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Begin at the Beginning: Revamping Collection Development Workflows

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Abstract

“Begin at the beginning,” the king said, very gravely, “and go on till you come to the end: then stop.” This paper describes how two librarians newer to the University of Tennessee Libraries refreshed collection development workflows at the libraries after a reorganization. This reorganization distributed tasks across departments in a different manner due to the new departmental configurations. In this new matrix environment, more communication was required to achieve desired outcomes, but more buy-in was also needed from constituents such as the subject librarians. This paper describes how a new Collections Committee was formed to make decisions on high-dollar resources; what information was added to the traditional request form to facilitate the committee’s decisions; what information was asked of vendors at the point of trial or initial interest; and how this fed into a new collection development policy. By revamping the workflows to ask for more information up front, the presenters were able to help the new Collections Committee obtain all the information needed for decision-making at the point of decision. The authors share insights into how organizational changes can be used as an opportunity to instigate workflow changes that help libraries acquire resources more nimbly and flexibly.

University of Tennessee Libraries

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) serves as the flagship campus of the University of Tennessee system, which has four total campuses throughout the state. As of fall 2019, UTK has 29,490 students.

The UTK Libraries employ approximately 150 staff and faculty, with around 50 tenure-track faculty librarians. The libraries employ a liaison model for instruction, research consultations, and collection development. Approximately 25 faculty librarians serve as subject librarians. Some of these individuals spend their entire time on liaison duties, while others spend a much smaller percentage of their time on these duties. The libraries’ technical services departments include Acquisitions & Continuing Resources, Assessment Programs & Collection Strategy, Cataloging & Metadata, and Enterprise Systems. Together these units employ approximately 30 staff and faculty, with 4 serving as tenure-track faculty librarians.

The impetus for collection development workflow changes came out of a staff reorganization that occurred in August 2018. In the years leading up to 2018, the libraries had experienced a steady trickle of retirements, including the retirements of two associate deans. After the second associate dean retired in the summer of 2018, it was decided that

the position would not be replaced. Instead, four new departments and six middle-management positions were created to shift the supervisory load. Other individuals were moved into new positions in areas such as Liaison Programs. The largest change was the shifting of historic responsibilities—most notably, Collections joined Assessment Programs to provide more data analysis toward collection management, and collections budget oversight moved from individual subject librarians and Collections staff to the libraries’ Business Services office. This office serves only the libraries and liaises with financial offices on campus. As part of the reorganization, the libraries were also hiring for seven brand-new faculty librarian positions.

All of this change created a chaotic feeling for the fall 2018 semester. Four new departments were figuring out what they and their departments were doing, on top of old job duties. Gaps were left by individuals who were moved into new roles, while their old roles were waiting to be reimagined and filled. Others in the libraries filled in temporarily. For example, the head of Acquisitions & Continuing Resources served as the point person for every vendor for everything, as she was the only “stable” name for those representatives. Once the new Collection Strategist came on board, it was possible to divide vendor relationship work into a more manageable load shared by multiple people, but it was temporarily handled by

one person. This had the inadvertent side effect of making it seem that one person was the new point person, when it was really intended to be someone else or shared by several individuals. And lastly, as new employees began arriving and settling into their roles, those individuals inadvertently stepped on some toes as they acclimated to our institution. This was to be expected, but given the reorganization, it created some extra hurdles that needed to be overcome.

Identifying Areas for Improvement

We identified areas for improvement in several ways: observation, requests, and analysis.

With the departments reorganized and having fresh perspectives, it was the perfect time to reevaluate processes to make sure every step was still needed. Informal and formal discussions were held with representatives from each part of the workflow to learn current processes and for newer employees to ask questions. Another goal was to make each process as simple as possible for everyone involved. This was an observed need as well as requested change—newer employees were able to question why things were done a certain way, and staff were able to express desired changes to workflows that would make both their lives easier and provide efficiencies that benefit the patron. Overall, observation showed that streamlining workflows would fulfill a number of needs.

