
Maximum Hours and Minimal Staffing

What Is a Small Library to Do?

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ABSTRACT Three directors of theological libraries at small institutions discussed the challenges they face that appear particular to their libraries. Participants in the conversation group were then invited to share their own challenges and compare them with those of others to see how common or unusual such challenges may be in the world of theological libraries.

INTRODUCTION

The small library has long been commonplace in ATLA and the world of theological libraries, but these libraries are not necessarily small in every respect. As you will hear from our introductions, although we have a small, mostly residential patron base and an accordingly small staff, we have generous hours, and our collections can be larger than those of bigger and broader academic institutions. This creates a special set of challenges. We will briefly share our own experiences with this, but we encourage you to explore with one another ways to manage the challenge of a library small in staff but large in content and operating hours. We will categorize these challenges into security, technology, and staffing.

PROCESS

Prior to the convening of the conversation group, the facilitators met on a monthly basis via web conference to share stories about their libraries and to work toward the development of a framework for a discussion with a larger group on the topic. They followed an agenda each day:

5-10 minutes: Introduction of us, our institutions, a challenge we face, and the structure through designated facets of security, technology, and staffing

4-6 minutes: Ask people to pair up and discuss their list of challenges

5-9 minutes: Ask pairs to join one other pair and compare lists

15-20 minutes: Ask each of the foursomes to identify their challenges

Remaining time: Discuss how these issues are addressed in our libraries (some problems will already have been addressed at other institutions)

Facilitator Introductions and Challenges

David Kriegh

(St. Patrick's Seminary & University, Menlo Park, California)

St. Patrick's is a Roman Catholic diocesan seminary run by the Archdiocese of San Francisco and receives seminarians from around ten dioceses in the United States plus Guam and South Korea. Our enrollment last year was 57 but has been as high as 114 just a few years ago. Our library staff has also dropped to 2.5 FTE, and we rely on student work-study to maintain evening and Sunday hours. The primary challenge to the library is the casual culture, which makes policies and procedures difficult to formulate and enforce.

SECURITY All residents of the seminary carry keys to the building, so our posted hours are for those outside the community. We are open to the public but not a public library. Facilities may be slow to correct potential hazards such as a door that will not shut properly. As we are a part of the main seminary building, there are nine different entrances to the library, so no security system is feasible. It would be akin to arming a single room in a house.

TECHNOLOGY Our library still uses the card catalog as the primary point of access for about half the collection. Even though many patrons

don't know how to use it, they seem to show concern that we may throw it away in the future. We moved to a modern ILS with a discovery layer for patrons, but some still want to fill out check-out cards and feel certain processes like hold requests are unusually complex for an institution of our size.

STAFFING As we do not currently offer self-checkout due to many books not being in the OPAC, we rely on having staff or work-study present for extensive hours to allow patrons to take books. This can result in patrons taking materials out of the library without checking them out, which they do not view as theft since they plan to return the materials eventually. However, our small staff is generally cross-trained well enough that patrons need not worry about the person they need being absent. Our library assistant can handle most patron needs, and the librarians don't mind doing basic circulation and book processing and even sometimes shelving to move things along.

Derek Rieckens

(St. Michael's Abbey, Orange County, California)

St. Michael's is a community of Norbertine canons. The Norbertines are a Catholic religious order with a quasi-monastic lifestyle: They live in community, but they perform a lot of pastoral ministry outside the abbey. There are about eighty canons, including about fifty priests and thirty seminarians. Some of the coursework for seminarians takes place onsite, but the abbey is not a degree-granting institution. The Norbertines also run a boys' high school onsite, with about sixty students. The library must therefore serve the pastoral needs of the priests, the formational needs of the seminarians, and the academic needs of the students. In the future, it will also be open to outside researchers.

TECHNOLOGY The collection has never been cataloged. Borrowing is self-serve and untraceable. I am in the process of changing all this by introducing automation: I have about 10% of the collection cataloged, and I am deploying the abbey's first-ever ILS. But even once we are automated, circulation will have to remain self-serve due to limited staffing hours, so the challenge will be to induce the community to make use of a self-check kiosk after sixty years with no formal circulation policy.

STAFFING I am it. Prior to my hiring, two years ago, the abbey had never had an actual librarian before. All the standard library functions, such as cataloging, circulation, and collection development, have never before had professional oversight, and so it is up to one person to put it all in place.

SECURITY For the canons, the abbey is not their school; it is their home. Access to the library is correspondingly casual. The library is locked for a good portion of the day, and prep student access is limited to certain hours, but the canons can use a key at any time. There is also a trickle of guests who may be permitted into the library. Special collections have no additional security layer. But to conclude on a hopeful note, we have a whole new campus under construction, which gives me the chance to ensure that the new library will have more security features, such as a locked place for rare books and EM gates. Until then, security depends mainly on trusting in the honesty of the community and the obscurity of our location.

Stephen Sweeney

(St. John Vianney Seminary, Denver, Colorado)

We have two houses of priestly formation forming men to be ordained Catholic priests from fifteen dioceses, mostly regional but three international (Vietnam, Uganda, and Myanmar): St. John Vianney (SJV) and Redemptoris Mater House of Formation. They both share the intellectual formation provided by SJV.

SECURITY: All seminarians have keys, so our posted hours are for those outside the community (the public). The facilities department is usually pretty responsive to our requests, especially if the request addresses a risk. We share our campus with the management corporation of the Archdiocese of Denver, so we only have one “official” entrance, but facilities and others have keys to the other entry points.

TECHNOLOGY: I was appointed Director of the Library in 2010, and since that time we have performed three inventories: 2013, 2015, and 2017, with our next one scheduled for the summer of 2019. Our collections have been fully cataloged and are almost entirely available through OCLC’s WMS; this process of retrospective conversion finished in 2011.

STAFFING: Our small staff is cross-trained well enough that patrons need not worry about the person with whom they choose to interact. Including myself, our FTE is 3.5, and we only have posted open hours to the non-seminary public thirty hours per week. We also have a dedicated group of volunteers, but there are, of course, the challenges that come with managing volunteers. Right now, we are working on volunteer job descriptions. We have regular volunteer/staff appreciation events, and they really help close the gap between where our service would be at 3.5 FTE and where they enable us to be with their service.

CONVERSATION

In the ensuing discussion, the following points were brought up among the attendees:

- One attendee appreciated knowing that they weren't alone in dealing with minimal staffing and shared that they were coping with a recent drastic staffing cut. Another expressed interest in collaborative approaches to staffing.
- Three attendees expressed interest in the role that regular inventories of the collection can play in quantitatively measuring losses to the collection.
- It was also raised that the session was a good forum for airing problems, but that more exploration toward finding solutions would have been beneficial. Another felt that some of the problems shared by the facilitators' libraries were more common among libraries in general and not unique to small theological libraries.

CONCLUSION

Based on the feedback received from the attendees, this conversation group primarily helped other members of the theological library community realize that their problems are not unique and they are not alone. The facilitators hope that this conversation group will serve as a starting point for future discussions on how to convert the problems faced by small theological libraries into solutions based on best practices reached through collaborative networks.