

Academic BRASS

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How to educate yourself as a business librarian when you didn't think you'd be one...

In my first position after library school I found myself unexpectedly asked to be the liaison to the Business Administration and Economics departments at a liberal arts college. I have no educational or professional experience in business and, because there were always more classes to take than I had time for, I chose not to take any business reference classes in graduate school. So here I was, new to the profession, without formal training in either of these subjects, and no other business librarian to turn to.

If you find yourself suddenly a business librarian, my first point of advice is to take a deep breath and realize that it will take time to become the expert you desire to be – and that's ok. Trust me, over time you'll get there. The good news is that there are many informal avenues to help you find your way. Like many business librarians my responsibilities include collection development, maintaining the online subject guide, answering reference questions, and conducting library instruction sessions. Below are suggestions that helped me as I began my unforeseen journey as a business librarian and that I continue to use today.

Become familiar with your library's sources and your business department's needs

After you have taken that deep breath, look around you. What is in your business collection (including databases, CD-ROMs, and print)? What is available in your online subject guides and reference collection? What seem to be the strengths and weakness of the collection? Spend time looking at other business schools' web sites and subject guides. This is a great way to learn what resources are most popular and which resources are best for certain topics. At first glance the resources might not make a lot of sense to you, but this process of review will help as you begin to familiarize yourself with different aspects of the field.

In my library we have student assistants that work at our reference desk and help us with various projects. If you are fortunate enough to have some input into hiring decisions, look for students majoring in business. Also, take advantage of every opportunity to talk with business students. When you are asked a business reference question use it as an opportunity to ask questions and learn. Business students can be a great resource for insight into their own needs

and a good source of information about what classes are offered, where they see deficits in the collection, and what sources they need help using.

Get to know the business faculty, their research areas, and what classes they teach. Try to meet individually with faculty and/or ask to have a few minutes at one of their departmental meetings. Ask for copies of their syllabi and course assignments. Find out where they think the collection is strong or needs work. Develop a systematic way to ask them for suggestions to include in the print and online collection. If your responsibilities include instruction, use every opportunity to promote library instruction sessions and then try to link the session with a course assignment. The process of preparing for instruction sessions is a great way to learn new resources.

Make contact with other business librarians

Whenever possible, get to know other business librarians in your institution, at nearby libraries, or at conferences. It might be helpful for you to contact the librarian who was in your position prior to your being hired, if possible. Think back—*is there anyone that you went to school with who had a business background or is now working in a business library?* If so, make contact again and ask if they would act as a mentor or resource for you when you get tough questions.

Join associations and get involved. The Business Reference and Services Section of ALA (BRASS) is a great organization with which to start. Attend BRASS pre-conferences, presentations and meetings at mid-winter and annual. Volunteer to be on a committee and look at their website for resources. Join a listserv (such as the Business Librarians' Discussion List buslib-l@listserv.boisestate.edu) to both ask questions that you need help with and to learn what types of questions you might be asked and what sources are best for answering them.

Build your collection

For collection development ideas look at business magazines (*Harvard Business Review*, *Business Week*), publisher catalogs, Choice Reviews, and *The Basic Business Library, Core Resources*, 4th edition, edited by Rashelle S. Karp. This last source is particularly good for understanding the variety and scope of business resources used in the discipline.

Learning the language and terminology used in business will be an ongoing process. Check to see if your reference collection has a good business dictionary – if it does not, make this one of your first purchases. To keep current on topics in business, regularly read the *Wall Street Journal* and the business day section of the *New York Times*.

Long term possibilities

After you've learned the absolute basics, do a literature review – check out what's been written about business librarianship. For those of you with extra time on your hands (!) consider taking a business course at your university, online, or through a local community college.

You'll be amazed at how much you are able to learn on your own and with the support of colleagues and professional organizations. The good news is that you'll make progress faster than you think and the exciting news is that there is always more to learn!