The most frequently requested change to collection development workflows revolved around requests for “big” purchases. Individuals from both technical services and the subject librarians desired a more collaborative process that was also faster. During the previous fiscal year, UTK Libraries had focused on paying off multiyear commitments instead of funding newer subscriptions. Subject librarians rightly shared that this had negatively impacted teaching and research.

Analysis also revealed gaps that negatively impacted collection development workflows. Through conversations and a focus group study, the authors learned that collection development training for subject librarians was haphazard and lacking. Subject librarians expressed desires to more easily place orders with Acquisitions, learn how to use dashboards to view statistics, and more. This is something that technical services is just getting started with, but has significantly shaped conversations between the two areas.

Forming a Collections Committee

One of the most requested changes was the revival of some kind of committee to make big purchase decisions. Therefore, the Collections Committee was formed in early 2019. The charge of this group is as follows: the committee reviews requests for resources that create a new ongoing encumbrance or a significant one-time encumbrance on the libraries’ collection budget. The committee also reviews current subscriptions that are questionable, and edits and drafts policies.

Membership is rather large, but must be to get all relevant input. The committee is co-chaired by the Collection Strategist and assistant head of Liaison Programs, in an effort to make it a collaborative initiative. Ex officio representatives include members from Collection Strategy, Acquisitions & Continuing Resources, Scholarly Communications, the Business Services office, and Cataloging & Metadata. Rotating membership include representatives from the three main subject areas (Humanities, Sciences, and Social Sciences) as well as General Education, the libraries’ group that handles the majority of undergraduate library instruction. The meetings occur once a month and are open to anyone in the libraries to attend.

The meetings held in 2019 mostly revolved around a backlog of purchase requests, created by the aforementioned payment of multiyear commitments. The committee members prioritized resources by need, with careful consideration of how the resource will be used for research, teaching, and learning over the next several years. The prioritized list is dynamic, meaning that any resource considered is prioritized against all other prioritized resources.

Preparing for Resource Reviews

To prepare for resource reviews that were to be completed by the Collections Committee, Acquisitions & Continuing Resources staff as well as Assessment Programs & Collection Strategy staff came up with several processes that could be completed in advance so the committee would have the fullest information possible at the point of need.

First, UTK Libraries believe in thoroughly testing a resource prior to purchase. To that end, the libraries have a long history of asking for and receiving 90-day trials to thoroughly advertise, test, receive training, and solicit feedback for electronic resources. The libraries have continued this process through the

reorganization and strongly prefer that all electronic resources be trialed prior to purchase consideration.

An Acquisitions & Continuing Resources staff member serves as the point person for trial requests. When requesting a trial from a vendor, the vendor is sent a “Vendor Questionnaire” form. This form was created in conjunction with several individuals from the Collections Committee. It started as a fillable PDF but eventually moved to an online survey format for greater ease of completion. The form asks about business practices of the company, open access initiatives, pricing options for the resource, any kind of fee that may be associated with the resource, and more. Almost anything that the committee might ask in regard to the vendor or technical aspects of the product are covered on this form. The answers, in conjunction with the trial, provide the most complete idea of what a subscription or purchase would cost, what would be provided by this resource, the vision for the resource, and identify any concerns before the subject librarian requests to purchase the resource. See Appendix A for a sample questionnaire.

Once a subject librarian decides that they would like to acquire a resource, they complete a request questionnaire. This is the official signal to the Collection Strategist that a resource is desired. The questionnaire is currently a fillable PDF, but technical services staff are working to create an online order system that will assist with tracking requests throughout the many steps that must occur prior to ordering a resource. This questionnaire was designed by the Collections Committee in the first few months of the committee’s existence, and asks questions such as “Who will use this resource?” and “For what purpose?” An important added question is the expected duration of use—this information could be the difference between purchasing a resource and subscribing to it. Again, the goal is to try to understand the potential impact of the resource on teaching, learning, and/or research at UTK. See Appendix B for an example questionnaire.

