Report of the Core Role of the Professional Librarian in Technical Services Interest Group, American Library Association Annual Conference, June 2022

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The Core Role of Professional Librarians in Technical Services Interest Group (RPLTS-IG) meeting was held in person during the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference on Sunday, June 26, 2022, in Washington D.C. and was moderated by the Interest Group's Co-Chair Sofia Slutskaya of Emory University, and Vice Co-Chairs Marina Morgan of Florida Southern College and Amy Fry of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The meeting consisted of four round tables where discussion facilitators led the conversation and encouraged participants to share their thoughts, opinions, and ideas. The topics covered in four discussion groups included "Exploring Normalcy in Technical Services," led by Jennifer M. Eustis, Metadata Librarian, University of Massachusetts Amherst; "Telling the Technical Services Story," led by Jessie Copeland, Director, Resource Services at Emory University Libraries; "Technical Services Retreat: Professional Development, Wellness, and Team Building for Technical Services," led by Cara Calabrese, Acquisitions & Access Librarian, Miami University; "Technical Services Advocacy Outside of Tech Services," led by Amanda Ros, Coordinator of Adaptive Cataloging & Resource Management, Texas A&M University.

Exploring Normalcy in Technical Services

Jennifer M. Eustis led the roundtable discussion and explored the idea of normalcy in Technical Services, focusing on the challenges and benefits during the pandemic and post-

pandemic times. Three general categories came to the fore, namely operations, meetings, and interactions, and how they were handled during these challenging times.

The guidelines to ensure staff safety were and sometimes continue to be strict, inflexible, and subject to frequent change. Finding a balance between these could create confusion on how to follow and adapt to changes. To add to this complexity, changes were happening at federal, state, and institution levels. Sometimes, some institutions' drive to ensure equality in guidelines wasn't equitable. A good example was that even those who could work remotely had to come in a certain number of days per week. There was a perception that it wasn't fair to have some staff remote while others worked hybrid or completely on-site. One issue relates to how staff felt safe in relation to their working environments. Some staff felt safer working remotely, while others wanted and felt better working on-site. Many attendees felt that they needed greater flexibility. This led to a discussion on better understanding the idea of work-life balance. The networks people relied on before the pandemic mostly collapsed or dramatically changed. It forced many to re-envision their work-life division, especially when life frequently spilled into zoom screens.

Many attendees also pointed out the challenges of building or rebuilding teams. In one case, an attendee explained how the divide between professional librarians and library staff had increased during the pandemic because of the perceived advantages afforded to professional librarians who could work remotely or have a flexible hybrid schedule, unlike staff. In another case, staff having different work schedules ranging from full remote to hybrid or on-site meant that reaching a librarian or staff person was challenging. The connections created between staff when everyone was on-site were lost when people went remote or hybrid. It became more difficult for teams to remain connected or create new bonds.

Another challenge was technology. With the pandemic, it was necessary to make sure people could work remotely and had projects to do. For those working in areas without access to the Internet or who didn't have a computer at home, the institution had to find ways to provide that access. Further, professional librarians often had to train staff in technologies such as Slack that staff had never used. It was challenging to find projects for staff just to keep people busy. Some felt that technology was being used to solve the problem rather than as an aid.

With these challenges, many saw some benefits. Alongside retirements, new staff has joined the ranks. These newer librarians were more fluent in using new technologies. In one case, after the pandemic, an attendee said that their team met more often and became more cohesive. It has also meant reevaluating what onboarding means and how to improve it.

Exploring normalcy had different meanings for each member of this roundtable. In the end, it meant being flexible not only on our part but also that of administrators to find new ways to connect, build teams, ensure that technology is a means to an end rather than an end to a means and that we talk differently about work and life in a way that meets the needs of staff in a changing world.

Telling the Technical Services Story

Jessie Copeland led the discussion that focused on how Technical Service departments can tell their story and build support for what they do and the contributions they make to their libraries. The group included mostly librarians from small departments with many different roles and responsibilities, but especially cataloging.

Technical Services librarians contribute in meaningful ways to their institutions, and the profession, and are subject matter experts in many fields. The conversation began with

discussing the various methods used to communicate about technical services work. One communication tool is a typical annual report that most libraries complete. Some commented about the annual report format often being unsuited to library work in general and Technical Services specifically. Also mentioned were regular library-wide or departmental staff meetings. However, these meetings also present problems with communicating about technical services work. It is difficult to describe the work done in a concise, interesting manner without resorting to merely describing the regular workflow.

It was suggested that it is important to emphasize that technical services work makes materials discoverable and to avoid a tendency to downplay the work by referring to putting stickers on books. Another suggestion was to create an orientation for anyone new to the library, librarian, or staff, to introduce them to Technical Services and give them an overview of the work the department accomplishes.

