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Biz of Acq -- Budget 101 or Here We Go Again

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A
s summer draws to a close, we can look forward to several annual events: fresh local produce, the upcoming football season, and those follow-up emails and phone calls from all of the sales representatives who we met at the summer library conferences. One other event that we await with some trepidation is when the administration has set the new tuition levels and determines the new library budget allocation.

The moment of truth? A healthy increase means you can cover inflation with some new resources. Anything less means big problems: cancellations. To make matters worse, most of us are part of big deals and consortia agreements that limit our available cash.

At the 23rd annual NASIG conference in Phoenix, I heard depressing horror stories from institutions across several states of slashed budgets, forcing emergency decisions. Paper journals and microform titles were being cancelled. One library decided to stop commercial binding of its journals. Another institution was cancelling their book approval plan and not buying any paper books this year.

In Michigan the collection development librarians from the fifteen public universities meet twice per year to discuss common purchases and issues. One of the favorite topics is when we all share our current budget situation, since what occurs at one may affect the others. As you know, Michigan has been having its shares of financial woes.

How to divide the library budget has been the topic of numerous articles and book. A recent question posted on the listserv, collib-l, in August brought out various suggestions with formulas. It again demonstrated that there isn’t one right answer.

At Eastern Michigan University the budget is divided by format (book/approval; binding; electronic resources; gift accounts; journals; media; microform; supplies, services, and materials; standing orders), then divided into funds by subject. The subjects are fields of study and do not correspond necessarily into an equivalent department at Eastern. While every department is assigned a librarian as their liaison, a fund is not owned by a single department, and more than one selector may spend it. Each selector is responsible to make sure that all areas of their liaison departments are fairly covered.

To cover interdisciplinary topics, we have set up two subsets of additional funds. One subset is for broad topics, which we call basic science, basic humanities, and basic social sciences. For instance any item that covers general science (call number Q) would be assigned to the basic science fund instead of arbitrarily spending one of the specific science funds such as chemistry or biology. A second subset is to cover multicultural studies. We have designated funds for such areas as Latino American, Asian American, Native American, and Gay and Lesbian Studies to make sure those areas are represented in our collection since those fields are covered in the humanities and social sciences.

Finally we often set money aside for a new program to help it get underway. For instance the College of Technology created an Aviation Management Program. Since it was a unique field of study for our institution, we designated a separate fund in order to build a collection. After a few years the fund was absorbed into the Technology fund.

How much gets allocated to a specific book fund is a combination of the negotiations between the individual selectors and the Collection Development Librarian and past practice. Allocations will vary some from year to year.

For example at Eastern Michigan University, the librarians are included in the new course/program development procedure. We receive copies of all new proposals. The selectors/liasons are encouraged to comment about how this proposed course/program is already complimented by the collection and the additional resources that would be needed to adequately support it. The selector would therefore have evidence to back their need for supplementary money for journals, books, or any other format.

As undoubtedly yours does, our institution continues to expand. During the last decade our institution has added doctorate programs in clinical psychology and technology. There is another doctorate under negotiation. Nearby Oakland University will be creating a medical school in 2010, the Oakland University William Beaumont School of Medicine.

Past practice remains an essential ingredient to the budget picture. Certain programs carry more prestige and have large enrollments. A higher percentage of the budget must be held for them. Eastern Michigan University has evolved from a teacher’s college and it remains one of the largest producers of elementary and secondary school educators in the country. The College of Education figures strongly when we review the budget.

Possible Remedies:

How can you prepare for the budget challenges? You need contingency plans:

1) Usage data. The majority of electronic resources have been great with providing usage data. If you haven’t been collecting data on your paper resources, you need to start. To compliment our electronic journal data, we have been tallying the paper use. It has started a project to make sure all of our bound journals have barcodes, so we can just scan them in order to collect the data. Our Assessment and Systems Librarians have also run circulation reports on the book collection, so we can tell what call numbers (subjects) have been getting use.

For instance, our book and journal data showed us that the physics collection (QB, QC) was being underutilized per the cost of their titles. This gave a basis for us to initiate...
a conversation with the Physics-Astronomy Department. Why are they not using the collection? What resources do they need instead?

While having complete runs of series is preferred, we discovered that too many series had parts that were never used. Cancelling low use standing orders and unblocking the series within our approval profile has allowed the selectors to purchase only the most relevant titles.

When we moved into our new library ten years ago, we created a very pleasant newspaper reading room to accommodate the heavy usage that we had in the old library. Today the paper usage has plummeted. Our holdings have decreased to a few local and popular dailies as the Internet has replaced the paper newspaper.

2) Have a list of possible cancellations in advance. Since many of the teaching faculty are not readily available during the spring or summer, it is essential to discuss the possibilities earlier in the year (though email has made it easier to stay in touch). While paper journals have been an obvious target, we have also reviewed and cancelled databases. The cost of interlibrary loan versus ownership should be considered.

3) Wish lists. While we have been able to support most of our faculty’s individual book requests, we have not always had the funds to initiate the annual expense of journal subscriptions or electronic resources. Separate databases have been created for these formats. We ask that the faculty prioritize their requests. This allows us to add titles as additional money becomes available. Past interlibrary loan requests is almost always required before a new subscription is considered.

4) Keep with the new technologies/trends in the profession. It is important to periodically check to see if your vendors are giving you the best possible financial deal by comparing the rates of their competition, either formally with a RFP (if required by your state) or informally via sales visits. Is it time to outsource functions of technical services?

Having a tighter budget does have a positive side: it has forced us to become better managers of our library’s resources. Anyone can spend money; only the creative can manage it successfully and keep your clientele happy.

Here’s hoping that your budget news was good this year and may your favorite football team have a successful season.