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Being Earnest with Collections — Improving Internal Communications at Georgetown University Library

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Column Editor's Note: *In this month's edition of **Being Earnest with Collections**, I am featuring a talented librarian I met a few years ago when we served together on the **Gale Library Advisory Board**. **Melissa** is a dedicated librarian who is well spoken. In this article, **Melissa** provides best practices to improve communication between the various stakeholders involved with decisions about subscription review and cancellation. Many of us have been involved with reduced purchasing power caused by budget reductions, inflation, or even flat budgets. In the article you will find important takeaways that may help if your library is anticipating a large scale review of titles with possible cancellations. My thanks goes to **Melissa** for her detail and efforts in making this information available to **ATG** readers. — **MA***

After several years of steady collections growth, **Georgetown University Library (GUL)**, like most academic libraries, faced initially flat and then declining collection budgets. A flat budget in FY15 prompted the library to assemble a task force of librarians to make small-scale reductions in order to account for serials inflation.¹ Although the library previously had various standing committees to address collection development and management concerns — the Collection Development Council (2000-2010) and the Allocations Committee (2011-2013) — these groups had been disbanded in the

course of key personnel changes. Without an existing standing committee, a task force was convened to deal with the collection review decisions needed to balance the budget. The collection review also coincided with two crucial vacancies — the Associate University Librarian for Scholarly Resources and Services and the Head of Collections, Research, and Instruction — adding to the existing challenges of the collection review.

Under these circumstances, the Collections Review Task Force (CRTF) was formed in fall 2014 with the charge to “establish and apply objective criteria for analyzing the content, cost, and actual/projected usage of titles. To ensure that the library’s limited resources are allocated appropriately, they will work closely with liaison librarians who will inform and involve interested faculty members.” The task force comprised the Head of Technical Services, the Head of Electronic Resources and Serials, the Collections Coordinator, and three additional subject librarians, representing a variety of disciplinary perspectives. For the first round of cuts, the CRTF was directed to find savings from within current electronic resources and serials subscriptions, standing orders, newspaper subscriptions, and microform subscriptions. Since the collections hadn’t been holistically reviewed in a significant amount of time, most of the initial cuts were for resources with low-to-no usage.

Concluding the first year of cuts and anticipating future cuts, the CRTF reached out to the subject librarians to solicit comments on and suggestions for improving the review process. To that end, the CRTF sent a survey asking for feedback on the following questions:

- What worked well in the collection review project this academic year?
- What did not work well in the collection review project? What would you suggest for improvement?
- Do you have other suggestions about how to approach the cuts in FY16?

From the survey the CRTF identified a number of ways it could improve its processes. Suggestions ranged from the review’s timing, which coincided with the busiest part of the fall semester, to internal communication processes and coordination of the review. The success of the project, in terms of meeting the budget reduction goal, would rise and fall on the active participation of all the subject librarians. With that in mind, the CRTF took the librarians’ critiques to heart and established several practices to ensure that information flowed smoothly and steadily to and from the task force and the subject librarians. While we couldn’t change the review’s timing, we could improve our methods of disseminating key information about the review.

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One of the topics that get an incredible amount of attention at my WEBEX's and in-house sessions centers on price. Inevitably someone from the audience will relate a horror story about the salesperson who could not justify the price being asked for by the company be it a renewal or new business opportunity. Moreover, some sales reps, I am told have had the audacity to tell the librarian that no price sheet exists! Really? Is it plausible that any information industry company cannot provide a simple price sheet to a customer? I think not.

My suggested response for an information professional unhappy with the price proposed by the vendor is to ask a simple five word question which is, “Can you defend your price?” At the very least, the company will endeavor to explain how they arrived at the price.

At my session at the **2016 Computers in Libraries** meeting in Washington, DC, two of the librarians in the audience reminded me that they attended my session the year before and that I had suggested the five word question when confronted with a vendor’s price that seemed excessive. They both told me that they had occasion to ask the question and in both cases (at separate libraries), a more reasonable price was negotiated. It can be done! All you have to do is ask.

Colin Vearncombe (1962 - 2016), known by his stage name **Black**, was an English singer-songwriter. He emerged from the punk rock music scene and achieved mainstream pop success in the late 1980s, most notably with the international hit single “Wonderful Life” in 1987. He wrote a song, “Something For The Asking” that pretty much sums up the point of this article.

