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When is a Librarian not a Librarian?

Frederick Friend

12.1 Introduction

When Reg Carr began his career the role of a university librarian was reasonably clear. Admittedly the profession suffered then as it does now from poor public understanding of what a librarian does, but within a university many members of the academic community held library staff in respect and had clear ideas of what they expected from them. It is very unlikely that the academics who appointed Reg Carr to his first job would have expected his last role as a librarian to be that of a fund-raiser. This was the time of university growth in the 1960s, when taxpayer money was poured into universities in abundance and the task of a librarian was to spend money, not to acquire it. Likewise, in respect of my own career, which began in Manchester University Library around the same time as Reg’s career, nobody would have expected that my career would end in a role known mysteriously as “scholarly communication”. What has scholarly communication to do with libraries? Has a librarian ceased to be a librarian when they become a fund-raiser or a scholarly communication consultant?

12.2 Learning Priorities in Manchester University Library

There were and are many types of jobs available within a library, and a librarian’s job description (usually verbal with only a general written statement in the 1960s) would vary according to their role and according to their position in what at that time was a fairly rigid hierarchy. Despite the rigid hierarchy there were opportunities for young librarians to gain a wide variety of experience in different roles, provided that they had the encouragement of the chief librarian. Separate staff-rooms for academic-related and clerical staff were one mark of hierarchical distinction in some libraries. Two key features of a successful future career were available to be experienced in the situation at Manchester.
The first was the opportunity to gain managerial experience in one of the small departmental libraries, and the second was the understanding of the importance of acquiring academically-rich special collections of rare books and manuscripts. Such collections make a huge difference to the value of a university library to the research community. Dr. Ratcliffe acquired many important collections during his time at Manchester, and it was very instructive for a young librarian to watch this process. Maybe this role will become less important in the internet age, when digitized manuscripts and books can be accessed from anywhere in the world, but the understanding of the research process which directed the acquisition of physical collections will still be important in the acquisition of virtual collections. Collecting the right “stuff” always has been and always will be a vital skill for a librarian to acquire. (The use of the word “stuff” to describe the variety of content needed in an academic library to feed the research process is attributed to Joseph Scott, Librarian of University College London, 1954–1982).

Work in Manchester University Library in the 1960s illustrated the expectations library users have from library services. University staff expected to come to the library building and to find the books journals and manuscripts they needed for their research on the library shelves. The role of the library staff was to acquire by purchase or donation the materials academic staff needed, to know enough about different academic subjects to be able to answer subject-related enquiries with a minimum of explanation by the reader, and to enable as many as possible of the items the reader needed to be taken to the reader’s office for as long as possible. If a dispute arose between a member of library staff and a member of academic staff it would generally be about some restriction placed upon the removal of a book from the library, a petty restriction to the reader but part of the custodial role for a librarian. In the days before electronic formats, the custodial role was very strong in the minds of librarians. Many books were stolen from libraries, and library staff were very aware of the number of occasions a reader looked for a book on the library shelves and found it was missing. If this happened frequently a library would acquire a bad reputation and its service to readers current and future would be diminished.

For students, university library staff performed a more prosaic role, essentially to have a high proportion of the books on a student’s reading list waiting on the library shelves in time for the student to complete her or his essay on the last minute before the deadline. Once student numbers rose after World War 2 this expectation posed the challenge of purchasing multiple copies of student textbooks, a challenge which required library staff to liaise closely with lecturers and obtain copies of reading lists in time for the books to be purchased and made available on the library shelves. The high turnover of books used by undergraduates also involved a librarian in decisions on loan periods and sanctions for the non-return of books on time. While there was a case for very lengthy loan periods for items required by researchers, undergraduate services demanded loan periods measured in days if not hours, combined with strict rules for non-return on time. Problems arose when an item required by undergraduates was borrowed by a member of academic staff, sometimes for their own use and sometimes to loan out unofficially to their own group of students.