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The Merger of Government Documents and Reference at a Mid-Size University

A 24-Year Retrospective

Claudene Sproles and Anna Marie Johnson

The University of Louisville (UofL) Libraries consists of the main library, Ekstrom Library, along with five branches. The Libraries are a member of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and possess approximately 2.2 million items. UofL has served as a Federal FDL Program. As of 2023, the University of Louisville Libraries' Government Documents Department and the Reference Department have been merged for 24 years, beginning in 1999.

Several writers argued that the key to successful documents reference is knowledgeable staff and brisk user instruction of documents collections.¹ Maggie Farrell stated that a “merged reference center must ‘intellectually’ integrate the documents collection into reference services, library instruction, and library promotion activities.”² She believed that integrated reference service would lead to higher documents use. So did this intellectual integration occur with the department mergers at the University of Louisville and what was the outcome when government documents became the responsibility of every librarian in the merged department? This paper explores how the University of Louisville Libraries handled the documents merger, what changes have occurred since the merger, and the state of the library’s government documents reference services today.

Literature Review

Storing and servicing government documents collections have always been problematic in libraries. Historically, libraries housed government documents in three distinct ways:

1. Integrating documents with other library materials,
2. Maintaining a separate collection of government documents,

3. Combining features of integrated and separate collections.³

Peter Hernon noted that separate government documents collections were present as far back as the 1890s at the Los Angeles and New York Public Libraries.⁴ Servicing these collections, became a challenge. Mahala Saville argued in 1940 that possessing dedicated, experienced documents personnel was essential to making collections publicly available.⁵ In 1961, George Caldwell asserted that a separate collection offered a “superior quality of bibliographic service”⁶ over integrating a collection and believed patrons would quickly learn the separate bibliographic navigation tools. Peter Hernon indicated that over the years, “the trend toward separate collections”⁷ allowed for better reference service and better bibliographic control of the collection. Presumably, a separate collection would be staffed by knowledgeable and experienced staff that could provide specialized reference service not received at a traditional service desk.⁸ In contrast, Frazer et al. noted that many small depositories “have always offered documents service from a central reference department.”⁹

In 1976, the Government Printing Office (GPO) began producing Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR) cataloging records, distributing them through both OCLC and the Library of Congress Distribution Service¹⁰ making records readily available and easily affordable, opening up additional, broader and more readily obtainable access to government documents. By 1978, library administrators questioned the “cost-effectiveness and convenience of a separate documents collection,”¹¹ due to the associated costs and benefits of full cataloging and the sheer volume of government information

published. Barbara Kile also pointed out that a separate documents collection implicitly “implied that the documents were not cataloged to the same level as other materials” and OPAC records should “make the physical location of a document less important.”¹²

However, even though the integration of documents collections and services had been discussed, the topic lacked quantitative research. In 1977, Michael Waldo contended that the “lack of scientific evidence to substantiate the claims of the various approaches”¹³ left libraries’ decisions based on anecdotal evidence and opinion, a trend that continued into the 1990s.¹⁴

In 1983, Peter Graham advocated for the necessity of a separate collection with a separate knowledgeable staff, allowing agency-related materials to stay together. He dismisses the argument of placing documents with other materials on the same subject, as, according to him, the sheer size of a research library’s collection “has made [subject] browsing undependable.”¹⁵ Peter Hernon and Charles McClure reiterated that a separate collection allows for experienced, specialized library staff to service the collection, rather than a random person staffing the general reference desk.¹⁶ This was the prevailing view as demonstrated in a 1987 survey of ARL libraries by Carol Turner and Ann Latta which found that of 77 libraries surveyed, only 9.5 libraries (12.3 percent) had decentralized or integrated documents collections.¹⁷

The tide shifted in the early 1990s, as it became apparent that stand-alone documents collections received little use.¹⁸ Staffing and maintaining these lightly used collections with full time experts started to attract the attention of library administrators who were grappling with library budgets that had been shrinking for the last decade or more.¹⁹

From the mid-1980s forward, case studies began to emerge about integrating documents collections and services with other library departments and services,²⁰ with the majority of stand-alone documents departments merging with the general reference department as opposed to other library units.²¹ In addition to mergers with general reference services, government documents departments also merged with other smaller library units, such as business,²² maps,²³ health sciences,²⁴ and social sciences.²⁵ Little information was found concerning the effects of documents department mergers on technical services or long-term outcomes of these mergers.

