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Marcia Thomas
Illinois Wesleyan University, mthomas@iwu.edu

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Marcia Thomas, "Getting to the Heart of the Matter: What Faculty Tell Us about How Our Collections Support Student Learning" (2011). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference.*
http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284314956

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Getting to the Heart of the Matter: What Faculty Tell Us about How Our Collections Support Student Learning

Marcia Thomas, Director of Collections and Technical Services, Illinois Wesleyan University

Abstract:
In 2010, librarians at IWU's The Ames Library embarked on a multi-year collection review process. This is an evaluation and prioritization project for assessing and building our collection as a whole. Our purpose is to not only evaluate what we have now, but also identify what resources, in which formats, best support student learning. The centerpiece of the review is one-on-one interviews conducted by librarians with each full-time faculty member in their liaison subject areas/departments. We asked faculty to reflect on how our collections (in all formats, including electronic) meet their pedagogical needs and support student research, as a way of helping us improve our decision-making about our collections and anticipate future needs. This presentation will focus on what questions we asked our faculty, what we learned from the interviews, and how these data inform a number of collection-related initiatives (including a long-overdue weeding project, an assessment of our materials fund allocation practices, and revision of our collection development policy), as well as our information literacy program. The audience will be asked for their observations about the questions asked of faculty and suggestions for additional ways that these data can be used.

BACKGROUND

Illinois Wesleyan University is a highly selective, private, residential, undergraduate liberal arts school of 2,100 students, offering a diverse curriculum in liberal arts, fine arts, and professional programs. Professional programs include Nursing, Theater, Music, and Art. One-fourth of liberal arts students are business majors. IWU has approximately 191 faculty tenure-line positions. The sole campus library, The Ames Library, opened in 2002 and currently houses over 350,000 items in its physical collection. There are nine librarians, all with faculty status. Librarians have responsibility for functional areas of the library and serve as liaisons to multiple departments, programs and professional schools. Ames Library is a member of the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (CARLI), a statewide consortium with a strong commitment to resource sharing and excellent interlibrary loan services. CARLI's consortial purchasing program is another important service.

We kept coming back to variations on questions that required the same type of information to make good decisions: Do we need title X? Do we need perpetual rights for e-journal X? Can we get rid of multiple copies of book X? If our budget is cut again, which databases do we cancel? The answers depend on our curriculum and how faculty use the library for their courses and assignments.

Faced with budget cuts, the need to weed our monograph collection and review our subscriptions, and an outdated allocation formula, we sought a firm understanding of what is "core" to our liberal arts. We also wanted to know which resources are our legacy material for future preservation and access. As Collections Librarian, I worked with the University Librarian to draft a plan for a collection review that would address these issues.

Collection Review Planning

With input from all librarians, the plan that emerged was strongly influenced by the work of two other libraries. In their 2009 Charleston Conference presentation, Rushing and Stephen (2009) described a project undertaken at Belmont University's Bunch Library in response to their provost's directive to link information literacy goals to the purchase of library materials and address a disparity in the allocation of funds among academic departments. The librarians undertook a course analysis based on each department's course catalogs and syllabi, which were analyzed to identify information literacy components and level of need for library resources. Each course was then ranked according to "library resource needs" scale. In the second influential project at SUNY Potsdam, librarians conducted a serials review and cancellation project in a manner that resonated with IWU's campus culture (Rogers, 2006). Instead of handing faculty lengthy title lists and spreadsheets with complex data, li-

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DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284314956

brarians used an interview process with faculty to first address broader issues: How do faculty use library resources in their classroom and how do they view online resources? What resources do we need to support the curriculum? What resources (and in what format?) best support student learning? After the interviews were conducted and analyzed, librarians then presented department chairs with a series of selected title lists, grouped according to the type of action or feedback required on the part of faculty.

The collection review plan that we have adopted at IWU, then is designed to be an evaluation and prioritization project. Our original goals were:

Primary

- Align our collections with current curriculum and support teaching and learning needs of our students and faculty—relevant and vital.
- Ensure that money is being spent on purchasing or providing access to the best possible resources for our users and our curriculum.
- Engage in long term planning for collection management.
- Identify essential resources for continued access and/or maintenance and preservation.

Secondary

- Shift format from print to online where appropriate.
- Prioritize expenditures for budget planning under a range of scenarios (responsible collection management).

