

The Collection Assessment is Done... Now What?

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Purpose

About collection management

The methods used to manage collections have changed dramatically in the last half century, a phenomenon that has been well documented in the literature.¹ This has been due in part to a reaction to the rapid growth of information resources,² increased costs of acquiring these resources coupled with decreased share of institutional funding towards libraries,³ and the shift to digital formats, resulting in changes in methods of making these resources accessible to library patrons. Some in the field have gone so far as to suggest that collection management is undergoing a “paradigm shift.”⁴ These changes have increased the need for information about the collections themselves, notably inputs (costs and needs), outputs (purchases/acquisitions, circulations, and uses), and outcomes (citations, student grades, and faculty grant successes).⁵

About collection evaluation

Collection analyses, evaluations, and assessments are an important aspect of collection development services provided by librarians. Collection evaluation “encompasses analysis of the library’s collection, its use, and ultimately its impact,” with the “real objective” being not to measure a collection’s quality, but rather its “utility—how effective the collection is in satisfying the purpose for which it is intended.”⁶ This emphasis on outcomes reflects the growing trend of assessment in librarianship as a whole, which is well summarized by Megan Oakleaf in her seminal work, *The Value of Academic Libraries*. In this report, Oakleaf recommends that librarians go beyond traditional measures of inputs and outputs, (primarily acquisitions [costs and counts]) and use data, and instead examine the impact that library services, including collections, have on student and faculty outcomes.⁷

Some librarians have developed formal collection evaluation programs that are comprehensive and extend beyond the traditional metrics, as advocated by Oakleaf. Duncan and O’Gara,⁸ at James Madison University Library, developed a “holistic and agile” collection evaluation method, including a rubric of measures and benchmarks. Madeline Kelly⁹ implemented a “tiered” collection assessment service at George Mason University to the subject librarians, providing more or less detail and analysis based on the needs and purposes of the evaluation.

Harker and Klein found, in their survey of collection evaluation practices at ARL libraries, librarians in most academic institutions conduct evaluations as sporadic projects based on *ad hoc* needs, notably accreditation reviews or the influx of funding for a particular subject. Indeed, the lack of positive change (in policy, selection, funding, or patron perception) resulting from these time-consuming projects has been noted by some in collections management. Furthermore, while librarians allude to potential uses or outcomes of such evaluations, such as “knowing the collection” or adjusting the “collection and managing activities to increase congruence between collection and [institutional] mission,”¹⁰ few professional resources on the topic provide specific methods of applying the results of these time-consuming and data-intensive assessments.

The collection development leadership at the University of North Texas Libraries has opted to take a more comprehensive approach: we incorporate the findings of our routine collection evaluations, such as gaps and strengths, into subject-based projects to enhance targeted subsets of the overall collection with funding purposefully planned within the collections budget.

Design, Methodology, or Approach

Subject-based collection evaluation

The current method used at UNT Libraries of evaluating subject-based collections is based largely on the historical collection development environment. There had been an established subject librarian service, which had once included collection development responsibilities, supported through subject-based funds. In addition, until 2012, there was an approval plan that was structured along the same subject-based divisions as the funds. Finally, there were recurring accreditation reviews, for which brief evaluations of support for the subject of the program were conducted. Much of these aspects have changed in recent years.

Since the creation of the Collection Development Department in 2010, responsibilities for selection of resources have become more centralized. Due to major reductions to the collections budget in 2012 and 2014, we reduced the funds available for purchasing monographs so greatly as to make the individual accounts practically worthless for many subjects. In 2012, the UNT Libraries began a pilot program of demand-driven acquisitions as a potential solution to this problem. We pooled the funds for the entire program, covering all subjects, into a single account. The pilot was successful, so we expanded the program to include three e-book platforms. The subjects covered by the program were based largely on the former approval plan.

From this structure of subjects grew our collection map, in which Library of Congress Classification ranges were applied to organize holdings and usage into subject areas based on curricular divisions within the university. We extended this mapping method by using the Conspectus ranges of the WorldCat Collection Assessment System (now called WorldShare Collection Evaluation System), and by applying selected ranges to multiple collections, as appropriate. For example, the range associated with the concept of management (HA29-32) is relevant to numerous professional programs in our institution, including educational administration, emergency management, and hospitality and tourism management. This method is described in detail in *Academic Libraries and the Academy*.¹¹

The UNT Libraries Collection Development Department currently evaluates between five and seven collections each year, some of which are broad (e.g., history) while others are quite narrow in focus (e.g., aviation logistics). This schedule, originally designed to suit the library's needs, has recently been revised to align with the university's own "Academic Program Review," in which the libraries are asked to comment on the support of each academic program under review. The change in scheduling these evaluations increased the number of collections to be evaluated each year (up to 10), so we made the methods more efficient and standardized to accommodate this increased workload.

