Changing the way Libraries and Faculty Assess Periodical Collections in the Electronic Age

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Background

Libraries have been struggling with a period of transition for the past ten years. It became clear in the mid 1990s that the emergence of the internet as an information stream would reshape and reframe our professional values and practices, but for the most part libraries simply had to wait and see exactly how that would happen. As librarians have struggled to predict the future and act accordingly, we've had ample time to observe what has come to pass. We now know that the internet had a profound affect on the production and distribution of scholarly information, and changed the user's expectation of information delivery equally dramatically. At the same time, library budgets were strained by depressed economics in higher education, and the emergence of online information resources, coupled with the rising costs of periodicals, increased that constraint. As user expectations have changed, and purchasing power has shrunk, libraries have struggled to balance traditional collecting habits with emerging patterns in our information culture.

Speaking practically, as budgets remained flat and the need for online content increased, libraries curtailed monograph purchasing, and have been forced to cut their periodicals subscriptions. Each year, as prices rise, and acknowledging the overlap of most online resources with traditional print periodicals, libraries have turned to their print subscriptions to create budget flexibility, cutting the least used titles and the lower-demand niche titles from the collection.

Today many libraries have reached the point at which they can no longer comfortably or responsibly reduce their print periodical holdings — to reduce their subscriptions further would be damaging to campus research and learning — but they are continuing to face the same financial constraints, user expectations of quick access, and concerns about print versus online access that led to the need to cancel titles. Faculty at many institutions are becoming increasingly embittered by their libraries' need to cancel periodicals, and in some cases library-faculty relationships are suffering. Furthermore, these seemingly endless rounds of cuts have led to print collections created not by forethought and planning, but necessity — only protected titles remain, often with too little attention paid to the balance between print and online information, the uniqueness of each library's collection as it relates to the curriculum, or the emerging needs of digitally native users.

In light of the changes of the past decade and the new information horizon racing toward us, we felt that the time had come to change the SUNY Potsdam campus conversation about periodicals — and in doing so, change our perception about library periodical collections. The time had come to try something new.

The Old Way

Many libraries have shared a similar approach to reducing their periodicals budget — evaluating and cutting titles. Both anecdotal and published evidence support this assertion; the literature is full of interesting and useful articles describing how University X methodically approached their periodicals cutting exercise, and the conversation of serials or collection management librarians, gathered at a conference or workshop, will inevitably turn to 'how we cut our subscriptions this year". The prevailing strategy, one we employed at Potsdam for many consecutive years, has been to provide selectors — be they librarians or faculty — with the list of current periodicals in a subject area, a collection of relevant data concerning use, price, and online availability, and then asking for opinions on which titles should be cancelled. Lists were generated, subscriptions were discussed, and the collection became leaner each year, inevitably favoring retention of high-use, low-cost print titles.

There were several unintended side-effects of this process. First, librarians had fallen out of the habit of considering any new titles — the process had become so focused on reducing expenditures that it was inadvertently blocking conversation about new periodicals, emerging curricular needs, or our changing student body. Second, continued cuts were creating an upwelling of frustration among teaching faculty who were simultaneously being given smaller resources for purchasing monographs (due to the increasing size of the electronic resources budget) and being asked to help us subscribe to fewer periodicals (to offset yearly price increases). They had come to view the periodicals cancellation process as a time when they must protect the traditional resources available in their subject area, rather than a chance to collaborate with the College Libraries. The problem was clear: the libraries were approaching the faculty with a yearly request for negative feedback about our collections, and they were providing us with exactly what we asked for.

The New Way

Several campus departments have had extensive faculty turnover due to retirements, and we chose two to approach as pilot participants. Because of their many new faculty members — with new curricular foci and new approaches to their field – these departments were eager to discuss our holdings in their areas of expertise. We were aware that we were stacking the deck in our favor by approaching eager new faculty with our changed approach, but felt that the benefit to the departments and the momentum gained by the libraries if the pilot proved successful justified our choices.

To get the project started, our Collection Development Coordinator explained the project in overview to the chair of each participating department, knowing that without engaged buy-in from departmental leadership, any project is likely to struggle. The Coordinator and chairs agreed that a librarian would conduct meetings with each department member (or, in larger departments, with one representative of each major area covered in the curriculum), and interview them about their periodical needs and usage. The librarians would compile a list of periodical recommendations based on their feedback, and then the department chair and librarians would meet to come to an agreement on a course of action. On the surface, that process is not remarkably different from the processes employed in the past — the difference lies in the questions asked during these interviews.

Past periodicals conversations had focused on currently-held titles, usage statistics, and cost, and had been accompanied by lengthy lists and spreadsheets, laden with valuable but complex data. How should a faculty member interpret use of current issues in relation to price? Librarians have productive conversations about such data, but this is not the faculty's area of expertise, and the data was not helping them make recommendations. The new interview process eliminated that portion of the conversation entirely. Hypothesizing that presentation of data and lists regarding the current state of affairs was predetermining library-faculty communication about the collection, and that the initial statement of "what we have now" was preventing all parties from looking at the broader periodicals context, the new process focused on student learning (a key part of the libraries' collection development policy), and on print versus online access (an issue of ever-increas-

ing relevance to both users and budgets). When librarians met with each faculty member in the target department, they asked a series of straight-forward, jargon-free questions:

1. What courses to you teach regularly? Which courses do you teach infrequently? What courses do you have in development?

2. Considering those courses, what assignments do you give your students that require library research?

3. What journals are most appropriate when they do that research?

4. Does it matter to your course's learning objectives if those journals are in print or online?

5. What student-accessible titles do you think we should have in print to provide a representative browsing collection in your discipline?