Initial reasons to merge services included budget cuts, more staff serving the collection, and loading of GPO records into the OPAC, making documents easier to locate,²⁶ and lessening the need for a separate department. Other reasons cited included retirements and institutional reorganizations.²⁷ Hernon and McClure observed that “government publication

within separate collections became isolated from other library holdings and branded with a stigma.”²⁸ However, June Parker’s 1996 study indicated that reference questions were more successfully answered at a stand-alone government documents rather than a combined reference desk.²⁹ Indeed, this was a long-standing concern with documents/reference desk mergers.³⁰ A 1989 survey conducted by Philip Van De Voorde found that overall circulation of the documents collection went down as well as the overall quality of the reference service offered to patrons.³¹

It was noted that mergers would require users become more self-sufficient and increase the need for user education in government materials³² as well as continual staff training in documents resources;³³ still, the mergers continued, resulting in documents librarians being physically removed from the collections they served.³⁴

Presumed advantages included all staff now being competent in basic documents reference and additional coverage at the reference desk.³⁵ Government information becomes part of the overall collection decisions in the library as well as part of the standard reference tools.³⁶ Subject librarians could familiarize themselves with relevant government information for their areas, creating a more holistic resource view.³⁷ Mergers could also increase the number of users of the collection as well as extend the hours of operation.³⁸

Much planning and preparation was needed to disband a documents department and reassign its functions. Usually, depository functions and staff would be split between the technical services and reference department.³⁹ Several libraries⁴⁰ found moving “in-depth and individualized” documents reference assistance to a busy reference desk required “a significant commitment to training for librarians and other desk personnel.”⁴¹ Frazer et al. employed a team based approach to plan department training. Both reference and technical services departments would see increased workloads.⁴² As Thura Mack and Janette Prescod noted, “government information reference is no longer a specialty but the responsibility of every librarian.”⁴³ However, Amata noted a general reluctance of non-depository staff to tackle documents questions.⁴⁴

By 2000, documents/reference department mergers were becoming commonplace.⁴⁵ A 1997 study found 72 percent of small, private academic depositories serviced depository collections from a single reference desk.⁴⁶ The Government Printing Office’s 2007 *Biennial Survey* reported that 82 percent of depositories provided a merged reference/government documents desk.⁴⁷ In 2018, Laura Sare surveyed 280 depository libraries and found that 226 (81 percent) had a combined service desk. Only 18 libraries (7.9 percent) still staffed a separate documents service point.⁴⁸

By 2019, the merger of government documents with library reference services was virtually complete. Claudene Sproles and Angel Clemons wrote that 86.7 percent of government documents librarian job advertisements listed reference services as an essential duty and 84 percent of ads listed information literacy as a job responsibility.⁴⁹ Nicole Trujillo and Kathryn Tallman confirmed this observation. The majority of government documents librarians surveyed stated that general reference and instruction was a primary duty of their positions.⁵⁰

Case Study

In 1999, two paraprofessionals and one of the two librarians from the staff of four in the stand-alone government documents department left the University. Instead of refilling the positions within the department, the decision was made to merge the department with the much larger Reference Department, due to shifting organizational priorities, budget concerns, and a desire to streamline services. This restructure would save on the cost of staffing an entire department, allow the integration of the document collection into the general collection, and enhance services offered at the main reference desk. UofL's rationale of cost savings and collection integration mirrored the reasoning many libraries gave for integrating their stand-alone documents department.⁵¹ Some of the changes were quickly implemented. For example, the phone number was easy to roll over to the main reference desk. One of the paraprofessional staff moved her office down to the reference office suite, microforms were transferred to the adjoining Media Department, and the government documents reference collections were re-cataloged and integrated into the main reference collection.

However, other changes were much more difficult and time-consuming. Government documents periodicals were re-cataloged into the Library of Congress system and integrated into the larger print Library of Congress collection. A bibliographic control project consisting of purchasing Marcive bibliographic records and barcoding over 160,000 government documents occurred simultaneously with the move. The service desk move, the partial reclassification, and Marcive barcode project placed the collection in flux, further complicating reference service and bibliographic control from approximately 1999–2003.

The remaining government documents librarian provided three training sessions for the reference staff, but retired in early 2000 due to the stress of the merger. This left the reference department with the expertise of one paraprofessional staff member and no depository librarian. While there are no studies (that the authors could find) relating to how many staff members choose to leave as a result of mergers, this was certainly an unintended outcome of the transition. It certainly created a

loss of institutional knowledge about the collection and diminished the amount of expertise that users had access to for some amount of time.

Similar to Frazer et al.,⁵² the check-in and processing piece of the stand-alone department moved to the Technical Services unit, along with the vacant librarian and paraprofessional position. The reference and instruction piece remained with reference and the head of reference took on the depository librarian role. However, the department lacked a professional documents specialist.

The reference department agreed that a documents librarian was needed, not only for the in-depth reference expertise but also to manage the depository operations and be the official liaison with the GPO. After the new depository librarian was hired into the Reference Department in 2001, knowledge of government documents and common documents questions became more routine and widespread among the librarians and professional staff. In keeping with the literature, the government documents librarian had regular general reference desk shifts and provided information literacy instruction, both in government documents and also in several subject areas such as geography and history. Clearly the government documents librarian was integrated into the reference department, but did government documents become a part of regular reference work and training?

Well, yes and no. To some extent, just the presence of the government documents librarian at department meetings ensured the inclusion of government documents into collection development discussions and decisions. The documents librarian would also report occasionally on changes at the GPO or take-aways from the Federal Depository Library Conference or show a particular government resource, especially if the resource had been updated or changed in some way. In no way was this training regular or systematic though and most department members continued to refer questions involving government documents to the librarian or the professional staff member with expertise in this area. The overall quality of government documents reference services decreased, as also reflected in the literature.⁵³

Was there any way to measure the use of the merged collection? Unfortunately, reliable records from the pre-merger period do not survive. The merged department used Gimlet as the statistics recording software and a tag was used to designate when a reference question made use of a government document. This provided some small measure of usage, but it was dependent on staff members remembering to tag the question or even in some cases being aware that they were making use of a government resource to answer a question.

