Communication between Technical Services and Subject Librarians: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT
This study explored communication between technical services departments and subject librarians. Librarians with subject collection responsibilities at the University of Tennessee Libraries were invited to participate in focus groups and complete a follow-up survey about their experiences, perceptions, and opinions related to their collection development responsibilities. Significant themes emerged around communication, training, and expectations for collection development responsibilities. These themes are heavily informed by the expressed (and often assumed) importance of shared expectations and the impact of communication. Understanding the expectations and internal communication that underlies these themes can provide insight into how to better work toward a shared goal across departments.

KEYWORDS
Communication; organizational communication; collection development; academic libraries

Introduction
For anyone who does not work in libraries, the work that goes on to select, pay, receive, and lend materials can seem a bit like magic. Even the work that occurs on the “back end” (technical services) and “front end” (public services) can seem like magic to the other party, especially for large academic research libraries. This study evolved out of an increasing sense of magical thinking and decreasing sense of understanding between the technical services departments and subject librarians at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UT). Throughout the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 semesters, the authors sought to answer the questions: How do subject librarians define collection development responsibilities? What is causing the disconnect between subject librarians and technical services departments? And what can be done to repair the disconnect? This article reports on the findings from four focus groups and one follow-up online survey. Significant themes emerged around communication, training, and expectations for collection development responsibilities.
Background

To fully understand the context in which this study became necessary, some background information is essential. UT is the flagship campus of the University of Tennessee system, enrolling approximately 30,000 students across 900 academic programs. The UT Libraries comprises one main library and two branch libraries, a Music library and an Agriculture & Veterinary Science library. The Libraries employ approximately 150 staff and faculty librarians divided into twenty departments. Four of these departments make up the traditional “technical services” areas: Acquisitions & Continuing Resources (ACR), Assessment Programs & Collection Strategy (APCS), Cataloging & Metadata, and Enterprise Systems. Together these departments employ thirty staff and faculty, with four serving as tenure-track faculty librarians.

Fall 2018 was a time of intense change for the UT Libraries. A long-serving associate dean retired; responsibilities were divided between the two remaining associate deans; and departments were reorganized to accommodate previous retirements. Altogether, approximately one-third of the Libraries’ employees were directly affected by the reorganization. Four new departments and six new middle-management positions were created to assist with the remaining two associate deans’ workloads. The Learning, Research & Engagement department was reimagined as three departments, the largest being Liaison Programs. Individuals from other dissolved departments were moved to new positions within Liaison Programs. This department now houses “subject librarians,” individuals who have subject-specific knowledge; instruction and engagement responsibilities with specific teaching departments on campus; and collection development responsibilities. Historic responsibilities shifted in significant ways. One very significant shift occurred with collection responsibilities. Research Collections joined with Assessment Programs to create Assessment Programs & Collection Strategy (APCS) and extend a data-driven approach to collection development. Additionally, the Libraries’ Business Services Office assumed responsibility for the collection budget, which had been previously distributed among individual subject librarians and collection staff. This office coordinates with financial offices across campus, but serves only the Libraries.

All of this change created some chaos, confusion, misunderstandings, and needed opportunities for change. Old responsibilities handled by individuals that had been moved or promoted were temporarily dropped. New responsibilities were unclear or undefined. Positions left vacant were reimagined before being filled. The unfortunate side effect was that additional hurdles were created due to this confusion. The largest hurdles emerged between the traditional technical services departments and the Liaison Programs department, which are areas that work together daily in
a collaborative approach to develop and maintain the Libraries’ collections. While the majority of the subject librarians are part of the Liaison Programs department, other librarians with subject area responsibilities are scattered among other departments across the Libraries. Throughout this article the phrase “subject librarian” refers to all librarians with subject collection responsibilities.

Literature review

Types of communication

This study focuses on internal communication between two functional areas within the library. Across the published literature, internal communication is also referred to as organizational communication, interdepartmental communication, or cross-departmental communication (Bolarinwa & Olorunfemi, 2009; Brown & Bookout, 2019; Mautino & Lorenzen, 2013). Conroy and Jones, writing on library communication in 1986 defined communication as “the exchange or sharing of information” (p. 7). Writing about library communication in 1975, Emery notes that “information or ideas do not themselves constitute communication” (p. 19). Conroy and Jones emphasize that communication includes the message itself and how that message is delivered: “Whenever we communicate, we deal with both content (the concept of attitude or emotion we wish to share) and process (how we try to transmit our message as well as the response we get or do not get)” (1986, p. 7). They define internal communication as “messages that flow among levels, groups, and individuals within the library” (p. 29).