As the librarians worked through the planning process, additional goals and lines of inquiry emerged. To better understand how our faculty use library resources, we wanted to know about their pedagogy and classroom assignments. These conversations would then give us opportunities to talk very specifically about our information literacy program and other services that directly support teaching and learning. We support faculty and students. We also wanted to learn more about individual faculty scholarship, how their own research agendas inform their teaching, and the resources they use.

The plan that emerged has two phases. The first consists of interviews conducted individually by librarians with each of tenure-line faculty member in their assigned liaison areas. This work was largely completed in this timeframe:

<u>Summer 2010 – Spring 2011</u>

- UL get administrative and department chair buy in.
- Test interview questions with our Library Advisory Committee and select faculty.
- Begin interviews mid-fall through following spring semester.

<u>Summer 2011</u>

- Compile and analyze all data.

<u>Fall 2011</u>

- Synthesize results and form recommendations.
- UL presents results to academic officers and department chairs; librarians report findings to liaison departments.
- The second phase begins in 2012 when we gather usage, costs and other data for an assessment of serials and databases, work with faculty to identify core titles and candidates for withdrawal, and revise our collection development policy.

Faculty Interviews

Borrowing from the SUNY Potsdam project, the questions asked by librarians in the faculty interviews focus on course content, pedagogy, and assignments. We added questions about faculty scholarship to help us better understand some of their research needs and to identify collections and resources that we might link to or support. The questions underwent several revisions and tests before we made appointments with individual faculty. We first discussed our plans and previewed the questions with the Library Advisory Committee, which is composed of faculty from variety of disciplines. Next we tested our questions with two small groups of faculty. Their feedback was critical. For example, we discovered that some faculty assumed there was some sort of a hidden agenda behind the questions. We then made sure that faculty understood our purpose was simply to gather information in order to make better decisions about our collec-

tions. A political science professor with a background in polling suggested we change the order of the questions: ask the questions about faculty research first, as a warm up to the questions about pedagogy and assignments.

Final version of interview questions
Faculty scholarship

1. What are your fields of interest/specialization/scholarship?
2. What professional associations do you belong to?
3. Do you edit or review for any journals? If yes, which?
4. What publishers/resource providers are most important for your field and your subfields? Do you receive catalogs for these or other publishers?
5. What collections (physical or virtual) do you use that are outside of our own?

Teaching

1. What courses do you teach regularly? Which courses do you teach infrequently? What courses do you have in development? Please include courses you teach in interdisciplinary programs.
2. What are your overall pedagogical goals when developing assignments for your students? Are our collections and resources relevant with respect to assignments? Are there ways in which the library might support—or further support—your goals and the work of your students
3. Are there any particular characteristics of those resources that are important for teaching that course or meeting the pedagogical goals of assignments and research projects? (E*xamples of characteristics: format, currency, types of information).* Are there any particular characteristics that are important for teaching in your discipline and interdisciplinary programs?
4. Are there resources we don't have that we ought to consider? Areas of the collection that could be improved?

The next challenge was determining how to capture and analyze the interview responses. At this time, The Ames Library was one of five Illinois academic libraries participating in the Ethnographic Research in Illinois Academic Libraries (ERIAL) project. The goal of the ERIAL research was to understand how students do research, and how relationships between students, teaching faculty and librarians shape that process. I consulted with ERIAL's lead anthropologist, Andrew Asher, for advice on conducting interviews as well as capturing responses. He advised us to let faculty know how much time the interview would take (no more than 60 minutes) and to be specific; rather than ask, "What library resources do you think the library needs to support student learning?" ask instead, "Thinking about your classes this semester - name a couple resources you used." For capture and analysis, he advised us to keep it simple, given the relatively small scale of this project, and suggested that we use Google Forms. Whatever information is entered into an online Google form is automatically collected in a spreadsheet.

Librarians decided to interview only permanent tenure-line faculty, excluding all adjuncts, most visiting professors, faculty in administrative positions, and a few music professors who were strictly studio instructors. The final step before scheduling interviews was to request from the registrar a list of all the courses taught be each faculty member for the last five years. With complete support from administration, our University Librarian e-mailed faculty about our plans at the beginning of the 2010-2011 academic year, and we began making appointments.

