



## Collection Development at Two Armenian University Libraries: A Conversation with Librarians and Faculty

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### Abstract

In the summer of 2016 two Hunter College librarians, working with a colleague in the Republic of Armenia, conducted an IRB-approved focus group at the American University of Armenia in Yerevan, Armenia. This group drew participants from the libraries and other academic departments of the American University of Armenia as well as Yerevan State University, a large public institution. The discussion attempted to ascertain whether these libraries have devised effective strategies to acquire materials and build collections in the face of the challenges they face (budgetary, linguistic, and sometimes political) and whether faculty at these institutions feel their library's collection meets their teaching and research needs. Together

with results from an online survey, the responses gathered help illuminate the challenges that scholars and librarians face in the unique context of the South Caucasus, as Armenia and other countries in the region continue to develop post-Soviet models of higher education and transition to more democratic forms of government.

**Keywords:** Armenia; South Caucasus; research libraries; collection development; open access; liberal education

## **1. Introduction**

This paper examines issues—including fiscal constraints, language, and social or political sensitivities—related to collection development at two academic libraries in the Republic of Armenia. The paper presents results of original research conducted among both librarians and teaching faculty into how these factors affect collection development. In early 2016 the authors administered an online survey to teaching faculty at both institutions to gauge their level of participation in collection development activities. That summer, the authors convened a focus group in Yerevan, inviting participants representing librarians and faculty at both institutions to discuss collections and collection strategies. This paper presents findings from both of these research projects.

The libraries studied here serve very different institutions. Yerevan State University (YSU) is a publicly funded institution employing more than 1,600 faculty members, with an enrollment of about 20,000 students pursuing bachelor's and master's degrees in 19 different departments or faculties (Yerevan State University, 2020). Instruction is conducted in Armenian with extra support provided for Armenian diaspora or other international students whose first language may be Russian or English. The YSU Library offers reference services, interlibrary loan, and subscription databases, and includes a special collections/archives division with rare and antique items. The YSU Library holds 2,168,198 monographs and in 2019 had circulation figures of 903,579 (Y. Mirzoyan 2020, personal communication, February 25, 2020). Faculty may submit requests to the library for purchase of books or other materials. In addition to electronic journals available through Springer, Elsevier, and EBSCO databases, the YSU library subscribes to 135 Russian electronic journals and 15 Armenian journals in print. The library's acquisitions budget was

\$600,000 USD. The entire budget for Yerevan State University amounts to approximately \$20 million USD.

The American University of Armenia (AUA) is a private institution that began operations in the fall of 1991, concurrent with Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union. The language of instruction is English. Originally conceived as a graduate institution, AUA did not begin offering undergraduate degrees until 2013 (American University of Armenia, 2020a); now students have access to three bachelor's programs, eight master's programs, and two certificate programs. In the fall of 2015, AUA had a total enrollment of 1,537 and employed 200 faculty members (American University of Armenia, 2015). The AGBU Papazian Library serves the university and is Armenia's only fully open-stack academic library (Donabedian, Carey, & Balayan, 2012, p. 8). The Papazian Library offers both in-person and virtual reference services, inter-library loan, subscription databases for use either on campus or remotely, and online guides and tutorials. The library holds 42,000 monographs and in 2019 had circulation figures of 27,288 (S. Avakian, personal communication, February 25, 2020). The Subject librarians serve as liaisons to departments and programs for bibliographic instruction and purchase requests. Paid subscriptions at the Papazian Library include 26,023 electronic journals and 7 journals in print. The library had a budget of \$70,000 USD for acquisitions, and the university had a total operating budget of \$11.6 million USD. In addition to the library's collection, AUA also hosts a digital repository for scholarly work produced by the university's faculty, staff, and students.

Participation in consortia and resource sharing provide an additional means for YSU and AUA to support and strengthen their collections. Both libraries are members of the Digital Library Association of Armenia (DLAA), formerly the Electronic Library Consortium of Armenia or ELCA. Through their membership in the DLAA, these libraries have access to scholarly e-resources and technology products licensed by Electronic Information for Libraries (EIFL). EIFL works with libraries and library consortia, providing grants, training and information to libraries in developing and transition countries (Electronic Information for Libraries, 2019a). In addition, AUA is a member of the American International Consortium of Academic Libraries (AMICAL). Currently, AMICAL's programs focus on cost saving for information resources and services, information and digital literacies, library and technology leadership and digital liberal arts pedagogy and scholarship. The Papazian Library is also working to increase its access to

licensed resources through copyright reform initiatives in partnership with EIFL. Currently, AUA's Head of Reference and Circulation Services serves as the EIFL Copyright Coordinator in Armenia, whose task is to "engage with . . . national copyright officials in support of library advocacy" (Electronic Information for Libraries, 2019b).

