
CONVERSATION GROUPS

“How Do You Do That?”

Theological & Religious Studies Collection
Development

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ABSTRACT The conversation group session was grounded in research conducted in December 2019 and January 2020, which investigated collection development trends of theological and religious studies librarians responsible for purchasing materials for their libraries located in the United States and Canada. After briefly introducing the details of how the research was conducted and key findings, the presenters facilitated guided discussion among attendees. Prior to the conference session, the presenters pre-populated a Padlet (an online, editable platform) with questions to which small groups of conference attendees could respond. These questions centered on collection development practices and the platform created a space for attendee responses to “live” in perpetuity, functioning also as a snapshot of the collection development trends that conference attendees embody.

INTRODUCTION

This conversation group centered on collection development trends of theological and religious studies collection development. Results from the presenters’ research study, conducted over December 2019 and January 2020, functioned to provide background to conference

attendees as they considered their own collection development practices and learned from their colleagues' experiences. Discussion through small groups was captured through a Padlet—a web-based platform resembling a bulletin board—where participants could respond to questions posed by the presenters and also comment on others' responses.

RESEARCH STUDY

Demographics

By means of introducing the research study, and also for the purpose of becoming familiar with conference attendees, the facilitators asked attendees to answer a few of the same demographic questions that study participants had answered. Attendees were polled at the beginning of the meeting, asking them to respond to which career stage they find themselves in, what kind of institution they are employed by (public, seminary, etc.), their total institutional enrollment, and if their institution is affiliated with a Christian denomination. Conference attendees represented a variety of career stages and were primarily from seminary or divinity school settings with enrollments of less than 1,000. Additionally, a majority of their institutions were affiliated with a Christian denomination. Conversation group attendee responses mirrored responses from survey participants in several areas. Presenters shared the poll results live and then described the demographics of study participants.

The presenters recruited 86 librarians for the research study by emailing Atlantis and Association of Research Libraries member librarians who focused on religious studies or theology. Nearly half of those who responded identified as either late career or nearing retirement, and most respondents indicated that they are employed at institutions with less than 1,000 students. Thirty-nine respondents, nearly half of those who answered this question, identified as either advanced career or nearing retirement, and most respondents ($n=26$) reported a total institutional enrollment (including undergraduates and graduates) as less than 1,000 students. A slight majority of respondents identified their institutional affiliation as a public university or college ($n=22$), yet 21 respondents identified that they are employed at a stand-alone seminary. The researchers also asked participants to identify if they work at a religiously affiliated institu-

tion. Forty-four respondents indicated that they did, and all but two work at institutions affiliated with Christianity. The two who did not identified their institutions as inter-religious.

Major Findings

Participants responded to a survey which contained up to 22 questions (where some questions were based on branch logic and no questions were required, so not all 86 participants answered every question) within a 3.5 week period spanning December 2019 and January 2020. Major findings gathered across these questions were presented to conference participants as belonging to three major areas: collection development funding, the use of acquisitions tools such as OASIS or GOBI, and methods for developing the collection.

Collection Development Funding

In an age when we hear about rising costs, especially of subscriptions and licenses, the researchers were surprised to see that a total of 61 respondents answered that yes, the collections budget they

Institution type and Question 6: "Does the budget you receive satisfy the needs of religious studies or theology faculty & students at your institution?"

