

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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Librarians' Corner



Thoughts on the differences between a corporate and an academic library

By Casey Duevel

Casey Duevel recently left a corporate position at Ecolab's Research and Development facility for one in academia at the Minnesota State University (MSU)—Mankato.

I worked for five years at Ecolab—an industrial soap, detergent, and pest control manufacturer—fulfilling several roles during that time. I began as an administrative assistant at the headquarters location in Saint Paul, MN; transitioned to a position as a library assistant at the research and development facility in Eagan, MN, in November 2002; and then was promoted to an associate knowledge and information analyst in November 2005, shortly before I received my MLIS degree.

In the Ecolab library, I was a “jack-of-all-trades”. Because I had limited background in chemistry, my responsibilities were operational in nature to start out. As I gained knowledge of both Ecolab and the library world, I took on more advanced tasks. I cataloged books, serials, and special collections; coordinated the library move to a new facility; recalled laboratory notebooks; worked with collection development and website oversight teams (I later coordinated collection development); started and maintained a collection of electronic resources; and conducted library tours and orientations. In addition to providing in-depth business and technical searches, I carried out the day-to-day operations of the library: answering ready reference questions, performing basic business searches, processing document requests and delivery, checking materials in and out, billing and invoicing, working with vendors, and performing some administrative duties.

Ecolab had provided me with a broad knowledge base, but I wanted to try my hand in the academic world. I felt inspired by the vitality of academic librarianship and excited to be working with students just learning how to research. Also, because I wore a lot of hats at Ecolab, I pondered what it would be like to have more specialized responsibilities. I began as an electronic resources librarian at MSU—Mankato in August 2006, managing the Memorial Library's electronic databases, staffing the reference desk, and serving on various committees, including collection development and website development.

The major difference between my jobs at Ecolab and at MSU—Mankato is that the university librarians hold faculty status. (I need to come up with some research ideas, and quickly!) Although I had been encouraged to consider research and continuing my education at Ecolab, research is not an option at MSU—Mankato; it is implicit with faculty status that, to gain promotion and tenure, education and research requirements must be met in a timely manner. Besides the emphasis on research, faculty status provides a sense of collegiality among the librarians because no hierarchy of supervisors and employees exists among colleagues. It can also provide for a plethora of committees, subcommittees, and meetings so that every librarian has a chance to provide input.

The physical spaces of the two libraries are completely different. MSU—Mankato's library has four floors and approximately 1.2 million volumes—including 3,200 print periodical subscriptions, 27,000 full-text electronic journals, and more than 200 electronic databases. In contrast, Ecolab's library had four rows of bookcases, about 100 active print periodical subscriptions, and approximately 20 electronic journals at the time of my departure. As the sizes of these collections reflect, the library of a state-run academic institution has a larger budget; it is a venerable fixture on campus and thus feels more stable to me. Quite the opposite, many corporate libraries struggle to justify their existence and prove their worth so that they can carve out a portion of the budget for themselves. They also must market their services to patrons who may not even know that a corporate library even exists, much less what such a library could provide.

Another difference is that the ultimate goal at Ecolab's library was to find the very best information in a timely manner. Information searches were often an iterative process: conducted entirely by the library staff, returned to the patron for further input and refinement, then run again to hone the search. At MSU—Mankato, the focus remains on providing quality resources and documents but even more on educating the patrons about the best resources for finding what they need and teaching patrons how to use the tools effectively and independently. Ecolab's bottom line was to find, build, and sell the best products, and the library's goal was to support that mission. In the same manner, the common goal at MSU—Mankato is to provide students with the tools and resources needed to gain the knowledge and capabilities that will take them the next step—beyond college—with the library fully supporting this objective.

The difference that saddens me the most is that with a campus of more than 12,000 students, I will not know all of my MSU—Mankato patrons by name and get to know their personalities, as I did with nearly all of my Ecolab patrons. The patrons, too, have very different needs. I now assist undergrad students who are working on their first research papers, need to know how to cite resources, or hope that librarians can help them do all of their research online; graduate students are looking for primary resources and consultation sessions with librarians. At Ecolab, patrons wanted in-depth searches on competitors' products, documents ordered and billed to their departments, or obscure references found.

Despite great disparities in size, budget, and specialization between the corporate and academic institutions where I have worked, similarities exist. Instruction and education are key. Patrons in both libraries must be taught how to use the catalog, microfiche readers, and electronic databases and also need help deciphering the Library of Congress classification system and finding resources in the library. The value of good customer service and meeting the patron needs is of the utmost importance at both libraries. Finally, the librarians at both institutions are dedicated to providing the best resources and learning new methods for information retrieval and use.

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