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Rolling Out a Database Review: Initiating a Comprehensive Database Review at the University of Maryland Libraries

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Abstract

The University of Maryland Libraries (UMD) has experienced a static collection budget for over 14 years. Despite the best efforts of the Collection Development and Acquisitions departments to mitigate the continuing effect of serials inflation, it became evident in the summer of 2015 that budgetary expenses would have to be curtailed in order to meet increasing serials costs. In the fall of 2015, the libraries initiated the first-ever comprehensive database review across all subject areas. The review involved subject specialists as well as acquisitions and collection development personnel. This paper describes the process undertaken to develop the review process, who was involved, what information was provided, how cancellation decisions were made and communicated, and the steps taken to publicize those resources selected for cancellation.

Introduction

The University of Maryland (UMD), is the flagship campus of the 12-school University System of Maryland. Serving over 37,000 students and faculty, the UMD Libraries has the largest university library system in the Washington, DC-Baltimore area. UMD ranks 40th among the 115 Association of College and Research (ARL) member libraries (<https://www.arlstatistics.org/analytics>). Currently, 86.9% of the collections budget is devoted to electronic resources, and 91.7% of the collections budget is spent on continuing costs. However, the libraries have experienced a static collection budget for over 14 years. Despite the best efforts of the Acquisitions and Collection Development departments to mitigate the continuing effect of an average 7% serials inflation, it became evident in the summer of 2015 that budgetary expenses would have to be curtailed in order to meet increasing serials costs. In the fall of 2015, the libraries initiated the first-ever comprehensive database review across all subject areas. The review involved subject specialists as well as acquisitions and collection Development personnel.

The Process

Once it became evident that the libraries' FY16 collection budget could not overcome budgetary constraints and anticipated inflation, the Associate Dean for Collection Strategies and Services met with leadership in Acquisitions and Collection

Development in the summer of 2015 to review available options. Although a serials review was planned for the coming spring, any costs savings from such a review would not be realized until two fiscal years in the future. Immediate actions including making changes to the approval plan and withholding a portion of discretionary funds from disciplines were taken, but these were still not enough to meet the anticipated shortfall. A more immediate solution was required, with databases being the only remaining option. Once it was decided that databases were the review target, a process needed to be developed.

Playing a key role in this process would be the approximately 40 librarians with subject responsibilities. These subject specialists belong to one or more collaborative groups divided into discipline areas. The collaboratives represent the Arts and Humanities (ARHU), Performing Arts (PA), Social Sciences (SocSci), and Science and Technology (STEM) areas and are called upon for group input and decision making in such areas as big-ticket purchases. Each collaborative has a representative that sits on the Collection Development Council (CDC). The CDC meets monthly, and its members advise the Collection Development department about issues of collections policy and process and communicate collection development issues to the constituents they represent.

Serial reviews are well-documented in the literature (Enoch and Harker, 2015; Grooms, 2011; Nixon,

2010; and Clement et al., 2008); however, there is little in the literature regarding database reviews beyond the experiences documented by Shapiro (2012) and Alvin (2015). Given a limited time frame available for action, there was a need to implement a relatively straightforward process so that subject specialists could quickly review and decide upon database subscriptions. The review itself needed to begin during the fall semester in order for cancellations to be processed and, wherever possible, realize savings in FY16.

The Interim Head of Collection Development outlined a two-step process for the review. The subject groups and CDC would first determine which group would hold primary responsibility for making decisions on a particular database. Once databases were “sorted” into their constituent groups, the actual ranking process would occur. The process design was reviewed and approved by the Associate Dean for Collection Strategies and Services, Head of Acquisitions, and the CDC.

In the first step of the process, all subject specialists received a copy of an Excel workbook generated by the Acquisitions department. This workbook listed 210 current subscription databases. Excluded from this list were any free titles, as well as any titles paid for via central (consortium) funds. The workbook included one tab containing the complete list of databases under consideration. General or interdisciplinary titles that were not assigned to a collaborative were listed on a tab for review by CDC members. The remaining titles were divided among three collaboratives, each with its own tab: ARHU, SocSci, and STEM. Because of the small membership size and relatively low number of databases assigned to it, the performing arts collaborative was combined with ARHU for purposes of this review.