It is believed that good and open internal communication can build trust, help motivate and retain employees, increase worker satisfaction, increase productivity, and alleviate feelings of isolation (Casey, 2013; Crockett, 2000; Mautino & Lorenzen, 2013). Naturally, the topic of internal communication is much better represented in business research. When it is the focus of library scholarship, it is historically discussed only as an administrator’s role. However, in the last fifteen years there has been an increase in library literature that focuses on the topic as a responsibility throughout the library organization (Bottorff, Robbin, Todd, & Alderman, 2008; Brown & Bookout, 2019; Casey, 2013; Chalmers, Liedtka, & Bednar, 2006; Jones & Arthur, 2019; Mautino & Lorenzen, 2013; Scull, 2017). As opposed to top-down or bottom-up communication, the focus of communication between departments is sometimes referred to as horizontal communication. Emery states that “horizontal communication in a library situation . . . aids coordination of decision making and work among individuals and departments” (1975, p. 47). When Emery wrote these words in the 1970s, he referenced several examples of
organizational structure that make horizontal communication necessary, one being “the development of subject departments,” as this signaled a change in how collection development activities were handled (p. 48).

Business literature separates communication into formal and informal. Formal communication is characterized by being passed along a predefined hierarchy of an organization and exists primarily through written documents, such as e-mails, meeting minutes, reports, policies, and webpages (Aman, 2010, p. 84). Informal communication does not follow an organization’s structure of hierarchy for departments and is characterized mostly by being oral, such as small meetings, in-person staff development, and grapevines (p. 85). The organizational structure of libraries with interrelated responsibilities across departments and units, as well as research collaborations in academic libraries where librarians hold faculty positions, makes horizontal and informal communication inevitable and necessary.

**Communication barriers**

Conroy and Jones lay out the barriers of internal communication within libraries and separate them as organizational and human barriers (1986, p. 22–27). Under organizational barriers are the organizational structure itself and bureaucracy. Conroy and Jones describe human barriers as personal traits and lack of skills to be acknowledged and addressed through employee development. Emery’s text specifies human barriers in communication as a constantly changing process where context and individual perspectives influence the interpretation of words (1975, p. 10).

Bolarinwa and Olorunfemi summarize communication barriers from management literature that expand on issues with organizational structure to focus on the individual employee and how lack of expectations can be caused by uncertainty related to organizational goals, relationships within the organization, and job performance standards (2009). Additional barriers noted by Bolarinwa and Olorunfemi include communication overload, poor messaging, and unsuitable message medium. Specific to libraries, Mautino and Lorenzen observe that “stratified roles, varying work schedules, and different primary job goals can contribute difficult hurdles and complexity to bridging communication gaps” (2013, p. 205).

**Internal communication assessments**

Internal library communication assessments, if conducted, have rarely been the topic of published work. In the 1970s to the mid-1980s, the published record demonstrates interest in the topic by using a communication audit to assess practices within an organization (Conroy & Jones, 1986; Cortez & Bunge, 1987; Emery, 1975). “The communication audit is a fact-finding,
analysis, interpretation, and reporting process that studies the communication philosophy, structure, flow, and practice of an organization” (Cortez & Bunge, 1987, p. 43). Conroy and Jones (1986) state that the audit can be used as a tool to assess the entire library’s communication or just within specific departments (p. 62). Regardless of the departments assessed, the process for assessment could include a mix of interviews with managers, group interviews or surveying non-managers, asking employees to keep “communication diaries,” and a communication network analysis (Cortez & Bunge, 1987, p. 56–60). The audit process often involves bringing in outside specialists to conduct interviews and surveys, which is quite costly. After analysis and reporting, the process as a whole could take almost a year to complete. Cost and time are probably why the communication audits only experienced a short period of interest.

In recent years, assessing internal communication has reemerged as a topic of interest among librarians. One 11 month-long study that librarians referred to as a communication audit surveyed and held focus groups with employees within one academic library (Chalmers et al., 2006). The survey acted as a method for gathering information to help identify communication channels and assess success of those channels and related processes. Focus groups were later held as a means to clarify concerns that emerged from survey results and to allow employees to develop solutions. Survey results revealed that e-mail was the most common form of communication, followed by in-person communication, and then meetings. However, the content of the communication occurring left the majority of respondents feeling as though they found out about “important information” informally (p. 190). The survey also revealed that less than half of employees felt they understood long-term goals. Another survey finding demonstrated that employees in departments who work in close physical proximity have more satisfaction with current communications than employees of departments who are not connected by physical proximity. During the duration of the audit, researchers found that their organizational structure left many employees confused about job roles and functions, and wondered if communication problems partly existed due to this confusion.

