

Moving Librarian Collecting from Good to Great: Results from the First Year of a Librarian Liaison Collaborative Monographic Purchasing Project

Genya O'Gara
James Madison University, gogara@gmu.edu

Carolyn Schubert
James Madison University, schubecf@jmu.edu

Lara Sapp
James Madison University, sapple@jmu.edu

Michael Mungin
James Madison University, munginmj@jmu.edu

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Genya O'Gara, James Madison University

Carolyn Schubert, James Madison University

Lara Sapp, James Madison University

Michael Mungin, James Madison University

Abstract

As Collins (2001) found in his evaluation of how companies evolve from “good” to “great,” one of the key components of such a transition is to focus less on continuing tasks, and more on NOT continuing tasks. Today’s librarians are juggling instruction, reference, collection development, outreach, and the need to develop new expertise in emerging areas, such as data curation, multimedia resources, institutional repositories, and more. Librarians cannot responsibly continue all traditional tasks while facing shifting budget priorities and new responsibilities. As noted in ARL’s Issue Brief (2012), “never before have we been required to grasp so many dimensions of research in order to make wise decisions” (p.1). In order to meet needs on campus that do not fit within traditional collection models or siloed subject collection practices, the James Madison University Libraries committed to evaluating and implementing more flexible approaches to collection development. These proceedings detail JMU’s Applied Health Sciences Librarians’ adoption of a collapsed monographic acquisition model. The model’s ability to address sustainable and flexible approaches to selection, reduction of duplication of efforts, alignment of collecting practices with budget priorities, and cross-disciplinary campus needs are explored.

Introduction

As Collins (2001) found in his evaluation of how companies evolve from “good” to “great,” one of the key components of such a transition is to focus less on continuing tasks, and more on NOT continuing tasks. Today’s librarians are juggling instruction, reference, collection development, outreach, and the need to develop new expertise in emerging areas, such as data curation, multimedia resources, institutional repositories, and more. Librarians cannot responsibly continue all traditional tasks while facing shifting budget priorities and new responsibilities. As noted in ARL’s Issue Brief (2012), “never before have we been required to grasp so many dimensions of research in order to make wise decisions” (p.1). In order to meet needs on campus that do not fit within traditional collection models or siloed subject collection practices, the James Madison University Libraries committed to evaluating and implementing more flexible approaches to collection development. These proceedings detail JMU’s Applied Health Sciences Librarians’ adoption of a collapsed monographic acquisition

model. The model’s ability to address sustainable and flexible approaches to selection, reduction of duplication of efforts, alignment of collecting practices with budget priorities, and cross-disciplinary campus needs are explored.

Background

In January 2013 James Madison University (JMU) Libraries again faced a flat materials budget and rising costs for continuing resources. Format and subject prohibitive collection development workflows impeded a nimble response to emerging collection development needs. Concurrently, the Libraries’ had a large number of new subject librarians, a restructured collections department, and a new Director of Collections. The time seemed right to examine existing collection development models, the allocation structure, and to explore alternate methods of content development.

JMU develops circulating collections through several avenues, including firm departmental allocations for single purchase requests, approval

plans, and a continuing resources budget. Departmental allocations, approvals, and purchase-on-demand acquisitions comprise 17% of the budget, with the majority of the materials budget (80%) devoted to continuing resources, and the remainder going to preservation, digitization, and information access and interlibrary loan costs. Subject librarians manage one-time purchases and approval plans. To promote collaborative collection development and management of continuing resources, the Libraries' selectors are divided into four subject clusters (Social Sciences,¹ Arts and Humanities,² Sciences,³ and Applied Health Sciences⁴). An elected representative from each cluster serves on the Collection Development Committee (CDC), which is chaired by the Director of Collections. The CDC evaluates and approves continuing resource requests that have been reviewed and priority-ranked for purchase by the subject clusters, or are general and interdisciplinary in nature.

