

Review of ‘The Small and Rural Academic Library: Leveraging Resources and Overcoming Limitations’

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Abstract: Review of Kendrick, K. D., & Tritt, D. (Eds.). (2016). *The small and rural academic library: leveraging resources and overcoming limitations*. Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association.

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[Editor's Note: the reviewer acknowledges a previous professional relationship with an editor of this book.]

One of the disadvantages to a series of chapters written around a central theme and presented as a monograph, is the difficulty of delivering a cohesive and on-message body of work written with an engaging voice. This work has been very successful in achieving this standard. The editors have a clear vision of the book they wish to present and there is evidence that they applied a very clear rubric to achieve this vision. This rubric consists of:

- A clear statement that the editors chose contributors whose libraries clearly met the Carnegie Classification Size and Setting Definitions. As evidence, all authors gave background information on their libraries, stating the full-time enrollment at their institution, the numbers of full time employees-both librarians and paraprofessionals- and the numbers of part-time employees – both paraprofessionals and students.
- Section headings that clearly defined the major themes of concern to small academic libraries: library and outreach services; human resources and professional development; planning; instruction; and development.
- Article length. Articles were capped at a length of 20 pages including appendices or resource lists. This compelled the authors to clearly and quickly define their problems, how their problems were addressed in the literature, and what methodology or program supplied a solution. The reader can appreciate clear concise prose that is not weighted down by unnecessary detail.
- The authority of the authors. The majority of the authors' biographies reveal that each has a job title that designates responsibility for a key department or service. Some biographies show that authors have additional areas of responsibility as well as their primary role. The authors' biographies also indicate that they have sufficient years of experience to

comment on the problems in the small academic library environment. In other words, their advice is valuable because they've "walked the walk." The experience of the authors enables the editors to achieve one of their stated goals, that this book "[act] as a...handbook on matters of human resources and management concerns that are unique to LIS professionals and paraprofessionals who serve at small campuses and in rural communities.(p. xiii)"

- Each chapter intends to focus on real problems and practical solutions, not theoretical constructs.

Introductions to chapters could be streamlined to make the content more precise. The editors state the parameters of the challenges for small academic libraries in their introduction. Almost all libraries face inadequate resource for their missions, insufficient staff, limited materials and facilities budgets, and oversized expectations from our administrations and users. It is, therefore, redundant and frankly a bit irritating to have these issues referenced again and again. This repetition could create a negative impression of small libraries, leaving one to question why dynamic librarians would work there. An interview article discussing the advantages of working in this environment, and what the practitioner enjoys about the work environment would offset the continued repetition of the negatives.

The chapters based on interviews, rather than a process of literature review, description and discussion, could profit by including more specific examples. For example, in a chapter about the value of local professional organizations, the interview outlined the organizational roles that the librarian had within in the organization. Rather than listing the role of webmaster and moving forward, it would have been useful for the librarian to specifically state the skill set that she developed, along with concrete examples of later instances where the skills learned through

participating in professional organizations gave the librarian an advantage in solving on-the-job problems or meeting new opportunities. Rather than generalized answers to the questions, the interviews would have benefited from more narrative along personal insight. These particular chapters ranged in length from three to five pages. A longer length would allow the interviewer to ask clarifying or additional questions to expand on interview themes.

If the value of the book can be assessed using the measurement of percentage of text highlighted, every chapter contained something of value. Nevertheless, certain chapters did present some radically different ideas.

“Technology triage: Assessing and managing library systems and projects” adopted the medical triage model to assess the information environment and to prioritize problems with a more intuitive framework. A clearer conceptualization helps craft the steps needed for implementing solutions, an improvement on the traditional Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats (SWOT) model. While the triage model was applied specifically to library technology management, the model could be used to grapple successfully with other areas. As an added bonus for those most concerned with library technology management who must self-teach needed skills to master their challenges, there is a resource list which provides pointers to trusted sites for necessary knowledge and skills training.

Chapter 8, “Let’s be direct about information literacy assessment: Using quick writes to gather authentic evidence of student learning” covers known ground on assessment and evaluation. The value in addressing these issues is the author’s definition of the difference between assessment and evaluation and the importance of each. Quick Write techniques have also been discussed in the literature. For these the author advocates for a more nuanced, and engaging rubric for this type of exercise.

Rather than examine succession planning in its traditional application to library leadership roles, “Succession planning at a small academic library” presents succession planning as a tool that can be deployed to maintain effective library services, in spite of cuts in workforce and budgeting and a rising reliance on outsourcing.

The chapter offers very clear graphics which aid the reader in understanding the changes in staffing and workflow sustained by the technical services department of the Ralph Pickard Bell Library. In planning for reorganization through attrition rather than layoffs, management controlled the pace of change while maintaining a good relationship with the staff's labor union. However, those graphics indicate that the remaining employees whose positions assume new duties would be eventually overwhelmed by responsibilities. The underlying assumption that further staffing cuts will continue to be part of the technical services environment will be, at some point, an area for contention between management and the union. The author addresses the “more with less” philosophy that is applied too readily in libraries and disputes it. It is inferred that management will need to adapt expectations to accommodate the resulting workflows. Amazingly, the author finds a silver lining to acquisition budget cuts, that operating with smaller staff is achievable due to the reduced volume of new materials. This allows existing services to continue to thrive despite staff cuts.

This compilation of work also raises awareness about the lack of literature to address the needs and environment of small libraries. Quick checks in databases evidence that this observation has merit. By identifying a lack of literature, other colleagues may be encouraged to craft research and case studies to increase the contributions on small libraries to the literature. One hopes this book will attain a wide readership. While small libraries routinely look at innovations in large libraries and scale them down, this writer doubts that larger libraries look at

small libraries' innovations and scale them up. Encouraging a cross-pollination of ideas between the classes of libraries could alter the perception that large libraries are elitist. Conversely, altering a perception that small libraries do not foster a culture of research is also one that needs reforming. This book reminds the profession of its common challenges -- the difference is in the scale.