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Big Deal Whack-A-Mole

by Roy Ziegler (Associate Dean for Collection Services, Florida State University) <rzeigler@fsu.edu>

Intro and Background

At the start of the 2015 spring semester, Florida State University (FSU) Libraries faced a budget deficit of \$1.3M for the coming fiscal year. The amount of the budget request was due in part to a significant amount of one-time money that needed to be replenished and annual inflation on databases and journal packages with major publishers. Because of the size of the request, library administration determined that the budget request should not exceed \$1M even though the need was greater. At the start, the library knew that cancellation of resources would be on the table. What was still unknown was the magnitude of the cuts.

The Dean of Libraries and members of the Senior Leadership Team communicated to the Faculty Senate Library Committee that it was likely that cuts to resources would be coming for the next year and that they would be asked to play a role if needed. Subject librarians were also briefed on the situation and asked to share the information with the academic faculty in the departments that they worked with. The goal was to telegraph the library's budget situation, lay the groundwork for supporting the library and reduce the chances of having surprises regarding cancellations early in the upcoming academic year.

Historically, the library and other areas of the university did not receive their budgets until after the fall semester started. Due to the late budget and the notification requirements for cancellations within journal packages, notifying publishers and consortial partners in a timely way would create significant problems. It was clear that the library had to have a contingency plan with various funding level scenarios in place before knowing the actual budget for FY 2015-16. Knowing that there was considerable uncertainty, the library communicated what it knew and didn't know to raise awareness. Even if the budget impact was unclear, the library wanted faculty, students and university administrators to have the library's budget circumstance in mind.

Mobilization and Process

In early March after the budget request was submitted, the library needed to move beyond awareness to having a process in place that would lead to specific cancellation recommendations and ready to take action immediately once the library's materials budget was known. It was the Library Dean's decision to request assistance from the Faculty Senate Library Committee. The committee was eager to help and would provide leadership and recruitment of teaching faculty across the university to serve. At the committee's April meeting, the

last of the semester, the Library Materials Budget Crisis Task Force was charged. The task force would then conduct its work over the summer and make final recommendations to the Library Dean by August 1.

Through May and early June, the task force recruited academic faculty to join. A special invitation to the Vice President for Research was accepted. Representation from academic areas across the curriculum was sought. Because the work was going to be conducted over the summer, having too many people serve was not seen as a problem as long as the work progressed and the deadline was met.

Library Materials Budget Crisis Task Force

When the task force convened in early June, 20 faculty and 6 ex officio librarians were present. The Library Dean set the stage for the importance of faculty involvement to make the recommendations. It was clearly stated from the start that librarians were to provide information and input along the way and that the faculty were the main drivers of the task force. For the first couple of meetings, the faculty had many opinions as to the cause of the library's budget situation:

1. Unsustainable Big Deals of STEM publishers
2. The role of **Open Access** to restrike a better balance between the authors and editors of the research
3. The lack of sustainable recurring funding from the university
4. The growth rates of other institutions within the Florida public university system, causing a number of research intensive universities in the state to participate in statewide Big Deals at significantly lower cost than FSU

From the library side, there were concerns about the conversations taking too much time; even though beneficial to laying the groundwork for the recommendations to come, it might prove difficult to meet the target deadline. The Library Dean insisted that the librarians let the discussions proceed for as long as the faculty needed in order to establish their comfort level and achieve buy in before moving ahead. This proved to be the case. In subsequent meetings, the faculty were ready for librarians to provide data and analysis regarding specific materials being considered for cancellation. Because the maximum amount of money needing to be cancelled was back to the \$1.3M mark, the discussions quickly focused on the resources that were the most costly within the current budget. With nearly \$4M dollars tied up in four publisher Big Deal journal packages, this is where the task force would spend most of its time and where most of the cancellations would eventually come. Based primarily on the

cost per full text accesses for the entirety of the journals in a publisher's package, the cost per use per article for each Big Deal was given a value and became a determining factor as to package(s) that would be consideration for adjustment.

In the end, the task force made recommendations with various cancellation scenarios: \$1.2M, \$900K, \$600K, with 60% of the final report consisting of a narrative explaining the landscape from the local institutional perspective, statewide within Florida's **State University System (SUS)**, and nationally/internationally. Emphasizing the need for alternatives to the dominant for profit publisher-driven scholarly communication model, the task force articulated why the library was facing a budget crisis. The task force made cancellations roughly by the percentage of library materials spent in broad subject areas: STEM 51%, Social Sciences 14%, Humanities 11%, Business 4%, General Library 19%. The faculty completed their work on time and the library gained informed champions to advocate on its behalf because they had a firm knowledge base.

Spin and Reality

In early September the library finally received its budget from the University and received 50% of what was needed to balance the budget, triggering the \$600K cancellation scenario. As part of the task force's recommendation, two major Big Deal journal packages were going to be broken.

Only the highest used journals within each package would be subscribed to for 2016. If the library had 2015 subscriptions in place but usage determined a lower rank falling below the spending target, the journal was dropped. If a leased access title had significant usage and ranked in the fundable range, a subscription to the journal was added. Because the library knew that it would be difficult to retain the subject specific journal cancellation percentages within each package, the library's Senior Leadership Team made the final determination to go exclusively with usage. Soon after notifying the two publishers that the library was cancelling subscriptions due to an insufficient materials budget for the coming year, the Associate Dean for Collections and Access learned that Publisher 1 was contractually obligated to continue to provide access to all leased non-subscribed titles for the years that the library had participated in the statewide contract. Leased access would stop with the end of 2015 calendar year. Having access to many of the publisher's journals in aggregated databases with an embargo also took some pressure off. However with Publisher 2, the library would lose access to all leased access titles at the end of December. With 90,000 full-text accesses in the previous year (leased and subscribed) and the prospect of losing access to 1,500 leased access titles with no access back

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to 1997, it was a moment for great concern. Breaking one Big Deal was big enough but breaking two seemed too much to do at the same time. At the request of the Associate Dean (AD) for Collections, the Library Dean asked the Provost for a supplemental budget to allow the library to stay with the Publisher 2 Big Deal. The Provost granted that request in a timely manner.