The missions of both the YSU and AUA libraries are similar in that both support curriculum and research, with the additional role for AUA of providing materials for the wider public community, who also makes use of the library's collection. While since independence most CIS countries have struggled to provide a place in the curriculum for liberal arts education, implicit in the language of the YSU and AUA mission statements is a concern for fostering liberal arts values of creativity, inquiry, innovation, critical thinking and civic values that in part characterise liberal education (American University of Armenia, 2020b; Yerevan State University, 2011).

As collection development is guided by an institution's mission, collection managers must assess the libraries' holdings in their entirety and in consultation with faculty; as Budd notes, it requires "all in the library to determine on what basis the collection will be developed, then it is up to collection development, both as a unit of the library and as a process, to bring that vision about" (Budd, 2018, p. 269). Interested to discover faculty members' level of engagement in the collection development process, the authors administered online surveys at both YSU and AUA. With the help of library directors, the researchers distributed the survey electronically to the e-mail accounts of instructional faculty at both institutions during January and February of 2016. Faculty members received an e-mail requesting their participation along with a link to respond online via Qualtrics survey software. As YSU does not maintain a listserv to contact its faculty, the director of the library assisted the investigators in distributing the link via social media as well as e-mail. At AUA, 28 participants began the survey and 24 answered all questions, for a completion rate of 89 percent. Nineteen of these respondents identified the department in which they serve: eleven came from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, four from the College of Business and Economics, two from Computational Science and Engineering, one from Law, and one from Public Health. At YSU, 43 participants began the survey and 28 answered all questions, for a completion rate of 65 percent. Of these participants, seven came from Philosophy and Psychology, five from Armenian Philology, five from Oriental Studies, two each from History, Mathematics,

and Romance-Germanic Philology, and one each from the departments of Economics, Journalism, Law, Physics, and Sociology. All questions were available in Armenian or English. The survey also captured data about respondents' rank, full-time or part-time status, and length of service at their institutions.

Because of differences in the services offered by the libraries at these two institutions, the investigators developed two separate instruments, but each contained one question asking faculty about their level of participation in decisions affecting the library's collection. The AUA questionnaire asked, "How often do you work with a Subject/Liaison Librarian assigned to your department to help select books or other materials for purchase?" For YSU faculty the question was worded, "How often do you submit requests to the library for purchase of books or other materials?" Data for responses to this question are given in Tables 1 and 2 below. Responses to all other questions from the survey are outside the scope of this paper and have been published elsewhere (Donabedian, Carey, & Balayan, 2018).

*Table 1. Faculty Participation in Collection Development, American University of Armenia.*

Q: How often do you work with a Subject/Liaison Librarian assigned to your department to help select books or other materials for purchase?

	Respondents (n)	Percentage
Frequently	1	4%
Sometimes	2	8%
Rarely	4	17%
Never	5	21%
I was not aware of this service	12	50%

Responses varied according to factors such as length of employment, academic rank, and employment status. For instance, at AUA all respondents who reported working with a subject liaison (n=12) had been with AUA for fewer than 5 years; of these participants, one said that they "frequently" work with their liaison, two that they "sometimes" do, four "rarely," and five "never." All respondents who reported having worked at AUA for five years or longer (n=8) said that they were unaware of the subject liaison service, as did all part-time faculty respondents (n=11). No full-time faculty said this, but 42% (n=5) did report that despite knowing about the service they

“never” worked with a liaison, 33% (n=4) that they “rarely” did, 17% (n=2) “sometimes,” and only 8% (n=1) that they did so “frequently.” All those who reported working with a liaison came from the associate professor level or higher; by contrast, 70% (n=7) of those at the rank of lecturer said that they were unaware of the subject liaison service.

Table 2. Faculty Participation in Collection Development, Yerevan State University.