These questions are clearly tailored to one library's mission, and an institution with a greater focus on faculty research or with different unique strengths would ask dramatically different questions. The key as we perceived it was to finally ask the questions that we really wanted answers to — how do faculty use library resources in their classroom, and how do they view online resources?

The interviewing librarian recorded all of the answers given by the faculty member, and found that faculty could answer those questions on the spot, with no need for research, lists, or data. We were asking questions that get at the heart of what faculty at a liberal-arts teaching college do while still highlighting the digital information landscape and its effects on teaching and learning. Additionally, the simple act of soliciting positive responses — asking "what do you need?" rather than "is what we have good enough?" — brought a collaborative energy to the project that had been missing from past periodicals exercises.

Using the Data

After all faculty members had been interviewed, their responses were input into an Excel spreadsheet, sorted by requested format, and then compared to the College Libraries' current subscription list. **(fig. 1)**

WHERE IS FIGURE 1 ??

The lists were sorted, and areas of faculty consensus as well as unique requests were identified. After adding current subscription status, current online availability, and current price, librarians assessed the requests, making recommendations based on our responsibility for overall collection balance and our professional experience. We made changes, adding in general titles that faculty had not suggested for the print collection, but which we felt added value to the browsing collection. We also moved some titles to the "not recommended" list based on excessive cost or the irregularity with which the subject

matter is included in the curriculum. Additionally, it was amazing to see how many of the titles that faculty had vehemently declared "essential" and "must be kept" in previous years did not appear on the new list at all, backing up the hypothesis that decisions were being made in the wrong context in previous years.

What we presented to each department chair was a series of short lists:

1. **Cancellations**. This list consisted of print titles that could be cancelled, titles that no one requested, or because the title was desired only in online format, which we were already getting through an aggregator.

2. **Titles to retain in print**. These titles were perceived to be valuable in print, and faculty agreed that classroom assignments would foster that print use.

3. **New titles.** The final action list was of new subscriptions requested, either for online-only or print-only access, or both.

4. **Currently available online titles**. This list was included as an educational tool. Faculty requested many titles that they wanted to see available online — titles that the libraries were already providing access to. This list pointed out the need for better communication of our available online resources to our faculty.

5. **Titles not acted upon**. This list was also included as an educational tool, and was made up of suggestions from faculty members in which the librarians' opinions differed from theirs. We felt that there was a teachable moment in including this list, allowing us to talk openly with the faculty about how and why we make decisions about our collections.

Each list had an associated cost — $X to be achieved by cancellations, $Y to be spent on new titles, $Z in current subscriptions. The Collection Development Coordinator worked with the department chair to balance those costs in light of the year's proposed subject allocation for periodicals. In each case, we were able to find a compromise that worked for both the department and the College Libraries.

Drawbacks

The process is not without drawbacks. It is an extremely time-consuming way to approach periodicals subscriptions because of the personal interaction involved and the human resources required to conduct the many interviews the project calls for. However, based on the amount of goodwill generated by the process, and the amount of informa-

tion gathered about the relevance, use, and composition of the libraries' collections, we have decided the human resources are well-spent on this endeavour.

There is also the potential, with these open-ended conversations, that the department will identify many more needs than the College Libraries can reasonably meet, and that the lists generated will produce a net increase in spending rather than a decrease. This is a chance we feel we must take – our responsibility is to provide adequate and appropriate resources to support the teaching and learning needs of our student body, not to simply manage budgets. If we learn that we are not supporting a portion of our learning community, it is our responsibility to address that inadequacy, and we are better off for knowing the scope of the problem. In the end, our detailed information gathering can provide the basis for requests for increased funding for the College Libraries, if that is what our assessment warrants. Good decisions must be based on all available information, and despite its drawbacks, this process provides us with far more information than the libraries had been gathering in the past.

Conclusion

The end result of this process was an understanding that, indeed, our approach to periodicals subscription management in the digital age must change. Informal questioning of the faculty who participated in the project indicated that they were pleased to have been consulted one-on-one, in person, and that they were satisfied with the decisions resulting from our conversations. Librarians agreed that it was very enlightening to discuss the teaching needs of the faculty and to gain a better understanding of their perspectives about information resources. We found that this was an excellent opportunity for us to realign our collections with current curricular initiatives, to shift our formats from print to online where appropriate, and to ensure that our periodicals dollars are being spent on the best possible mix of print and online titles for our users and our curriculum.

Collection managers and serials librarians must ask new questions in the new environment libraries operate in. We need to understand what resources our teaching faculty, intimately involved in the research life of a college, believe that their students will need to support teaching and learning. While many librarians will be quick to argue that we have been asking that question of the teaching faculty for years, that may be a false assumption. It appears that what many libraries are asking is "what journals need to be in the library?", which is a very different question from "what resources, in which format, best support student learning?" That change in language has the possibility of producing startling results.

By approaching teaching faculty bearing lists of titles, data on usage, charts showing

the decline in periodical use, and asking them to tell us what they think we should get rid of, without clearly focusing on what resources the library may already provide online or asking what students truly need to succeed at our institutions, we have inadvertently fostered a sense that the scholarly literature so valued by academia is less useful and less worthwhile in the eyes of the increasingly digitally oriented library. In order to reverse that perception, and instead foster a culture in which teaching faculty understand that the libraries are striving to provide the best, most vital and most relevant collection of print and online periodicals possible, we must ask new questions. We must probe for honest answers and reactions rather than cursory and negative responses to the same questions we've been asking for years. Our budget management, our collections, our relationships, and most of all our relevance to our users will benefit from a new approach.