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Title of Column: ERM Ideas & Innovations

**The Evolution of E-Resources Management in a Small Academic library –
Paraprofessional Staff and Librarian Perspectives**

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From the Column Editor, Randall Lowe:

The focus of this ERM Ideas and Innovations column is on the evolution of e-resources management at Frostburg State University from the perspective of two of the paraprofessional staff members who participated in the transition from a largely print-based departmental operation to one in which working with online resources came to comprise the majority of their job responsibilities. They detail their experiences in taking on more ERM responsibilities, including how their jobs have changed, the challenges they have faced in assuming new duties, and where they have and have not received support during this transition. In addition, their supervising librarian (and the column editor) addresses some of the managerial mistakes made and corrective actions taken as informed through engaging staff in regular and frank dialogue.

Column:

The Lewis J. Ort Library at Frostburg State University (Frostburg), an approximately 5,200 student regional comprehensive public university located in Western Maryland (Frostburg State University, 2019), began an evolution in the change of its electronic resources management (ERM) procedures and related staff responsibilities in 2008, as an increasingly larger percentage of its materials budget was earmarked for the procurement of e-resources. As detailed in a previous ERM Ideas and Innovations column (Lowe, 2019), this was the result of a concerted effort that began in 2007 with two primary collection development objectives: (1) increasing the

representation of e-resources in the library's collection within the existing materials budget framework; and (2) systematically engaging both library and teaching faculty to ensure that these resources met curricular and research needs. Meeting these objectives included first migrating the vast majority of the library's individual print and microfilm journal subscriptions to online formats, followed by incorporating electronic books and streaming video into the collection.

Successful initiatives were undertaken to meaningfully engage both teaching and library faculty in this effort in order to meet these objectives, including the revitalization of the library liaison program and giving library faculty a more consequential role in collection development activities. The transformation of the Ort Library's collection into one in which procurement of materials was largely electronic had a considerable impact on all technical services units, including the Acquisitions and Periodicals Department.

The previous column on this topic (Lowe, 2019) briefly discussed the supervising librarian's approach to managing the department through these significant changes, from informing staff members that they would be assuming increased responsibility for managing electronic resources, to providing educational materials and training, to allowing staff the space to take ownership of their tasks and investigate workflow improvements; an investment in regular dialogue with staff was present in each of these actions. This approach to providing adequate instruction while including staff as true partners in the process was one that resulted in staff empowerment in fulfilling their responsibilities in the past; however, the systemic nature of the changes resulting from becoming a library that now invested its acquisitions dollars primarily in e-resources presented some unique challenges for everyone involved.

While narratives accounting (Dollar et al., 2007; Hulseberg & Monson, 2009) and surveys reporting on (Erb & Erb, 2015; Macaulay, 2018; West & Miller, 2011) ERM challenges, ideas, innovations, and best practices in library technical services departments as detailed by librarians or library supervisors are readily found in the literature – ideas that, in fact, form the very basis of this column – experiences and perspectives authored by the library technicians and paraprofessionals who have responsibility for regularly completing ERM-related tasks are much more difficult to find. Nancy Frost and Emily Zumbrun, both paraprofessionals in the Frostburg Acquisitions and Periodicals Department, provide their perspectives and detail their experiences as two of the staff members who participated in the transition from working in a largely print-based operation to one in which the acquisition and licensing of e-resources became the primary focus, resulting in significant changes to their job responsibilities. Randall “Randy” Lowe, their supervising librarian, then addresses this transition from his perspective, discussing some of the managerial challenges that occurred throughout this process and how they were resolved.

Staff Experiences & Perspectives – Nancy & Emily

A Changing Work Environment: The Incorporation of ERM Duties

Five years ago, ERM comprised a small percentage of our Acquisitions and Periodicals Department’s staff time and effort as it was primarily conducted by one librarian. Today, ERM encompasses a large portion of all paraprofessional job duties in our department as these responsibilities have been redistributed among all staff in the unit. In addition, our department was reorganized twice over a three-year period due to the retirement of two staff members. Our department’s overall staff size decreased from five to three, resulting in the assignment of more

ERM duties to fewer people. The saying “work smarter, not harder,” represents the approach our department was forced to adopt in response to these changes. Through many discussions that included paraprofessional staff input, some traditional acquisitions and periodicals functions were largely reassigned to different departments (such as binding) and some services were reduced or eliminated (such as accepting and screening most donor gifts) to ensure that staff had adequate time to fulfill ERM responsibilities. These sacrifices were necessary for the unit to function successfully.