Q: How often do you submit requests to the library for purchase of books or other materials?		
	Respondents (n)	Percentage
Frequently	3	10%
Sometimes	10	33%
Rarely	6	20%
Never	6	20%
I was not aware of this service	5	17%

Higher-ranking participants at YSU were more likely to make a request, with 100% (n=1) of department heads and 18% (n=2) of associate professors saying that they submitted requests “frequently;” the other 82% (n=9) of associate professors did so “sometimes.” At the level of assistant, 60% (n=6) of respondents said that they rarely submit purchase requests to the library, 10% (n=1) “sometimes” do, and 30% (n=3) “never.” No participant in the foregoing ranks indicated that they were unaware of this service. All participants who described themselves as holding lecturer, researcher, or other rank said that they were unaware of the service, with the exception of three lecturers (60%) who were aware of the service but “never” used it. A majority of full-time faculty respondents (59%, n=10) said that they “sometimes” submit purchase requests and 18% (n=3) “frequently” do so. By contrast, only 15% (n=2) of part-time faculty respondents reported even “rarely” submitting a request, with the rest almost evenly divided between never using the service (46%, n=6) or being unaware of the option (39%, n=5).

Purchase requests at YSU were more likely to come from recently hired faculty. All of the participants who had less than five years of work experience (n=3) said that they “frequently” submit requests, and 63% of participants in the 5–10 year group said that they do so “sometimes,” with the remainder (37%, n=6) doing so “rarely.” No participant in either of these groups indicated being unaware of the service. However, participants who had 11–15

years of work experience at YSU (n=8) said they were either unaware of the service or had never used it and all who had 16 or more years of service (n=3) said that they were unaware.

The small sample size for the online survey means that the results may not be generalisable to faculty as a whole at these institutions. Nevertheless, the results suggested some patterns in faculty engagement with library services. Several months later the authors convened a focus group with participants from both institutions to more fully explore both faculty engagement in the collection development process, as well as librarians' perspectives on the challenges they face in this area.

## 2. Literature Review

As their primary mission, academic libraries must offer access to a collection that meets the research and curricular needs of an institution's faculty and staff. Of course, the teaching mission of postsecondary education needs not be narrowly construed as preparation for certain types of careers, but rather has often been understood to include the cultivation of critical thinking skills that students can apply in a wide range of settings. Toward this end, Budd argues that "[c]urricula should be reshaped to accomplish two purposes: (1) prepare students to be citizens . . . and (2) offer knowledge, skills, and preparation for certain careers" (Budd, 2017, p. 72). By maintaining a well-rounded collection that includes materials from a diverse range of sources and viewpoints, academic libraries can create an environment to foster this type of civic engagement as they fulfill their institutional mission. Subject librarians or liaisons can provide expertise in the collection management process and help ensure that materials purchased are satisfying users' needs.

Pfohl (2018) identifies numerous challenges to collection development at academic libraries in developing countries, including limited budgets, poor trade infrastructure, delays in delivery of items, and lack of technological skills (p. 66). With regard to e-books and electronic resources, further obstacles emerge such as limited internet connectivity, power cuts, or licensing complications (Pfohl, 2018, pp. 67, 72). Evaluating a collection through benchmarks or usage statistics becomes problematic when some libraries may have difficulty finding a peer institution or may not have stable IP addresses with which to track usage (Pfohl, 2018, p. 74). Journal price increases present

another serious challenge for these libraries. As Kairatbekkyzy notes in her study of information barriers for Kazakhstani researchers, a bundle of journals offered by Elsevier in 2016 for approximately \$24,000 in USD represents a cost that “almost no” library in Kazakhstan could afford without assistance (Kairatbekkyzy 2016, p. 848). This “information availability problem” puts Kazakhstani researchers at a disadvantage, as “lack of access to information might result in rejection from publishers” (Kairatbekkyzy 2016, p. 848), resulting in lower visibility for research done at these institutions.

