How do librarians explain the fact that titles go out-of-print?

We really don’t have any easy answers from either a collection development or an information literacy standpoint. What we do know is that publishing is a business that depends upon supply and demand. Libraries alone as customers cannot generate enough demand to keep titles from becoming out-of-print. In addition, competition from the Internet (Aren’t most literary classics reproduced in some version or other?) and streamlining publications (How many versions of Romeo and Juliet really need to be published yearly?) contribute to the growing out-of-print status. We know: things are upgraded and replaced with new features that often make obsolete all previous editions. Students are used to things being replaced and naturally updated. Whether we’re discussing iPods, phones, computers, or even library resources, the philosophy of dates in the Information Age dictates that the current is king and will continue to be so. In an age of live streams, blogs, and tweets, an older publication date almost instantly eradicates a source’s worth. As mentioned before, how do we impart that there is still value in out-of-print books?

Some last thoughts about Out-of-Print resources?

It seems today that out-of-print is a dated concept. When resources are not available or easy to locate, then students and even instructors suggest turning to other sources — the thought of asking the collection development librarian to purchase an out-of-print item rarely, if ever, comes up. Locating out-of-print resources is really not an issue anymore — at least not at our university. In the classroom, students want access immediately; and the mentality is that, if it were important, it wouldn’t be out-of-print. This reasoning has some logic behind it, right? Rarely are there requests for out-of-print materials; and if the event ever arises, collection development has to question whether using funds to obtain these resources is a better use than purchasing newer materials.

As more companies, such as Google Books, produce items on demand and book sellers, such as Barnes & Noble, venture into the used and out-of-print market, libraries now have easy access to and sources for acquiring hard-to-find items. But, how much of our time and money will be spent in this pursuit? We believe that each library will have to answer that question for itself. Demands of faculty researchers, doctoral students, and classroom instructors will all factor into that decision. In an age when disappearing shelves reveal a diminishing physical collection, libraries are transforming themselves into a world of virtual resources, accessible anywhere and anytime.