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Giving Them What They Want: Providing Information for a Serials Review Project

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Abstract:

In preparation for a comprehensive serials review project, we created a homegrown Access database in order to bring together and analyze information about our collection from multiple sources. Bibliographic and order information were taken from the catalog; online access information was exported from the A-to-Z list; and in-house as well as electronic use statistics were gathered. These were assembled into a single, easy-to-use form showing the comprehensive range of data for each title. From there, the information could be tailored to best serve each level of review during the decision making process. The discussion includes the challenges in assembling and presenting the data to diverse constituent groups, the results of the cancellation project and the role having a comprehensive database of information played throughout. Finally we will discuss the reasons for choosing this method of review over a commercial product and our suggestions for others in similar circumstances.

Western Carolina University conducted a complete review of continuing resources expenditures due to a severe budget reduction during the fall of 2011. Library budget reductions included a 23% reduction to the continuing resources budget after accounting for both the overall budget reduction and predicted inflation in continuing resources. Data-based decision making and faculty involvement were identified as key to a successful review. A homegrown database was created to bring together and analyze information about current subscriptions. Using the database, the data was organized and presented to various audiences. Large amounts of data were organized into useful formats through the creation of a Microsoft Access database and prepared for various audiences including serials librarians, subject librarians, and faculty using Microsoft Excel.

Data Collection

In order to collect the data necessary, a collections committee compiled a list of data it considered essential for a comprehensive review. The electronic resources librarian assessed the list and excluded data which would not be feasible to collect on a large scale including impact factor, accreditation information, detailed data about journals within aggregators, and some circulation statistics. The integrated library system served as the primary data source for the information collected. Electronic usage data, online availability and indexing information originated from external vendors. Metrics, such as cost-per-use and the annual cost of irregular

series, underwent additional pre-processing before they were included in the database. The cost-per-use was calculated across an extended use period, reflecting the cost of maintaining a subscription over multiple years and mitigating fluctuations in use. Local practices proved to be a source of confusion, especially for the librarians new to the university. The inconsistent treatment of journal packages and combination subscriptions made some titles difficult to track. Other data had been stored in notes fields which had to be manually prepared in Excel before inclusion in the database. Identical format codes were used for electronic resource order fields, making it impossible to distinguish e-journals, databases, and ongoing maintenance fees without human intervention.

Using the collected, computed and corrected data, the electronic resources librarian created a database using Microsoft Access. Data tables were linked using record numbers from order and bibliographic records and ISSNs as controlled identifiers. Once relationships between tables were established, a form was used to create a "simple view" that displayed all data related to each title. Microsoft Access provided the added benefit of simplifying complex information, like online access availability and print journal holdings, into embedded tables within the form. The Access database could also be used to provide additional reports on-demand which allowed specific review of subsets of data based on material type or location codes.

Figure 1. List of data and their sources

ILS Sourced Data

- Bibliographic information
- Order information
 - Cost
 - Subscription type
 - Department or Fund codes
 - Format(s)
- Print & Microfilm holdings
- Print & Microfilm use

Externally Sourced Data

- E-Journal Use
- Abstract & Index locations
- Online availability
 - Provider
 - Coverage dates
 - Embargos

Computed Data

- Cost-per-use
- Annual costs for irregular series

Data Interpretation and Presentation

The purpose of providing the data was to help guide decision making at each level of review, with an emphasis on added value over raw numbers. As the review progressed, each constituent group added a layer of interpretation to the data with the next constituent group in mind, while removing a layer of information that was either unhelpful or confusing.