Some libraries in developing countries are finding ways to work around certain of these problems. One major channel for circumventing high costs is to participate in library consortia when negotiating with publishers. As Cuhadar and Cimen note, cost-sharing arrangements have long existed among academic libraries but today have evolved to focus on “three major issues for library consortia: open access, renegotiation of big deals and resource sharing” (Cuhadar & Cimen, 2019, p. 253). In their assessment of the cost-sharing models offered through the Anatolian University Libraries Consortium (ANKOS) in Turkey, Cuhadar and Cimen found that out of 82 member libraries surveyed, 76% ranked their satisfaction with the consortium at 7 out of 10 or higher (p. 260). Other libraries look to emerging technologies as a means of overcoming information barriers. As Tapfuma and Hoskins write in their study of open science initiatives in Zimbabwe, there has long been “a low volume of research and publishing in the region and, in comparison with authors and journals from the global North . . . low visibility of published research” (Tapfuma & Hoskins, 2019, p. 406). In response, more universities in Zimbabwe have invested in the creation of institutional repositories “to overcome cost and access restrictions to scholarship, and to increase visibility and reach of their research” (p. 407). Similarly, Ahammad describes how the library of the Independent University, Bangladesh, used the DSpace platform to create a digital library and institutional repository to promote student or faculty work and host open educational resources (Ahammad, 2019). By promoting open access and open resources, libraries can help mitigate barriers to access while at the same time enhancing the profile of researchers at their institutions.

As the above studies indicate, a growing body of literature has explored both challenges and solutions regarding collection development for academic libraries in developing countries. However, to the authors’ knowledge



there have been no studies specifically investigating collection development in Armenian research and academic libraries since independence of the Republic. This paper seeks to address this gap in the literature.

### **3. Collection Development Conversation: Focus Group**

#### **3.1. Methods**

The investigators conducted a focus group in Yerevan, Armenia on July 25, 2016. Participants were volunteers representing both librarians and teaching faculty from YSU and AUA. The goal of the study was to ascertain whether these libraries have devised effective strategies to acquire materials and build collections in the face of the challenges they face (budgetary, linguistic, and sometimes political) and whether faculty at these institutions feel their library's collection meets their teaching and research needs. In an effort to elicit an open dialog among librarians and faculty, the authors chose a focus group rather than an individual interview format. To guide the conversation, the investigators used an instrument consisting of 14 questions. Eight questions were specifically addressed to librarians, four to faculty, and two to all attendees. One of the investigators who is a native speaker of Armenian served as facilitator, and participants conducted the discussion entirely in Armenian. Each participant (apart from the authors) is identified below by institutional affiliation and title rather than by name:

- AUA, E-learning librarian specialist
- YSU, Instructor, Cultural Studies
- YSU, Instructor, Oriental studies
- YSU, Library, Administrator
- YSU, Philosophy, departmental librarian
- AUA, Instructor, Translation Theory
- AUA, Instructor, History

#### **3.2. Results**

The findings below are grouped according to those questions addressed to librarians, those addressed to faculty, and those addressed to both types of attendees.

### 3.2.1. Questions to Librarians

#### 3.2.1.a Mission and Collection Development Policy

Librarians from both institutions indicated that their collection development policies emphasise materials that serve a curricular purpose and are for immediate student or faculty use:

*We try to purchase books that meet student needs. Faculty suggest books that are needed during the upcoming semester, these books get approved and we purchase them. We also try to get e-resources. (AUA, E-learning librarian)*

*Our main purpose is to serve YSU students and specialists by providing them high quality information. . . . Sometimes the departments suggest books to be acquired and sometimes we propose to the departments certain books. (YSU, Library Administrator)*

However, respondents also indicated that rather than being able to actively collect the most relevant materials, their libraries often rely on largesse. Especially at YSU, donations formed a large proportion of new acquisitions but were not always ideally suited to the programs of instruction:

*We acquire from 14,000 to 17,000 units [not titles] of literature. Not only the main library, but departmental libraries receive donations. We acquire other literature too, but . . . [v]ery few sources are refused. (YSU, Library, Administrator)*

*Many books were donated to our departmental library but these books were not related to our profession. Many books that were kindly donated we accepted simply out of politeness (as books were given with best intentions). (YSU, Philosophy, departmental librarian)*

It also emerged during the discussion that the libraries at AUA and YSU have slightly differing missions. While both are academic libraries, the Papazian Library at AUA is also open to the public and thus collects some materials with the larger community in mind:

*We keep fiction literature to ensure diversity, but we focus on textbooks. But our library is open to the public as well. . . . We have extension programs,*

*summer programs and our library serves their needs as well. Legally we are not a public library but we act like a public library. (AUA, e-learning librarian)*

### **3.2.1.b Barriers to Acquisition**

Librarians from both institutions cited logistical and financial obstacles to collection building. Participants mentioned turning to consortia such as AMICAL or philanthropic donors to help get around budgetary limitations, or cost-sharing arrangements as at AUA where acquisitions are paid for by both the library and academic departments. However, the discussion revealed that even when funds are available legal or geographic issues can affect acquisitions.

