Change: Watch For The Right Time

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Change—Watch for the Right Time: Structuring Collections Budgets to Meet Current and Future Needs

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Abstract

Collection budgets are an essential tool for building collections, yet the amounts of allocations can ebb and flow over the years. Modifying the budget structure is an intimidating, exhausting exercise with administrative and political ramifications that affect the workload of collections librarians as well as the workflows in Acquisitions departments. External and internal forces such as impending budget cuts and serials reviews, a new library system, new department heads, newly minted librarians' learning curves, and the creation or demolition of Big Deals seem like roadblocks to a budget revision process. They can also be seized as opportunities to look at new models. Libraries get by with the allocations provided in any given year, but would it be better for the collections if the approach to allocations was more flexible from the beginning, more of a proactive allocation instead of reactive?

At Binghamton University Libraries, the hiring of a new head of Collection Development and migrating to a new library system necessitated collaborative conversations concerning structures and roles for the two departments. This paper presents scenarios and recommendations for determining when and how to collaboratively evaluate a legacy budget structure, redefine allocations, and review staff roles.

Background

Binghamton University is a premier public university with a student population of 14,145 undergraduate and 3,985 graduate students. Binghamton is one of four research university centers in the State University of New York (SUNY), system which is comprised of 64 campuses. The university is known for providing an excellent liberal arts education with a growing emphasis on research and graduate programs.

The Binghamton University Libraries' mission is to "bring people and information together utilizing value-added local initiatives to enhance learning, teaching, and research" for our faculty, students, and staff. The staff of 28 librarians and 61 library staff work at four locations—the main library, two branch libraries, and an off-site annex. The libraries' unique and diverse collection includes 2.2 million print volumes, 1.1 million e-books, 63,000 e-journals, and 425 online databases. The libraries are a member of the SUNY Libraries Consortium (SLC) comprised of all of the libraries in the SUNY system.

Restructure Collection Budget—Why Now?

The libraries' general budget structure had been in place for more than two decades. It was developed within Ex Libris's Aleph library management system

that was implemented in 1993. The structure was print focused with numerous fund codes to track purchasing of print monographs, journals, and standing orders. Over the years, fund codes were added for electronic resources and some adjustments were made to accommodate new formats, but the overall budget structure had not been thoroughly examined or significantly revised since implementation.

In 2017, SLC decided to migrate from Aleph to Ex Libris's new library services platform (LSP) called Alma. The process for migration began 2018 and was completed in July 2019. As a SUNY-wide system, Alma allows for greater collaboration among the SUNY libraries. With the enhanced features, the migration to a new system also provided a great opportunity to evaluate the budget structure as well as acquisition workflows.

In addition to the new LSP, the new dean of Libraries (who started in 2016) requested that librarians conduct an extensive collections allocation analysis project in 2017 since the last one was performed 10 years earlier. The time-intensive project required gathering four years' worth of library and campus data. The library data included collection funds for monographs, journals, and databases by academic department (as set up in the Aleph budget structure

system) as well as circulation and interlibrary loan data. The campus data was by academic department, including course hours, full-time enrollment, and the number of full-time faculty and degrees granted. Using a ranking analysis, the library data was compared to campus data to determine areas of potential under- or overfunding by department. In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative data was also considered, including subject librarian expertise and support for general education courses. The results showed a need to reallocate funds in a number of areas as well as possible ways to restructure the budget (Brown, Galbraith, Dixon, & Tuttle, 2019).

An additional factor making it the right time was the hiring of a new head of Collection Development in 2018. The new head came with extensive collection development and management experience from previous positions at several other university libraries. His knowledge brought new ideas and a fresh perspective in the evaluation of our budget structure. It is valuable to have a new librarian ask questions on how and why funds are allocated as well as considering other options. He also proactively reviewed and negotiated new multiyear license deals for many of our online databases that saved funds that could be reallocated within our budget.

Finally, two external forces influenced the decision to restructure the collection budget. First, the university created numerous new academic programs over the past 10 years. For most of these programs, the libraries were given little to no funds for collections, which resulted in underallocated programs.

Second, in 2018, there was a campus-wide budget reduction. For the libraries, the cut came primarily from the collection budget. It required a significant serials review to identify resources for cancellation. And, while certainly not an ideal situation, it did allow subject librarians to work more closely with their departments to discuss current research and teaching priorities. Through this budget cut, the faculty also learned more about our budget process. Both of the external factors, new programs and budget reduction, provided more insight into ways to reallocate funds and restructure the budget.

The internal changes and external factors all came together at the right time to provide a framework for advocating for and implementing a new approach to our budget structure and allocation. The new approach required examining our workflows, planning, multiyear negotiations, and staffing that

resulted in significant changes to our collections budget and acquisition of materials.