The ball is in your court. 🍌

*Mike is currently the Managing Partner of **Gruenberg Consulting, LLC**, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, “**Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success**” has become the definitive book on negotiation skills and is available on Amazon, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. www.gruenbergconsulting.com*

In the following fiscal year, the university significantly reduced the library's budget, requiring a concerted effort on the library's part to meet the target cuts. In the FY16 review, no proverbial stone was left unturned. The task force and librarians systematically looked at all areas of expenditure from firm orders, approvals, and standing orders in the monograph collection to all resources with ongoing expenses, including individual journals, journal packages, databases, newspapers, and microforms. Cuts to the monograph collection were made across the board: an even percentage cut to all firm order funds and the cancellation of domestic approvals and standing orders. Reductions in our subscription resources required more attention by both the task force and the librarians, which made communication between these groups even more critical.

For FY16, the task force's composition was slightly amended so that the membership was more representative. Librarians from technical services, electronic resources and serials, library administration, and five subject specialists representing the arts and humanities, business and professional programs, social sciences, sciences, and area studies now comprised the task force. The new iteration of the CRTF distributed the responsibility for communication across the subject librarians on the task force whereas the first year of cuts had put the onus of communication on the collections coordinator. The distributed communications model alleviated the pressure that had fallen on one librarian while allowing for increased personal contact with subject librarians. This also gave subject librarians a clear point of contact if they had questions for the task force. If there were particular questions related to a humanities discipline that arose, then the CRTF representative for that area would work with the appropriate librarians to gather their feedback.

Another crucial factor in the FY16 collections review was that the Library filled the vacancy for the Head of Collections, Research, and Instruction just prior to the fall 2015 semester. The newly hired head joined the task force and was instrumental in moving the review process forward and helping the library meet target goals for reducing collection expenditures. The new department head helped increase cohesiveness in the task force and provided a voice of authority when communicating review tasks to the subject librarians.

In order to share information with the librarians in real time, the task force used a shared Google Sheet to relay information as resources came up for renewal. For each database the electronic resources and serials department staff would add it to the spreadsheet along with information on the FY15 cost, the FY16 cost, the fiscal years impacted by the payments, potential savings, a due date for the review decision, the librarian primarily responsible, and space to record drop/keep recommendations along with comments. As resources were added to the review list, then

updated usage statistics were pulled and placed in a readily accessible shared drive. The CRTF members worked closely with subject librarians to ensure that each of them had subscribed to receive e-mail updates regarding changes to the spreadsheet. This allowed all librarians to know in real time when resources were up for review and to see what the task force's final decision had been. The due dates provided also clearly indicated how much time was available to review each resource. Even with the automated notifications, members of the task force would personally contact individual librarians when questions arose and when resources in their disciplinary areas came up for review.

In its first iteration, the CRTF had established criteria for reviewing resources; however, because the initial process lacked a systematic process for gathering feedback, the criteria weren't always applied evenly. The criteria were designed to encourage librarians to consider the monetary and intellectual value of each resource and to discourage them from simply keeping all resources in their area without thoughtful analysis. As each resource came up for renewal, librarians were asked to recommend whether the library should keep or drop a particular resource. Any recommendation to keep a resource had to be accompanied by a justification form in which librarians considered the following factors:

1. Usage stats, cost, cost per use
2. Relevance to curriculum/research (e.g., class assignments, faculty input, etc.)
3. Overlap analysis to determine overlap between collections
4. Environmental scan (consider the resource's contents in comparison with our other holdings, inclusion in LOCKSS, etc.)
5. Percentage price increase
6. Impact factor (for journals, where applicable)

To gather this information for the FY16 collections review process, the CRTF developed a justification form in Google Forms so that subject librarians had a streamlined, consistent way to provide feedback on resources. The form also allowed multiple librarians to review a given resource, which provided for cross-disciplinary review. The task force members relied heavily on the subject librarians' assessments in order to make well-informed decisions. As an added benefit, collecting responses through the form meant that all responses could then be easily shared with the task force and considered in retention and cancellation decisions. Without a completed justification form, the default decision was to drop the resource.