In 2008, librarians at University of Central Florida published results of an exploratory survey that focused on sentiments related to communication, collaboration, and networking between personnel in branch libraries and their peers at main academic library locations (Bottorff et al., 2008). The survey garnered almost 500 respondents serving in an array of positions from a variety of library types and sizes. Researchers noted that published quantitative studies around these topics in libraries are few (p. 329). Their research found that branch library employees are more likely to feel isolated and disconnected from the main library. The findings demonstrate that more frequent communication between branch library employees and their peers at the main library is correlated to a lesser feeling of isolation (p. 342). Physical
distance and reporting structure were found as two factors contributing to these feelings (p. 353). Lack of time due to juggling too many responsibilities was reported as another factor (p. 354). The physical separation and differing reporting structure is itself echoed in large institutions where departments within the main branch libraries can become too siloed and when responsibilities find librarians rarely in their office, making it more difficult to physically locate coworkers without planning ahead.

In a 2013 article, one academic librarian details a communication study investigating the experience of externally-driven change and the impact of communication at three large academic libraries (Casey, 2013). For this study, the author conducted one-on-one interviews with administration and managers, as well as focus groups with staff. The author concludes that during times of rapid change there is a “connection between effective communication and the ability to successfully maintain priorities” (p. 131). The author also concludes that open communication helps “librarians and staff understand their circumstances, trust their leaders, and believe they are heard” (p. 131). A 2019 article focused on a journal review project surveyed subject librarians as a way to solicit feedback after the project and to inform similar future projects (Jones & Arthur). From that survey, “two-way communication” was identified as the most important aspect to improving the process (p. 71).

A 2017 book focusing on communication between librarians providing research and instruction services and their counterparts with a primary focus on the acquisitions and management of collections is the only scholarly source to-date specific to communication between the two areas (Scull, 2017). Scull suggests that this lack of literature is due in part to the vastly different organizational structures that exist among academic libraries, which makes it difficult to conduct a study that is applicable across institutions (p. 4). She acknowledges the void of information and research in this area and attributes that void to a library’s focus on external communication while also making an argument that good internal communication between these areas leads to better external communication. Scull also highlights the importance of further study in this area because many aspects of collection development have shifted significantly away from traditional subject librarian duties, which makes a close relationship with collection departments all the more important (p. 8). She summarizes the importance by stating: “If the necessary input is not sought and the right information is not communicated that can have a domino effect on other services and the workflows of other departments” (p. 36).

Scull conducted a survey that generated 113 responses from a large variety of academic libraries. Her survey asked respondents to identify as being in either a role with primarily collections responsibilities or primarily teaching and reference responsibilities. The survey then asked questions to assess the types and frequency of communication between departments. From
responses, Scull suggests several ideas to improve communication between these areas: use e-mail for notifications, not discussions; rethink meetings to make them less formal as a way to increase productivity and foster open discussion; observe instruction sessions to learn how resources are being used; and attend events that focus on different aspects of librarianship as opportunities to better understand roles across the libraries (2017, p. 47–52).

Methodology

This study used a multimethod data-gathering approach with focus groups and a survey. Focus groups were used as a means for preliminary exploration and the survey as a means of quantifying responses to questions that came out of the focus groups. The focus groups were first held as a venue to explore the broad issues around communication by posing specific questions and listening to respondents discuss their experiences, feelings, and perspectives. Because this involves human research, the UT Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the application in early fall 2019. All subject librarians were identified as potential participants and sent an e-mail inviting them to participate in the study. Approximately 80% (20 out of 25) of subject librarians agreed to participate, but due to scheduling conflicts and unplanned absences, 64% (16 out of 25) actually participated.

Focus group sessions took place during September 2019 and lasted no longer than 90 minutes each. Participants were divided into four groups of three or more. To help with conversation as well as future analysis, participants were grouped according to experience level: most experience, medium experience, newer experience. A fourth participant group contained librarians outside of the Liaison Programs department with subject responsibilities. Creating small homogenous groups strategically encouraged comfortable conversations that expanded on shared experiences, feelings, and perspectives. This approach worked well to achieve this study’s goals of improving communication, despite being smaller than the typical recommendations for focus group sizes (Litosseliti, 2003, p. 3). During the focus group sessions, one researcher acted as note taker and time keeper and the other acted as facilitator. Each group received the same questions (see Appendix A), although because each group brought unique perspectives, the amount of time spent discussing each question varied. Questions were projected on a screen to allow participants to read at their own pace and to help keep focus on the current question.

The follow-up survey helped ACR and APCS clarify discussions around collection development responsibilities, understand the usefulness of current training opportunities, and prioritize efforts for planning future training and communication activities (see Appendix B). The IRB approved the survey questions and methodology in early 2020. The online survey consisting of 13
questions was created using QuestionPro and distributed to all subject librarians in April 2020, regardless of their participation in the focus groups. Eleven out of twenty-five librarians completed the survey, a 44% response rate.