The project began by evaluating the Libraries' collecting framework. Although the largest part of the budget is reserved for continuing resources, the majority of subject librarians reported spending the bulk of their collection development time on title-by-title selection.⁵ If where the Libraries spend money is reflective of what JMU values, then there was a steep imbalance where subject librarians expended collecting energies. This was one signal that practices needed to be reevaluated. Further, the Director of Collections, the Director of Acquisitions and Cataloging, and CDC were fielding requests each semester to shift funds from allocations to support alternative academic content, such as datasets, digitization, archival manuscript purchases, streaming media, tablet accessible medical resources, and more. And while some subject areas were overspending allocations, others were having trouble expending

funds. The Collections Department commits to making data-driven decisions to build responsive collections across disciplines, and the data suggested the current model was no longer working. Further, it wasn't allowing enough space for busy librarians to explore new methods of content development. CDC took on the job of examining current allocations, preparing for database and journal reviews, and surveying alternate models of collection development.⁶

After examining different models, CDC determined that a collapsed fund model would fit well at JMU; particularly attractive for the committee was the potential in this approach for collaborative selection across interdisciplinary fields. Of the allocation models examined the ones that paralleled the institutional structure were the most compelling to the committee. This move would cause the budget to reflect changing constituent and curricular needs at the college level, with the added benefit of more closely aligning collecting priorities with those of the university. Further, this would allow the vendor to work out any bugs, and for the Libraries to streamline internal workflows between selectors, collections, and acquisitions. Since subject clusters are already loosely based around colleges, this would also support future allocation and approval profile revisions to be more reflective of campus organization.

The Applied Health Sciences (AHS) cluster members possess a series of characteristics including size, diversity in positions, and years of collecting experience that made it ideal for this collaboration. The cluster consists of 5 subject librarians across 7 departments. Three are full-time subject librarians and 2 are part-time subject librarians with large administrative responsibilities. The AHS cluster librarians also

¹ Business, Education, Social Sciences, Communication and General Education.

² Music, Theater and Dance, Art and Art history, Media, History, Philosophy, Religion, English and Writing, Rhetoric and Technical Communication.

³ Math, Sciences, Engineering, Geographic Science, Geology & Environmental Science, Integrated Science & Technology, and Computer Science.

⁴ Nursing, Health Sciences, Psychology, Kinesiology and Communication Science Disorders, and Social Work.

⁵ 15 of 19 subject-liaison librarians completed a brief anonymous survey about their collection development habits. Respondents included 8 full time liaisons and 7 with liaisons' duties in addition to functional responsibilities.

⁶ Including conversations with the University of Guelph, review of Penn State's Collections Allocation Team documentation, and literature review of allocation approaches.

vary in their experiences with collection development from novice to expert.

In addition to the cluster members, the creation of the College of Health and Behavioral Studies encouraged new ways of thinking about how to collect and collaborate in support of the new interprofessionally focused College. This new College consists of the seven departments covered in the AHS cluster.⁴ Each of these departments continues to expand enrollment to meet the 19-38% anticipated job growth and increasing workforce demand (U.S. Department of Labor, 2014). For example, the Health Sciences department grew 160% between 2000-2010 to a size of 1680 students, making it “larger than some colleges within the university” (Birch, Deaton, DuBose, Frazer, Lambert, Schoenfelder, & Wunderlich, 2012, p. 2). This growth creates new demands on librarians' time for supporting instruction, reference, and collecting; necessitating the need to think about other ways to be more flexible in the Libraries' support to address new or emerging needs. One response has included more team-based liaison support.

Methods

The first step in establishing the pilot was coordinating the initial conversation with the cluster and the Director of Collections to gauge interest and address concerns about the collapsed funding model. Given the diversity in terms of department size and specialization, the AHS librarians had several concerns. For example, while noting some overlapping subject areas, other subject areas did not need to be reviewed by more than one or two librarians. Finding a workflow that would allow maximum openness to all slips and subject specific filtering was necessary. Another concern centered on the long-term implications of this decision. Recognizing the need for flexibility, it was agreed that the pilot would last for one year with the opportunity to adjust back to the previous model if the collapsed project became too burdensome.

