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## **Brains!**

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## COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

### Brains!

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The zombies have been right all along. The brains really are the best part. If I were a zombie tearing through the law library at speeds that only the undead can achieve, I wouldn't slow down for the *Standard Federal Tax Reporter*. I wouldn't pause to see if all the volumes for the sixteenth edition of *Collier on Bankruptcy* had arrived. I wouldn't even stop to review the collection covering the intentional infliction of emotional distress. I would have more important things on my mind. I would be looking for brains!

You are likely reading this wondering what possible relationship zombies could have to law libraries, much less collection development policy and process. You see, I really believe that the zombies are honing in on a fundamental truth of librarianship that is often neglected. Of course the library's holdings are important, but it is the human capital behind the collection that makes all the difference in achieving excellence in service. It is the experienced minds of those librarians responsible for selecting, weeding, cataloging and connecting users with the materials in the collection that take the library from being a mere repository of information to being a living, breathing, full-service place of wonder. Of all the collection development tools I have used in my quest to build a better collection, the most vital tool has been the wealth of knowledge, experience and ideas found in the incredible minds of my colleagues.

For those of you who know me or have read my previous columns, you know that my library is in the process of undertaking a massive review of every serial and periodical title in our collection. If it gets updated, we are putting it under our microscope for a thorough examination. While I have learned an incredible amount about our collection, our users and our aspirations for our institution from this process, I have also learned something far more precious. The full potential of a well-developed library collection can never be realized without the expert stewardship and utilization of knowledgeable librarians. In fact, the success of the library absolutely depends on them.

I want to let you in on a secret. I am deathly afraid of tax law and treaties. Ask me to help you find a current treaty and I am likely to shout "Kavass!" and run the other direction. I can only hope that one of my good colleagues happens to be in the vicinity to save the day. If I were on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* and I got a question about *Kavass's Current Treaty Index*, I would have to use my "phone a friend" lifeline to get in touch with one of my favorite law librarians. Similarly, I could strive to build an unrivaled tax law library, but without the in-depth knowledge and experience of my fellow librarians, the collection would likely have critical gaps. A rich and deep collection without the minds of the librarians who know how to use the materials (or even which materials exist!) falls short of its true potential.

Another secret I will share with you here is that I really, truly want to be one of those outstanding librarians that the zombies go after. Not that I necessarily want to be zombie fodder, but I have a sincere desire to take the brain I have been given and continue growing it into the best collection development tool that it can be. While I will always be a work in progress, there are a few things I have been taught over the last seven years that have helped me grow both personally and professionally.

#### **1. In librarianship, as in life, big-picture strategic thinking works.**

I learned early on that collection development decisions don't happen in a vacuum. Our decisions are based on policies. Where we lack the guidelines to handle new situations, we create new policies based on our greater strategic vision for our collection and for the library as a whole. Some strategic visions may be summarized in mission statements or collection

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development policies, while others remain less formalized. Yet we should all be in the business of thinking about the guiding principles behind the decisions we make. With a strong strategic vision, we are more likely to make the kind of consistent and thoughtful collection development decisions that will ultimately benefit our users and our institutions.

## **2. Asking questions and sharing answers enriches everyone involved in the process.**

I am constantly amazed by the responses I receive when I post questions to law library discussion lists. I have yet to ask a question that hasn't already been considered by at least one other librarian. More often than not, I find that there are a number of people struggling with the same issues and that they are willing to share their ideas and concerns. And while the decisions we ultimately make are unique to our libraries and the populations we serve, there is great value in sharing the process whereby we make those decisions. Working through the process of explaining the choices we have made in my library often helps me think more deeply and critically about the implications of those choices. Seeing the factors that others have taken into account also enriches my view of the possible solutions to the questions I am confronting. Reading the questions others often raise gives me an opportunity to think in new and different ways about aspects of my library collection I had never before considered. We are in the business of connecting information seekers to the right resources, and sometimes the best resource we can consult is the mind of another librarian.

## **3. Despite the differences in our facilities, users, funding and missions, law librarians engaged in collection development share most of the same fundamental goals.**

At a time when change is the most consistent element in our professional lives, there is a great benefit to remembering that we are all more alike than we are different. While I think of myself first as an academic librarian, it takes no more than a few minutes of conversation with public or law firm librarians to realize that we have an incredible amount of knowledge and experience to share with one another. And though one of my primary functions in my institution is to develop the collection, I have grown immeasurably by learning about the focus and perspectives of librarians in access services, reference and computer services. We are all traveling different paths, but we share a common trajectory.

My hope is that as we move toward a future that is both exciting and unknown, we can continue to appreciate each other in ways that make us all better librarians. I think there is great value in remembering that our greatest collection development tools are the colleagues with whom we share both our physical and virtual professional spaces. And should zombies come staggering through the door, I hope each of us would spring into action to protect the most valuable resources we have. Rest assured the zombies will be headed for your best librarians. After all, they know that the brains really are the best part.

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