**Qualitative analysis**

The analysis for this study focused on better understanding communication barriers and possible solutions. Methods used were meant to identify themes and gain a nuanced interpretation that would lead to more significant conclusions and possible solutions to implement at the UT Libraries. Since the researchers began with a loose theoretical framework, but heavily relied on qualitative analysis to define theoretical constructs, the researchers followed a loose grounded theory approach to the analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

**NVivo analytics**

Notes taken in the focus groups were anonymized by reading through and removing any indicators that could identify speakers. The notes were then uploaded to NVivo as separate documents, one for each focus group. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that aids in the organization of data to help produce findings and take-aways through coding data. The data coding in NVivo leverages “nodes” as the thing to which text is referenced. In this analysis, nodes were labeled for commonly-discussed topics. The researchers worked together to agree on a common coding terminology that became the coding schema. Discussion points were tagged throughout each group of notes to reference text to one or more nodes (see Figure 1). This helped produce findings and takeaways by allowing topics discussed to be viewed in an organized, connected, and analytical way. The organization made it possible to compare and contrast discussions among groups to see where common ideas emerged and where differences might exist.

When analyzing the coded topics using NVivo, three high-level themes appeared: collection development and management, processes and training, and methods of communication. Each NVivo node exists in relationship to one of

| Name          | Codes | References |
|---------------|-------|------------|
| Focus Group 1 | 22    | 72         |
| Focus Group 2 | 19    | 64         |
| Focus Group 3 | 18    | 88         |
| Focus Group 4 | 20    | 69         |

Figure 1. Table from NVivo showing number of coded statements and references from each focus group.
Based on the focus group notes and NVivo analysis, the researchers wrote a definition for each node that further identified its relationship to a greater theme and cemented the understanding of each concept.

**Survey analysis**

By design, survey questions were grouped according to the themes identified in the NVivo analysis: four questions focused on collection development responsibilities; five questions focused on processes and training; and three questions focused on communication. One open-ended question provided space for additional thoughts. QuestionPro has built-in analytics that enable easier survey analysis, and also a more quantitative approach than the NVivo analysis of the focus groups. Each survey question is accompanied by counts of how the respondents answered, as well as percentages of how each answer option performed relative to all the options. Many questions incorporated multiple choice options plus ranking metrics, which made this analysis very helpful. Visual representations of the questions in pie or spider charts were especially helpful in providing a quick idea of the highest- and lowest-ranking options for each multiple-choice question. Since the survey response rate was 44%, the results cannot be fully extrapolated to all subject librarians at UT Libraries.

*Figure 2.* Shows the relationship between the three higher-level themes and their relevant topics.
Findings

Collection development and management

Advising librarians on skills for successful collection development in 2004, Tucker and Torrence discuss how liaison activities are critical for informing selection decisions. Their article is written in the context of liaison activities being a smaller part of the role of academic librarians than experienced today. Since 2004, many libraries have centralized collection management activities to lessen the time subject librarians spend with collection activities. Although organizational models may have changed, Tucker and Torrence’s words remain true: “Liaison work is an extremely important part of collection development” (p. 403). Even if collection work is now a minimized part of the subject librarian’s job descriptions, what is learned through engaging with faculty and graduate researchers can be one of the most worthwhile contributions to inform collection decisions. Therefore, it is no surprise that collection development and management emerged as a high-level theme in discussions related to communication between technical services areas and subject librarians. Understanding the context subject librarians bring to collection development and management activities, as well as their perspectives on where there is a breakdown on the flow of information, can greatly improve communications between the two areas.

Six topics stood out that directly relate to roles of collection development and management: selection of materials, subject knowledge, anticipating needs, responding to needs, budget, and time management. Many discussion points around these topics illustrate how engagement with researchers informs collection management and how the collection roles of their job intertwine with engagement. For example, subject librarians discussed spending the majority of their collections time responding to needs, not just because they feel obligated to respond to an e-mail or phone call from a patron, but because the activity encourages communication and relationship building between the librarian and the patron. Subject librarians discussed how this activity also informs what topics are being researched and used for teaching and learning, which helps them more confidently make collection decisions. Unfortunately, from the group of librarians who have positions outside the Liaison Programs department, much discussion occurred about the lack of time available for devoted engagement activities and even less for collection activities.