Interview Findings

During the remainder of the 2010-2011 academic year and into the following summer, librarians interviewed 118 or 87% from a pool of 136 tenure-line faculty. There are 191 tenure-line positions at IWU (including librarians), but we chose not to interview faculty in administrative positions, visiting faculty, and a handful of studio music faculty. In reviewing the results posted by librarians in the Google Forms spreadsheet, we were able to categorize responses by department, schools, and divisions. Obviously some of our findings are unique to IWU, while others will hold for any academy; for example, business and economics faculty rely on current online journals for their courses while philosophy faculty have minimal need for secondary sources of any format or type.

Other responses were quite surprising: Physics faculty value monographs as much as journals for their discipline; humanities faculty still prefer print for their own work but they are no longer concerned about format ("It's the content not the form" is a typical response to question 8); Greek and Roman Studies faculty enthusiastically use the ACLS Humanities E-book collection for their classes; School of Nursing faculty want feature films, TV shows, or YouTube videos in which characters exhibit symptoms of diseases or conditions that students are likely to encounter in their clinicals.

At the macro level, these are the key findings that will guide us in our work to meet our stated goal of aligning our collections with the current curriculum and supporting the teaching and learning needs of our students and faculty:

- Video: Faculty across all disciplines use video as a primary format for teaching. More importantly, there is a demand for streamed audio and visual content. We need to allocate funds accordingly and also work with campus IT to ensure adequate bandwidth to support online media.
- Interlibrary Loan: Faculty expressed nearly universal satisfaction with our interlibrary loan and document delivery services to meet student research needs in all levels of course work. Indeed, many of our faculty—in some cases entire departments—rely almost exclusively on interlibrary service to provide resources for their own scholarship. The implications are significant: Our faculty are cognizant that we don't need a "just in case" collection. On the other hand, we are concerned with the trend in research libraries to purchase e-book packages and titles with restrictive licenses. We need to actively work with our consortial partners to ensure that resource sharing remains a top priority.
- Format: It is now clear that faculty are comfortable with electronic format, particularly journals. While many faculty still prefer print for personal use and for some course texts, the consistent message regarding supporting resources is "It's the content, not the container." We will continue to educate our faculty about library initiatives to preserve content while we move ahead with plans to withdraw print journals for which we have secure electronic access.
- Information literacy: As our University Librarian observed, "These discussions opened doors of communication that will allow future conversations to occur more easily. I think we planted the seeds of how the library can impact pedagogy and student research habits."
- Collection building: Faculty like the consultative role regarding collections but they seem to trust us to make good decisions, keeping in mind their needs and priorities for the curriculum. The interview process reinforced that trust and empowers us to make critical collection decisions with confidence.

Librarians' Responses

In addition to capturing responses of individual faculty in Google Forms, each librarian was asked to provide a brief summary for each of their liaison areas, responding to these questions:

- What did I learn? What surprised me? What was confirmed?
- What consistencies and variances did I observe in responses from faculty in a given department?
- What will I report back to the department faculty?
- How will this data inform impact my decision making about collections? Other liaison responsibilities, such as instruction?

To a person, librarians thought the process was very worthwhile and built good will, despite the considerable investment of time. The interview format itself provided a new avenue of communication with faculty we have not worked closely with in the past and a different type of engagement with faculty we know quite well. One of our librarians reflected, "I think the utility of the interviews worked both ways: The faculty were directed to reflect on the library in an engaged way, and I was directed to ask them questions that I had pre-supposed the answers to. Sometimes my suppositions were right, and sometimes they were only what I wanted to think—so it was a great opportunity to reflect on

my assumptions." It was especially affirming to hear that our services and collections are valued. More importantly, responses to the questions about assignments and pedagogy provide *direct* evidence for our assessment of how our collection does, or does not, support the teaching mission of our university. All of us discovered new opportunities to connect to our faculty in multiple ways: Collection building, information literacy opportunities, assistance with faculty research, and linking resources to pedagogy.

Follow up and Phase II

We will wrap up the first phase of our curriculum review by reporting back to departments and administration and responding to individual faculty requests for resources or other services. The second phase of our curriculum review begins in 2012. Our goals for this phase include a title review of serials and databases, identification of core resources and candidates for long-term preservation, monograph and serial weeding, a review of materials allocations, and a complete overhaul of our collection development policy. In addition to hard data such as usage and costs, with results from faculty interviews we now have rich, qualitative data to inform our collection decisions as well as our information literacy program. Finally, we will plan to repeat the curriculum review on a three to five year cycle.

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