While the Google form and spreadsheet were used primarily to track database renewal decisions, the CRTF also asked subject librarians to review individual journal subscriptions from **EBSCO** and **Harrassowitz**, journal packages, newspaper subscriptions, and microform subscriptions. While the CRTF did most of the analysis on the journal packages, the responsibility for reviewing other resource types

was shared with the subject librarians. Each project was distributed via e-mail with links to appropriate resources such as usage statistics, review directions, and deadlines. Some of the deadlines were driven by vendor-set renewal dates whereas others were set by the task force, but regardless, the CRTF attempted where possible to allow adequate time for each review to take place. With careful coordination and communication between the task force and subject librarians, the library was able to successfully meet the collection reduction target and balance the library's budget.

The importance of two-way communication between the task force and the librarians can't be over-emphasized. The task force had the onus for sharing information with and responding to questions from the subject librarians in a clear and timely manner, but the subject librarians also were responsible for providing timely evaluations of resources and for communicating the priorities of the disciplines they represented. The dialogue that ensued was essential for the success of the review process.

The task force's work highlighted the need for a standing committee to focus on library collections. At the task force's recommendation, the library charged a Standing Committee on Collections (SCC) in FY17 to:

- Serve as an evaluative body for Library collections purchases and licenses
- Identify changes in scholarly publishing that the Library should address within the framework of its collections
- Conduct ongoing assessments of the Library collection
- Make determinations about cancellation or alteration of subscriptions to ensure that limited materials funds are expended appropriately
- Recommend action items and review **GU's** participation in Washington Research Library Consortium (WRLC) projects on a local level (i.e., any initial discussion would take place in SCC) based on information brought by GUL leadership from WRLC committees (e.g., Co-ordinated Collections Committee)
- Work with liaison librarians to review potential purchases, subscriptions, and trials
- Report SCC issues and decisions to liaison librarians, who will inform and involve faculty as cancellations, revisions, trials, and additions are made to the collection

The newly formed committee includes appointed members representing the humanities, social sciences, sciences, area studies, archives and special collections, and specified ex-officio members: the Associate University Librarian for Scholarly Resources and Services, the Head of Collections, Research, and Instruction, and the Head of Electronic Resources and Serials. Similar to the CRTF, the SCC will serve as the front line for collection review and assessment

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And They Were There

Reports of Meetings — SALALM 61, and the 36th Annual Charleston Conference

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SALALM 61 — University of Virginia,
Charlottesville Virginia — May 9-13, 2016

Reported by: **Claire-Lise Benaud** (University of New Mexico)
and **Suzanne Schadl** (University of New Mexico)

SALALM 61, the organization's 2016 annual conference was hosted by the **University of Virginia** in Charlottesville from May 9th to May 13th. **SALALM's (Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials)** meeting is a catch all for Latin American Area Studies librarians and "*Libreros*," book dealers from Latin America and Spain. The theme this year, "*Nuestro norte es el sur: Mapping Resistance and Resilience in Latin American, Caribbean, and Iberian studies*" encouraged large roundtable discussions and small panel sessions that addressed means by which Latin Americanists, Caribbeanists and Iberianists resist "one size fits all" globalizing trends that privilege the Global North (that's the U.S. and Western Europe) in the academic discourse of the areas. Collections from Latin and Spanish America are important parts of this resistance because they help propel Latin American voices in the U.S. scholarly mix. The goal of the roundtable discussions was to foster dialogue between librarians and other stakeholders such as area studies program administrators, faculty, doctoral students, and publishers.

From our perspective, the hottest button issue at this conference was open access because many Latin American institutions (particularly in Brazil, Argentina and Chile) led charges in open access — some making dissertations and university funded journals freely available as early as 1996. In return, many of them bore the brunt of declining income from abroad matched with higher subscription costs from the likes of **ProQuest** and **Gale** (often for their own cultural patrimony). Needless to say post-custodial partnerships like Guatemalan National Police Historical Archive at the **University of Texas** and the Fideicomiso Plutarco Elias Calles y Fernando Torreblanca Archive at the **University of New Mexico** speak to part of this problem. They do not, however, address the international preference (even among scholars in Latin America) for scholarship from the U.S. and Western Europe.