Impact on Workflows and Planning

Implementation of the budget changes was facilitated by detailed planning, including preparing the staff in Technical Services' Acquisitions department and the Collections team for the adoption of the new funds. With the understanding that budget structures in the new system (Alma) were similar to those in the legacy system (Aleph), the proposed changes were comprehensible and easily incorporated into Collections' and Technical Services' daily routines.

A minor change to the monographs budget three years before migration paved the way for the Alma revisions. In the original (print-based) environment, book funds were divided into two sections for each academic area and coded -A for approval and -B for firm orders (thus, ART-A and ART-B, and so forth.).

In response to increasing e-book purchasing and the need for better tracking of these expenditures, the fund names were retained but the significance of the codes changed. Beginning with the 2016/17 fiscal year, -A was newly designated for print format and -B was designated for electronic format. This revised structure provided useful and quickly retrievable information concerning monographic expenditures by format in Aleph.

Alma's capabilities provided the opportunity to streamline the budget structure for monographs. Because material format is selected at the point of order in Alma and relevant statistics are easily viewed and compiled, the legacy fund structure was no longer necessary. The result was that each discipline's book fund was collapsed from two to one (no more ART-A and ART-B, just ART). The changes were targeted to coincide with Alma migration and the framework was in place when the system went live at the beginning of the 2019/20 fiscal year. (See Figure 1.)

The upcoming migration to Alma was logistically an appropriate time to also consider and update library funding areas related to changes in campus programs and to combine some disciplines. The university had experienced a growth spurt under the current president; new areas of study had been introduced and established programs had evolved. For example, the Watson School of Engineering and Applied Science has gradually expanded

Original (pre-2016)	Revised (2016–2019)	Collapsed (2019–)
ART-A (approval monograph)	ART-A (print monograph)	ART (monograph, any format)
ART-B (firm order monograph)	ART-B (electronic monograph)	

Figure 1. Historical format for monographic funds.

Original (pre-2016)	Revised (2016–2019)	Collapsed (2019–)
Bioengineering-A (approval monograph)	Bioengineering-A (print monograph)	Engineering (monograph, any format)
Computer Science-A	Computer Science-A	
Electrical Engineering-A	Electrical Engineering-A	
Engineering Design-A	Engineering Design-A	
Mechanical Engineering-A	Mechanical Engineering-A	
Systems Science-A	Systems Science-A	
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Bioengineering-B (firm order monograph)	Bioengineering-B (electronic monograph)	
Computer Science-B	Computer Science-B	
Electrical Engineering-B	Electrical Engineering-B	
Engineering Design-B	Engineering Design-B	
Mechanical Engineering-B	Mechanical Engineering-B	
Systems Science-B	Systems Science-B	

Figure 2. Engineering funds, simplified.

to encompass several distinct departments and programs. To better track purchases for each area as it was introduced, the libraries subdivided the original engineering fund. The end result was six separate engineering budget areas, each with -A and -B allocations, resulting in 12 funds. Eventually this separation was no longer necessary but there was no incentive to dismantle the structure until Alma was on the horizon. The proposal to merge all 12 funds into one simplified engineering fund was accepted and welcomed by the Engineering librarian. Another action was to merge the fund for the Translation, Research and Instruction Program (TRIP) into that for Comparative Literature. The two areas are closely aligned and share a subject librarian. These changes are illustrated in Figure 2.

Continuing orders are more complex and revisions to their fund structures are made each year, but the dynamic nature of periodicals, standing orders, and aggregator databases poses challenges to consistent statistics gathering. The original funding framework

was based on print periodicals grouped by subject areas coded PX (example: ARTPX). Standing orders retains a parallel structure with a code of SX. As Big Deals and other packages for electronic journals were created, funds were moved into another group, coded with the EX suffix. The lines have blurred with most periodicals now online only, and the assignment into PX or EX has become misleading. As the staff at Binghamton becomes more familiar with Alma and its analytics functions, it may be feasible to further refine the funds.

Impact of Multi Years on the Budget

Negotiation with materials suppliers has had a positive impact on expenditures and on workloads. Prior to a new dean's arrival in 2016, it was not Binghamton's practice to seek multiyear agreements for ongoing resources. This policy was reversed in 2018 and is already beginning to produce significant savings even for the less expensive databases and journal packages. By locking in modest price

increases over three-year periods, staff time as well as funds are freed up. Creating the initial budget in the spring is simplified; collections staff no longer need to develop multiple scenarios for across-the-board inflationary percentages as the prices of most of the ongoing resources are now set in advance. Having definitive prices is also easier for Acquisitions staff during the renewal process. Most significantly, it frees up funds for big-ticket purchases early in the fiscal year. With the campus granting a modest yearly increase to the libraries' budget, any excessive price increases were difficult to absorb and it was necessary to carefully monitor the billing of ongoing orders. Prior to the adoption of multiyear deals, staff would harvest journal prices as they were released. Some figures were not available until the point of renewal or invoicing, and with some resources not billed until the spring, it was imprudent to identify leftover monies until several weeks before fiscal year close. Prices for many resources are now fixed a year or more in advance, thus it is not necessary to wait until the end of the fiscal year to expend funds.