In early September the Senior Leadership Team drafted a set of talking points that librarians could share with teaching and research faculty across campus. The Library Dean posted an open letter to the university community, communicating the upcoming changes that would occur at the start of 2016. In a briefing session with subject librarians, the Collections AD emphasized that even though subscriptions were being cancelled and there would be a growing gap with the currency of leased access titles, the more accurate story line was that no access was being lost. Journal access would be “mediated” or “unmediated,” but in all cases the requested article(s) would be provided. As a sales and marketing strategy, framing the issue as mediated and unmediated access avoided the negative connotations associated with the word “cancellation.” In fact the word “cancellation” was never mentioned in communications to the campus community. The university wasn’t losing access to 1,300 leased access titles, only changing the manner in which access was being requested and retrieved.

2016 Impact

In 2015, university patrons accounted for 70,000 full-text accesses to Publisher 1 journals. Having access to all leased access titles from 1997-2015 reduced the immediate impact but it would become a growing problem. To complicate matters, the publisher did not cut off access to 2016 non-subscribed titles until April which would delay the impact of breaking the Big Deal. Once leased access to 2016 content

was blocked, the library only saw a modest increase in interlibrary loan article requests and in Universal Borrowing from in-state public colleges and universities. Near the end of the 2016 calendar year, the publisher provided data that showed that the library had received 14,000 full-text denial of service accesses to previously leased titles, with the holdings closed on all leased access journal title records in the online catalog. Adjusting for the entirety of 2016 and factoring in the four months of complimentary usage, the library estimated approximately 20,000 full-text article denials. It is likely that the persistent researchers found alternative ways to get their articles because ILL requests did not materialize in any significant way. The number of access denials was significant and, with an ever increasing full-text gap for what is linked thru the Web of Science database, there was concern that the number of turnaways would be considerably higher in 2017.

The library’s strategic plan calls for the seamless access to information; it is awkward when the library is forced to apply mechanisms that run counter to that goal due to budget constraints.

Holiday Surprise

Throughout 2016, Florida’s SUS libraries were negotiating a new three-year contract with Publisher 1 that also included the acquisition of another major STEM journal publisher. After the Thanksgiving break, the publisher reached out to **FSU Libraries**. During the conference call, the library stated it was opposed *not* to Big Deals — just bad deals. Because the Publisher 1’s cost per use was significantly higher than other publisher packages, this was the primary reason why their package was cut. Several years earlier, the library had successfully renegotiated a large journal package with another STEM publisher by making one-time purchases of eBooks and journal archival backfiles to offset recurring reductions of current journal subscriptions. Publisher 1 said that they would take this information into consideration and present the library with a proposal before

the end of 2016. It needs to be stated that Publisher 1 had refused to make such adjustments when approached with a similar negotiation two years prior.

A few days before the start of the fall semester break, the publisher contacted University Libraries with an offer to offset already implemented cuts in recurring spend with one-time purchases. This would allow the library to rejoin the publisher’s Big Deal and not increase subscription expenditures. Over the course of the next two weeks, negotiations were conducted to refine the offer and payment terms. In late December 2016, the one-time payment agreement was reached. The terms of the statewide journal contract were being negotiated separately and FSU would be included in the finalized contract.

For a majority of 2015, University Libraries had lived with the anxiety leading up to breaking one and possibly two Big Deal journal packages. Navigating the entirety of 2016 with the cancellation of a major journal package and subsequently re-negotiating for 2017 was a wild ride. It’s unknown what the deciding factor was that changed the publisher’s hard line but FSU was pleased that a more conciliatory approach was presented and that the library was able to accept. Months of consulting with other institutions that had broken Big Deals, consulting with legal counsel and contract experts, conducting information exchanges with publishers about the content the library would/wouldn’t retain culminated in a better Big Deal for FSU. There will be challenges in finding the money to put toward the purchase of eBooks and journal backfiles; for the longer view, the University is better positioned by achieving a more sustainable Big Deal. With two major journal publisher package renegotiations completed, there are two more waiting to be tackled. The likelihood of revisiting one of them for 2018 cancellation is very strong. The challenge of providing the most content at the most sustainable cost will never end. 🌲

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also important to de-dramatize the subscription cancellations: what is being lost is instantaneous access, not access per se. Articles remain accessible, with a slight delay, through the interlibrary loan and document delivery service.

The UdeM collections analysis project has resonated with other Canadian universities: it is currently being implemented in 28 of them, in the form of the **Journal Usage Project (JUP)**⁶ led by the **Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CKRN)**. Engagement by other institutions and their communities expands on the vision that UdeM has worked to instill, and adds to the pressure that must be brought to bear on publishers to ensure sustainable, affordable access to knowledge. 🌲

Author’s Note: The French version of this article can be accessed at Papyrus, the University of Montreal’s Institutional Repository: <http://hdl.handle.net/1866/16446>.

Endnotes

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