The conversation tilted towards discussing the ways in which Technical Services librarians are pulled in various directions. The perpetual understaffing leads to the inability to participate in the professional development that is necessary for advancing technical services work. There was general agreement that while there is much more to technical services workflows than buying and cataloging books, there is a lack of awareness in much of the library about all the work that goes on.

One theme that was brought up is the lack of Technical Services issues being reflected in a library's strategic plan. This seemed to be universal to the librarians in the group. However, the amount of change happening in the area is ripe for inclusion in strategic planning. Linked data, RDA, and real-time ordering were just a few of the developments mentioned. But in discussing

these issues, most agreed that the time needed to learn about them, let alone implement them was non-existent.

Technical Services librarians could change how they think about their work in order to emphasize their contributions better. One suggestion was to look at how time is divided and to devote one-third of work time to planning and focusing on management aspects. Although with the chronic understaffing mentioned earlier, this was considered very difficult to do. Another suggestion was to recognize our reluctance to talk about ourselves, neglecting to promote our contributions to our stakeholders. The final thought was that we need to present our data visually and in a way that demonstrates our contributions.

TS Retreat: Professional Development, Wellness, and Team Building for Technical Services

The TS Retreat roundtable discussion led by Cara Calabrese focused on professional development, wellness, and team building for Technical Services. Librarians from Acquisitions, Cataloging, Metadata, Electronic resources, and Serials with and without supervisory roles and from libraries of different sizes were represented in this group. Some of the major topics of interest to the group were upskilling or reskilling current staff to better fit future or new department directions, the fun aspect of team building and collaboration, and onboarding new employees.

A large portion of the discussion focused on training. One-on-one training seemed very prevalent. Some noted that they were working on their documentation. Others mentioned that documentation itself could pose a challenge as they had found much can be too specific or unique. The tools for organizing and sharing documentation were also discussed. Examples

included GitHub and Microsoft Teams Chat. These tools make it easy to share notes, see who accessed an item last, and by who or when it was last updated. Participants shared available training opportunities and discussed creating in-house training tools like video tutorials or training modules in their learning management systems. It was acknowledged that developing training resources can be time-consuming, but could help refine workflows in addition to more easily onboarding new staff.

From here the conversation moved on to the apprenticeship nature of Technical Services and the need to acknowledge that truly training or developing a new person is a long process. There is a need to build a holistic system; to go slow and allow for a full understanding of the basics or philosophies is highly important. Often the focus is only on skill building when we should be considering the art of work as well. Many in the group seemed to concur that their knowledge was not solely from books, but from people who gave them the space to learn and grow. The need for good mentors for current and future Technical Services staff is massive. A mentor can help staff explore the breadth that Technical Services covers. It was also mentioned that having this guide not only helps one person but also leads to the creation of more mentors in the future.

The group also discussed incorporating fun in training and team building. Someone mentioned that their department keeps a puzzle on a table in their department and staff drop by and work on it when they need a break. At Miami University, Technical Services partnered with another librarian who fosters kittens to have their staff help socialize the kittens through play. If you don't have kittens, creating an inviting space in your department could be a way to foster collaboration. Letting staff know they are allowed and supported in developing relationships outside the department is valuable and creates a better working environment.

The group ran out of time to touch on all the topics. There was specific interest in two areas that could be pursued further. One was the idea of apprenticeship in Technical Services, whether that takes the form of internships, resident positions, or finding the right mentorship for new employees. The other is how to properly prepare and provide training to adjust existing skill sets as Technical Services grows and expands its role in the library.

Technical Services has been at the center or core of the library by ensuring materials are properly acquired, described, and made accessible to patrons. Moreover, Technical Services continues to shift and grow, and adequately preparing staff for the next venture is one of the core issues faced by technical services today.

Technical Services Advocacy Outside of Tech Services

The group facilitator, Amanda Ros, led the "Technical Services Advocacy Outside of Tech Services" discussion, focusing on the importance of Technical Services advocating for collections, budgets, and staff. One of the best practices discussed by the group to advocate for Technical Services was pitching elevator speeches to community members or administrators. The group suggested using simple language that anyone can understand and avoiding complex concepts or unfamiliar terminology such as authority records. Another suggestion was aligning Technical Services with the institution's priorities. When leadership highlights its priorities, include Technical Services in the discussion, bringing forward how your department can support them. Another discussion point was to build relationships with other departments in the library to cultivate advocacy. Email users or units when Technical Services helped solve an issue or host an open house to introduce your services. The group's final recommendation was to get outside of your comfort zone to find ways to advocate the Technical Services value.

At the end of the session, program facilitators summarized each group's findings. Many similar topics emerged showing that concerns about communicating the value of Technical Services, creating an inviting work environment, and training and onboarding staff are shared across many different libraries and department types. All four discussions were rich, engaging, and thoughtful. Seventy participants attended the program.