institution, the more likely you are to be sought for advice and input into decisions affecting the library. If you work directly with your patrons, you'll better understand user needs and will create access that's more relevant to your constituents. And, if form really does follow function, by adding to your functionality, you might be asked to help shape the form of your library when its organizational structure evolves. Finally, you can increase your job satisfaction, enhance feelings of pride in yourself and your institution, and earn the respect of your peers if you develop a visible professional identity—a face—that emphasizes service.

How I Ventured into the Library and How You Can Too

While, perhaps, not true of all libraries, technical services is completely out of sight in our library. When I started as a student intern, the college was in its formative years. While our current campus was being planned, the college of law opened its doors for business in a historic downtown building that had been through many incarnations. Our offices, classrooms, library facilities, and collections were spread skyward over 10 floors. As an intern with no official status outside the library and working in this maze-like facility, I found that just finding my way around was tricky. The more important task of creating a professional identity seemed insurmountable.

Trying to conquer the warren of offices in that building and trying to put faces to names, I used any work-related opportunity to get up from my desk and venture into the academy. I offered to do routing, made faculty deliveries, and sometimes dropped by offices instead of using the phone. When two paraprofessionals moved on to other positions within weeks of each other, I volunteered to help with acquisitions and serials until replacements were found. Imagine my surprise when the “replacements” ultimately were me!

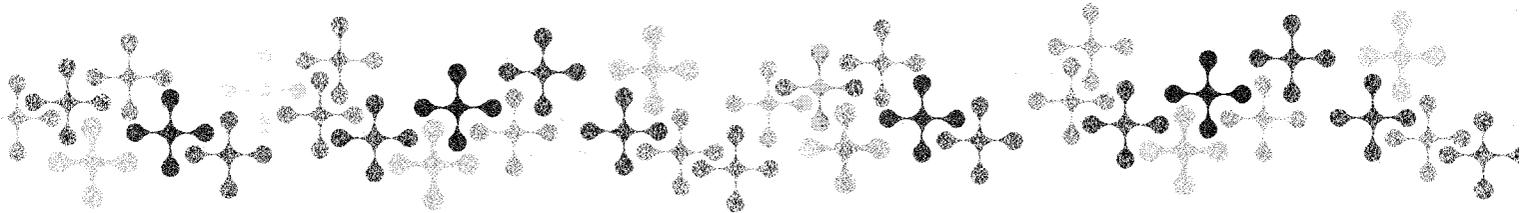
Fast forward: We're in our new building, with many new faculty and staff. I'm a somewhat newly minted librarian when offered the newly-created position of acquisitions librarian. All of this newness gave me, within boundaries, the opportunity and challenge to invent the position and my professional self within it. Drawing on my earlier experience, I started out using tasks in the new building that I'd used in the old. I got out from behind my desk and into the college in order to meet new colleagues, find faculty and staff offices, and learn how and when people used our spaces, where they congregated, and, sometimes more importantly, where they hid!

Beyond “Baby Steps”

How did “all about me” turn into public service and greater involvement with the institution as a whole? It was a gradual process, which was important because my job is in the technical services department. Critical aspects of crossing job or departmental boundaries include ensuring that your primary job is covered and that you don't offend or create tension in other areas. Use common sense and courtesy and go through proper channels where necessary. My circumstances may not apply to everyone, but the following general considerations should. These suggestions will help you represent the heart and the face of the library by broadening your experience, providing better customer service, and getting out of the back office.

Let others know your interests.

If reference work would enhance your experience, talk with the appropriate staff and offer your services for backup.



If you're a cataloger who'd like to understand more about the technology behind electronic access, make a friend in IT. After starting in acquisitions, I expressed interest in collection development; before long I was making selection decisions and soon became the primary selector. You're more likely to have your interests rewarded if the people who can help you are aware of your aspirations.

If learning about someone else's job would enhance yours, ask for explanations, information, or permission to shadow the person.

Reach out to colleagues who can expand your knowledge of your job or how it interfaces with other parts of the library; look outside the library to put your job in context. An effective selector must know about curriculum, faculty research interests, student writing assignments, trends, hot topics, and current developments. I survey faculty, track new classes and seminars, monitor inter-library loan activity, talk to moot court and mock trial advisers, and monitor news feeds and legal blogs to learn more about these areas.

Attend campus events. Curriculum and research are increasingly interdisciplinary. You can stay current on new developments, overlapping fields of study, and faculty and institutional direction by monitoring your institutional news sources for information about faculty involvement in symposia, conferences, and campus events. Attending these events is especially valuable and provides opportunities to interact with colleagues. But even if you can't attend, you'll gain a better understanding of how your institution is fulfilling its mission if you know what activities and events are scheduled.

Always respond with more than is expected of you, and don't drop the ball. If a professor requests that you order a book or you learn of an interlibrary loan request, ask if anyone has checked for similar library holdings. If not, connect the professor with a

reference librarian or, if you won't be stepping on toes, search the online public access catalog yourself and email a list of titles that might fill an interim need. If you get a request that's outside your expertise, make sure you connect the individual with someone who can help. There are dozens of similar opportunities available in a workweek. Giving more than is expected is a win-win for everyone.

Create opportunities to connect with co-workers outside the library and offer your assistance.

When ordering books with faculty or classes in mind, I keep records and contact professors when books of interest arrive. If they want to see the book, I check it out and personally deliver it, usually with my business card, giving them a face to remember and the ability to make contact should they want to reach out to someone in the library. Preparing and circulating "recent acquisitions" lists provides an opportunity to connect with faculty. The lists are attached to emails offering to deliver any books of interest. I always receive requests for listed books and appreciative emails. When I learned a professor was trying to purchase a small collection of books for a program's use, I called her and offered to help with the process. There are endless possibilities for making a positive connection between the library and the college if you keep your eyes, ears, and mind open.

Find something you can do that no one else does and your phone will start ringing. I keep a list of contact information including phone numbers, URIs, and email addresses for publishers who provide faculty textbook review copies. It's amazing how often I receive calls for this information and even more surprising how elated people are when it works.

Take advantage of "teachable moments." Listen for opportunities to offer helpful information to a student, professor, or colleague, and take the time to share; you'll leave a positive impression. A law review editor asked me about a billing issue and then segued

into a discussion of her writing project. After hearing her struggles to find articles, I realized she wasn't using the OPAC in the most advantageous way. My offer of help brought her back for a short training session. The same offer has been accepted by faculty members. After showing a professor a range in the library with books about his research interest, I later saw him browsing the stacks himself. He volunteered that, up until then, he had never looked at the collection.

Volunteer, but also learn to say "no." You'll find there are endless occasions to volunteer once you start extending your contacts outside the back room. There are committees in the library and outside, public service projects, events, VIP tours, fundraising, hooding ceremonies—the list goes on. An important caveat, however, is to know your limitations and learn how and when to graciously say "no" so that you keep your head above water and continue to give necessary priority to your primary responsibilities.

Embrace the Future

We don't need statistics or articles to tell us how much our field is changing, but it's easy to forget to assess and reassess our situations to see how we fit into, and can improve, the evolving big picture. Not only must our profession adapt in order to stay relevant but we must also, at the individual level, take responsibility for facilitating that process, institutionally and personally, or we may become irrelevant or even obsolete.

So, will you be unprepared if big changes hit your library? Of course not—you'll be poised to embrace change and move forward with enthusiasm and confidence because you've already stepped out of the back room. ■

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