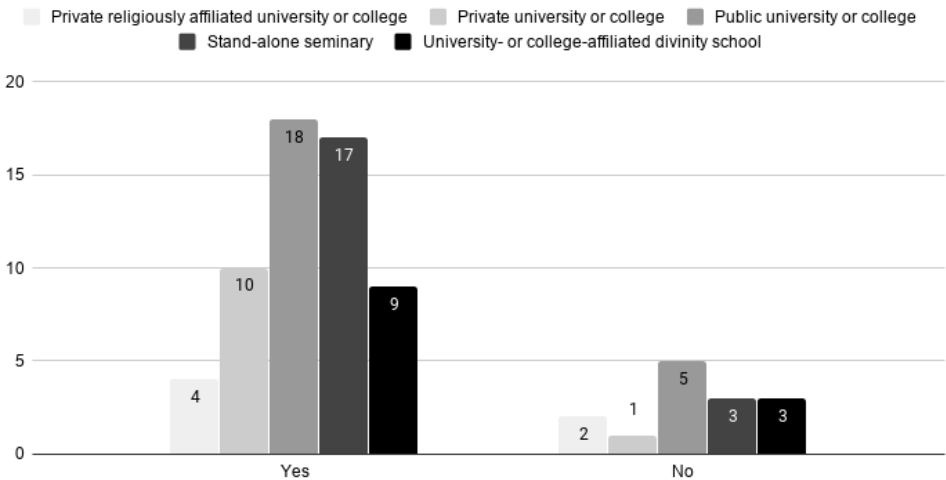


FIGURE 1: Responses to question #6 ("Does the budget you receive satisfy the needs of religious studies or theology faculty & students at your institution?") by institution type. Note that the authors removed responses from those who identified as from "Other" institutions. These responses totaled six where three survey respondents chose "yes" and three chose "no."

receive satisfies the needs of religious studies or theology faculty and students at their institution. However, through open comments, sixteen of these individuals indicated that they would buy more materials if they could. Seventeen respondents indicated that no, their budget does not satisfy needs.

Conference attendees also seemed surprised that the majority of survey respondents effectively had enough funding to satisfy patron needs. As this result about budget satisfaction was presented, a conversation group attendee asked “So, were these more public institutions that were satisfied with budget?” The researchers did not have an answer to that question immediately, but reviewed the data after the conference and discovered that, although public institutions did report the most satisfaction across institution type (n=18), many respondents who reported affiliation with stand-alone seminaries were also satisfied with their budgets (n=17) (See figure 1).

Contemporary Acquisitions Tools

The researchers asked survey participants to choose from a list and identify how they gather ideas for materials to purchase. On this list was the option “Reviewing titles that match a pre-established profile through an acquisitions portal (e.g., Proquest OASIS, GOBI).” For those who did not choose this option, indicating that they did not use acquisitions tools, they were asked what prevents them from using such tools. Forty responses were collected and several themes arose. Notably, eight respondents did not see a need to use these tools, six said that using these tools was not worth it (that they are a hassle to set up, they add an unnecessary layer to their practice, etc.), and four said they do not have time to get familiar with these tools.

Collection Development Methods

The main goal of the study was to identify trends in collection development practices among theological and religious studies librarians in the United States and Canada. To this end, the researchers asked three distinct questions asking participants to indicate what collection development methods they use. Survey questions included:

- An open-ended question about the primary method by which librarians discover relevant materials to purchase
- A multiple response question about ways in which librarians gather ideas about acquiring physical materials

- A multiple response question about ways in which librarians gather ideas about acquiring digital materials

Overall, the most common method for gathering ideas is reviewing print catalogs, something by which the researchers were surprised. In an age of such technological advancement and online portals of vast amounts of information, responses indicate that the print catalog is classic and timeless. Additionally, despite the challenges of using acquisitions portals that some experience, using tools like GOBI or OASIS was the second most popular collection development method.

Faculty recommendations constituted the primary collection development method reported in the open-ended question, but it happens to be the lowest practice identified overall. The researchers neglected to include “patron recommendations” as an option in the list of responses for questions about physical and digital materials. On the other hand, only one person mentioned that they review syllabi to gather purchase ideas in the open-ended question, but many more chose that option from the list of responses for the questions about acquiring physical and digital materials.

CONVERSATION IN SMALL GROUPS

Prior to splitting participants into breakout rooms, the conversation group facilitators shared a link to a Padlet—a web-based platform resembling a bulletin board—where participants could respond to questions posed by the presenters and comment on others’ responses. The Padlet is accessible to conference attendees (and readers of the *Proceedings*) beyond the annual conference at padlet.com/megan_welsh/Atla2020CollectionDevelopment. The presenters asked attendees to open the Padlet, review the questions the presenters had posted prior to the session, discuss answers as a small group, and add these to the Padlet. A total of 53 responses were recorded, with many attendees liking responses that others had contributed (likes are represented by a heart icon underneath each response). Participants indicated that the Padlet was easy to use, resulting in a productive conversation. Additionally, participants expressed their gratitude for being introduced to Padlet as it is a helpful platform that they would consider using in the future.

