
A Year in the Life

Business Librarians

Report on 2008–09

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Guest Columnist

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Academic Business Library Directors (ABLD), an association consisting of the directors of libraries at the preeminent business schools in the United States and Canada, comes together each year to discuss issues of interest. Prior to the meeting, members are asked to respond to a questionnaire on what has happened in their libraries in the previous year. This survey results in the *Annual Review*, a collaborative report on new initiatives, organizational changes, space and collection issues, business school events, and the budget situations in their libraries. Roye Werner compiled this year's *Annual Review*. This article contains the highlights from that report, which were also presented at the latest ABLD meeting, held at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, April 21–23, 2009. These trends will be of interest to many *RUSQ* readers because they relate to broad concerns that affect libraries of all types.—*Editor*

When I switched from being a public business librarian to an academic one three years ago, I thought I should get my collegiate bearings by studying some relevant journals. I spent some time perusing, among other publications, the *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship*, which turned out to be right on target for that purpose—and it was there, through references in various articles and reports, that I learned about the Academic Business Library Directors (ABLD) association.

ABLD is a small, specialized association, consisting of the directors of libraries at the preeminent business schools in the United States and Canada. The first meeting—which was inspired by discussions at the College and Universities Business Libraries Roundtable at the Special Libraries Association—was held in May 1987 at the Columbia University's Watson Library at the invitation of their business librarian Jane Winland. It began with less than a dozen members; today, membership is limited to fifty. As described in the charter (www.abld.org/charter.html), ABLD provides

a forum for directors of academic business libraries to discuss mutual concerns and share information. Interests include: managerial and administrative issues and trends; cooperative initiatives to preserve and provide access to unique collections in business; opportunities to influence development of new products and services for the academic business library market and to influence contract development (vendor relations); and opportunities for informal collaboration and networking.

The organization has frequent contact and occasional meetings with sibling groups overseas, such as the European Business Schools Librarians' Group and the Asia Pacific Business School Librarians' Group, and recently has communicated with the newly formed Agrupación de Directores de Centros de Información in Latin America.

Lucky for me, I soon became a member, and have since made good use of the group's accumulated wisdom and collegial support through their e-mail list, statistics compilations, conference sessions, website, and professional contacts. Perhaps the most extensive and revealing form of information gathering takes place a few months before the annual meeting, when the *Annual Review* is compiled. An editor sends a questionnaire to all members, who are asked to describe and record their reflections on what has happened in their libraries in the past year. The results are combined and distributed, and the editor then tries to make sense of the collected responses—finding common themes, shared concerns, and standout events and ideas—to report on at the conference.

This past year, I had the privilege of being that editor, and saw the process through, from distributing the questions to presenting the synthesis. For this latest *Annual Review*, we asked the members to report on the following:

- new and ongoing initiatives
- library organizational changes and new staff
- physical space
- collection and vendor issues
- business school issues, organizational changes, and new initiatives
- effects of the current economic situation
- other

Detailed and thoughtful reports came in from forty-three of our forty-nine members (an 88 percent response rate!), resulting in a sixty-four-page compilation. What follows are the highlights of those contributions.

First of all (with apologies to *Star Trek*), space is indeed the final frontier. In response to lively student demand, group study rooms are being built by the dozens, as are scores of seats in quiet study areas. Learning labs, interactive classrooms, presentation rooms, and lounges are being added. Collaborative workstations are popular. In a representative case, the Schreyer Business Library at Penn State is installing new collaborative workstations for group projects and planning, and equipping a group study room as a “presentation practice room,” complete with a high-definition screen, projector, and a podium. The William C. Gast Business Library at Michigan State has created the Collaborative Technology Learning Lab, equipped with an interactive whiteboard, videoconferencing capabilities, a DVD player, plasma screens, a projector, and a laptop. Boston College's O'Neill Library redesigned their formerly solo business workstations to allow two users to sit and work together.

In conjunction with this, reference print materials con-

tinue to be moved to the stacks or offsite—also weeded and downsized, often drastically, and making intense use of compact shelving. Some reference collections are being moved almost in their entirety. Print serials and journals also are being cancelled and relocated. Naturally, the concurrent move is to e-books and databases, both in reference and the general collection—which continues apace. At the Howard Ross Library of Management at McGill, the collection policy has a new guideline to order e-versions of books whenever possible. Several reports mentioned making a special effort to enhance user access to electronic texts and data, which is not as intuitive as it should be.

Outreach, a practice that is not new, still keeps evolving, and as such had a major role in the *Annual Review*. In numerous cases, possibly because of the current bleak employment climate, business libraries are collaborating with the career centers at their schools. They are creating career collections, presenting at career workshops, developing online tools, and advising students about job searching. And in an outreach trend seen all over the library universe, business librarians are embedded in courses, workshops, and nonlibrary buildings (though reportedly not decked out in camo). Active library involvement in entrepreneurship efforts—on and off campus—was also chronicled. Librarians from MIT Sloan's Dewey Library for Management and Social Sciences hit two of these trends at once when they took an active role in the school's Global Entrepreneurship Lab, where they met with faculty, delivered instruction, created course-specific Web guides, consulted with class teams, and, finally, assessed their impact.