The manner in which a library paraprofessional handles change such as this varies from person to person. After years of primarily working with print materials, our department now supports a largely electronic collection. This gradual change has affected how we provide collections and services to our patrons and, in the case of technical services, the way we process materials. The loss of working mostly with print materials can be equated to the slow demise of a treasured friendship. The satisfaction, security, and happiness derived from truly understanding your day-to-day job function dissolves. Such a loss can instill fear and uncertainty, as well as stress and anxiety. All of these can negatively affect job performance; however, taking ownership of one’s responsibilities and embracing the stressors can lead to great improvements. In our department, we came to embrace the change that ERM brought to our workflows and, after some trial and error, found success in our processes.

Nancy started her employment in the Ort Library in 1993, and since 2001 has been a pivotal member of the Acquisitions team serving as a Library Services Supervisor. It has been during the past few years that ERM has become the largest part of the duties in this position. More and

more, this position requires the use of our library management system, subscription agent databases, and spreadsheets to track various workflows, budget information and subscription renewal cycles, as well as use of the administrative modules of publisher websites to manage ERM functions such as subscription access and collecting usage statistics.

Emily joined the Acquisitions team in 2012. At this time, the processing of electronic resources was in full swing in the department. After having been initially trained to process print materials – inputting financials into the library management system, receiving materials and verifying prices, then passing items to the Metadata Department for cataloging – the management of e-resources was introduced into this position gradually over the ensuing years.

Uncertainty and Rising Concerns

The downsizing of staff positions in our department was a big change and caused us to take on several new responsibilities. The duties within our department became much less siloed and more integrated as a result. It was a stressful time, with a whole lot of work and not enough time to complete it, but it also gave us an opportunity to really improve our operations. After some initial training, we took responsibility for several maintenance tasks related to our existing e-journal subscriptions, which were previously shared by the two staff members of the Periodicals team who had retired, as well as the supervising librarian; this included financial tracking, link resolver and discovery knowledgebase management, and correcting holdings information as subscriptions changed. This certainly seemed like something we could each handle as we already knew the basic principles behind what needed to be done to manage a subscription, but we struggled to find the time to fit it into our existing job duties.

In addition, we found it easy to prioritize tasks that were more comfortable to us, namely processing print items, and placed less familiar ERM tasks lower on our to-do lists. Months went by and we found ourselves falling behind on e-journal maintenance. After consulting with one another, we discovered that neither of us was very clear on what our roles were. Who is supposed to correct the holdings in the link resolver? When there is a discrepancy, how do we know if our records or the publisher's are correct? This initial miscommunication led to frustration on our part as well as our supervisor's (Randy). As paraprofessionals, we didn't fully understand what was expected of us or exactly how to accomplish the end goal. There was likely a bit of fear of embarrassment or shame that was preventing us from going to our supervisor sooner, but because both of us were uncertain of our roles, we desperately needed to get some clarification.

Clearing the Air: The Importance of Communication in Addressing Concerns

During a scheduled department meeting, we finally explained to Randy our trepidation with completing the now essential ERM functions of our jobs and requested a clear workflow, in writing, so that we knew exactly what we were supposed to do. He was very receptive to this request and thanked us for reaching out to him and being honest. It was a relief to "clear the air," so to speak. Randy worked quickly to produce a document that detailed the workflow of e-resource management tasks within our department. Once we had our responsibilities outlined in such a concrete way, we were finally able to confidently take ownership of this piece of the puzzle. We arranged to work together on e-journal maintenance for a short while to ensure we both knew the process inside and out before we worked independently on our individual

responsibilities. This cross-training was helpful in not only learning ERM processes, but may also be helpful in the future if responsibilities need to change.