The large question to be answered by each evaluation is that which is found in most accreditation reviews: ***How well does the subject-based collection meet the needs of those most interested in this subject?*** We center our collection evaluations on the following key aspects of collection development: patron needs, capacity of the collection, usage, and impact. The needs are assessed based largely on enrollment trends, program type and degrees awarded, and faculty research interests and output. We also gather faculty research interests from the university website, while we assess faculty output based on articles indexed in the ***Web of Knowledge***. The capacity of the collection is a description of the holdings, specifically by age and format. Capacity is also measured qualitatively by comparison with standard lists, such as the ***Journal Citation Reports*** (JCR) and Choice's ***Outstanding Academic Titles*** (OAT). Usage includes both circulation and e-resource usage data, although the latter is more limited in scope at this time. The individual subjects (that is, the Conspectus subjects, composed of LC classification ranges) are assessed qualitatively based on distributions of holdings, by age and by format, usage, and interlibrary loan (ILL) requests to determine overall strengths and gaps. These judgments are largely subjective, informed by the current curriculum and topics of research interests, knowledge of the direction of the academic program, and discussions with the subject librarian.

The result of each evaluation is a summary report that includes a description of the overall collection, a review of the current needs based on academic, curricula and research trends, results of the analyses of

capacity (quantitatively and qualitatively), usage and impact, and conclusions that are centered on the broad question of how well the collection meets the patrons' needs. Specifically highlighted are subject areas which are particularly strong (relevant areas that have a large number of titles which are recent and well-used) and those which may need particular attention. The specificity of these subjects is useful for the subject librarian for selecting monographs, while the broader subject areas are useful to the Collection Development Department for selecting packages and collections of resources.

Action Plan

Budget

In 2015, the UNT Libraries implemented a new method of collection development to reflect changes in collection philosophy and realities of library budgets and the marketplace.¹² Our new method of collection acquisition resulted in a drastic change in the materials budget, moving us from a traditional subject-based budget to a simplified "one big pot" budget. Previously, each subject area was allocated a specific, small amount of funding based on a historic formula; we also distinguished between one-time and ongoing funding for each subject area. The new model distinguishes only between one-time and ongoing funds for the entire main collection—there is one very large fund for each. The main collection materials budget is shared by all subject areas—from history to social work to biology. The new budgeting model allows us to better plan and implement application of collection evaluation results to our selection and acquisition activities.

The new "one big pot" must accommodate planned and unplanned purchases for an entire fiscal year, so we have dramatically shifted our planning process to ensure expenditure of the entire budget in a timely fashion. To do this, we thoroughly plan the use of the big funds. We begin each year with a list of both planned purchases and enhancement projects. The goals and budget are planned, but the specific materials to be purchased have not yet been identified. Enhancement projects range from narrow subject areas (e.g., forensic science) to item types (e.g., graphic novels) to very specific genres (e.g., select *an* interactive anatomy resource). The head of collection development (HCD) determines in advance the amount of funding for each enhancement project, based on the amount of the materials budget and the needs identified in the collection evaluation.

Staff

Implementing these complex enhancement projects without restrictive budgeting infrastructure was initially a challenge. To do this, we delegate responsibility for expenditure across our team. Each enhancement project includes a project leader, along with clear goals and a specific budget. As with many libraries, the collection budget includes a certain amount of undesignated funding set aside for unplanned purchases, such as monographs, new journals, etc. The HCD monitors expenditure of both the delegated budgets and the shared funds. Towards the end of the fiscal year, the HCD begins monitoring expenditures much more closely by requiring increased communication from team leads and staff. Eventually, HCD approval of all purchases are required, to ensure we do not over-expend.

Implementation

Enhancement Parameters

The library's extensive coverage of the universe of scholarship made assessing all of the collections every year not feasible. Instead, the collection assessment librarian (CAL) has planned a ten-year cycle of subjects for review within the collections. Each subject-based collection is to be evaluated, and the strengths and gaps reported on, in one year; the collection is then targeted for enhancement the following year. The enhancement projects have a specifically allocated budget and mostly encompass one-time purchases, although the HCD can approve modest amounts of additional resources paid by subscription.

