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Finding the Silver Lining... in the Serials Budget Crisis

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Most readers are familiar with (and indeed weary of) the long-running serials crisis: budgets have stagnated as the cost of serials for STEM disciplines continues to rise (Bosch & Henderson, 2016). These circumstances force libraries to cancel journals, affecting researchers’ instant access to articles. Nearly two decades ago, Mobley (1998) identified university faculty as important players in this drama and called upon librarians to galvanize and educate faculty. The stage has become even more complex in the intervening years, as the preponderance of subscriptions have become digital. Librarians have considered a variety of factors in their attempts to make journal cuts as painless and equitable as possible. Such factors include usage, cost, impact factor, discoverability, and uniqueness (Williamson, Fernandez, & Dixon, 2014).

Librarians have included the voices of faculty during journal cuts in a variety of ways. Williamson et al. (2014) surveyed science librarians and found that they frequently consult with faculty one-on-one concerning cancellations. The University of Wisconsin Eau Claire library sent departments spreadsheets with cost and usage data so they could rank the necessity of journals identified for deselection (Carey, Elfstrand, & Hijleh, 2006). Purdue University appointed two faculty members from each academic department to an ad hoc committee that recommended criteria for deselection. The library then created lists based on these criteria and sent them back to the faculty for final review (Nixon, 1999). When yet more journals had to be slashed in 2009, Purdue librarians reached out to faculty via newsletter, met with a group of department heads, again sent lists to departments, and finally met with entire faculty departments. Nixon (2010) reflects that, if she were forced to do cancellations again, she would work with lists of all titles and send them to all faculty members, rather than breaking out by departments. Librarians at Hofstra University also relied on faculty to vet lists of suggested titles for cancellation, collaborating with their Faculty Senate Library Subcommittee (Srivastava & Harpelburke, 2005). At Trinity University, Chamberlain and Caraway (2006) met with department chairs to provide context about journal cuts. These meetings became broad-ranging discussions about scholarly communication and library issues.

When Oregon State University Libraries (OSUL) was faced with a potential budget shortfall in excess of one million dollars over 2008 and 2009, a divide and conquer method was used to identify which serial titles would be cut. Subject liaisons were sent with subject-based lists to garner input into the cancellation process from departments. Negotiations took place and faculty that spoke up to defend their access to a specific journal usually succeeded in sparing a title from cancellation. Over the years, smaller cuts have occurred leaving the library with only core content.

In 2016, OSUL foresaw another potential one-million dollar shortfall if budgetary changes weren’t made. This was due to flat budgets and serials inflation. Because of changes in the subject liaison model at OSUL, and because we were only left with core content, the library opted to not ask each college or department for input. Instead of having conversations about the individual title level needs of each department, the library had conversations with faculty about the underlying problem of journal costs as it related to the ability to provide a wide range of access, the role the library plays in their research process, and their role as research producers. Due to the complex nature of the process, a team from across the library was formed. This team included librarians from the teaching and engagement department, the resource acquisitions and sharing department, the center for digital scholarship and services, the Guin Library (a branch library at the Hatfield Marine Science Center), and the assessment librarian.

The library reached out to the faculty community to schedule five lunch-time conversations; food was provided in appreciation for their participation. These conversations were done, three of the team members separately looked through notes taken and then came together to talk about what stood out from the conversations. Based on our discussions, six lessons were learned that will guide our ongoing practices and may help others as well.

The first lesson learned was that there are some baseline assumptions you can make about research and publishing, but to convince faculty that you understand their research and publishing choices you need to understand the culture of their discipline. For example, participants from across disciplines expressed their beliefs in the importance of publishing in journals, and specifically peer-reviewed journals that would reach their peers in their discipline (or community). While our participants demonstrated that there are shared practices across academia, we also noted that it is within specific disciplines that the knowledge, practice and culture of the community is further defined. Through our participants’ stories and examples, we saw that one clear way where the values and practices of a discipline are manifested is through the process that is involved in engaging with a core journal recognized as such by the entire discipline.

Lesson two: We need to understand faculty members not just as researchers, but also as...
Lesson five is about how these conversations can be used to promote library services as well as to identify misunderstandings about library services. During our conversations, faculty members proposed other solutions such as using inter-library loan (ILL) to access all research as needed or teaming up with other libraries to share the cost of journals or resist publisher price increases. At OSUL, as in many academic libraries, we have a robust ILL system and we participate in regional alliances to share resources. Because of the complexity of copyright law, and that ILL still relies on institutions having access to resources, it is not a panacea to the serials crisis. When the faculty brought up collective action and resource sharing, this gave us another opportunity to engage them in discussions about our current practices and restrictions. The feedback and solutions offered in these conversations were helpful because they demonstrated a key reason why faculty and librarians need to continue to discuss these issues together: we have differing communities of practice.

Finally, lesson six: Don’t assume anything and use these conversations to test assumptions about researchers’ practices. In particular, we do not have complete knowledge of each others’ practices. Faculty are not fully aware of the practices of librarians and the solutions that we have been working toward for the past several years to combat the issue of increasing serial costs. Similarly, librarians continue to learn about the publishing pressures and constraints of faculty members across a range of disciplines. Without having these discussions, our solutions will not include the breadth and depth necessary to solve the complex problems we have in front of us.

These conversations have had a range of impacts for our future decision-making. First, we learned that faculty members are interested in learning more about library practices, want to be involved in solutions, and understand the need for partnership with the library to solve problems. Second, these conversations have informed future discussions that the library will have with other stakeholders, including upper administrators, about the library budget. Third, our conversations have affirmed for us the importance of building bridges across different communities of practice and the possibilities of learning from one another about issues where we can explore them using diverse perspectives. While this may seem common sense, it takes time, resources, and patience to build bridges and learn from one another intentionally and purposefully. That affirmation is our silver lining in an otherwise gloomy situation.

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References


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