Addressing these inadequacies with clear communication was key to improving our processes. We are very lucky to have a supervisor in our department who truly values and seeks to maximize his staff members' talents. It is also very important for him to understand our weaknesses. Only by understanding both strengths and weaknesses can he lead effectively. He must ask himself questions such as, "Do they embrace technology?" "Do they think outside the box?" "What don't they do well?" "What types of tasks do they resist?" He must evaluate the good, bad and everything in between.

Taking Ownership: Teamwork & Support

With only two paraprofessionals in our department now instead of four, it is critical that we each bring into play our best attributes. Each of us can discern, within reasonable parameters, where she excels, where she is average, and where she can improve. We are savvy, creative, thoughtful and determined. With characteristics such as these, not much escapes us nor do we cut corners.

For the greater good of the team, both of us continually look for ways to streamline and improve workflow and have been successful in implementing many changes. As part of our annual performance evaluation process, we each develop personal goals with the objective of creating a more efficient department. For example, we have devised and implemented electronic notification of e-resources processing tasks that must be addressed by members of the Metadata

Department, despite our legacy library management system not providing this capability. This procedure, while still not ideal, utilizes our time and resources more efficiently.

Our supervisor is very supportive in helping us adapt to workflow changes necessitated by the evolution of ERM within our department. This is evident in the fact he is always willing to teach and reteach, as necessary, a new process or theory. He strongly advocates for us to take ownership of our ERM tasks and other work, which includes improving workflow by adapting whatever means are necessary to reach a specific outcome, developing a new spreadsheet or data tracking mechanism, starting a newsletter, serving on a committee, or attending a training webinar; he campaigns for our success. Without this freedom, enthusiasm would wane. Lack of enthusiasm, by any member, can diminish the success of the entire department.

Work within the Acquisitions Department, like all of our library's departments, is ever-changing. We are dealing with the reality of reduced staff and stagnant budgets as well as outdated technology. There is a never-ending learning curve, not to mention stressors outside of the workplace; however, the reality is that ERM workflow is complex but not unmanageable. Defining individual and departmental needs and goals is paramount. Without a clear vision, you cannot fully move forward. Once everyone is on board, as is currently the case in our department, full ownership and successful completion of duties can become a reality even when human and fiscal resources are limited.

Lessons Learned

Despite the challenges associated with incorporating ERM responsibilities into a traditionally print-based operation, success can be achieved with an inspired and determined team. We basically welcomed ERM with open arms, although there were a few bumps to address along the way. In hindsight, we felt that we were not given full ownership of various tasks early in the transition. This is not meant to be a mark against our supervisor, but considered to be more of a growing pain. With additional organizational changes regularly occurring within the library and department our supervisor had to learn to delegate, with confidence, various ERM tasks to us. We have all learned that once he was able to shift some responsibilities to us, it proved to be beneficial to everyone. Once we felt that our skills and job knowledge were valued, we eagerly took on the new tasks and made them our own. Being given ownership of a task can speak volumes for a paraprofessional's morale.

Our department is not perfect. The changes that are required in the ERM learning process can include some challenges.

- First, some aspects of ERM are harder to grasp than others. One reason causing a lack of understanding of a new concept or idea is that it is not fully explained at the introductory level. Often the individual teaching a new skill or concept forgets that the person being educated usually knows little to nothing about the subject being explained. With that in mind, teaching something new needs to start at its root; assume that the learner knows nothing and go from there. It is better to over-teach than to under-teach. After being introduced to something new, a student may become afraid if the basics are not fully understood. Being afraid can cause uncertainty and misunderstanding. Being fearful can

cause resistance to acceptance and implementation of something new. Without proper groundwork and guidance, avoidance and regression can be easier than making an attempt and failing.

- The second problem that can affect a paraprofessional's ability to grasp something new is the indiscriminate use of professional jargon, acronyms and buzzwords. In many instances, by the time someone hears a new word, phrase or acronym for the first time, the speaker already knows the definition and is comfortable with using it in a sentence to convey a thought. The use of new words, phrases or acronyms should be accompanied with an explanation when introducing new terminology. This may seem elementary, but failing to do so can cause great confusion.
- Third, it is crucial for a paraprofessional to feel trusted enough to be given full, unadulterated ownership when delegated a new task. If a supervisor holds on too tightly to a task, the paraprofessional may be confused as to the nature and extent of their responsibility. It is understandable during a training period that the supervisor retains some control. However, there comes a time when a supervisor needs to relinquish ownership knowing that the paraprofessional staff member will be ready and capable of undertaking a new responsibility.