*Our funds are not to be compared with library funds that universities abroad have, but still they are OK for Armenia. . . . We have legal problems that hinder acquisitions. To acquire materials we need to announce tenders and providers are chosen through competition. But we are a very small market and no publisher/vendor wants to become our book provider. We have a donor, the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), and we ask them to donate books instead of money. (YSU, Library administrator)*

*The AUA library has the same problem. It is hard for us to get hard copies of books. Hard copies take a lot of time to travel to Armenia and it costs much. AUA library acquires books directly from Amazon, but because of some legal complications the YSU library cannot do that. (AUA, e-learning librarian)*

Language emerged as another complicating factor. Responses revealed that only a small proportion of the collection at either institution's library is in the Armenian language:

*At AUA less than 10% of literature is in Armenian. The rest is in English. (AUA, e-learning librarian)*

*At YSU about 60% of literature is in Russian. About 20% is in Armenian and 20% in other languages. Regarding acquisitions: About 70% is in Armenian. The rest is in other languages. Donations that we get are predominantly in English. (YSU, Library Administrator)*

### 3.2.1.c Specialization and Breadth of Selection

As mentioned earlier, the AUA library assigns liaison librarians to subject areas while the YSU library does not. The YSU library administrator indicated that at YSU, ensuring the quality of selection in a given area is instead an informal skill that librarians develop with experience:

*We discuss with the faculty. But people who work with given subjects get specialised. . . they remember and learn about needs. (YSU, Library Administrator)*

Respondents indicated that their collection budgets did not always allow for acquisition of sources outside the most crucial academic resources (for instance, materials from alternative publications or small presses). The YSU library administrator said that the YSU library buys from “all publishers in Armenia,” but a librarian from AUA reported that their experience was different:

*Not sure that we do it at AUA. It is related to finance. We try to target databases that have more articles. (AUA, e-learning librarian)*

Free and online resources play a large role in supplementing the collection at both libraries. Participants reported that not only high quality open resources are available in relevant subject areas, but that they sometimes fit better with the ways that students work:

*We have to use open electronic resources. . . . In Moodle we cannot place books that students cannot print. This is why we promote open access. Indeed we promote the databases that we subscribe and pay for, but first we present open access sources. (AUA, e-learning librarian)*

*There are many open access journals with impact factor. There are many scholars who publish in open access journals intentionally. There are excellent open access journals in Chemistry, in Mathematics . . . they are not worse than other sources. (YSU, Library Administrator)*

### 3.2.2 Questions to Faculty:

#### 3.2.2.a Materials Selection and Access: A Consideration by Faculty

Faculty members identified a number of ways in which the libraries were doing well with regard to providing materials in their respective disciplines and areas in which the libraries could improve.

The YSU instructor for Oriental Studies noted that the library is doing a “good job with digitising literature.” However, there is room for improvement in this regard as the above mentioned participant related that the digitised literature was not always top priority.

Another respondent, noted that the AUA library offered strong collection support for his field:

*AUA acquired thirty books during the past two years only for my course. Some of these books are new and expensive, but the university has acquired all of them. I am sure other universities in Armenia do not have resources to teach with the type of syllabus that I have. I cannot complain. There are no bureaucratic hurdles at AUA. (AUA, Instructor, Translation Theory)*

The experience of two faculty members from YSU, however, differed significantly.

*Some of the books we request are highly specialised...and it is very expensive. Because it is so problematic we often use the Internet and access books and other resources. Some of the resources we access are published on-line illegally. (YSU, Instructor, Oriental studies)*

*Instead of using the YSU library system I ask my friends from other universities, such as AUA, for material. (YSU, Instructor, Cultural Studies)*

Two participants from YSU took issue with not having direct access to library databases:

*When we use the YSU library e-database we have to contact the library and a library representative finds and e-mails us the given article. But we should have direct access to the databases. (YSU, Instructor, Oriental studies)*

*Articles that we can get through our library are not easy and fast to reach for. We need to ask someone and that someone finds the article and sends it to the inquirer. (YSU, Instructor, Cultural Studies)*

Another database related concern on the part of an AUA faculty member concerns difficulty with accessing e-books.