One of the most articulate critiques of an uneven open access system came from **Micaela Chávez Villa** at the **Colegio de México**, with whom **Suzanne Schadl**, **SALALM** President-Elect, is honored to plan the **2018 SALALM Conference** in the Centro Histórico, Mexico, DF. An interesting counter-point came from **Melissa Gasparotto**, a colleague at **Rutgers**, who addressed how more nuanced developments in Spanish language metadata creation and retrieval might help make Latin American resources in the **HathiTrust** (and beyond) increasingly discoverable and thus more available to Latin Americans.

Other sessions were thought provoking. **Library of Congress** Subject Headings have been a political battleground for many years, and again this issue came to the forefront this year. **Tina Gross**, cataloger at **St. Cloud University**, discussed the now defunct subject heading "Illegal Aliens" and how subject headings are embedded in our history and in

biases. The movement to promote this change started with **Dartmouth** students, not librarians, and they proposed the heading "undocumented immigrants." Under pressure, the **Library of Congress** replaced "Illegal Aliens" with two headings "Noncitizens" and "Unauthorized immigration." **Gross** drafted a document, which **SALALM** approved, to be sent to the U.S. Congress to support the change.

Lisa Gardinier working at the **University of Iowa** discussed collecting zines. Most of the topics covered in zines are far outside of the mainstream and many writers use pseudonyms. When cataloged, their real names appear in the catalog record. This creates interesting issues when authors wish to remain anonymous and consider their zines to be semi private — just for their friends or community. This generated interesting discussions because issues of privacy are common in the archival world but usually not much discussed in the cataloging community.

Collaboration among libraries has been a goal for decades. The most interesting presentation was the 2CUL Project between **Cornell** and **Columbia University**. **Sean Knowlton** and **Socrates Silva** presented briefly on the overall objectives of the Columbia/Cornell initiative (2CUL) which started in 2013 with a focus on their efforts in the Latin American collection development. Their project was two-fold: to eliminate duplication of low-use Latin American print materials and for the **Columbia** librarian to do reference and outreach to **Cornell** students and faculty. Both libraries have distinct collecting policies on geographies and topics. The project was premised on print sharing and the transition to eBooks in the future. While collection development was conceived collaboratively, materials budgets remained separate. Both libraries continued to collect core materials. Using WorldCat, they determined what titles they held in common and what titles were held only by **Columbia** and only by **Cornell** for 2000-2011. For several of the Latin American countries in which the libraries were collecting, the duplication rate was close to 50%. By 2015, they drastically reduced the overlap between the two institutions. The duplication rate fell to 10% or less. This collaboration also involved outreach and research services with the librarian from **Columbia University** providing reference services to **Cornell**, including on-site visits twice a year and communicating via phone, email, and Skype.

Beyond the conference theme, **SALALM** included traditional business meetings and the *Libreros* book exhibit. It also provides a platform for regional group meetings and consortia including the Latin American Materials Project (LAMP) and the Latin American Research Resources Project (LARRP). These projects have long histories of pooling institutional and expert resources to preserve and share hard to find materials — in partnerships that cross state and national lines. You can check the fruits of these labors at: <http://www.crl.edu/area-studies/lamp/collections> and learn more about our collaborations at: <http://www.crl.edu/grn/larrp/about-larrp>.

Next year, **SALALM** will meet in Ann Arbor, MI, May 20-24, 2017. In 2018, **SALAM** will meet in Mexico City at the **Colegio de México**. 🌸

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projects and will build on the work of the task force.

Communicating well about collections within the library was crucial to the success of the review process and will continue to be crucial as the library makes collection deci-

sions and defines collections strategies going forward. While the work of the task force laid the groundwork for improved communication about collections, the work is not complete. The new standing committee will have to continue to communicate well with subject librarians in timely and consistent manners in order to succeed. True two-way communication builds both trust and buy-in with broad collections decisions and strategic directions. We must all

earnestly seek to have real, continuous dialogue about collection priorities, sharing information and listening well to one another. 🌸

Endnotes

1. **Georgetown University's** fiscal year runs from July to June, so FY15 encompasses July 2014 through June 2015.