Given each subject librarian's instinctual regard for his or her departments, other general concerns centered around balanced spending across the departments and how to communicate

changes effectively. With a single shared fund librarians were concerned about tracking spending by department. Other questions included whether safeguards should be developed to prevent areas from being over or under supported. In response the AHS cluster identified the need to evaluate spending trends after the first year. Beyond internal workflow and balanced spending, librarians were concerned with how to communicate this change back out to the departments.

The Libraries worked with the approval vendor to collapse AHS slip plans into one fund while leaving the book approvals untouched. Conversations with the vendor enabled tweaking of the processes to meet cluster needs. One challenging aspect was the implementation of a mechanism to allow librarians to see all AHS slips while still being able to filter to those most related to their department.

From an acquisitions standpoint, collapsing the funds meant monitoring one account instead of many, fielding all requests through the same fund, simplifying reporting procedures, and having a cleaner audit trail. Since most of the AHS funds are spent on firm selection, the cluster had to collaborate to establish individual purchasing expectations and meet acquisition order request deadlines.

Results

In late spring Collection Management began the process of documenting the results of the 2014 collapsed model pilot. Data gathered and charted aimed to address questions that arose during the pilot, such as workflow impact, spending distribution by department, and spending distribution by LC classification. Results were reviewed in comparison to the previous year to identify similarities and differences.

Comparison of spending patterns during the collapsed model year and the previous year was one initial indicator of the sustainability of the pilot. In total for 2014 the AHS cluster had a firm fund of \$97,260. Throughout the year the AHS cluster worked on selecting titles and expending funds along the prescribed expenditure timeline: 30% by

October 11, 80% by January 31, and 100% by March 28. As of January 24 only 31% of firm funds were spent, requiring the cluster to collectively address the spending need. Forty-seven percent of funds were expended by late February and, by the March deadline, 94% of funds were expended. In comparison to 2013 spending, each firm fund varied widely in total amount spent by the January deadline –ranging from 0% to 101%, with the average being 51% spent. And by the March

deadline only three funds were fully expended, bringing the average to 92%.

Collection Management visualized firm fund spending across departments for the 2013 and 2014 year to compare spending supporting each department, as represented in Figure 1. Health Sciences, Nursing, and All Other increased spending amounts while Psychology, Social Work, Kinesiology, and Communication Sciences & Disorders decreased.

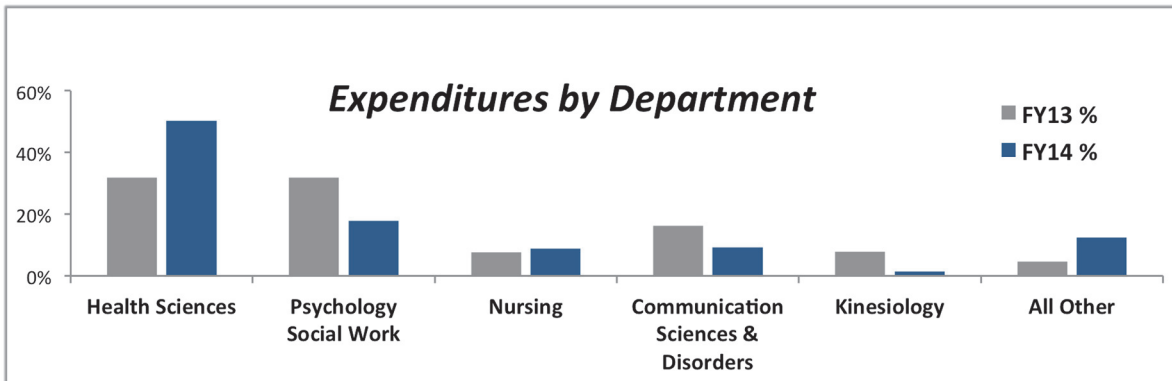


Figure 1.

When comparing spending to department FTE the drop in Communication Sciences and Disorders in the collapsed model appears more reflective of departmental size than in previous years, as

represented in Figure 2. Others, like Health Sciences and Nursing, became more in-line with departmental size and new programs.

