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Share Those Stats! Collaborating With Faculty to Make Evidence-Based Serials Collection Development Decisions

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Abstract

During the 2014 fiscal year, the St. Mary's College of Maryland Library faced a temporary budget reduction, and library administration anticipated much larger and permanent cuts in the coming fiscal years. This budget reduction prompted a need to critically evaluate the library's journal subscriptions and as a consequence, the author developed a new collaborative review process. In this new process, librarians leveraged usage statistics, collection development experience and the subject expertise of faculty to make more informed collection development decisions. Although many libraries have involved faculty in journal cancellation projects, the St. Mary's College of Maryland librarians took a proactive approach by implementing a unique collaborative review process before experiencing their severest budget cuts. By starting conversations with faculty early, the librarians were able to make evidence-based collection development decisions that emphasized usage statistics, increased transparency, and built faculty trust. Librarians used a variety of methods to facilitate faculty-librarian collaboration, the most important of which was the sharing of usage statistics with academic departments. This presentation explored the strategies implemented by the St. Mary's College of Maryland Library to increase transparency and encourage faculty involvement in journal renewal decision making.

Journal Reviews and Renewals at the St. Mary's College of Maryland Library

With the start of the 2014 fiscal year, the St. Mary's Library faced a budget reduction, which was described as temporary, but forecasts indicated the cuts would become permanent. The librarians decided to proactively address the budget reduction's impact on serials collection development ahead of larger cuts. Additionally, the Library had been operating under a flat budget for several years with a policy of "add one, cancel one," which was no longer fiscally possible and further emphasized the need for a collaborative and comprehensive assessment of the entire journal collection. In response, the author developed an entirely new review and renewal process for journals and revised the serials collection development policy accordingly. The new process factored usage statistics into renewal decisions and invited faculty to share their subject area expertise and recommendations in departmental journal reviews. By engaging faculty early, before journal subscriptions reached a crisis point, the librarians hoped to maintain positive relationships with their faculty colleagues and gain buy-in and support.

The primary goals of the journal reviews were to improve collection development decision-making, streamline the collection, and better align journal holdings with campus teaching and research needs. Transparency and faculty-librarian collaboration were essential themes that drove the new renewal process. The St. Mary's Library had not assessed its serials collection comprehensively since the 2004 fiscal year, during a large-scale cancellation project targeted at the print collection. Unfortunately, this past project generated an excess of ill will towards the Library. The cancellations came as a shock to faculty who were not consulted or notified of the project until after cancellations were made. Although librarians involved in this current project were not part of the earlier cancellations, they were especially sensitive to this particular piece of institutional memory. Additionally, the St. Mary's community is small and close-knit. The College employs approximately 143 full-time tenure and tenure-track faculty. The Library currently enjoys a positive reputation on campus and the librarians have successfully built partnerships with both academic and administrative departments. Transparency and openness seemed to be the best strategies to keep and improve those valuable relationships.

Literature Review

Journal reviews and high-impact cancellations have become the norm in academic libraries. As Sinha and Tucker (2005) note, most libraries tackle reviews at point of crisis, when librarians are forced to make difficult decisions and are often put in the uncomfortable position of balancing the demands of a reduced budget while maintaining positive relationships with faculty. Multiple authors describe methods of gathering and incorporating faculty feedback into journal cancellation projects for the purpose of improved decision making and protecting working relationships (Murphy, 2012; Carey, Elfstrand, & Hijleh, 2008; Sinha & Tucker, 2005). The North Carolina State University and University of Nevada Las Vegas Libraries in particular created a dedicated website to inform faculty of the changes and provide another avenue to share feedback (Day & Davis, 2009; Sinha & Tucker, 2005). Most case studies that describe journal reviews, which incorporate faculty input, focus on a single cancellation project triggered by a budget reduction and completed once a target budget was reached and not an ongoing effort to refine the journal collection.

Project Strategies

The themes of transparency and faculty-librarian collaboration weaved together to influence many aspects of the project. Faculty were first notified of future journal reviews and changes to the renewal process at a department chair retreat, during which the interim library director introduced the project. The announcement was made a semester in advance of journal reviews and both department chairs and departmental faculty were encouraged to seek further information and clarification during the initial meeting's Q&A session and later as concerns arose. To further distribute information and address faculty question and concerns, web pages were designed and added to the library website to explain the details of the project, point faculty to the revised serials collection development policy, outline the steps of a typical departmental journal review, and illustrate how usage statistics are gathered and measured as part of the review. This

dedicated portion of the library website will also serve as a platform for faculty feedback. Before final decisions are made, all journals recommended for cancellation will be posted to the library website with an open comment period.

Most significantly, usage statistics for current journal subscriptions were shared with academic departments undergoing review. Statistics were distributed via e-mail far enough in advance so department members could review the data and ask questions. After usage statistics were shared, liaisons scheduled in-person meetings with academic departments to answer remaining questions about the usage data and communicate their recommendations for subscription changes. In discussions with faculty, librarians were honest about the intent of the reviews and outlook of the library's journal collection. Throughout the entire process, faculty were encouraged to send questions and concerns to their liaison and the interim library director, or schedule additional in-person meetings with their liaison.

Biology Journal Review

The journal reviews and new renewal process were recently implemented and at the point of presentation, only one academic department had undergone a review. The Biology Department, one of the largest departments on campus, participated in a review during the spring 2014 semester. (The liaison librarian for the department and author are one and the same). The newness of the project prevents any in-depth analysis, but the following observations were made about the initial review.

During the first meeting, conversations between the author and departmental faculty were candid and faculty were receptive to participating in the review, although, talks did not lead directly to productive next steps. Faculty were eager to share their recommendations for new subscriptions, but hesitant to recommend any single title for cancellation. The author recommended a small number of journals as candidates for cancellation, but faculty immediately opposed the recommendations, despite recorded low usage. The author and department faculty did agree to revisit the recommendations again the following

spring semester with another year's usage data to determine if continued subscription was the most effective means of access.

Sharing the usage statistics served two unexpected purposes. First, it indicated to faculty that librarians were genuinely interested in involving faculty in the process and signaled the level of participation expected. Second, usage statistics became a comfortable starting point for conversation. For the biologists especially, seeing the usage statistics and cost per use analysis provided evidence that direct subscription was not necessary for all journals and for some titles, interlibrary loan was the more fiscally advantageous mode of access. Focusing on the data at least initially seemed to reduce an automatic opposition to the process.

Future Work

The Library plans to conduct similar journal reviews with all academic departments, while refining the process further. One lesson learned from the biology review is liaison librarians will have to be more assertive in recommending

journals for cancellation. Without the policy of "add one, cancel one" as an option, faculty are far less willing to let go of current subscriptions. The Library is open to starting new subscriptions, but only with sufficient cost savings from cancellations. If faculty continue to be closed to the idea of cancellations, the Library will be hard-pressed to make any changes to the journal collection without making cancellations a requirement.

The journal reviews are meant to be ongoing and reoccurring. The goal of the project is not to reach a budget target or cancel a certain number of journals, but rather ensure relevance and develop a streamlined collection. The author could track the budget percentage spent on journals over time, or average the cost per use of the collection before and after reviews for some indication of effectiveness. To take a more evidence-based approach, librarians could survey faculty to rate the perceived relevance of existing journal subscriptions. Librarians could also ask faculty to evaluate how well each subscribed journal met program needs, and quantify those evaluations for renewal decisions.

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