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# From a University Press: By the Numbers

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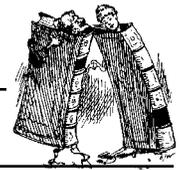
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Recently, our department heads and acquisitions staff gathered in an off-site space to do something I've been wanting us to do since our last round of strategic planning four years ago: look at numbers. Of course, the staff looks at numbers all the time: editors and assistants prepare P&Ls/forecasts for each new book before it goes to our board. Marketing is tracking daily sales, monthly and annual sales targets, returns, individual book backorders, and a host of other things. The business office is tracking inventory, low stock, and eBook conversion and database expenses, as well as cash flow and the overall expenses as they track as part of the annual budget. Monthly, the department heads conduct one- and two-year anniversary reviews on each book we publish (this has turned out to be one of our most valuable exercises, as hindsight makes it very clear when a sales projection, print run, price, or discount was bungled, and we try to learn from that). I examine all these things and others, including vendor trends and sales by channel.

My favorite report, though, is the annual operating statistics report from our professional association, the **Association of American University Presses (AAUP)**. When this report arrives in my inbox, the math-averse English major in me gives way to the person who learned how to be a financial manager from

valuable mentors over the years and from the equally valuable school of hard knocks, aka the recession of 2008, which happened to coincide with my first year as a director. Publishing is both art and science, gut and numbers, and these operating statistics are as close as we get to being able to benchmark our performance as a press against averages for presses according to size as well as the group as a whole. When I can assess our gross margin, institutional support, and non-book revenues against peer presses, the result is often information our board is very pleased to hear. The data also incites me to ask valuable questions that teach me about our operation and industry trends. The report caused me to become obsessed with inventory several years ago, both its level and procedure for write-downs, and that inquiry yielded positive change for our press. It also tells me that our book-per-staff-member ratio is nearly double the average of other presses, and I need to continue ice cream socials, direct praise, and the other things I should do to recognize and reward my outstanding and incredibly dedicated staff.

Since being mired in numbers is a daily thing, why was I so excited about the recent retreat, in which huge stacks of reports detailed sales by subject area, series, and overall performance for the last four years? In part, it was because my talented and thoughtful

colleagues and I were all in the same place, thinking about and discussing individual books and larger trends together, developing a group conversation. (Copious amounts of food and coffee didn't hurt, either.) In an even greater measure, though, what we were doing was examining numbers — hard data — in order to develop a narrative about our press.

People and organizations are deeply shaped by their own stories. Such narratives, shared and individual, can tell us who we are, how we became that way, what it is that we do well, what it is that we should stop doing, what we can do to improve, and how we can build on existing strengths. I'd posit that most of us in the business of publishing or librarianship need no convincing about the power or value of the narrative. What makes our narratives most informed and most useful as a guide to future action and policy, however, is when the narratives are built on numbers and data.

In a vacuum, it's easy to develop misguided theories about our customers and users and what they want or how they discover, access, and read content. Without numbers, it's easy to theorize that our favorite lists and authors are successful, if for no other reason than we like them so well and one of them sent you a fruit basket last year. Conversely, that list

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you've never believed in (often for reasons that are purely personal in origin), the one you assume limps along on borrowed time and was misconceived from the beginning may turn out to be surprisingly strong and even growing when you run a sales or use history. We are only human, after all, and it's easy for our prejudices and preconceptions to color and even take over our narratives when they remain unleavened by data.

So on that magical day, far from our phones and computers and armed with about 50 different reports focused on our books, we looked at the hard truths about what we publish. We examined every subject area, every series, and even looked at studies of pricing averages and publishing models from seven other university presses. What was perhaps most remarkable about that day was that no one, including me, walked into the room with a lot of preconceived notions of what we would find. This examination was not personal, not bent toward any one objective or against any particular subject area. We all simply wanted to see what was working and what wasn't and to talk about how to change our acquisitions strategy or publishing models for underperforming lists according to what the numbers were teaching us.

What surprised me further was that after six-and-a-half hours of this kind of analysis, we ended up with an affirmed narrative about who we were and also a prescriptive narrative for what we needed to do more of or stop doing altogether. The numbers were an entrée for a frank assessment and discussion of the books of ours that sell well and who buys them. Looking at the reports also clearly showed us what disciplinary subsets and types of books were experiencing several years' worth of decline and waning purchaser interest. To my delight but not surprise, I've already heard staff referencing the issues and "things to avoid" list that came out of this retreat as part of other discussions.

