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Divide and Analyze: GW's Approach to Serials Cancellation

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Beginning in 2016, librarians at **The George Washington University (GW) Libraries** found that they needed to make significant reductions in continuations costs over the next five years. In response, this past year, we took significant steps toward these ends, developing systematic, sustainable procedures for addressing these reductions.

Effective Approaches

For a project to be successful, it is useful to define the goals of successful completion. Definitions of success* include:

- Meeting cancellation financial savings goals
- Doing work that makes sense in the long term — 5 year projections
- Communicating effectively with stakeholders
- Doing the “least harm”
- Realizing an opportunity to develop an optimal collection
- Achieving an optimal balance between one-time and continuing resources

For **GW**, what were effective approaches to cancelling serials? We had conducted serials reviews for four of the last five years. In 2016, we learned that we would have a flat budget for the next five years. For 2017, this would require us to cut 7.5% (\$350,000) due to the observed inflation rate of our serials in past FYs, the projected inflation rate, information from our **EbscoNet** account, and our reading of the latest *Library Journal* serials pricing article. To handle the project of developing a response for the first year and looking toward the next four years, we formed a Serials Review Sub-group out of our Collection Development Steering Committee. The sub-group consisted of our Serials Manager and three subject selectors. The sub-group recognized that if we were to meet our 7.5% cancellation objective, there were several factors that we would need to consider; so, we *divided* the serials review by different components and *analyzed* each; that is, we took a multi-faceted approach. The three main components were: individual subscriptions, journal packages, and databases.

Individual Subscriptions

We had over 1,200 online journal titles that were not in packages. This year we decided not to focus on such measures as impact factor or importance in the field. The sub-group mandated that if the per title cost/use were more than

\$30 (the expected ILL cost), we would cancel the title, unless there was a strong justification focused on reasons to expect higher usage in the coming year.

To provide subject selectors with useful information for analysis, we needed to include cost per use data for each title. To gather this data, we began with information extracted from our ILS (**Voyager**) that included title, ISSN, and cost data. Usage data came from other sources, largely from the **ProQuest Serials Solutions Intota** client. Initially, we ran an **Intota** batch query for Counter-compliant JR1 usage data for titles from approximately thirty-five different providers. We supplemented these results with those from separate queries run in **Intota** for usage data from other providers or publishers.

A major challenge lay in obtaining usage data for titles whose usage data was not available in **Intota**. We needed a process for prioritizing those titles, before going through the time-intensive process of going to individual publisher websites to pull the data or contacting the publishers to send the data. To prioritize, we took two approaches. We prioritized our journals by publisher, working with those with the most journals, and also by price, beginning with those titles with the highest cost. We had to curtail our searches after a certain point, as it became a matter of diminishing returns on time spent. We ended with a “long tail” of titles (approximately 100), each from an individual publisher, which we did not investigate. Since we have several years to go on the process, we will probably work on these titles in upcoming reviews.

After obtaining what we considered a satisfactory amount of usage data, we needed to link our use data to our per title cost data. This latter data was in the **Voyager** report, so we pulled the usage data from the various sources into this report by use of the VLOOKUP function in Excel, utilizing the ISSNs available in both the **Voyager** report and the usage reports as the common factor. In this way, we were able to include per title cost data and usage data in one report and thereby calculate and show per title cost per use, which we asked the selectors to consider in their renewal decisions. This was

the first time for our library that we were able to provide cost, usage, and cost per use data for each title together in one spreadsheet for our selectors to evaluate.

Because we had conducted serial reviews for four of the past five years, we looked for pockets of titles which may have been overlooked in previous reviews. One such pocket was our standing orders (mostly print), which we carried as continuations and effectively counted as subscriptions. The sub-group decided that standing orders would be canceled across-the-board as ongoing commitments. Selectors might acquire individual issues of such titles at their discretion as one-time firm orders.

A second area which had not been heavily reviewed in the past were print titles, although each year we examined these titles for possible conversion to online access. Due to the lack of usage data, print titles weren't as closely examined during serials cancellation projects; anecdotally, we rarely saw users in print stacks. With 221 print titles under review, the sub-group decided that titles with annual costs of over \$360 would be cancelled unless clear justifications for retention could be made by selectors in those areas and their faculty. The \$360 cost represented one use a month at \$30 each use (\$30 being our expected cost of an average ILL). This standard seemed reasonable; it assumed some print use and also identified higher cost titles.

By focusing on individual subscriptions, electronic and print, and cancelling standing orders, we were able to cancel 188 titles, \$131,898, or 38% of our cancellation goal (\$350,000 or 7.5%)

Package Reviews

George Washington University does not subscribe to as many “Big Deal” packages as many other institutions our size, but we were able to review 13 packages. Package reviews consisted of three levels of analyzing usage statistics across the entire package:

- Analyzing straightforward cost/use for the entire package
- Sorting titles within the package by use to determine how far down

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the long tail of usage we would be able to get if we purchased titles separately outside the package and calculating the cost of interlibrary loan for those downloads that would be lost if we cancelled the package

- Calculating the true cost for each title by taking the overall cost/download and applying it to the number of downloads per title. This last analysis was helpful in looking at titles which have low use since it can easily be seen they are not costing much in terms of the overall package

In the end, we cancelled only one package deal. Several issues to be wary of in conducting these reviews included ensuring that the titles reflected in the usage data matched the titles paid for in the package. In several cases we discovered that titles on the platform were not part of the package and were being paid for separately, either by us, or by other entities on campus.