*What I do not like about our university library web-page is that it is not easy to find the electronic books via the library. In other libraries you simply have to type the title of the book and the system finds the books no matter where the books is located. (AUA, Instructor, Translation Theory)*

Regarding the content of library databases the AUA Instructor of History stated *"I would like AUA library to subscribe to more academic journals."*

When faculty members were asked to what extent free Internet resources in Armenian and Russian affected the way they do research and if they use open educational resources, an instructor from YSU responded:

*About 80% of literature I use are open access libraries. I believe the same is true for my students. (YSU, Instructor, Cultural Studies)*

He further clarified his statement by saying that those "open access" resources include those provided by pirate libraries. A library administrator from YSU added that *"[t]here are many Russian sites with scam [pirated] versions of books."*

Two faculty members from YSU raised the issue of some students' unfamiliarity with the Russian language and the barrier to research this presents, due to the prevalence of Russian language materials in the library's collection. One faculty member offered

*[t]he single predominant issue related to literature that I see is related to language. Most literature is in Russian but current students are sometimes unable to use literature in Russian. I know that YSU library stocks are being updated but at this stage it is not enough. Students cannot access literature available because of language. (YSU, Philosophy, departmental librarian)*

Relatedly, the YSU Instructor of Cultural Studies noted *"[t]here is only 1 book in Armenian that we use (a translation) and another book written by Gagik Melkumyan, a philosopher."*

### **3.2.2.b Faculty Participation in Collection Development**

On the topic of whether faculty have a chance to participate in collection development, responses came primarily from the YSU faculty and often displayed a lack of connection to the process:

*In the history department, for instance, we send the list of requested literature to the library. I think this mechanism is not working well. I personally do not participate in compiling this list, because I never know what happens to it. (YSU Instructor, Cultural Studies)*

*I personally do not know any example when I have demonstrated interest in a given book and it was added to the collection. Even if books were added to the collection I am not informed of it. (YSU Instructor, Oriental studies)*

This faculty member said that in fact, his department sometimes goes through channels outside the library to acquire relevant materials:

*We try to solve literature shortage through our contact[s]. We are in touch with embassies of Arabic-speaking countries. If the ambassadors are supportive we get literature. These books come to the departmental library of oriental studies. (YSU Instructor, Oriental studies)*

At other times, the discussion revealed a sense of confusion about the collection development process or the overall organization of the library. When asked when the last time was that he had spoken to a librarian about collections for his department, one instructor asked:

*Last year I was talking to the librarian. Another time I was talking to the librarian at the department. Are departmental libraries branches of the main library? (YSU Instructor, Cultural Studies)*

Some participants took the opportunity of the focus group discussion to ask about other library services. For instance, the YSU instructor in Translation Theory asked whether the YSU library offers interlibrary loan, and the instructor in Oriental Studies had a question about database access. The e-learning librarian from AUA reported that they conduct “so many trainings” with faculty to address awareness of these services. The administrator from YSU offered a different experience:

*We contact faculty and say we can do trainings. Give us the best time for you. They say we will let you know and, indeed, they disappear. Some people complain of our library but have not used the library for 20 years. (YSU, Library, Administrator)*

When the library does acquire resources requested by faculty, use by relevant researchers does not always follow. One participant reported:

*We sent a list of Russian e-resources to departments and asked them about their needs. They gave us a lists of resources. At the end of the year we reviewed usage of the literature departments had ordered. Some journals were used only once. We had subscribed to 125 paid Russian e-resources. About 50 of them were not used even once. (YSU, Library Administrator)*

This low level of use and awareness can apply to other parts of the collection as well:

*We have a . . . department of “Antique and rare books”. This library unit has 4000 books. Only about 100 students have requested books from us. Many lecturers do not know about this library unit. (YSU, Library, Administrator)*

### 3.2.3 Questions to All:

#### **Controversial Topics, Alternative Views**

At the close of the discussion the investigators posed several questions not customised for either librarians or teaching faculty, but rather open to both. With these questions, the investigators sought to ascertain whether participants felt their libraries provided a well-rounded collection that included a diverse range of sources even on issues that might be politically or culturally sensitive. As an example, the investigators suggested topics such as deforestation and lake level (both pressing environmental issues in Armenia); the debate over the safety of genetically modified foods; or Armenia’s ongoing dispute with Azerbaijan over the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, claimed by both countries.