Time was a recurring topic in the focus groups. Each group expressed the need for more time to adequately complete collection tasks, and several librarians noted that collection tasks often fall to the side. The survey attempted to better understand the time given to collection activities by asking respondents to indicate the percentage of total time spent in this area. Respondents were allowed to enter any number and so almost every response is different, but the largest cluster is in the 20–40% range (see Figure 3).
Subject librarians commented on how collection responsibilities are carried out with skills mostly acquired through experience. How subject librarians feel about these topics seems to be consistent with how much experience they have in the role. One focus group labeled the processes of collection development as “a black box.” The reorganization of the Libraries and shifting around of departments and responsibilities likely contributes to the “black box” feeling. For example, individually controlled subject funds no longer exist, and some librarians previously measured their positive contribution to collection development through spending individual funds. In response to these sentiments, approximately half of the questions on the survey related to collection development and management because this is the area in need of the most clarification. Several questions sought to establish how involved subject librarians can and should expect to be considering the full scope of their job responsibilities. The survey found that the majority of respondents understand their responsibilities very well and spend the majority of their time ordering materials for the collection that results from either patron requests or items the librarian selects (see Figure 4).

When asked what they felt was a good use of time, subject librarians again indicated that ordering materials requested by patrons is the best use of their time followed by a tie in responses for several of the other options (see Figure 5). When responses to this question are adjusted to equal 100%, the comparison to time spent on tasks can be observed (see Figure 6). The result
signifies that certain activities, such as professional development, are thought to be a better use of a subject librarian’s time than the time actually allotted. While these results suggest that there is a relationship between the value of an activity and time, more research is needed to determine the exact relationship and how it affects the subject librarians’ perception of a “good use” of time.

A slight majority of subject librarians indicated that they devote time to collection development responsibilities equally throughout the year, but 45% of respondents indicated that one time of year receives more attention than others (see Figure 7). These responses align with comments made in focus groups, showing a slight trend in behaviors among subject librarians, but also acknowledging that one size does not fit all.

Processes and training

Processes and training emerged as a high-level theme from the focus groups because the various processes and workflows inform much of the way subject librarians and technical services areas interact. Training provides context for those processes and brings an element of shared

Figure 4. Survey responses showing how subject librarians spend time on collection activities. Results show the percentage of mean attributed to each response.
understanding to communications. Discussions tagged as this theme express sentiments related to processes and sentiment related to training for those processes. Topics include: acquisitions process, informal training, and formal training.

Focus group participants discussed the acquisitions process in a broad sense rather than focusing on a specific workflow or part of the process. Subject librarians noted that the process is complicated with the many ways of acquiring content, the many vendors providing content, the various acquisitions models, and the laws and internal policies that the University must adhere to. There were many expressions of uncertainty about the acquisition processes, such as not knowing where requests are in the process at any given time. Other feelings of uncertainty related to the length of time requests can take, particularly those for subscriptions or large dollar amount acquisitions, and not feeling knowledgeable about what electronic resources are available to acquire in support of certain subject areas. In the months prior to the focus groups, several changes were made to various processes to improve efficiency, a few of which saved some time for subject librarians. Subject librarians mentioned those changes with pleasure and expressed a desire for continued changes toward improving efficiency.

Figure 5. Survey responses showing what collections activities subject librarians feel is a good use of their time. Results show the percentage of total responses for each option.
Figure 6. Mean percentage of responses showing what subject librarians indicate is a good use of time compared to the amount of time they report spending on those activities. (Other is left out of this comparison because it was not included as an option for both questions.).

Figure 7. Pie chart showing which time of year respondents devote the most time to collection activities.
Informal training was discussed during focus groups most often as peer-to-peer or mentor training. Several subject librarians described this type of training as their preferred method but acknowledged that it is often difficult to engage in due to lack of physical access to peers, which is a barrier to communication in general that is well documented in previous research (Bottorff et al., 2008; Chalmers et al., 2006). Despite the inconsistent nature of informal training, most subject librarians found it particularly useful for getting quick answers to procedural questions and for seeking advice on collection development and management duties and expectations.

Formal training was discussed during focus groups as including technical training for the systems and programs used to engage in collection acquisition and management tasks, onboarding-type training for new subject librarians that can provide in-person introductions to local acquisition processes, as well as ongoing training that can provide opportunities to continuously learn about processes and acquisitions methods as they change. Most of the subject librarians described experiences that lacked formal training. Many commented on how they learned simply by doing and with time. There was consensus for the lack of preparation provided by higher education degrees related to the collection development and management responsibilities of librarians. Some focus groups mused about a formal training program that would provide foundational knowledge and context needed for new subject librarians with ongoing training for more in-depth technical training and better understanding of factors that impact collection development and management. When conversations turned to methods for training, subject librarians expressed mixed sentiments. However, having training available in one central location at point-of-need was conveyed repeatedly, as was the ability to access refresher-type training for tasks not completed regularly.

The follow-up survey asked five questions related to processes and training. In regards to useful training, topics covering processes such as deselection and weeding were ranked highest with vendor-led training as least useful. However, when the options and rankings are viewed individually, training where tips and tricks are shared amongst subject librarians is the highest “very useful” result (see Figure 8). In a separate question about specific internal training that already occurs, 73% of respondents found an annual Fiscal Year Kickoff training to be very helpful and 50% found individual Orientations with APCS and ACR to be very helpful. This shows that the departments are on the right track by focusing on internal instead of external training, although additional training topics are desired.

