Chapter 10

New Professions, New Opportunities:
Collection Development in Support of Interdisciplinary Programs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is focused on how academic librarians have responded to the information needs of inter-disciplinary programs. A review of literature of both American higher education and academic libraries is provided as a context for understanding current needs and collection development techniques. These techniques include the development of core book and journal lists, citation analysis, citation scatter analysis, the use of ontologies, and creative approaches to collection budgeting. The results of a survey of collection development librarians are presented, which identify current practices when dealing with interdisciplinary programs developed in recent years and the budget issues that either facilitate or present obstacles to the development of interdisciplinary library collections.

INTRODUCTION

The history of American higher education shows a long-time tension between disciplinary and interdisciplinary influences. Studies of the history of higher education show that the issue of disciplinary versus interdisciplinary education has been debated for some 100 years. Now, with more limited resources and flat or reduced collections budgets, it is a current hot topic for higher education and academic libraries. Many interdisciplinary programs, especially those developed over the last five years, are career-oriented, and are structured similarly to professional programs such as law or engineering.

Academic libraries are tasked with actively collecting, organizing, disseminating, and evaluating knowledge to support the information needs of faculty, administration, and students. It may first appear that libraries do not have to choose between disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. Both of these approaches are legitimate and there are advocates for both; however, the support of new interdisciplinary programs that cut across disciplines is a big challenge. The level of support needed will depend upon the proliferation of information, organization, and budget issues that continue to loom and force librarians and faculties to make difficult choices. For example, to acquire one necessary but expensive resource, libraries often must discontinue another quality resource. Librarians take their cues from both classroom faculty and students. They must be involved in academic discussions and be flexible so they can deliver the best resources, when and where needed, and within budget. Thus, budget issues and choices in academic libraries are never far away.

The purpose of this chapter is to orient librarians to collection development strategies that address the particular needs of interdisciplinary programs. It includes a summary of the history, trends, and budget issues that impact the growth of interdisciplinary programs by presenting them with a broad view of the issues they may face. This approach will provide a context for academic librarians such that they will be able to more confidently discuss the issues with colleagues in the library and the classroom. While collection development techniques are available to librarians working with interdisciplinary programs, the issue of funding continues to be a primary obstacle. Therefore, a brief survey of academic librarians was done that focused primarily on collection budgets that may either encourage or hinder the development of library resources for interdisciplinary programs. A review of the literature of higher education and libraries shows how some institutions are responding to these challenges.

BACKGROUND: LITERATURE REVIEW

Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Approaches in Academia

Interdisciplinarity is a growing trend in academia but it is not necessarily an easy one to follow for many reasons. There are obstacles to both the development of interdisciplinary programs and the development of related library resources. One major obstacle is the strengths of already established academic departments. These are the basic building blocks of universities and the principle way of organizing people, that is, the placement of faculty/scholars who "belong" to each discipline. However, this structure does not accommodate knowledge that falls outside of disciplinary boundaries. Yet, it is the research that is at the boundary of disciplines that offers a most fertile ground for new insights and opportunities.

An understanding of the history and trends in academia can help librarians to plan their approach to gaining support for collection development in new interdisciplinary areas. Insight into the development of both disciplinary and interdisciplinary subjects offers librarians a broader perspective and should boost confidence when working with faculty and administrators relating to these issues. Following is a brief summary of the literature of interdisciplinary approaches in academia.

Klein (1990) is a much-cited leader in both the research in and advocacy for interdisciplinary higher education. She noted that interdisciplinary approaches have been variously defined as:

... a methodology, a concept, a process, a way of thinking, a philosophy and a reflexive ideology. It has been linked with attempts to expose the dangers of fragmentation, to reestablish old connections, to explore emerging relations, and to create new subjects adequate to handle our practical and conceptual needs…[as] a means of solving problems and answering questions that cannot be satisfactorily addressed using single methods or approaches (p. 196).

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