Supervising Librarian Perspectives – Randy

As described in the previous column on this topic (Lowe, 2019), the approach I have taken to planning and decision-making throughout my professional life has been strongly influenced by

my experiences in athletics as both a distance runner and collegiate coach. A foundational principle in this management approach is while each individual is responsible for the outcome of his or her performance, the team as a whole cannot be successful without everyone's collective contributions. To ensure that team members are fully engaged, they must feel that they have a strong degree of ownership over their work, which includes being provided with training, support and guidance, but also knowing that they are empowered to make suggestions and that their feedback is valued in the operation of the department; regular dialogue is a critical element in this approach.

In following this management approach over the past two decades, I have striven to fulfill my role as supervisor and mentor by collaborating with my staff to establish realistic overarching objectives and set intermediate goals, creating individual plans with staff members so that their knowledge, skills, and abilities are directed in ways that best meet our shared objectives, and then working diligently to execute these plans in a manner that includes regular staff input and assessment of progress. I continued to apply this management approach as operational processes and staff roles and responsibilities were transformed to meet the requirements of a collection that was increasingly comprised of e-resources; this has been our department's greatest administrative challenge over the past ten years. So, how did I do? Did I follow through effectively in my intentions? Was I "intentional" enough? Based on the feedback of my staff as detailed above and my own reflections of my performance, I give myself a mixed grade, with positive and negative experiences and outcomes described in the following sections.

The Ort Library's E-Resources Operational Environment, 1998-2008

Frostburg began licensing and providing access to web-based e-resources in 1998, beginning with indexing and abstracting databases and followed shortly thereafter by full text journal article aggregators and reference subscriptions. I have been the librarian primarily responsible for managing the Ort Library's e-resources dating to this time period. During the first ten years, I conducted all ERM-related duties, including budgeting, license negotiation, procurement, subscription activation, and administration of user accessibility via web-based A-Z lists and management of link resolver and discovery service knowledgebases, as well as assessment.

I assumed my current position in 2007 overseeing the Acquisitions and Periodicals units while maintaining my ERM responsibilities. This placed me in a leadership position to execute the library's collection development initiatives to increase the representation of e-resources while simultaneously planning and implementing operational changes in these units to more effectively disseminate ERM job duties among the four paraprofessionals that comprised the staff. We conducted a survey of teaching faculty in 2007-2008 to evaluate periodical and monographic standing order subscriptions to determine which should be migrated to online format, which should be cancelled, and what new titles should be considered to better meet University curricular, programmatic and research needs. The committee that designed and executed the survey included acquisitions and periodicals paraprofessionals, making them stakeholders in the collection development decisions that were being implemented. This placed them in a better position to be full partners in creating new operational processes for managing these e-resources within our unit; however, it was when these processes began to be implemented that underlying challenges and additional environmental pressures presented themselves.

Objectives, Training, Inclusion... and Empowerment? – 2008-2019

Early in the process I informed and discussed with staff members the considerable impact that the intentional migration of library materials budget expenditures from physical formats to e-resources would have on operations. This included addressing changes that they could expect in their responsibilities over time and setting objectives for incorporating ERM tasks into their primary job duties as appropriate. I also invested significant time and effort into evaluating processes and developing initial sets of procedures to utilize in setting expectations for new job responsibilities and to assist in providing training in ERM functions such as activation and cancellation of subscriptions, regular verification of access to procured content, and management of link resolver services, among others. I followed my management philosophy of providing clear objectives, benchmarks, training, and staff inclusion throughout the process of making these changes with the expectation that the staff members would feel empowered to take ownership of their new duties and begin to suggest and make workflow improvements that would enhance our operations, just as they had always done in working with our print, microform and other physical resources.

Two environmental factors created obstacles to meeting my expectations, thus prolonging the process to more effectively disseminate ERM duties among staff members by what ended up being several years. First, two long-term employees were quite slow to accept, let alone embrace, that e-resources were becoming the dominant format in the library's collection. As a result, I continued fulfilling many ERM responsibilities such as link resolver and discovery knowledgebase management and activation/de-activation tasks related to subscription changes. This had the unfortunate effect of continuing to foster the impression that "Randy takes care of e-

resources” – an impression easily reinforced since I was the first librarian to fulfill these responsibilities in our library as described above.