The savings accumulated by multiyear license agreements are now placed in discretionary funds, playfully coded COLD (short for Collections Discretionary). One fund is dedicated to one-time purchases and another for continuations. Subject librarians are encouraged to submit their wish lists for big-ticket items early in the academic year. Since funds are immediately available, there is time to review and discuss proposed purchases rather than scramble just before fiscal year close, and consider any end-of-calendar year vendor deals.

Impact of Budget Changes on Staffing

Modifications to the budget structures logically led to the review of roles and workflows in Acquisitions. For many years staff members had been broadly assigned to work on either approval books or firm orders. Ordering, copy cataloging, and invoice processing for approvals was the shared responsibility of two people and several others handled firm orders. There was a further division based on print or electronic format. After collapsing the two monographic funds into one, tasks are no longer divvied up since many routines are similar regardless of approval receipt or firm order, print or electronic format. The print approval plan has been significantly reduced in recent years anyway, and combining subjects (like the six engineering funds) had no measurable impact on workflow aside from the staging of print books for review. Now each of those staff members can handle

any approval or firm order, and the cross-training provides a welcome flexibility for everyone. Also, in anticipation of the Alma migration another long-overdue initiative was put in motion: the merger of the monographic and continuing resources units under the Acquisitions umbrella. With shared knowledge and parallel job functions, the combined staff are handling tasks that are not necessarily relegated to specific budget groups.

The impact of the budget changes on Collections was also significant, in large part due to the approach by the new head of Collections. He initiated the review by scheduling individual meetings with subject librarians to discuss the potential changes to the budget, including streamlining and reallocating some funds. The response was very positive as the librarians felt appreciated and this promoted collegiality. Underfunded program areas had been draining the energy of subject librarians trying to stretch their dollars and at times asking other librarians to share costs or apply for grants. By finally addressing the needs of these programs by providing increased funding, the librarians could better plan their annual spending and no longer needed to find alternative funding. Streamlining monographic funds has made the workflow and decision process more efficient. The Engineering librarian was relieved to have just one monographic fund to monitor instead of six separate areas totaling 12 funds.

In short, the end of fiscal year scramble has been minimized, subject librarians now have time to fully consider big purchases, and they are more easily included in the final decision-making of discretionary funds. Acquisitions staff isn't on high alert (waiting for invoices, creating orders for big-ticket items) for the last three weeks of the fiscal year.

Summary and Recommendations

The libraries' Collections Team considered the collections budget structure outdated for several years, but the magnitude of a revision project was intimidating. With a new head of Collections, a collection allocation review, a mandated budget reduction, preparation for a new library system, and the expansion of university programs, it became clear by 2018 that the time for a new approach had come.

After reviewing library and campus data, consultation with each subject librarian, and the merger of two Technical Services units, the new structure was put in place as the migration from Aleph to Alma was implemented.

In review, several lessons were learned:

- The outdated budget structure was overfunded in print and underfunded for electronic materials.
- New programs and priorities needed to be funded and reallocation was critical.
- The budget should have been revised sooner; it was a good thing it was not postponed any longer.
- It was advantageous to have the new budgets already in place when Alma went live, as postmigration work would have made any further changes difficult.
- Input from librarians experienced with budget manipulation was complemented by a newcomer, head of Collections, who provided a fresh perspective.
- There was a positive impact of multi-year deal negotiation on workload and purchasing.

Recommendations to other librarians considering budget revision:

- Push for it, as it is common for other initiatives to take priority over it.
- Use migration or other event as a catalyst to evaluating the budget.
- Perform the allocation review process regularly to stay in touch with current and future campus needs.
- Consider discretionary funds to address unmet needs throughout the fiscal year.
- Ensure subject librarian buy-in for the process by seeking their viewpoints and expertise.
- Solicit programmatic information from Acquisitions librarians, who have insight into materials requests by instructors, researchers, and students.
- Review staff roles driven by any aspect of the budget structure and prepare those affected by the changes to their work assignments or routines.
- Simplify a legacy structure by streamlining fund codes.
- Support a culture of flexibility.

Reference

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