The survey contained one specific process question – if a recent approval plan review achieved its goal of having fewer titles for each subject librarian to review. Most respondents (81%) said that they are receiving somewhat fewer titles for review, indicating that the goal was mostly, but not totally, achieved.
In response to the focus groups, an internal guide for Collection Management was reimagined, recreated, and renamed “Collections Ready Reference.” The guide was unveiled in early Spring 2020. The Collections Ready Reference guide aims to be a central location for many internal procedures and frequently asked questions. When the survey asked if specific topics on this guide were useful, 100% of respondents said that “who to contact for what” in the various technical services departments was very useful; with procedures and policies for ordering materials coming in at 94% and 91%, respectively (see Figure 9).

**Methods of communication**

The focus groups revealed that communication is a high-level theme that overlaps with everything. Whether the subject librarians are speaking with patrons about material for the collection, technical services employees are explaining a process that will improve efficiency, or the Libraries is marketing collection materials to patrons, communication is occurring. Discussions
tagged as this theme express sentiments related to both successful and unsuccessful communication. Topics include: outreach, formal communication, informal communication, and ready reference.

Focus group participants discussed outreach as communication, although the researchers noted that outreach was also essential to collection development and management. Subject librarians identified a number of tools used to improve their outreach to teaching departments, such as emailing regular newsletters, attending department meetings, holding pop-up sessions, and asking for course syllabi. These methods inform the relationship between subject librarians and teaching departments and allow for the subject librarians to tailor communication to the specific needs of a department or individual. An additional component of outreach is informing patron expectations. Participants noted that educating a patron on realistic time expectations for receiving new materials required both training in processes for the subject librarian and balancing the patron’s needs.

Formal communication was discussed including regular meetings and update e-mails. Regular meetings include an annual Fiscal Year Kickoff as well as onboarding orientations with APCS and ACR. While these meetings
also serve as formal training opportunities, they are primarily a way for technical services departments to formally communicate processes to and expectations of subject librarians. Other discussion of formal communication focused on areas that needed improvement. An expressed desire was repeated for communication of the status of the budget to occur in a way that is easily understood by subject librarians. The implication is that clear, understandable formal communication from technical services departments to the subject librarians aids their own formal communication with their teaching departments.

Two topics that received less discussion were informal communication and ready reference. Informal communication often occurs via e-mail, when technical services employees respond to questions posed by subject librarians. Overall, the subject librarians highlighted responsiveness as the most desired quality of informal communication, and expressed that they were satisfied with the level of responsiveness offered at the Libraries. Ready reference overlaps with internal training tools, such as the Collections Ready Reference guide discussed earlier. Ready reference offers the opportunity for technical services departments to communicate with subject librarians in an easy-to-find, straightforward, and authoritative manner. Ready reference communication can also offer efficiency with answers to anticipated questions that subject librarians may receive from patrons.

The survey addressed general communication in three separate questions. As the subject librarians spend a considerable amount of time communicating both outside and inside the library, the questions were geared toward both of these areas. UT Libraries’ “suggest a purchase” form is a tool for external communication, as patrons can indicate what they would like purchased and the subject librarian is then connected to this patron for follow-up. A slight majority (60%) of respondents prefer for the form submissions to go to the relevant subject librarian, while 30% would prefer that the form go directly to technical services for ordering but include the relevant subject librarian in the reply. This shows that the “suggest a purchase” form is a communication tool that most subject librarians would like to continue using.

In May 2019, the technical services departments created a bimonthly “Collections Updates” e-mail that is sent to all library employees to keep everyone apprised of current information. This coordinated effort involves each department’s designated individuals updating a SharePoint document, with one individual formatting the most recent updates into an e-mail and sending it to an all library employees’ listserv. The majority (73%) of survey respondents indicated that these regular e-mails are very helpful, while 9% of respondents indicated that they do not read these e-mails. Overall, the majority of respondents would like quarterly updates about the various funds that are used to purchase collection materials (see Figure 10).
**Figure 10.** Desired frequency for funding updates. “Never” was a response option, but is omitted from the chart below because the option was not selected by any participant.

**Figure 11.** Subject librarian preference for being contacted by a vendor.
The final communication question was to provide clarity about when APCS or ACR should direct a vendor to a subject librarian (see Figure 11). This was mentioned by a few individuals during the focus groups but was not widely discussed. The responses enforce the assumption that each subject librarian desires an individual approach, but since that is not sustainable, APCS and ACR will continue serving as a gatekeeper for the subject librarians in regards to vendor communications.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. As it was conducted at a place of employment, colleagues may or may not have felt that they were able to speak frankly, even though no subject librarian was in either researcher’s department or reporting line. The results are also limited by which subject librarians chose to participate in the focus groups and the survey. Neither venue had 100% participation, and it is not known if all of the survey respondents also participated in the focus groups. Both situations allow that all perspectives and experiences may not be fully represented in this study.