The incorporation of government documents into general information literacy instruction was somewhat more successful. The Government Documents Depository Librarian assisted with some one-shots that specifically requested government documents instruction, but in other cases, the head of the instruction program and the department head included examples using government documents in lower-level, standardized instruction, especially instruction involving lower-level communications and English classes where students typically conduct research on interdisciplinary topics. Close association with the Government Documents Depository Librarian ensured that government documents would be more readily considered for instruction.

Due to turnover in the technical services department and the need for someone with documents expertise in cataloging in 2005, the Government Documents Depository Librarian was reassigned to the Technical Services Department for 50 percent of her time. This dual posting lasted for 10 years until she was permanently transferred to technical services full time in 2015. The permanent transfer was due to the need for another professional in technical services rather than to address government documents. Even though she was still the Depository Librarian, little of her job involved working with government information. Because of the ever-decreasing number of tangible receipts of government documents, the paraprofessional position was reassigned to non-documents duties in the early 2010s. Over time, the professional government documents cataloger in technical services was assigned other duties and documents cataloging became only a small part of her position.

In 2017, the Depository Librarian became head of library collections, further reducing the time spent on documents librarianship. This left one legacy documents staff position in reference and no professional documents specialist. While there are still close ties with the Reference Department and the depository librarian, the change of focus for the former government documents librarian has understandably resulted in some reduced efforts to promote government documents. What was learned from this experience? There were many positives to come from the merger, but there were also some negatives.

Pros

- Better overall awareness of government resources by both patrons and library reference staff. Subject librarians are now expected to know the government information resources within their area.
- Patrons now don't necessarily need to know about government resources to be referred to them.

- Integrating the documents collection within the main library collection certainly increased usage as government information became easier to locate.
- Patrons are now referred to government documents more frequently than before, particularly in the electronic environment.
- Usage of the documents collection increased, in part because of being tied to general reference and in part because the reclass into LC classification.
- Cost savings from closing a service point.
- Incorporation of government resources fostered increased collaboration between subject librarians.
- The steady increase of online government information happened after the merger, so the librarians learned the emerging resources together.

Cons

- Patrons did not always get referred to a documents specialist when needed.
- Documents reference services were superior when the library contained a stand-alone documents department.
- Bibliographic control suffered when the collection became integrated.
- Due to the perception that everyone should be able to field documents questions, the Reference Department no longer possesses a professional documents specialist.
- Government documents are no longer anyone's primary reference responsibility, instead it is shared throughout the department.

In many ways, the experience of the University of Louisville during the period 1999–2019 is typical and mirrors what has happened with government documents departments in academic libraries all over the country. As the internet has become the go to reference resource and an easy means of accessing information of all types, including government documents, reference questions in general have decreased along with questions involving the finding or use of government documents. With fewer questions, a corresponding increase in the need for specific subject expertise has emerged. In many ways, this inevitable shift reflects the moves libraries have made to new areas of information expertise: copyright, scholarly communication, data management, visual literacy, and other new areas of librarianship. Government information plays in these emerging areas, through policy directives, legal rulings, agency mandates, and data access and curation. The amount of information that US federal, state, and local governments provide is still relevant and necessary for many people's information

needs. Perhaps, it becomes a functional type of librarianship, similar to data librarianship where ideally, one librarian can be the expert, but all librarians have some baseline level of knowledge.⁵⁴

Conclusion

From the literature and from the experience at the University of Louisville, several conclusions can be drawn regarding the benefits and drawbacks of integrating a government documents and reference department.

Lessons learned

1. If government documents are everyone's responsibility, they can become no one's responsibility.
2. Government documents still need an advocate if they are to be promoted and utilized to their full extent in a library.
3. A training system needs to be implemented to familiarize reference staff with government information. We lacked this and reference service suffered.
4. Basic government documents orientation and training cannot be a one-off experience but must be regularly integrated into professional development.
5. Integrating documents into instruction is both easier and more likely with merged departments where an advocate for them is present.
6. Overall documents reference quality decreased, while the usage of the government information has increased.
7. Emphasis on bibliographic control has lessened in favor of increased focus on reference services.

Even 20 years ago, according to the 2003 Biennial Survey of Depository Libraries, the majority of libraries had merged documents and reference services.⁵⁵ Taking a look back at this transition, government documents librarianship has changed from managing a stand-alone department focused on bibliographic control of a print collection to a more holistic approach that focuses on subject integration in an electronic era. The advent of an all-electronic FDLP means that the University of Louisville Libraries needs to continually adapt their collections and services to ensure continued access to electronic government information. This will need to be achieved through continual training, specialized knowledge, increased data management and consistent marketing of government resources. We need to continue our approach of the last 24 years, providing an integrated service to government information.

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