

How to Easily Improve Real Access to All Aspects of Your Collection

Beyond Vendor Cataloging

When I decided to leave my position at an automation vendor to become a library media specialist, I was startled first by the sheer number of calls from salespeople that library media specialists have to field. Then, as I began to actually listen to the salespeople, I was shocked by what many of them obviously believed to be their most enticing lure—free MARC catalog records. The records were often displayed side-by-side with bare-bones CIP data. While the vendor-supplied records were more complex, it didn't mean that their access points would be useful for my high school students.

I know that technical service work is not everyone's cup of tea, and that, particularly for library media specialists coming from the classroom, working with the record at the MARC level might seem unnecessary. However, I felt that cataloging, like selection and even shelving, was an essential element of being a library generalist, which was how I chose to approach my role as a solo library media specialist in a school. The idea of shelf-ready processing scared me; how was I to know what I was adding to the collection without the added dimension of analysis and description? As I began to get familiar with the electronic representation of my collection, I was surprised to realize the skeletal quality of the existing records, many of which were obviously the result of an initial automation in 1994. I had a sizeable amount of nonfiction lacking



By Wendy Stephens

any unique numbers to serve as a match point, with description limited to author, title, and number of pages—often with

incorrect call numbers. These books were almost as useless as the old set of the Code of Alabama, brought in to fill up shelf space when the new library media center was constructed in 2001.

The retrospective catalog situation was less than could be desired. While I wasn't foolhardy enough to want to wrangle with all of the relatively few bibliographic records (9,000) in our database, I knew that improved technical services would lead to improved patron services, and I immediately began to assess our priorities.

The Collection as (Not) Represented in the Catalog

Partly because of our school's involvement with the Alabama Reading Initiative, serving as a demonstration site for secondary

literacy, our library media center is well used for a school of its size, and about a third of our fiction is routinely checked out. In my second year, the state legislature eliminated all library media center funding. Because our school community has begun to shift from rural to suburban, and has grown almost exponentially, the collection simply had not kept pace. Our number of books per student was particularly low: about nine titles per student.

Catalog Enrichment Based on Usage

I ran up immediately against the questions of information quality and quantity, perhaps amplified by digital technologies. And while there are wonderfully illustrated nonfiction titles on every available subject,

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a Western Civilization overview of European history might include more than enough on “the Plague” or “the Enlightenment in France.” Few students these days seem to have the time or the attention span to plow through an entire volume on any topic, no matter how thrilling. There had to be a way to connect students to the information available—particularly quality information—but in the smaller, page-sized amounts they were used to pulling off the Web.

Many of the individuals who formed the basis of subject-area Black History Month projects were lurking unfindable in the collection. To remedy the problem, we added 500-field notes, and my first large-scale enrichment project involved the 920-collective biographies, particularly the many glossy century-end profiles donated to the library media center. I pulled more volumes with potential and was able to increase the findability of these works. The student assistants helping with data input surprised me with savvy questions about diacritics and the size limitation of particular fields in our Athena™ automated system. Because Athena, like many products geared toward library media centers, allows graphical as well as MARC-level manipulation, this approach would work for library media specialists with minimal technical services expertise.

Now, online catalog searches will turn up those titles for students and act as a pointer for both myself and my top-notch paraprofessional aide. I have begun to add free-text 500 notes in response to reference questions. After all, what is the good of knowing that Alice Walker wrote about Zora Neale Hurston in *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* if I can't share that information with the students? I am ensuring that my own knowledge becomes a part of the institutional memory through cataloging. The increased access points ultimately result in more student engagement with the collection and higher circulation figures.

Adding to the Collection and the Catalog

When I came to Buckhorn, service to my school community was compromised by access issues of the sort that only a long-term library media specialist with an excellent

memory could supplant. Now, the library media center catalog has begun to reflect our collection accurately enough that students can come to the catalog for tangible, superior information sources before they turn to Google™. I model searching Athena whenever I get the chance, and am pleasantly surprised by how often I find the catalog search interface up on the PCs in the library media center.

While I will miss one selling point of the better vendor-provided catalog

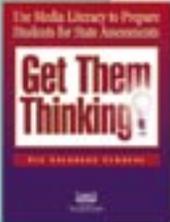
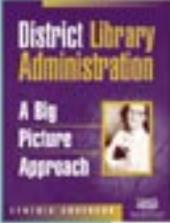
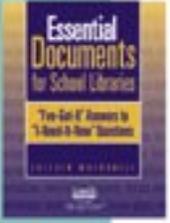
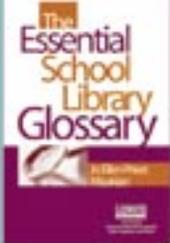
records—having a comprehensive list of periodicals that had reviewed a particular title at your fingertips in the 520 field—I could easily find this information myself for any newer title in our state-provided electronic databases. Even though our state legislature restored library media center funding this year, I am spending my limited funds on adding new materials instead of merely adding to the catalog. ■

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