The researchers surmise that the timing of the collection activities around the focus group sessions and survey influenced some of the topics discussed. For example, immediately prior to the focus group sessions, most of the subject librarians had participated in an in-depth and time-consuming review of their approval plan areas and this topic was brought up repeatedly in focus groups. The topic may have been mentioned only minimally if focus groups were conducted during a different time. Another example of this is an expressed desire by subject librarians to not make large decisions during the busy fall semester. However, this was not expressed during the focus groups or survey, but rather during renewal review discussions held in the Fall 2020 semester. These experiences with the timing of collections activities run contrary to some of the thoughts and opinions expressed during this study.

A final limitation is the timing of the follow-up survey itself. The survey was conducted in April 2020 when all respondents were acclimating to work from home, online teaching, and personal impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The timing, which was intentionally set at a less-busy time in the spring semester in order to garner the most responses possible, likely attributed to a lower response rate than what would have been in a different year. The pandemic likely worsened the before-mentioned lack of time subject librarians feel they have to accomplish all job responsibilities, and higher survey response rate may have changed the results.
Discussion

The three overarching themes of collection development and management, processes and training, and methods of communication identified in this study show the interconnectedness of technical services and subject librarian work in a large academic library. These themes did not surprise the researchers. However, the surprising result was that the understanding of expectations (or lack thereof) underlies every focus group discussion and many survey responses. The Libraries’ reorganization in 2018 left many with confusion or uncertainty of their expected responsibility regarding collection activities. This study shows that for many, a lack of expressed expectations, training, and informal peer mentorship to establish and guide responsibilities caused feelings of uncertainty toward collection roles and related responsibilities. Currently, there is little formal guidance for what a subject librarian’s collections role is and how much of their time should be spent on collection activities. This illustrates one of the fundamental breakdowns in communication between subject librarians and technical service departments: they do not know what is expected of their roles and what to expect of technical services roles. What is learned through this study about how subject librarians think about collection development and management activities is extremely useful to establish expectations for both subject librarians and technical service employees through a coordinated department leadership effort.

Another significant finding was the realization that communication overlaps with everything discussed in the various components of this study. Subject librarians are constantly in communication with patrons about topics related to technical services, such as when a new book will arrive, how long until there is access to a newly purchased database, etc. Technical services communication is an opportunity to inform subject librarians in advance of their receiving patron questions. This communication is also at its most successful when subject librarians have enough context and training so they feel as though they can pass the information along in a way that allows them to confidently answer follow-up questions, provide examples based on their experience with the teaching department, or frame the information in a way that will be understood by the department. The two themes of collection development and management and processes and training impact communication externally as well as internally. This finding reinforces Scull’s statement that good internal communication is necessary to have good external communication (2017).

Since this study was conducted, some significant changes occurred that were unrelated to but still impact the findings of this study. The Collection Strategist is now part of the agenda-making process for subject librarian meetings as a way to increase communication and engagement between the areas by providing time for collection-specific discussions at these meetings. There are fewer librarians outside of the Liaison Programs department with subject librarian responsibilities, but more subject librarians juggling
increased workloads. There are plans for hiring in the department. However, at the time this article is written, all hiring plans are frozen due to financial effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Financial effects arising from the pandemic caused the UT Libraries to review every renewal in fiscal year 2021. Doing so created an immediate need for increased communication between technical services departments and subject librarians, as well as new workflows. The best communication and workflows resulted in a very short time period and with difficulties along the way, but the experience created better relationships through more open communication between the two areas. During this time, most subject librarians and many technical services employees were working remotely from home. Working entirely from home for such a long period may increase feelings of isolation previously expressed by some subject librarians. Working from home may also result in fewer interactions and informal communication opportunities between subject librarians and technical services employees. Despite the extended time employees have worked remotely, contacting colleagues at home may still feel like an imposition unless a strong relationship is already established. This is a new communication barrier that warrants further exploration.

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has normalized technologies that can be leveraged to strengthen communication, such as remote meetings. Previous to the pandemic, it was rare for the UT Libraries to hold an in-person meeting while also connecting employees remotely who were in another building on campus. However, going forward, combining in-person and remote meetings may increase attendance at sessions designed for subject librarians, such as trainings, to accommodate those in different physical locations. Remote portions of the meetings can also be recorded for those who could not attend to view later or to satisfy the expressed desire to have refresher trainings on hand when needed.