Before resource requests are discussed at the Collections Committee, the requests are discussed at the relevant subject area meetings (Humanities, Sciences, and Social Sciences). The Collections Committee tried assessing resources in two ways during fall 2019: taking resource requests back to the respective subject groups for discussion and prioritization *prior* to being discussed at a committee meeting, and

having those initial discussions occur *at* the committee meeting. Anecdotally, it was observed that more opportunities for interdisciplinary interest and engagement occurred at the subject group meetings. Also, discussion at the subject group meetings seemed to bring up questions that needed clarifying, allow subject librarians to discuss potential use by their departments, and allow for the general sharing of what is of interest to other departments. This creates more collaboration and also better opportunities for the fullest, best-informed conversation to occur at the Collections Committee.

Opportunities for Communication

Because of the many changes to the organization, through restructuring as well as new hires, Acquisitions & Continuing Resources staff initiated the creation of a “Vendor Relations” PDF. This idea was borrowed from the University of North Texas Libraries, which created a similar handout for vendors (Brannon, 2018). This PDF shares information about the libraries’ fiscal year, when we typically buy resources, and whom to contact. With all the changes that the UTK Libraries threw at vendors during fall 2018 through spring 2019, the libraries really needed this communication tool! The PDF is attached to e-mails when the incorrect person is contacted, is shared when new vendor representatives introduce themselves, and is also provided to other library employees to use.

In an effort to provide more communication about collections and workflow changes to the entire library, the technical services departments started a monthly e-mail called “Collections Updates.” This e-mail is crowdsourced from the relevant folks in the Acquisitions & Continuing Resources, Assessment Programs & Collection Strategy, Cataloging & Metadata, and Enterprise Systems departments, and expanded to also include the Business Services office (for budget updates), Scholarly Communications, and Collection Logistics departments. Any information that might be of use is included, but primarily revolves around trials, new resources, and policy updates or changes.

Another attempt at communication includes the Collections Committee minutes, which are e-mailed to the entire library and housed on the intranet. The widespread sharing of these minutes dispels some of the “mystery” around these meetings. Also, as was stated in the first minutes e-mailed out, the

committee's work should be of interest to everyone in the libraries, as the decisions that come out of the committee inform the libraries' collection activities.

An opportunity for better internal communication has been through the newly formed "Budget Team" meetings. This group includes representatives from the Business Services office, Assessment Programs & Collection Strategy, and Acquisitions & Continuing Resources departments. The group members touch base once a month on budget-related issues such as updates on internal processes and external factors (i.e., the university's budget). A lot is still changing on the budget side, including continued consolidation of funds and a changing university budget model, so these meetings are currently mostly a mix of informational and next-step planning.

Next Steps

The head of Acquisitions & Continuing Resources and the Collection Strategist conducted separate focus group research with the subject librarians in the fall of 2019 to learn more about the expectations of subject librarians around collection development

duties. A lot was learned about the training and communication that subject librarians would like to receive, what they think about the recent workflow changes, and how they feel about their roles. Some of the research findings will require more discussion with internal stakeholders, but some—especially around training and communication—are things that technical services can immediately or readily act on to enhance everyone's experience around all areas of collection development, especially workflows.

After significant changes are made and professional development is offered, the head of Acquisitions & Continuing Resources and the Collection Strategist plan to solicit feedback as well as survey subject librarians to determine the success of these efforts. Improving workflows and communication is an art and a science. It will take continual trial and error to determine what combination of trainings, tools, resources, and support will work best at the UTK Libraries. The goal is to remain flexible while keeping an eye on the goal of getting the resources patrons need for teaching, learning, and research in the time-liest way possible.

Reference

Brannon, S. (2018, November 8). *Vendor relations*. Flyer from UNT. Message posted to ALA ALCTS-ERES group.

Appendix A: Vendor Questionnaire Form

Vendor Questionnaire Form

Please complete this resource form to provide the University of Tennessee, Knoxville Libraries Collection Committee with the necessary information for making purchasing decisions. Before beginning, please have this information on hand: authentication methods, MARC records information, usage statistics information, your policies, and pricing details.

Please have a copy of your VPAT, Terms of Use, Privacy Policy and a Price Quote to submit with this form (if applicable) as well. Thank you for providing as much detail as possible. Please start the form now by clicking on the Next button below.

General Information

Vendor:

Today's Date:

Resource/Collection Name:

Your Contact Information:

First Name

Last Name

Phone

E-mail Address

Part I: Access Information

1. Is this resource compatible with IP authentication?
Yes
No
2. Is this resource compatible with Single Sign On systems (SSO)?
Shibboleth

Open Athens

None

Other

3. Does the resource require the user to create an account to gain access?

Yes

No

Please explain how the user creates an account and what is stored on the account:

4. What user information is collected and how is it used?

Part II: Records and Statistics

1. Is this resource's content discoverable through Ex Libris products (Alma, Primo, etc.)?

Yes

No

How often are records updated with Ex Libris?

2. Are quality MARC records available for this resource?

Yes

No

Is there a cost associated with receiving MARC records, how are the records made available, and how often are updates sent?

3. Is usage data provided?
4. Are usage statistics COUNTER compliant? How are they accessed?

5. Is there an administrative portal that provides the library access to control settings, download usage statistics, add Open URL linking, etc.?

Yes

No

6. Is this resource dynamic (content is added or removed) or static? How would we be notified when content is removed or added?

Part III: Licensing and Policy

1. What are your policies on resource sharing? Do you allow ILL (Inter-Library Loan)?
2. Please explain how you are working to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.0):

Ex: audits, product testing, accessibility statement, etc.

3. Describe any initiatives to make content open.

Part IV: Cost

1. Is this resource offered as a one-time purchase?

Yes

No

For one-time purchases, are there annual platform or hosting fees?

Yes

No

Explain how the annual platform or hosting fees are assessed, what the cost supports, and if the cost will increase:

2. Is this resource offered as a subscription?

Yes

No

For subscriptions, what is your standard annual renewal rate?

(Please write as a percentage.)

For subscriptions, does the institution retain access to content? How is access facilitated in the case of nonrenewal?

Part V: Additional Information

1. Do you have any testimonials or feedback? Any additional comments?

Please upload your Privacy Policy.

Please upload your current Terms and Conditions.

Please upload any accessibility documentation (VPAT, accessibility statement, etc.).

Please upload a price quote for this resource.

Appendix B: Request Questionnaire

Collections Committee Review Questions

Resource Name:

Please answer the following questions to provide the Collections Committee with the best understanding possible about the requested resource. Explaining responses is the best way to convey information, so please do not skip “Explain Response” sections unless the response reiterates the question. There is no one-size-fits all for evaluating resources. Answering “No” or “Not Sure” to a question does not make the resource a lower priority.

Content

Is this resource unique or essential? Explain how it is different from similar resources we currently access.

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

If it does not provide new content, will it replace a current resource?

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

Will content be added to this resource or will acquisition of this product complete a resource?

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

Does the vendor/publisher have a commitment to preservation? Explain how. (Ex.: Publisher is a LOCKSS partner)

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

Does the vendor/publisher have a commitment to open initiatives? Explain how. (Ex.: Vendor states that 5 journals will be made available as open access in 2021.)

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

Is there an expected time when the resource will no longer be needed or relevant?

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

Are there any content restriction or limitations of use?

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

User Community

Does this resource address a specific need? (Ex.: researcher request or class assignment) Please explain.

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

Will this resource be of value to multiple disciplines and audiences? List departments, classes, programs, etc.

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response

Has the resource been trialed? If so, please provide feedback (may include additional documentation).

Yes ☐ No ☐ N/A ☐ Not Sure ☐

Explain Response