The Melbourne Collection Evaluation Project

Stephen Connelly

I am very grateful to the conference committee for inviting me to speak on the subject of the MCD libraries evaluation project. The invitation came at just the right point for the project committee as we were struggling to finalise the publication of our results. It gave us a deadline to work to, and an opportunity to mark the end of our project in a memorable kind of way.

I am also very grateful to Lawrence McIntosh for agreeing to take part in this presentation. His knowledge and experience was enormously helpful to us throughout the early and middle stages of the project. I think it is fair to say that we wouldn't have been able to achieve as much as we have done without him. On the other hand he shouldn't be blamed in the least for any deficiencies in the management of the project or in the quality of the results that we achieved. I think on the whole we feel proud of what we have achieved. But we know there are imperfections as well. Anyway, they were our doing, not Lawrence's.

The "we" in this presentation is the group now known as LIAM - the Librarians of Institutions Associated with the Melbourne College of Divinity, which was formed as a special interest group of the Victorian Chapter of the Association in late 1997 just after the MCD began a major review of its goals, structures and programmes. There are twelve libraries represented at our meetings. Eleven of them took part in the evaluation project. We have had a practical focus from the beginning of our existence; that is, a focus on what together we could be doing better. So the idea of a collaborative evaluation project was an obvious thing for us to address.

To some extent we took advantage of the existence of the review I have just mentioned because it made it more likely that the College would support a major library project. So we applied for a grant, got it and were underway.

The MCD gave us exactly what we applied for - $4000. In the end this was enough to support the project through to fruition. However most of the labour costs involved were covered by the individual institutions, so the actual cost of the project must have been much higher. I could only guess at the actual cost of the project.

I wrote some notes for the *ANZTLA Newsletter* by way of a progress report on the project in May last year. At that stage we had passed through Stage One of the project's three stages, and had entered upon the longest and most laborious second stage. The first stage was a work shop which we organised for a number of reasons: to explain to the institutions what we were going to try to do, to reach agreement on some of the operational issues that required a choice of some sort to be made, to train those who would be involved and, ultimately, to shore up support for the exercise. In the second stage individual libraries evaluated their collections according to project guidelines.

In the third and final stage of the project we were concerned with the publication of the results. Economic considerations made us aware of the importance of identifying the potential users of any reports we produced and in which bits of information different categories of users would be more interested. So we decided to publish our results in three separate undertakings or programmes:

1. **A book.** Theological Library Resources in the Melbourne College of Divinity has recently been published. It includes the collection policies of all of the libraries that took part in the project with an introductory overview.
2. **A website.** This is now available at: www.ormond.unimelb.edu.au/jtl/mcd. Here you will be able to find current editions of library collection policies and tables of their conspectus results.
3. **The Australian Libraries Gateway** (www.nla.gov.au/libraries)

I would like to end this presentation with some reflections on the question of whether anything has changed as a result of our project and, in particular, whether there have been any benefits.

It is probably too early to answer this with any confidence. I think it would be very useful for the group to organise a formal review of the exercise, say at the end of the year when there may have been adequate opportunity for some of the evaluations to have become known, and when we ourselves have had a chance to look critically at the reports. It would be sensible for us to talk to library stakeholders in such a follow up exercise.

However, let me make some predictions.
1. Those who did the exercise will develop a better idea of their collections than they had before.
2. Collection development thinking and practice in some libraries will improve.
3. Some libraries will direct some amount of purchasing into areas that might otherwise have been neglected. There will be quite significant purchases made which would not have been made before.
4. There will be more awareness of the library and its collections on the boards and governing committees of the institutions concerned.
5. Some of the librarians concerned will be recognised for having done a good job in an important undertaking by important people in their institutions. That couldn't be a bad thing either for the librarians or their libraries.
6. There will be many people who will develop a strengthened understanding of the resources available for theological research in Melbourne. Some of these will be higher degree students who really need to know about the diversity of resources available through the network, and the strengths and weaknesses in collections.

I believe it was the hope of the library consortia that initially promoted the conspectus methodology and objectives to create the underpinning for the sort of thing that became known in Australia as the distributed national collection. So it was expected that as the number of completed conspectuses multiplied, so too would the number of interlibrary agreements on collection development issues.

I understand these hopes have been largely disappointed, and it would be surprising if LIAM libraries did anything distinctive in this regard. However, I think changes will probably occur in both the amount and the quality of discussion about collection issues at LIAM meetings once our group of libraries attend to the content of our reports.

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