This study provided an opportunity to name problematic issues and identify potential solutions to the communication between the technical services departments and subject librarians at the UT Libraries. The researchers hope that continued improvement in communications will result in better peer-to-peer learning relationships between these two groups, which is identified as the subject librarians’ preferred method of learning. Onboarding, the Ready Reference guide, and trainings, coupled with improved working relationships and shared expectations, will hopefully resolve the majority of confusion around the responsibilities of collection development and management activities.

**Conclusion**

This exploratory study led to several changes. Some changes were implemented in the time between when the focus groups occurred and when the survey was administered, such as the Collections Ready Reference guide. The
survey results provide clarity and direction to some topics that were discussed in the focus groups and impact how and what technical services departments communicate with subject librarians. Other changes are in process and will take a significant amount of time to implement, such as a formal training program.

After changes have time to make an impact, an additional survey is recommended to measure the success of those changes and determine if any of those changes need further improvement. Another survey would also identify issues that were overlooked during or have emerged since this study, or may provide an opportunity for more subject librarians to share issues that were not previously identified.

Overall, this study was a worthwhile exploration into communication breakdown between the technical services departments and subject librarians at the UT Libraries. The key findings showed the expected themes of collection development and management, processes and training, and communication. However, the most interesting findings resulted from the expressed (and often assumed) importance of shared expectations as well as the permeation of communication through all of the themes and the impact of communication internally and externally. Clarifying expectations and communication has already helped the two areas improve their working relationship.

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Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

(1) What does collection development mean to you?

(2) How do you go about developing and managing your collections?

(3) In your experience with the acquisitions process here at the Libraries, what do you like about the process and what do you not like about it?

(4) How confident do you feel with collection development?

(5) In a perfect world, how involved would you be with collection development?

(6) When it comes to communication related to collection development and acquisitions (information about submitting orders, the status of orders, the status of our budget, vendor visits, etc.), what is going well and what is not?

(7) Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic?

Appendix B: Follow-Up Survey Questions

1. How well do you feel that you understand your job responsibilities related to collection development and management?

   • Very well
   • Somewhat
   • Not at all

2. What percentage of your total liaison activities are spent on collection development activities and tasks?

   [Open answer]

3. Of the time spent on collection development, what percentage is spent on the following collection development tasks:

   • Reviewing data that informs collection development and management
   • Reviewing slips/GOBI notifications
• Providing input to Collection Strategy for renewals and new resource decisions (not including time spent on Collection Committee activities if you are a current Committee representative)
• Ordering materials requested by faculty and students
• Ordering materials you select (not requested by faculty and students)
• Communicating with faculty and students about order requests
• Professional development related to collection development
• Other:

4. Which of the following do you feel is a good use of your time?

• Reviewing data that informs collection development and management
• Reviewing slips/GOBI notifications
• Providing input to Collection Strategy for renewals and new resource decisions (not including time spent on Collection Committee activities if you are a current Committee representative)
• Ordering materials requested by faculty and students
• Ordering materials you select (not requested by faculty and students)
• Communicating with faculty and students about order requests
• Professional development related to collection development
• Other:

5. When do you devote the most time to collection development:

• Fall
• Spring
• Summer
• Equally spread throughout the year
• Other:

6. What types of trainings would you find useful?:

• Dashboards and other reports in Alma
• Deselection and weeding
• Electronic resource usage statistics
• Placing orders
• Sharing tips & tricks among liaisons
• Strategies and tools for selecting content for your areas
• Understanding the collection development lifecycle
• Vendor-led trainings (most likely webinars) on specific databases
• Other:

7. How useful have you found the following trainings:

• Fiscal Year Kickoff
• Liaison Orientation with APCS and Resource Acquisitions
8. The Liaison LibGuide (https://libguides.utk.edu/liaisons) currently houses information for liaisons. How useful would you find these “ready reference” topics:

- Ebook platforms and the types of access offered
- General time frames (from order to completion) for overall item types
- Procedures for ordering
- Policies and guidelines for ordering
- Using GOBI
- Who to contact for what
- Other:

9. A goal for the approval plan review in Fall 2019 was to have fewer slips (GOBI notifications) to review. Since the approval plan has been turned back on, are you looking at fewer slips?

- Many fewer slips
- Somewhat fewer slips
- No difference
- More slips
- N/A

10. Would you prefer that “suggest a purchase” submissions from our users go:

- Directly to the Third Floor for ordering
- To the appropriate subject librarian for vetting
- Other:

11. Do you find the Collection Updates e-mails helpful?

- Very helpful
- Somewhat helpful
- Not at all helpful
- I don’t read them

12. How often would you like communication about:

- Firm funds
- Continuing resource funds
- Gift funds
- Restricted funds

13. When should APCS or ACR direct a vendor to a liaison?

- Advertising a new resource
- Offering training
- Never
- Other: