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Random Ramblings: "You Can't Always Get What You Want": When Academic Libraries Say No

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you’ve never believed in (often for reasons that are purely personal in origin), the one you assume limps along on borrowed time and was mismanaged from the beginning may turn out to be surprisingly strong and even growing when you run a sales or use history. We are only human, after all, and it’s easy for our prejudices and preconceptions to color and even take over our narratives when they remain unleavened by data.

So on that magical day, far from our phones and computers and armed with about 50 different reports focused on our books, we looked at the hard truths about what we publish. We examined every subject area, every series, and even looked at studies of pricing averages and publishing models from seven other university presses. What was perhaps most remarkable about that day was that no one, including me, walked into the room with a lot of preconceived notions of what we would find. This examination was not personal, not bent toward any one objective or against any particular subject area. We all simply wanted to see what was working and what wasn’t and to talk about how to change our acquisitions strategy or publishing models for underperforming lists according to what the numbers were teaching us.

What surprised me further was that after six-and-a-half hours of this kind of analysis, we ended up with an affirmed narrative about who we were and also a prescriptive narrative for what we needed to do more of or stop doing altogether. The numbers were an entrée for a frank assessment and discussion of the books of ours that sell well and who buys them. Looking at the reports also clearly showed us what disciplinary subsets and types of books were experiencing several years’ worth of decline and warning purchaser interest. To my delight but not surprise, I’ve already heard staff referencing the issues and “things to avoid” list that came out of this retreat as part of other discussions.

I imagine that libraries also possess this wealth of data, particularly in the form of circulation statistics, that could be used to initiate or marshal financial resources around programs that will usefully reshape collections strategies or augment the user experience. I also wonder if sometimes librarians, as I know some press administrators do, worry that a calculated and intentional engagement with numbers and data signals that we have somehow lost our way as mission-oriented professionals. Our recent retreat, however, has made me a firm believer that quantitative analysis is an essential tool for conducting an honest and productive assessment of the quality and reach of an operation.

We know the end goals for the scholarly materials we create and manage: excellence, wide discovery and dissemination, and active use. The beauty of our numbers, then, is what they can evolve and continually improve in pursuit of these fundamental (and very mission-oriented) goals. 🎉

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Random Ramblings — “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”: When Academic Libraries Say No

I chose the topic for this month’s column after reading the excellent piece by Barbara Fister, “Breaking Taboos for All the Right Reasons,” in the April 16, 2014 edition of Inside Higher Ed. (http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/breaking-taboos-all-right-reasons) She was commenting on a snippet of conversation overheard at a gathering of librarians that “eBooks are a huge headache and students often prefer print.” She then asks: “if students don’t want eBooks, shouldn’t we listen to them? Aren’t they supposed to be student-centered?” I contend that academic library users, most often students but also faculty, join the Rolling Stones in complaining that you can’t always get what you want. Let me start with examples and also contrast some of these policies with the public library model.

Multiple Formats. To start with the case above, most academic libraries buy materials in only one format, either print or eBook, even if some students want the other format. Public libraries buy the same best seller in multiple formats including print, eBook, audio, and video.

Multiple Copies. Except perhaps for reserves, academic libraries purchase only one copy of most works, even very popular ones. Sometimes, they do purchase multiple access options for eBooks and will consider interlibrary loan to help desperate users, though other libraries often don’t lend popular materials. Public libraries expect multiple users to want the same best sellers and often have rules to buy extra copies based upon the number of requests.

Textbooks. Almost all academic libraries voluntarily choose not to meet the most important information need for their students — access to current textbooks. Students would be overjoyed if libraries met this want because they would save hundreds of dollars each semester.

Lending Policies. Academic users have divided wants on this issue. If they have successfully checked out the item, they want to keep it as long as they need it. If they want to get their hands on the material, they want liberal recall policies with heavy fines for those that don’t return the desired resource on time, even from an important faculty member.

Recreational Reading. Some academic libraries have policies against purchasing recreational reading. Others, especially with no good public library nearby, don’t and try to meet the entertainment needs of their faculty and students. These libraries sometimes solicit gift books and don’t process them fully to keep costs down. Even the libraries with a policy against recreational reading will purchase materials to support the curriculum that may include courses on science fiction, writing for popular publications, and the like. Finally, some users will consider the Jane Austen novels purchased to support the English Department to be the best possible leisure time reads. As a quick aside, my own university purchased a streaming audio service for classical music with a limited number of seats. I felt guilty whenever I used one of these seats for pleasure listening and perhaps kept a student from completing a course assignment. Public libraries consider providing the recreational reading demanded by their patrons to be one of their most important responsibilities.

Popular Materials. I’ll go out on a limb here to suggest that undergraduate students might want many more popular non-fiction materials than library selectors buy. Having another resource than the textbook to explain general principles in a comprehensible but different way would be useful to many undergraduates. Then there is always a demand for the Idiot’s Guides. Public libraries specialize in buying accessible non-fiction.

Microformats. I doubt that anyone in the world actually likes microformats, but they used to be a necessary evil because they provided materials that could not be easily found elsewhere. Today, many academic libraries are giving patrons what they want by buying digital versions of these resources, sometimes at a high cost. Public libraries have always tried their best to avoid microformats.

Patron-Driven Acquisitions. While the idea behind patron-driven acquisitions is giving the students and faculty what they want, I don’t believe that this statement is completely accurate, especially for print materials. The undergraduate student whose paper is due tomorrow will use whatever is available and will most likely not find the same richness of resources as in the past. These collections may not also reflect the same balance of divergent viewpoints that collection development experts were expected to provide. The unsophisticated student may not even recognize that the collection is unbalanced. For eBooks, the student must navigate the online catalog including selecting the appropriate subject headings, often not an easy task even for experts, while in the past the same students would find the correct general area in the print stacks and pull down books until they found the required number of resources. Public libraries strive to anticipate user wants so that popular materials are available as quickly as possible after publication.
Changing Library Operations — Consortial Demand-Driven eBooks at the University of California

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The program that has had the most influence on University of California planning is that of the Orbis-Cascade Alliance. Initial planning for this consortial eBook DDA program was described in the article “Pioneering Partnerships: Building a Demand-Driven Consortium eBook Collection” by Emily McElroy and Susan Hinken published in the June 2011 issue of ATG. Actual experience with the model was described in “Pilot to Program: Demand-Driven E-books at the Orbis-Cascade Consortium, One Year Later” by James Bunnelle published in the November 2012 issue of ATG.

Each of the ten University of California (UC) libraries has its own history and culture. As a result, each library is at a somewhat different place in the transition from print to electronic resources, the acceptance of eBooks, and the willingness to implement a DDA model. Continued on page 60.