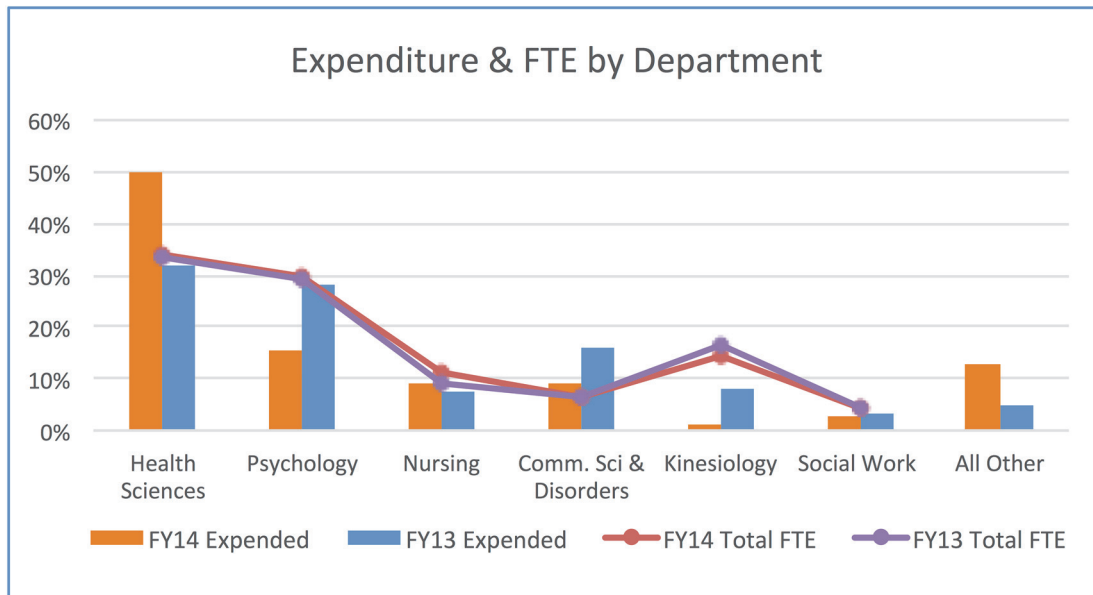


Figure 2.

In a closer look at “All Other” spending (Figure 3), Collection Management charted the percentage

distribution of purchases across the Library of Congress (LC) classifications.

LC Classification	% Spent
R - Medicine	67.89%
B – Philosophy & Psychology	7.05%
H – Social Sciences	6.79%
Q – Science	8.41%
P – Language and Literature	4.44%
T - Technology	2.86%
G – Geography, Anthropology, & Recreation	1.07%
L – Education	0.55%
K – Law	0.49%
Others	0.46%

Figure 3.

Discussion

To better understand the impact of this new collecting model, the cluster identified first-year and third-year tiered evaluation points. The first-year analysis included reviewing the cluster’s ability to meet spending deadlines, selection ease, an initial comparison of programs to expenditures, and an analysis of spending patterns between the previous year, contrasted with the collapsed year. The cluster also identified different aspects of collecting to assess, such as subject librarian workflow and acquisitions staff workflow. Based on these parameters, the pilot addressed and improved many of the issues previously plaguing firm title acquisition. However, the cluster must consider additional work to improve workflows and ongoing evaluation of the collection’s usage before defining complete success.

First-Year Successes

The pilot achieved the first requirement for success by completing the expenditure of firm funds as a cluster even with an increased allocation from the prior year of \$15,000. Despite this significant change in budget, the cluster expended their firm funds on deadline.

Throughout the year, evaluation of acquisitions, collections, and subject librarian workflows were all important factors, and required frequent adjustment before the cluster settled on determinations of success. The Monographs Manager in particular found this approach streamlined her financial and audit reporting processes. In comparing 2013 and 2014 spending patterns results, the collapsed fund appears to normalize spending patterns and alleviate the shifting of monies between funds seen in previous years. Acquisitions and collections workflows benefited from a more consistent purchasing pattern throughout the year.