The workbook was discussed at a CDC meeting and later distributed to all subject specialists for review. Additionally, a copy of the workbook was made available on an online file sharing service (box.umd.edu). Collaboratives were asked to review both the interdisciplinary (CDC) titles as well as their own subject collaborative tab to verify which databases should remain within their subject collaborative and which databases may be moved from the CDC list to a subject collaborative. The goals of the first phase of the process was to ensure that databases were listed in the correct discipline and that the only titles remaining on the CDC list

were those that were interdisciplinary, central to the University’s mission, or necessary for accreditation.

Collaboratives were given time to meet and discuss the draft lists. CDC collaborative representatives were charged with submitting a document on behalf of their collaborative indicating titles to move from the CDC list to their subject collaborative list and vice versa. The Interim Head of Collection Development received submissions from collaboratives and collated them for discussion at the next CDC meeting.

Although it was hoped that this phase of the project would be a relatively simple process for collaboratives to undertake, in some cases, it was challenging for collaboratives to determine which databases would fit the definition of “essential” or “core.” After discussion by the CDC, a revised list of titles was distributed to the collaboratives for final review. In addition, subject specialists were asked for their thoughts as to what data would be useful to facilitate the review process. The group suggested the following fields to inform future decision making: Cost per use, usage (downloads, views, and searches), and seats/concurrent use limitations.

Once the collaborative lists were finalized, a second workbook was made available via the online file-sharing service with the finalized list of databases. Subject specialists were instructed to review databases assigned to their collaboratives and prioritize their databases into one of three rankings: 1 = Top priority to maintain, 2 = Mid-level priority, 3 = Lowest priority. Subject specialists were instructed that the distribution of rankings 1 through 3 should be roughly equivalent in terms of cost for each grouping, and each collaborative list included a target for these levels. To assist with this process, cost data was provided at the top of each worksheet based upon the most recently available payment information.

As noted by Shapiro (2012, p. 154), “Identifying resources for cancellation is a complex decision-making process that includes consideration of such factors as usage, the number of resources supporting a particular discipline and their relative importance, departmental concerns including accreditation, cost, internal politics, duplication of resources (overlapping content), degree programs added or dropped, and the existence of comparable and less-expensive databases available from other vendors.” Maryland’s process took many of these

variables into consideration, and subject specialists were given as much data as possible to facilitate their decisions. Subject specialists were given great latitude in determining their own criteria for cancellation. However, it was suggested they look at criteria developed for a serials review conducted some years previously (Foudy & McManus, 2005), as well as sample criteria suggested via a discussion on ERIL-L (Swindler, 2015).

Once the results of the collaborative reviews were collated, they were reviewed by the CDC. CDC members also ranked databases on the CDC list individually and then met as a group to discuss the titles once their individual rankings were averaged. Databases on the subject and CDC lists with a rank of 3 were then identified for cancellation. Acquisitions was notified of the decisions and worked with vendors to process the cancellations.

Data Supplied

As noted previously, in the first phase of the process, Acquisitions created an Excel workbook divided by collaborative. Interdisciplinary titles were separated out on a CDC tab and were to be reviewed by the individual collaboratives. Each Excel workbook contained basic data extracted from the ILS about each title. This data included title, order number, subscription period, budget code, and consortial group coded, if available. Also included in the workbook was a list of databases that were associated with a group order. These included the collected "child" records for a parent subscription/entry that have multiple resources linked to it. Including a group order number (GON) allowed subject specialists to determine which titles came with another title (such as a package or an association membership), and what additional resources were included with that subscription.

The acquisitions department then collected both COUNTER and non-COUNTER compliant use data from publishers. The 210 titles under review were from 96 publishers. Of those 96 publishers, 58 were able to provide usage data. The subject specialists were asked for their feedback on which metric or metrics would be most useful in evaluating the databases. Regular searches and cost-per-use, calculated using the regular search total, were selected. For non-COUNTER compliant data, the electronic resources librarian selected the metric from the publisher-provided data that most closely

resembled regular searches. These metrics were added to the Excel workbook. The workbook also contained a column for notes from the collaboratives, one for notes from acquisitions, and for the assigned rank.