The serials librarian began review using the *Access* database directly in order to gather a “big picture” understanding of the data and determine a review strategy. A collections committee approved this set of budget reduction strategies. Most attention would be given to titles purchased in multiple formats or available through databases, to titles with low use, and to titles that no longer suit the curricu-

lum. Using the budget reduction strategies, “Library Recommendations” were assigned by the serials librarian to each title. Some categories clarified information, separating databases and titles within journal packages. Other categories combined several data points into a succinct recommendation. During the review and classification of the data, the need for additional categories emerged and those categories were created. In the end, standing orders, databases, newspapers, and microforms were simply identified as such and reviewed separately. Package titles and titles in the browsing collection were identified but exempt from review. Three categories for close review were established, described in figure 2. The remaining titles received no recommendation and were considered according to curricular need.

Figure 2. Categories assigned to titles under review

Format Overlap	Journals where full text access was available through databases with no embargo.
Low Use	Journals with high cost per use, but no full text access was available through databases.
Embargoed Full Text	Journals with high cost per use available in full text in a database. Database and length of embargo were provided.

Subject librarians requested as much information as possible for their continued review. *Excel* spreadsheets were developed to provide the data for the review in a comprehensive but usable manner. One file was created for each fund code and included a detailed worksheet with all information from the database and a summary worksheet, which included only the format, cost, cost per use, and library recommendation for each title. The intent of the summary worksheet was to create a simple display that was easy to manipulate and could serve as the basis for spreadsheets created by subject librarians for their faculty.

In order to help subject librarians fully understand the magnitude of the project and the data involved, a workshop was held to frame the review project. Background was given on all data collected and presented in the spreadsheets, focusing on caveats and questions that faculty might raise. Library recommendations were discussed at length, including what amount of cancellation in each category would result in the necessary budget reduction. No quotas were set for cancellations by any program, department, college, or subject librarian. A “sample script” of a meeting with a department, along with a list of what additional data could be collected and

how data might be presented to faculty was provided as follow up to the workshop.

Subject librarians were then free to prepare the data and consult with faculty in the manner they felt was most appropriate. Subject librarians provided additional data where possible and applicable for review. In addition to their subject knowledge and familiarity with the curriculum, subject librarians also researched available indexing of journals, details of full text coverage, comparable resources, and additional use statistics. Combining the additional research with the data from the spreadsheets, subject librarians sought input from faculty in a variety of methods. Subject librarians' presentations of data were likely to be organized in *Excel* workbooks by what would happen to access if a title were cut, and stripped of extraneous information and library jargon. Subject librarians made the following adjustments to the data for faculty consumption:

- Combining formats into single line items for each title
- Replacing numbers with explanations for titles with no use
- Including use statistics for standing orders where applicable
- Explicating full text – indicating type and extent of coverage
- Including indexing information where applicable
- Including subject librarian recommendations
- Removing extraneous information to reduce confusion
- Removing titles not under consideration
- Sorting titles by outcome of cancellation

A minority of subject librarians took a different approach to presenting information to faculty, forwarding only a small number of titles for faculty feedback. These librarians relied on their relationships with faculty and extensive knowledge of the curriculum to act as stewards of the collection in their subject areas. Because of the established trust with faculty, these reviews had equally positive outcomes as those which shared highly interpreted data with faculty.

Impressions of the Review Process

Informal conversations with subject librarians indicated that the presence and preparation of data were key to the positive outcome of the review. Subject librarians reported that the data provided a solid basis for the review process. In addition to reducing workload, library recommendations provided a framework for the review process. Having titles already divided into smaller groups by certain characteristics was reported to be very helpful in preparing recommendations to the faculty. Many subject librarians conducted additional research or confirmed data, reporting that doing so helped to familiarize themselves with their titles and provided a deeper understanding of the data ahead of discussions with faculty. Library recommendations ensured that uniform principles of review were in place at the beginning of the review, even while freedom to make adjustments was given. Subject librarians reported satisfaction with the mix of guidance and freedom given them in the review process. Subject librarians reported that faculty understood and appreciated the work the library had put into the review and the budgetary need to make changes to the collection. The categories assigned by liaisons, often closely following the original library recommendation, allowed faculty to focus on specific titles of interest within each of the smaller groups. This more focused review facilitated discussions about required resources and curricular trends between faculty and subject librarians that might not have otherwise occurred. These anecdotal findings are in line with other reports on serials review projects where faculty engagement has been increased through an in-depth review of subscriptions.¹

