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Op Ed — Should Academic Libraries Ask for Bailout Too?!

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W ith the ever scrolling marquee of media proclaiming the downward spiral of both the domestic and global economy, I am sure by now you have heard enough about the gloom and doom of how this international recession affects every aspect of our lives. With the threat of no industry, organization, or institution free from the impending onslaught of cutbacks and proverbial belt tightening, the recession has been granted the right to prey on entities far too close to home, including academic programs, library funding and the ability to maintain and enhance library collections. The argument can thus be posed as to whether this monster we see feeding on the big corporations is a real economic meltdown on a global scale or if this chain of events is simply a natural market correction originating in real estate and the stock market.

In retrospect, we witnessed astronomical and unrealistic growth in both of these markets. Real estate values rose without any rational reason and values of stocks skyrocketed with no relationship to the actual value and asset of the firm they represented. As one of my former college professors often quipped, the stock market is legalized gambling. Sometimes you win and sometimes you can lose your shirt! Unfortunately, the financial institutions that benefited from this legalized gambling and later lost their “winnings” are now reaching to the government to save the day, and curiously, are being granted their wish! However, the bailout of financial institutions and the anticipated bailout of the major auto makers will change nothing! These courses of action will simply apply the Band-Aid! Perhaps, this is like a person with the common cold. One can take a variety of medications to aid the symptoms or let the body go through its natural course and cure itself! Where is the understanding of accountability; the notion of the inevitable ebb and flow of a fluid system? Have we lost sight of what capitalism actually entails? The risks it poses?

However, with this kind of environment, politicians and college administrators have been sharpening their knives to pare down the budget any way they can without really understanding the consequences of these actions. Research indicates that the need for effective academic programs normally rises during economic hardships. Library leaders at academic institutions have two options, join the list of different organizations asking for bailout and government aid or try to become inventive in how to get the most returns from the limited budget that they have. In the same way that other firms try to identify revolutionary technologies and methods to make their operation more efficient, libraries have the responsibility to look into all available and emerging technologies to achieve higher value, added business.

Perhaps, academic librarians should look into different methods and technologies in increasing their return on investment. In the area of science, technology and medicine (STM) the willingness of users to employ online resources is far greater than other fields, “almost 90 percent of researchers said they went online first, then consulted print source.” Academic librarians must consider this an opportunity to push for content where they receive a greater value for the money they put in. Notably, libraries can obtain a vast amount of contents for a fraction of the full price of the print version when purchasing electronic materials, not to mention obtaining E-Content through consortia. Libraries could also sharpen their ability to bargain and negotiate with publishers. After all, the publishers are facing the same economic slowdown and need to keep up with the challenges of a slow economy.

In considering means to achieve a strategic and thrifty allocation of funds that enable libraries to invest more in contents, information communication technology (ICT) can assist libraries in two major areas; (1) Cost savings; using ICT in replacing some of the inefficient old-fashioned processes and procedures (e.g., Use of Webinar for conducting library services, education programs, communication with all library patrons electronically, etc...); (2) Increasing service; ICT can be extremely beneficial in enhancing the efficient and effective level of services that a library provides to its patrons. The use of Web technology is highly recommended to allow almost everyone to have access regardless of their location. Library leadership must understand that the role of assisting library staff with the continued on page 47
library users expect us to provide them with access to more and more of their content in electronic format, including journal backfiles and archives. Researchers already liked to trace the history of their topic by looking up the articles cited in the articles they were reading. Beilstein and Gmelin have always indexed chemical information back to the 1770s, and GeoRef indexed geological information from 1785 to the present. Now, several other indexing and abstracting services have added earlier content to their databases, including Biological Abstracts, Chemical Abstracts, Web of Science (Science Citation Index), COMPENDEX (Engineering Index), and INSPEC (Physics Abstracts, Electrical & Electronics Abstracts, and Computer & Control Abstracts). The searching of these databases by our users now also creates a demand for the backfile for this title. The University of Akron (UA), we have a strong research interest in polymers. UA belongs to the OhioLINK consortium, which includes most of the colleges and universities in Ohio. OhioLINK has loaded the full-text of many publishers’ journals on its own server; although, for the American Chemical Society (ACS) journals, it has loaded only the metadata, and we access the full-text at the ACS Website. The OhioLINK server makes it easy to obtain usage statistics, and it is no surprise to us that the journal, Polymer, has the highest usage. Therefore, I assumed that there might be a great interest in the backfile for this title. The journal, Macromolecules, actually may be used more, but I do not have ready access to the ACS electronic journal statistics, and even though OhioLINK tracks the usage on this title through the metadata on its own server, many users access it directly at the ACS Website. OhioLINK purchased the ACS backfile, and so I did not need to consider that publisher for purchase or lease, or make the extra effort to get accurate usage statistics for ACS journals.

The next step is to determine if the backfile for the journal, Polymer, is available. Indeed, it is available, but in a package with 107 other Elsevier materials science journals. Most of the scientific publishers make their backfiles available in packages with one or two exceptions, such as Lancet for Elsevier, and Angewandte Chemie International Edition for Wiley. It is likely that you will be paying for titles that have lower usage along with the highly used titles. To make a fairer, but certainly not perfect comparison, you should look at the usage on all of the titles in one package and compare it with the usage on all of the titles in another package. You might also look at the number of years available in the backfile for the highest used titles. And, if available, you might look at the usage on your paper, microform, and storage collections and interlibrary loan statistics.

For The University of Akron, the table on the next page shows which 30 journals had the highest number of downloads on the OhioLINK server in 2006. The publishers appearing most often in the list of the most downloaded journals are Wiley, Elsevier and the American Psychological Association (APA). The OhioLINK server already includes the backfiles of the APA journals.