Database Reviews

This review was more complex, as simple cost/use analysis could not form a significant basis for review. Because we had gone through the cancellation process several times before, **GW** did not find enough individual journals or packages to cancel to meet our financial cancellation target. But because databases cannot be replaced via interlibrary loan, this was a review with some of the trickiest decisions. Rather than cost per use, we focused on low usage overall, overlapping or redundant content, and whether or not the database provided unique full-text content or bibliographic indexing only. Our primary concern, in support of doing the least harm, was to continue to provide access to as much content as we could. We were aware that the primary alternatives to any cancelled databases would be alternative databases (where there was overlap) or travel to other area libraries with subscriptions to the databases.

Similar to journal subscriptions analysis, our process utilized our ILS (**Voyager**) cost data, **Intota** for overlap analysis of full-text databases, vendor sites for additional usage data and titles lists, and communication with vendors for questions and details about usage data.

Overlap analysis focused on the obvious — where major databases would likely have the same content — and provided alternative scenarios of access and of content lost, including lists of journal titles. Overlap analysis is imperfect as ISSNs are not always present; comparisons can become questionable. Overlap analysis did not consider dates of coverage due to time constraints and shifting content. For a few bibliographic databases, where overlap could not be run, ISSN's were compared in Excel.

For usage data we employed both **Intota** and vendor sites to be certain of search and session usage, often running usage reports multiple times on databases where low use/high cost

could mean automatic cancellation. It is worth noting that usage data was not a justification for major databases with redundant content; all had high usage so the content overlap was the major consideration. Some non-academic databases — such as in business — do not utilize **Counter** statistics and provided unique content; they can also carry the highest cost and vary in usage; retention decisions became more difficult. Other unique databases with high cost and low use were cancelled.

Communication

At **GW**, we started our more formal communication process through several modes. First we held a campus-wide town hall/faculty meeting publicized to all faculty to alert them to the need for the five-year project and to solicit their feedback. At the same time, we created information on our website, created an easy to understand infographic, and highlighted the project in our **GW Library** magazine *Visions*.

Internal communication was facilitated by having our selectors work in four cross-disciplinary teams. This was especially critical to support broader perspectives for interdisciplinary work, and when focusing on databases. Individual selectors communicated with their specific departments to provide direct personal communication about how the project would affect researchers in each department.

Lessons Learned/Assessment

How would we assess the outcomes of the first year of a five-year project? Did we meet our objectives?

- Did we meet our financial savings goal? We did on paper. We're still working on the actual final renewals, with some titles coming in more expensively than we'd projected, so the final answer is still out there.
- Did our work make sense in the long term? We have new strategies. We were able to include titles and categories of titles that weren't included before. Our work on continuing resource/monograph balance will continue. Another area we're focusing on building is consortial ebook purchases which again affects the monograph side.
- We involved more people, both internally and externally. When it comes to prioritizing across faculty and across departments, we learned that we need to communicate at the Dean level. Individual faculty and even individual departments have a hard time putting aside their specific needs and interests to see the needs of the entire university. Moving up to the School level can help get a broader view. Three critical components moving forward are strong liaison relationships, library leadership in communication, and continual evaluation of resources.
- In terms of doing the least harm, we've been able to stick to fiscally sound principles for making our cuts. We aren't cutting off access to jour-

nals, just supplying them via ILL or document delivery when that is more cost effective. If the library budget becomes unable to sustain ILL costs, charging for ILL and copyright fees may have to be considered. We hope any cancelled database gap can be filled with alternative overlapping databases, and/or by travelling to another area library. But both result in more time spent completing research steps for our patrons, and, in some cases, the journal article or database will not be used.

- Our ILL statistics will probably continue to increase, but more faculty and students are talking about getting articles from friends in other schools, or going to the alternate, but potentially legally questionable sources.
- Monographs have been more protected in our institution, so we may have a chance to balance our monograph to serial allocations. Working within our strong consortial relationships, we're hoping we can form some win-win arrangements with publishers.
- With our databases, we need to allow extra time for price negotiations. After we decided on some cancellations, some publishers negotiated lower prices, making it difficult to return to the drawing board to find the extra money to take advantage of the lower price. 🐼

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Endnotes

1. **Bosch, S. and Henderson, K.** (2016). Fracking the ecosystem. *Library Journal*, 141(7), 32-38. http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2016/04/publishing/fracking-the-ecosystem-periodicals-price-survey-2016/#_

Rumors

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Kory Stamper is a lexicographer who writes witty "ask the editor" posts on her blog. (What's the plural of octopus?) But do not worry, **MW** is still very much a brick and mortar operation based in a small New England town where the **Merriam** brothers bought the rights to **Noah Webster's** dictionary in the 1840s. Looking forward to the release of **Ms. Stamper's** new book, *Word by Word: the Secret Life of Dictionaries*.

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