I imagine that libraries also possess this wealth of data, particularly in the form of circulation statistics, that could be used to initiate or marshal financial resources around programs that will usefully reshape collections strategies or augment the user experience. I also wonder if sometimes librarians, as I know some press administrators do, worry that a calculated and intentional engagement with numbers and data signals that we have somehow lost our way as mission-oriented professionals. Our recent retreat, however, has made me a firm believer that quantitative analysis is an essential tool for conducting an honest and productive assessment of the quality and reach of an operation. We know the end goals for the scholarly materials we create and manage: excellence, wide discovery and dissemination, and active use. The beauty of our numbers, then, is what they can show us about how our organizations can evolve and continually improve in pursuit of these fundamental (and very mission-oriented) goals. 🌱

## Random Ramblings — “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”: When Academic Libraries Say No

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I chose the topic for this month's column after reading the excellent piece by **Barbara Fister**, “Breaking Taboos for All the Right Reasons,” in the April 16, 2014 edition of *Inside Higher Ed*. (<http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/breaking-taboos-all-right-reasons>) She was commenting on a snippet of conversation overheard at a gathering of librarians that “eBooks are a huge headache and students often prefer print.” She then asks: “if students don't want eBooks, shouldn't we listen to them? Aren't we supposed to be student-centered?” I contend that academic library users, most often students but also faculty, join the **Rolling Stones** in complaining that you can't always get what you want. Let me start with examples and also contrast some of these policies with the public library model.

**Multiple Formats.** To start with the case above, most academic libraries buy materials in only one format, either print or eBook, even if some students want the other format. Public libraries buy the same best seller in multiple formats including print, eBook, audio, and video.

**Multiple Copies.** Except perhaps for reserves, academic libraries purchase only one copy of most works, even very popular ones. Sometimes, they do purchase multiple access options for eBooks and will consider interlibrary loan to help desperate users, though other libraries often don't lend popular materials. Public libraries expect multiple users to want the same best sellers and often have rules to buy extra copies based upon the number of requests.

**Textbooks.** Almost all academic libraries voluntarily choose not to meet the most important information need for their students — access to current textbooks. Students would be overjoyed if libraries met this want because they would save hundreds of dollars each semester.

**Lending Policies.** Academic users have divided wants on this issue. If they have successfully checked out the item, they want to keep it as long as they need it. If they want to get their hands on the material, they want liberal recall policies with heavy fines for those that don't return the desired resource on time, even from an important faculty member.

**Recreational Reading.** Some academic libraries have policies against purchasing recreational reading. Others, especially with no good public library nearby, don't and try to meet the entertainment needs of their faculty and students. These libraries sometimes solicit gift books and don't process them fully to keep costs down. Even the libraries with a policy

against recreational reading will purchase materials to support the curriculum that may include courses on science fiction, writing for popular publications, and the like. Finally, some users will consider the **Jane Austen** novels purchased to support the English Department to be the best possible leisure time reads. As a quick aside, my own university purchased a streaming audio service for classical music with a limited number of seats. I felt guilty whenever I used one of these seats for pleasure listening and perhaps kept a student from completing a course assignment. Public libraries consider providing the recreational reading demanded by their patrons to be one of their most important responsibilities.

**Popular Materials.** I'll go out on a limb here to suggest that undergraduate students might want many more popular non-fiction materials than library selectors buy. Having another resource than the textbook to explain general principles in a comprehensible but different way would be useful to many undergraduates. Then there is always a demand for the *Idiot's Guides*. Public libraries specialize in buying accessible non-fiction.

**Microformats.** I doubt that anyone in the world actually likes microformats, but they used to be a necessary evil because they provided materials that could not be easily found elsewhere. Today, many academic libraries are giving patrons what they want by buying digital versions of these resources, sometimes at a high cost. Public libraries have always tried their best to avoid microformats.

**Patron-Driven Acquisitions.** While the idea behind patron-driven acquisitions is giving the students and faculty what they want, I don't believe that this statement is completely accurate, especially for print materials. The undergraduate student whose paper is due tomorrow will use whatever is available and will most likely not find the same richness of resources as in the past. These collections may not also reflect the same balance of divergent viewpoints that collection development experts were expected to provide. The unsophisticated student may not even recognize that the collection is unbalanced. For eBooks, the student must navigate the online catalog including selecting the appropriate subject headings, often not an easy task even for experts, while in the past the same students would find the correct general area in the print stacks and pull down books until they found the required number of resources. Public libraries strive to anticipate user wants so that popular materials are available as quickly as possible after publication.

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