Second, the library lost as many as eight positions during this period, primarily due to retirements, including the two aforementioned long-term staff members in my department. While these retirements provided opportunities for us to move forward with more effectively redistributing ERM duties, I was simultaneously presented with the task of reorganizing all operations within the department with less people as each staff member retired. This resulted in us further delaying our objectives related to improving ERM processes and workflow.

Changing Course, 2019 to the Present

When we became a three-person department following the second staff retirement in 2019, we were finally in a position to move forward with operational changes that included ERM functions as the environmental factors preventing change, as described above, had diminished. Beginning in January 2019, I provided Nancy and Emily with training in link resolver management, content activation, and the other ERM duties they would assume, but still found that they were not as quickly taking ownership of these tasks as with those in our traditional print operations. I became concerned about a possible return of the deleterious environmental factors that prevented change in the past, perhaps leading to further setbacks in meeting our objectives.

For example, I found myself sending out lists of tasks to complete each time we repeated a cycle such as activating new subscriptions, rather than staff taking the initiative. Upon observation throughout the year, I surmised two things were occurring from my perspective: (1) staff were

prioritizing print operations, perhaps because it was more familiar and comfortable to them, and (2) more importantly, while I provided training on tools and basic functions, I failed to set clear enough expectations that the specific e-resources management tasks in which staff were trained were now not only an integral part of their job responsibilities, but also the priority over print resources in most cases. I was assuming staff would take to ERM work in the same manner they did for traditional print operations (training, inclusion, and empowerment leading to quick ownership of processes). The primary lesson I learned was *don't assume – discuss, and discuss often.*

We addressed these concerns during frank discussions in staff meetings in December 2019 and January 2020 where I explained that the ERM tasks upon which they were trained were now part of their primary duties and a daily priority. Nancy's and Emily's reaction to this and the ensuing discussion made it clear to me that I had not laid out these expectations clearly or effectively. After redefining these expectations, our conversation become more constructive, turning to what support they needed. Nancy and Emily immediately made it clear that an outline or flowchart of tasks for which each of us had responsibility was needed. I drafted this and shared it with them, and with some further clarification and discussion we hit the reset button.

From this point forward, Nancy and Emily did a wonderful job taking on these responsibilities. In just a matter of a month we had caught up on e-journal subscription verification maintenance, a task that had lagged for years. Subscription activation and deactivation tasks are now also being handled more independently by both of them. Not only are Nancy and Emily now working more independently, but they have quickly moved to taking ownership of their tasks,

asking questions and offering suggestions to improve the effectiveness of departmental ERM operations, as well as beginning to document changed procedures.

Lessons Learned

While I believe in my inclusion-to-ownership management approach, this is a case where I did not adhere to all of its tenets. I did not as effectively set *clear objectives and expectations* in regard to the assumption of ERM duties by my staff as I did with the public-facing and faculty inclusion elements of our move to intentionally increase the representation of e-resources in the library's collection. In my defense, I think we did a better job of this in our other departmental reorganization efforts for non-ERM functions, such as incorporation of traditional periodicals maintenance and processing into the Acquisitions team, all resulting from staff reductions due to retirements. Overall, we effectively met our benchmarks and objectives in collection development as well as adjusted to a new reality of operating with half the staff, but something can get lost with so many balls in the air – intentionality regarding ERM roles and responsibilities for paraprofessional staff in this case.

A Final Word from Nancy and Emily

ERM will continue to evolve in our department, as will the roles that librarians and paraprofessionals play in the process. For example, we are in the early stages of implementing an Electronic Resources Management System (ERMS) with integrated workflow. It is our hope that this tool will provide the necessary ERM capabilities that our current library management system lacks. Paraprofessional staff members may not have all the skills or always be psychologically ready to adapt to every change like this right away. Having a committed and

determined team will always be beneficial. Providing a supportive environment conducive to learning will help your team come out on top. Never quit learning. Never quit teaching. And remember ownership is a paraprofessional's key to success (pièce de résistance).

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