Both faculty and librarians indicated that the most current sources on such topics were not to be found through the library. Echoing earlier responses, the library administrator confirmed that acquisitions are more targeted toward curricular needs:

*We acquire literature that is primarily . . . to be used for educational purposes. Our society deals with such issues differently. Main discussions are conducted in*



*social media. More importantly we do not have competent people writing about such issues in Armenia. Luckily recently Armenians started to translate quality literature directly from European languages. (YSU Library administrator)*

Another participant indicated that not only is such literature hard to find, but also that the culture of their institution does not encourage research in these areas:

*I am interested in social movements, social issues. I cannot find good literature in any Armenian institution. There are some, very few researchers who write about this. Sometimes NGOs publish such literature. YSU declares to be a research institute but [has] not managed to become one. . . . When you read the YSU statute, the mission of YSU is to educate “patriotic and militaristic” citizens, not people who deal with social and/or ecological problems. (YSU, Instructor, Cultural Studies)*

*I agree. This is a problem for top administrations of universities. But the . . . problem should be solved bottom up as well. (AUA, e-learning librarian)*

Responses also indicated that concerns about sensitive content can also affect knowledge production in Armenia. One participant raised the following example:

*We are trying to publish a book on discourse of elite and elitism in Armenia. The . . . publishing house refused to publish the book because it seems to be sensitive to politicians, to oligarchs. . . . The book passed peer review by a highly qualified international board. (YSU, Instructor, Cultural Studies)*

When asked about acquisitions via pre-selected bundles or patron-driven platforms, participants indicated that their libraries still purchase books on a title-by-title basis. While in one sense this increases the degree of control librarians have over selections, it does not afford them complete latitude:

*In the library we have a group of people from different faculties and administration. This group decides what we can buy and what not. Many people are involved in the decision, not only the librarians or individual faculty. We also use data we can get from evaluations (e.g. evaluations of library by the faculty, etc.). (AUA, e-learning librarian)*

However, according to the YSU library administrator, the YSU library does use patron-driven acquisition to “*acquire academic articles . . . but not books.*”

### **3.3. Discussion**

The focus group questions encouraged a lively conversation among the librarians and faculty present. Their responses shed light on issues including institutional mission and community served, barriers to acquisition, the range and depth of library collections, materials selection and faculty participation, and the fostering of diverse views. One of the first common themes to emerge is that both the YSU and AUA libraries focus primarily on curricular needs and supplying titles for frequent student use rather than building comprehensive research collections. Librarians from both institutions expressed a view that their collections budgets, when supplemented with largesse, are adequate for this purpose. Faculty seemed to have a mixed experience depending on institution and discipline; for example, the instructor in translation theory from AUA was very happy with the titles held by that library, while faculty in two departments at YSU mentioned that they go through channels other than the library to obtain certain titles. The barriers to acquisition that participants identified (centering on budget, language, or format) did not differ in substance from the challenges already commonly documented in LIS literature by Pfohl (2018) and others.

Faculty awareness of and access to the collections, however, presents a more complicated picture, as does faculty participation in collection development. Participants from both institutions commented on real or perceived obstacles to the use of library collections. For instance, instructors from YSU expressed dismay they cannot directly access a database that they need, but rather must request articles on an item-by-item basis (because YSU does not have an institutional license). An instructor at AUA found the library's website difficult to use when locating e-books; a participant from YSU was unaware of interlibrary loan. Some of these issues may stem from budgetary limitations (such as ability to purchase a license) but others could be mitigated by better educating students and faculty about library resources and services. The focus group responses suggest that making progress in this area will require increased engagement from all parties concerned, since as the library administrator noted, faculty may not always take advantage of training opportunities offered by the library. Better communication between the library and the campus community might allow library staff to structure and schedule these opportunities in a way that is more convenient and meaningful for the desired audience.