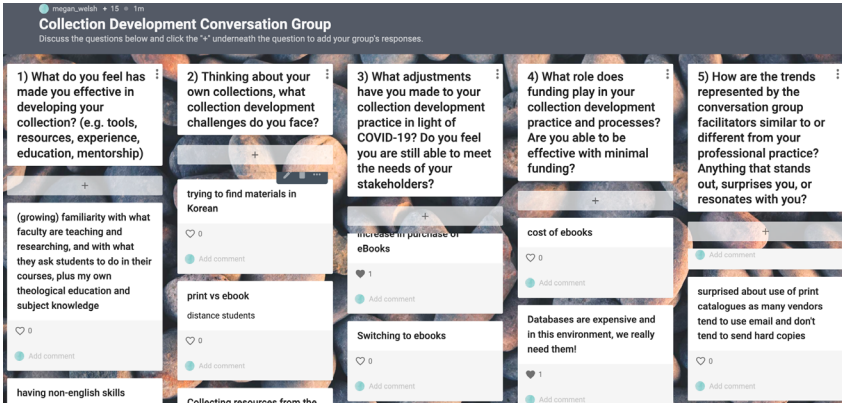


FIGURE 2: Screenshot of the Padlet with question prompts and attendee responses.

Padlet Instructions

In order to maximize the amount of input and quality of participation, attendees were divided into breakout rooms of six persons or less. Each breakout group was asked to add highlights from their conversation to a Padlet prepared for the discussion group as a whole. The Padlet contained six discussion prompts relating to collection development trends and practices, with special attention given to adjustments which have had to be made in light of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. These prompts were represented by six columns in the padlet and groups were asked to add main points from their conversation underneath their respective questions' columns.

Participants were asked to respond to the following prompts:

- 1) What do you feel has made you effective in developing your collection? (e.g. tools, resources, experience, education, mentorship)
- 2) Thinking about your own collections, what collection development challenges do you face?
- 3) What adjustments have you made to your collection development practice in light of COVID-19? Do you feel you are still able to meet the needs of your stakeholders?
- 4) What role does funding play in your collection development practice and processes? Are you able to be effective with minimal funding?

- 5) How are the trends represented by the conversation group facilitators similar to or different from your professional practice? Anything that stands out, surprises you, or resonates with you?
- 6) How can Atla members provide support for one another to satisfy collection development needs and overcome challenges?

Conversation Summary

Conference participants found the most success in their collection development when maintaining close relationships with faculty. This includes maintaining familiarity with course assignments and faculty research. Some respondents also noted making use of collection development tools, such as GOBI, and periodic surveys of faculty needs.

Hurdles encountered in the cost and functionality of e-books and databases was a refrain across nearly all points of discussion. The onset of SARS-CoV-2 appears to have only exacerbated existing pressure to invest in digital resources, including e-books, databases, journal subscriptions, and streaming services. Some participants found it difficult to advance their collections when a majority of their current budget needed to go to buying electronic versions of physical materials already in the collection. Furthermore, some participants expressed frustration with the licensing limitations of certain e-books, such as user limits. Looking ahead from adaptations that have had to be made in light of COVID-19, one participant noted that the current focus on e-book purchases may be one that is unlikely to subside in the near future:

A vast majority of the books we have purchased this year are e-books, though I do wonder if this moment represents a watershed, in that more faculty will have had experience with online teaching and it may be the norm for some time to come as the pandemic continues.

Reflecting on ways that Atla members can support each other to address challenges in collection development, respondents emphasized the importance of interlibrary loan. Along those lines, respondents suggested that Atla members invest in DRM-free e-books that can be loaned and that regional groups be created to enable reciprocal borrowing outside of OCLC. Additionally, respondents suggested that Atla create a collection development interest group as well as

make the special collections holdings of member libraries accessible to the association as a whole. Lastly, one respondent recommended that Atla invest in publishing more book reviews so that librarians can better evaluate potential purchases.

CONCLUSION

Grounded in research representing themes identified from religious studies and theological librarians across the United States and Canada, conference participants were able to engage in a thoughtful discussion across geographical and institutional categories. Hopefully more discussions of this nature happen in future conferences, especially as the effects of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic are felt in the years to come.