

ACADEMIC ENGINEERING LIBRARY

FIELD TRIP REPORT BY VALERIE FLOREZ

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Déjà vu sweeps across as I walk onto the grounds of the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC. I attended college in California, but the similarities are enough to trigger strong memories: The Tau Beta Pi Bent at the Engineering building entrance brings a smile to my face. I spent many an hour in the Engineering library at UC Berkeley as an undergraduate student, but now I am interested in being on the other side of the equation. Kimberly (Kim) Hoffman, Coordinator of the Sciences Libraries at CUA, offers to give me a tour and discuss the workings of their Engineering/Architecture library.

Kim has been Coordinator of the Sciences Libraries at CUA for just over a year (her earlier LIS career was spent at a high school library); she manages the Engineering/Architecture and Physics libraries and oversees the Nursing/Biology library. She holds a BS in Civil Engineering and a MLS. She is active in a wide variety of professional organizations, including American Library Association, Special Library Association, National Council of English Teachers, Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture, American Society for Engineering Education, and American Society for Information Science & Technology. The list is long because academic science librarians need to stay abreast of advances and trends in numerous specialties relevant to their libraries and patrons. Having obtained a degree in engineering herself, she believes that the main reason for the shortage of capable academic science/engineering librarians is because a science/engineering undergraduate degree is an underlying necessity.

CUA is based on the German education style, where each discipline is its “own” school with significant autonomy to address subject matter and student population. This autonomy extends to the libraries, which are organized as branch libraries stemming off of the main library. The most important advantage of branch libraries is the embedded librarianship. This proximity allows the librarian to deliver resources that address the specific needs of her patrons.

What strikes me most upon entering the Engineering/Architecture library is the limited space; I estimate its size at 2,500 square feet. Kim combats this challenge by using offsite storage. She is also working (little by little) to upgrade the facilities: She has removed walls and provided more tables to allow patrons adequate room for research. She is quick to mention that she believes it is best to understand a library before implementing changes.

Like most academic libraries, the Engineering/Architecture library uses the Library of Congress classification system; the bulk of its print collection is *NA* for Architecture. The print collection for Engineering is mainly textbooks. While textbook collecting is not the norm for academic libraries, Engineering is a common exception. Kim has not crafted a formal collection development policy (it is “under construction”), but one of the main tools that she uses to maintain the Engineering and Architecture collections is current course syllabi. Reviewing these provides her with the professors’ subject-matter focuses. Kim finds that another key to maintaining the best collection is communication: She must clearly communicate with the Technical Services department responsible for cataloging, the third-party purchasing company that supplies acquisitions, and the faculty and students (mainly graduate) that request new publications.

The CUA Technical Services department uses a mix of Yankee Book Peddler, FAST TRAC, and original cataloging methods for on-site collection cataloging. Collection responsibilities for the branch libraries are divided by subject matter. Kim is in charge of all of the subjects in the Engineering/Architecture and Physics libraries: Architecture & Planning, Biomedical Engineering, Civil Engineering, Electrical Engineering, Engineering Management, Mechanical Engineering, and Physics.

To access these science/engineering collections, patrons have a choice of over 30 databases as well as personalized reference assistance from the librarians. Each subject-matter librarian also offers patrons individual instruction sessions on how to use the subject-specific databases. Of the science/engineering databases, the e-journal catalogs are most heavily used, especially the American Institute of Physics (AIP), Institute of Civil Engineering (ICE), and Industry of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) collections.

The library is shifting to digital collections more and more because that is what the patrons request; Kim believes that the digital collection is one of the main resources in need of expansion/attention. She hopes to communicate the helpful aspects of digital collections, like RSS feed of e-journal table of contents, to her less-enthusiastic patrons – the faculty. The serials collection (print and e-journals) is by far the most complex aspect of the library according to Kim: The decision to bind vs. not bind, the cost of maintaining a litany of subscriptions, the frequent journal updates and title changes. The serials recordkeeping alone consumes an entire library assistant's time.

In addition to the serials upkeep, Kim faces several unique situations due to the fact that the Engineering and Architecture schools share the same library. Engineers prefer

everything online, while most Architects prefer a “visual presence” in print. Even within the Architecture discipline there is a growing rift. Of the four Architecture programs, the two new programs (Sustainable Design and City & Regional Planning) align more with online and electronic resources; the two traditional programs (Architecture and Architectural Studies) are mainly hands-on/studio based. Kim has to provide resources to satisfy all sides in this mix. For example, there are scanners in the library for use by the Architecture school only. Also, reference materials are skewed toward the Architects and are heavily arts-based.

The loan policy is another aspect that is unique, yet frustrating to faculty and students – Kim wants to develop a clear loan policy to ensure course reserves are available in the stacks while minimizing frustrating 2-hour loans. When asked if she is satisfied with the collection’s use, she states, “Is any [librarian] ever? We always could be doing more to instruct, promote and communicate resources.” To that effect, she has created online *LibGuides* (<http://guides.lib.cua.edu/profile.php?uid=14789>) for engineering, architecture, and physics to better inform patrons of available resources (searchable sections include Books & e-Books, Journals, Articles & DB, Engineering Disciplines, Internet Sites, Standards, and RefWorks).

CUA also supplements its collections by participating in the extensive Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC), which includes nine DC-area universities. The WRLC helps Kim manage her collection in multiple ways. She sends more of the collection to storage knowing that items can be retrieved in about 48 hours. She also reduced the serials subscriptions because articles can be obtained through other

members of the consortium (often in less than 24 hours because the articles are scanned in and transmitted electronically).

CUA is a privately-funded university, so its budget is somewhat shielded from the ravages of the current economic climate. For example, the libraries only charge for photocopying; all other services are free to patrons. However, the university and its library system have not been shielded completely; the most significant cutbacks have been in serials subscriptions. CUA has crafted ways to help minimize these economic effects by increasing enrollment in (and revenue from) the Metropolitan College (adult continuing education program) and increasing utilization of the WRLC and interlibrary loans to access publications. Kim hopes to fend off the need for additional cuts by implementing complementary collection development and weeding policies, continuing to move from print to digital and weeding the collection of out-of-date/unused items to make room for new publications.

At the end of our discussion, I thank Kim profusely for donating her valuable time (we in fact finish just five minutes before the start of her first of several meetings that day). I wander slowly back to the Metro taking in as much of the collegiate air as possible. Reflecting on my field trip, I realize that there are several aspects of the academic science librarianship to which I can contribute my unique experiences and skill sets. I temper this, however, with a desire to learn much more about other LIS fields before making any decisions as to where my heart will lie.