Many subject librarians anecdotally noted the impact of a team-based approach influencing their investment and engagement. Instead of five different people purchasing independently, the single cluster representative managed deadlines and spending status, which allowed the other librarians to focus on collecting. The cluster also communicated more frequently and shared recommendations for purchasing lists. This approach to collecting created flexibility; instead of each librarian debating purchases of a particular resource, librarians were empowered to purchase resources based on his or her understanding of users and departments. No longer were books about autism spectrum disorder, for example, waiting for the Health Sciences Librarian or the Communication Sciences & Disorders Librarian to discuss the purchase.

To address the earlier concern about hoarding funds, the cluster reviewed the overall AHS monographic collection distribution and budget. The budget for the cluster's firm monographic titles increased significantly between the 2013 and 2014 purchasing cycles due to the statewide consortium assuming the cost for a key Psychology collection. Therefore, the changes in firm fund spending require additional interpretation to avoid accidentally assuming that Psychology was underserved in this new model. Instead, the new model allowed for greater flexibility to shift funds to other areas. Tradeoffs like these allowed for collecting in emerging areas like anatomy, neuroscience, and genetics in Sciences; health policy in Law; and leadership in Social Sciences. This collapsed model was less problematic than a permanent reversion of funds for those that underspent.

First-Year Challenges

While there were successful outcomes related to workflows, challenges did emerge; these included retraining librarians, revising larger collections-related procedures across the library system, and clarifying library vendor workflows.

Librarian retraining focused on new methods of collecting, identification of titles within the system, and an understanding of how decisions within the system impacted others. Titles that

were profiled by the vendor prior to the collapsed profile were coded with the previous fund codes (e.g., pre-publication profiling of not-yet-published titles). This meant there were multiple fund codes in the system at the beginning of the pilot, causing confusion for the librarians about the new filtering procedures. Similarly, by collapsing the firm titles altogether, AHS librarians now had a significantly larger number of slips to review. After a few months, the Director of Collections and the vendor were able to develop a workflow for filtering titles. Subject librarians also had to master how decisions were documented or tracked in the vendor system. Since each librarian saw a separate list, rejection decisions were not obviously indicated.

By collapsing the funds, other aspects of the collections lifecycle needed to be considered and clarified, such as individual title replacements and collection promotion. Throughout the year as newer editions arrive, subject librarians are asked to retain or weed older copies. With the new process more than one person could be responsible for this decision. Similarly, monthly collection promotion on the library homepage was tied to specific call numbers or fund codes. While this provided a shorter list of resources it failed to provide for effective interdisciplinary cross-promotion across subject areas.

Future Steps

Based on success of the initial pilot the collapsed purchasing pilot will continue with the AHS cluster and expand to the Social Sciences and Science clusters. The AHS cluster will revise its approval profile collaboratively this upcoming year, rather than individually. Collapsing the separate approval profiles will help with the eventual expansion of the project from collapsed firm funds to collapsed approval funds. An evaluation of the acceptance and rejection rate of approval and slips titles will inform this process. Expansion of the percent of titles that come within adjusted approval profiles will both better align current collecting practices and reduce time spent on title-by-title selection.

For the AHS cluster, the next step is considering what other areas across the collections lifecycle are impacted by this new approach. On a broader

scale, the collapsed purchasing model pairs with larger ongoing holistic collection assessments, including revision of allocation formulas to more closely align with colleges, and the completion of a yearlong review of the libraries' continuing resources. Initial CDC discussions concerning the allocation formula will continue with a goal of developing a more nuanced approach, that acknowledges the diversity of formats, materials, and shifting campus needs.

It has been determined that a minimum of three years of data is necessary to discern any patterns in spending practices that emerge with this new model and in order to compare the utility of the model across subject clusters. However, the initial results are promising and the preliminary success

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of this model is already helping the organization to think outside the box for creative ways to align collecting practices with users needs, recognize the Libraries' capacity for change, and most importantly, empower librarians with more time and more fluid resources to meet the shifting content needs of the JMU campus.

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