This is especially true when considering faculty involvement in collection development. Recall that in the faculty survey that preceded the convening of the focus group, 71% of respondents at AUA either were unaware that subject liaisons existed or had never worked with one; at YSU, 37% of respondents either did not know they could submit purchase requests or had never done so. This detachment from the collection development process recurs in the focus group responses. At YSU, where academic departments maintain libraries outside of the main campus library, one participant expressed confusion regarding which librarian they should approach with questions or concerns. Another YSU instructor mentioned that he knows of no instance of the library actually acquiring a title in which he expressed interest and that faculty are not generally informed of recent purchases. However, there remains great potential for these libraries to meaningfully enhance faculty participation. For instance, the survey data showed that recently hired faculty at both AUA and YSU report greater use and awareness of liaison services and purchase requests, suggesting that outreach targeted to new faculty may be promising.

Finally, the responses gathered here show that free online resources and interlibrary loan continue to serve as key means of reaching beyond an existing collection's strengths and weaknesses. Another salient area of agreement throughout the conversation is how participants from both institutions, whether librarians or faculty, expressed uniformly positive views toward open access literature and open educational resources. This is not surprising given that open access journals and repositories have been growing steadily in Armenia (Electronic Information for Libraries, 2019c). Free online resources could play an especially important role with regard to the sensitive political or social issues discussed during the focus group conversation, where participants identified a lack of resources available in Armenian or produced within Armenian institutions. The faculty member who reported that 80% of the literature he uses is open access also defined open access to include pirate libraries, and one of the librarian participants noted the prevalence of websites that provide Russian-language pirated copies of books. Given that the two biggest pirate libraries, Sci-Hub and Library Genesis, are either based in Russia (Harris & Barrett, 2019) or began as "a tool to be used in a Russian-speaking online research community" (Whitehair, 2016), such sources may be especially relevant for researchers in Armenia.

### **3.4. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

This study had some limitations in both the focus group and survey components. For the focus group, the fact that librarians and teaching faculty were combined in one focus group might have led some participants to feel hesitant about criticizing the work of colleagues who were present. In the future, researchers could hold separate focus groups in succession for librarians and for faculty as well as a combined focus group to see whether respondents might answer differently. Regarding the survey component, the small sample size means that the results obtained may not be representative of faculty at these institutions as a whole, and the need to recruit YSU participants via social media rather than a formal listserv may have excluded some faculty or affected response rates. However, if researchers found channels to address these challenges, they could conduct a similar survey with more participants and an improved response rate.

## **4. Conclusion: Academic Libraries and Civic Engagement**

Collection development practices at the two institutions examined grow out of changes Armenia has made since achieving independence in 1991. This can be seen, for example, in reforms such as the Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking program launched in 1999 and in the Armenian National Curriculum and State Standards for Secondary Education developed by the Armenian Ministry of Education and Science in 2004 (Terzian, 2010, p. 5, p. 6), which link Armenian higher education with European standards. These changes account, at least in part, for the language we find in the mission statements of AUA and YSU in support of civil society. We have seen from focus group responses that the libraries' scope of collecting is determined by fiscal constraints, language, and social or political sensitivities. One way for Armenian libraries to overcome these limitations is by furthering their participation in the kinds of consortial efforts and resource sharing described above. Another way is by incorporating open access and free online resources into their collection development. This of course requires a free and open Internet. Fortunately, Armenia's access to the Internet in recent years has been generally free and open; in 2019 Freedom House identified Armenia as one of only 16 countries where Internet freedom has improved, in contrast to a global trend toward greater restrictions on access and freedom of expression (Shahbaz & Funk, 2019, p. 5).

However, a free and open Internet does not address restrictions of copyright and intellectual property. As we have seen, Armenian libraries are trying to achieve more liberal copyright terms for themselves. Given the apparently widespread use of pirate libraries and websites by Armenian researchers as found in this study, we must ask whether such reform can be sufficient or whether only an open access model that recognises informational and economic inequality can meet the needs of these researchers. Indeed, the operators of some pirate libraries have defended their actions by noting that they are aiding researchers who would not otherwise be able to access these materials for the greater good of both scientific advancement and society (Whitehair, 2016).

The pedagogic reforms referenced above have made the environment in Armenia more conducive to the values of liberal education, an education that is conscious of the common good. This good “is made visible only through open debate and discussion in which all are free to participate” (Finkin & Post, 2009, p. 125). Library collections representing a diverse range of voices in support of the university’s mission are central to enabling such a dialogue. Likewise, providing for collections’ research and instructional needs requires responsive communication between librarians and faculty. In the end, it is a critically aware and informed population who can best determine their way forward individually and communally.

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