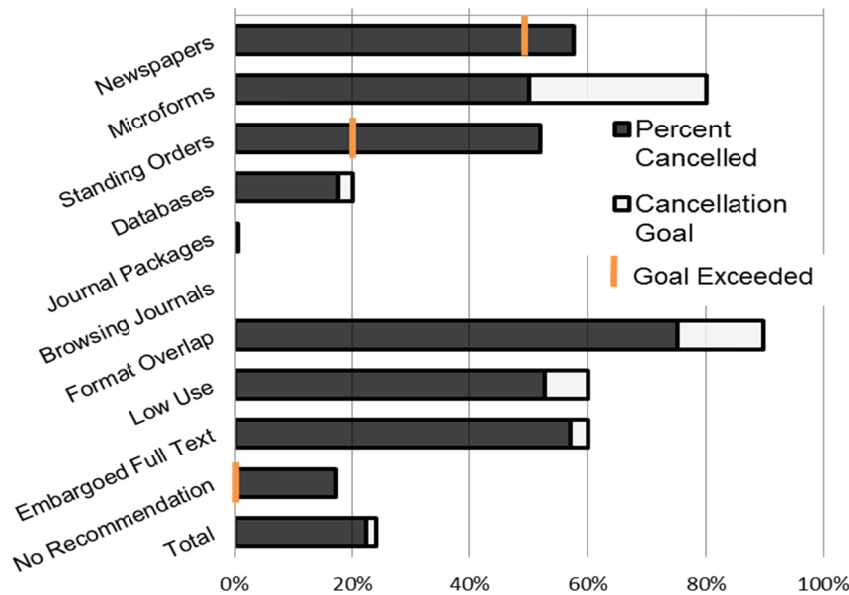
Collection Review Outcomes

The library recommendations based on use and online availability helped to frame goals for reductions. Without these goals, reductions stemming of the review might have been more conservative. Library recommendations targeted for heavy reductions had the most cancellations, each over half. Other categories of review had significant reductions above what was expected, most notably standing orders and titles with no library recommendations. Exceeding the cancellation goals in standing orders and no recommendations were most likely closely related to curricular need.

Although some goals for cancellations by library recommendation were not met, the categories that exceeded expectations made up for the shortfall, re-

sulting in a number of cancellations that approached the amount of funds needing to be reduced.

Figure 3. Percent cancellation by cost by category



Creating a database that combines all essential information about continuing resources subscriptions was a fruitful experience for the library at Western Carolina University. In addition to highlighting areas for the current reduction, a holistic review of the continuing resources collection made areas for future review apparent. Although the library is currently implementing EBSCO's ERM Essentials and incorporating that tool into e-resources workflows, the *Access* database will continue to be an important part of subscription and retention decisions for serials. The ERM is expected to improve the

overall management of e-resources, but does not have all the capabilities necessary for evaluating resources for cancellation. In particular, ERM Essentials cannot incorporate use data or perform cost per use calculations. The reporting and data export functionality is also limited. The *Access* database was designed to allow for future years of data to be appended onto existing tables. As the *Access* database continues to be used, the cost of set-up and maintenance decreases while benefits continue to be accrued.

¹ See Ronadin Carey, Stephen Elfstrand, and Renee Hijleh, "An Evidence-Based Approach for Gaining Faculty Acceptance in a Serials Cancellation Project," *Collection Management* 30, no. 2 (April 2005): 59-72 and Sandhya D. Srivastava, and Pamela Harpel-Burke, "The Library and the Faculty Senate: Legitimizing the Serials Evaluation Process Using the Department of Biology Subscriptions," *Acquisitions Librarian* 18, no. 35/36 (April 2006): 149-159.