For the CDC's review of interdisciplinary databases, the ranking by each member for each title was averaged to arrive at a final ranking for the title. This final ranking was discussed and adjusted if needed. For the collaboratives, the process to arrive at the final ranking was decided by each group separately. Only the final ranking was given to CDC.

Communication

One key goal of the project was transparency. This was realized in several ways. First and foremost, all files associated with the review were made available to all subject specialists and acquisitions and collection development personnel via an online file sharing service (box.umd.edu). Additionally, once the project was complete, Acquisitions created and shared a "databases to be canceled" spreadsheet that was made available via on the same online file-sharing service. This spreadsheet contained information including the date when the database subscription ended (subscription period), and the date the vendor was notified of the database cancellation. It also included fields indicating which subject specialist would be responsible for creating a LibAnswers entry announcing the database cancellation, and a link to the LibAnswers entry once it was created. This spreadsheet was regularly updated as vendors were contacted and LibAnswers entries posted.

A further effort at transparency was in the methods used to notify the campus community of the cancellations. Subject specialists were responsible for sending direct notifications to their constituent faculty and students. Beyond this, LibAnswers was used as a broader means of explaining cancellations and pointing to equivalent products. The CDC reviewed the list of cancelled databases and assigned a LibAnswers contact (subject specialist) to each database canceled. This contact was responsible for creating an entry in LibAnswers indicating when the database would be canceled, alternative resources available (if any), and including the name and e-mail of an individual who could be contacted for more information. The Interim Head of Collection Development created a template and

guidelines for LibAnswers and provided these to subject specialists to assist them in this process.

As a means of informing patrons of the upcoming cancellation, LibAnswers entries were linked to the canceled database in the database A-to-Z list one month prior to the cancellation date. Access to the database itself remained active in this one-month lead-up period. Once the cancellation date had passed, access to the database itself ceased, and all database A-Z links pointed to the LibAnswers entry. Additional communication efforts included library website announcements and LibGuide updates.

Review Results

Over the course of the review, a total of 37 databases were canceled as of September 2016. This total includes two centrally funded resources, as well as three databases identified by a subject specialist for cancellation after the initial review period. The savings realized in FY16 was \$78,110. This is a result of many of the databases identified for cancellation already being renewed at the point where the decision had been made. Although this savings was lower than anticipated, the savings for FY17 and beyond totaled \$322,336.77, a significant amount.

Upon reflection, several elements worked well throughout the review process. These included the use of an online file-sharing service for folders/spreadsheets. This facilitated collaborative work at the time of the cancellation project and also after the project had concluded, as new subject specialists were hired, and the process was explained to them. Additional aspects of the project that worked well were the final cancellation spreadsheet, database A-Z list, and LibAnswers entries. The cancellation spreadsheet provided a place for subject specialists and the acquisitions department to track progress on cancellations and

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verify the status of LibAnswers entries. The LibAnswers entries themselves are accessible to anyone visiting the Library website and provide background as to the rationale for the cancellation as well as alternative resources.

Several opportunities for improvement to the process presented themselves during the database review. First and foremost, despite the best efforts of Collection Development and Acquisitions, some interdisciplinary databases were assigned to only one subject group. This meant that some subject specialists did not have an opportunity to weigh in on resources central to their subject areas. In the future, this will be addressed by sharing the entire title list by subject group assignment with all subject specialists before creating subject specific workbooks. An additional issue that occurred was that although the intent was for costs to be evenly distributed between the three cancellation levels, this was not clearly communicated. This aspect needs to be more strictly enforced in the next review. Third, and as alluded previously, many titles identified for cancellation had already been renewed for the current fiscal year by the time decisions were made. As a result, savings could not be realized in the current fiscal year. One means of addressing this issue is to start the process earlier the next time it occurs.

Conclusion

Until a permanent solution to the collection budget is realized either through additional campus funding or via other means, it is likely the database cancellation project initiated in 2015 will not be the last at the University of Maryland Libraries. However, having a path to follow already established makes it that much easier to undergo any additional review activities.

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