Continuing to be adopted and heavily used are Wharton's Business FAQs—a knowledge database developed by librarians at Wharton's Lippincott Library, working with IT staff at the Penn Library.¹ It contains answers to hundreds of business reference questions, pointing users to databases, websites, online guides, library policies, and print sources. It is continually evolving, and is available 24/7. The system has been installed by more than twenty-five ABLD member libraries at this point, which can customize it for their own purposes. As reported this past year, four member libraries joined up, and James Fries at Dartmouth's Feldberg Business and Engineering Library created a website that will search all of them at once: www.dartmouth.edu/~feldberg/business/BusFAQs.php.

Vendor issues—particularly the acquisition and control of databases and data—could provide a report all to itself. Many business database vendors look to corporations, not universities, as their major clients, and their high prices and rigid access control policies reflect that. As a result, there is a continual struggle to convince them to adjust their contractual demands and to provide better customer service for the academic market, which after all gives them prime exposure to their future corporate customers. The review, as well as discussions at the conference, continues to relate that attempt.

At last year's ABLD conference, one of our members gave

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an enthusiastic presentation to the group on LibGuides—a template for library resource guides produced by Springshare Software—and its appeal was clearly powerful. As reported this year, almost a quarter of the group has switched over from their previous systems. “Continue to use and love LibGuides,” says one report. This year, a similar starring role at our presentations was played by interactive “clickers”—handheld wireless devices used in classrooms for student feedback. We’ll see if next year’s report comes back with more rave reviews.

Naturally, in light of this past year’s economic meltdown, budget issues loomed large. In expectation of this, we included in the initial questionnaire a specific category called “effects of the current economic situation.” The results, at least in this initial year of the crisis, were not overwhelming. As noted above, there were numerous examples of building, equipment, and furniture upgrades, as well as new hires and added hours. On the other hand, twenty respondents mentioned either funding cuts or flat budgets, nine said they were dealing with staff reductions, and there also were mentions of salary and hiring freezes and even a pay cut. Historically, however, budget concerns in libraries are never very far away. Although the ABLD *Annual Reviews* from the previous two years evince very little concern with budget reduction, unless it was to transfer funds from one area to another, the report from 2003 revealed that “budget was the most highly cited issue facing member libraries.”²

A number of other issues and initiatives were reported by at least a few libraries and deserve honorable mention. Scanning and digitization projects, website redesign, use of Web 2.0 and social networking technologies, and creating institutional repositories for faculty research all made appearances. The word “assessment” came up fifteen times: of resources, programs, student needs, reference questions, and space use. In one case, the main library created an entire position responsible for assessment and co-opted a business librarian to fill it. Alumni are being offered continued database access.

When I step back and look at the whole *Annual Review*, what stands out to me are two tendencies that head simultaneously in opposite directions—toward the physical and

toward the virtual. On the one hand, our libraries’ physical spaces are highly in demand by people who want to meet there for academic and other pursuits, and they are being developed accordingly. It’s interesting how much this shows a strong desire among young people for face-to-face interaction, teamwork, and physical proximity in a world dominated by twittering and tiny screens. On the other hand, information on paper is vanishing from the library shelves, only to reappear on those tiny (and larger) screens; librarians are no longer tethered to their desks, and are spending more and more of their reference time responding in cyberspace. So the library as structure is moving rapidly from a house for readable objects to a home for intellectual and social contact. At the same time, the library and librarians as information protectors and distributors are no longer imprisoned within the structure.

Looking over the tables of contents of *Reference & User Services Quarterly* for the last two years, as well as many other indicators in the library world, it’s evident that most of these concerns and trends affect all libraries, not just academic business libraries. And of course, many of these issues—like outreach, electronic reference, websites, print cancellations, and problems with vendors—are constants that have surfaced in the *Annual Reviews* of recent years, though the emphasis, conditions, and solutions keep changing. How all this ultimately evolves over the coming decade—how our libraries become transformed, and how profoundly the librarian’s role is altered—will assuredly continue to be reported in ABLD’s *Annual Reviews*. Stay tuned!

References

1. Michael Halperin, Linda Eichler, Delphine Khanna, and Kathleen Dreyer, “Just the FAQ’s Ma’am: Sharing a Business Knowledge Database,” *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 12, no. 1 (2006): 33–39; Karen Anello and Brett Bonfield, “Providing Reference Service in Our Sleep: Using a FAQ Database to Guide Users to the Right Resources,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 46, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 28–33.
2. Shari Buxbaum, “Academic Business Library Directors’ Meeting,” *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 10, no. 1 (2004): 39–62.

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