Starting Points

The collection assessment report identifies the topics most underrepresented in the library's holdings. For each project, the CAL additionally compiles title lists for consideration. The title lists are materials (mostly monographs) in the specific subject areas of the collection, identified from three sources: works listed in *Choice's* OAT to which the library does not provide access; materials requested through ILL, and; JCR titles

in the top quartile. The OAT maintains a higher priority over other sources. The project leader communicates with the subject librarians and occasionally with faculty, soliciting ideas and, eventually, reviews of enhancement proposals. This communication is primarily via email for the kick-off and the final proposal, with one face-to-face meeting during the time period of the project.

Roles

The collection development liaison librarian (CDLL) leads the enhancement efforts, using the collection assessment report, consulting with key librarians and faculty in the research field, and assigning research and acquisitions tasks to monographic acquisitions unit staff. The CDLL researches potential suppliers, guides the staff assisting with the project, and selects materials for purchase. Some of the CDLL's work involves negotiating discounts with vendors for additions to the library's reference and e-book platforms or for packages of electronic resources such as e-books and archival collections.

The CDLL directs the two monographic acquisitions associates to research and recommend packages of e-books and other electronic resources related to each enhancement project. The associates ensure that potential acquisitions include content on the gap areas, check package titles against existing holdings of the library, and later order individual titles. The CDLL handles reference platform purchases and some of the package purchases. The electronic resources librarian completes the work for a few of the package purchases when requested by the CDLL.

Four collection enhancement examples: Engineering; Education & Learning Technology; Ethnic Studies; Business

One of the first collection enhancements we formally conducted under this new plan was for engineering. As with most science-related disciplines, engineering researchers rely heavily on relatively expensive journals and database subscriptions, and the designated enhancement allocation could not fund all of the recommended materials. The CDLL proposed four separate combinations of resources, some weighted heavily toward subscriptions, others much less so; nevertheless, each option included the highest-ranked requests from the subject librarian. The review team of collection development librarians eventually chose a combination approach. We agreed to spend about half of the allocation for one-time purchases of 14 reference books and one year-long trial of a science publisher's entire catalog of monographs (over 3,000 titles); the other half of the allocation was used for database subscriptions and a subscription to an online library of current technical reference materials. In the process of evaluating e-book packages for the enhancement, it became evident that many titles were available as demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) discovery records. Instead of buying these titles, the CDLL created a separate tracking system for these materials and added these 400-plus titles to the library's DDA discovery pool. This early enhancement was a challenge due to the high number of relatively expensive subscription items considered important to address the needs of the engineering research community. The solution was to allow a higher-than-expected amount of recurring costs, to use DDA to acquire some of the needed content with no up-front funding required, and to explore the option of purchasing short-term access to the entire catalog of a prominent publisher in engineering and technology, with a potential future purchase of highly used titles.

The enhancement for education and its sister discipline, learning technology, was more in line with the original vision of the enhancement projects to primarily purchase items with one-time costs. The final proposal for this enhancement allotted about 80% of the budget to over 770 monographs that were requested by the subject librarians, recommended from the collection evaluation, or selected due to their availability on reference platforms. The remainder of the budget went to non-book resources: six types of robot construction kits, ten tablet computers, and a charging station. The subject librarians in this enhancement strongly advocated for these non-traditional items to provide future teachers the experience of creating instruction around new and evolving technologies. The CDLL also added over 1,200 titles to the library's DDA discovery pool.

The ethnic studies enhancement was highly interdisciplinary; it covered women's and gender studies (which included some LGBTQ topics), Latino/Mexican American studies, Jewish studies and Native American

studies. The final proposal approved by the review team devoted approximately 40% of the budget to 118 OAT and reference platform resources; the content of these selections addressed each of the ethnic studies areas with at least a few worthy resources. The remaining funds went to four electronic archival collections of digitized primary resources from under-heard voices within the library's ethnic studies collections: Native American empowerment movements, the history of women's movements for two time periods (late 1780s to early 1930s, and the 1970s), and government reactions to radical movements in the 1960s. The CDLL also found over 240 titles to add to the library's DDA discovery pool; these works were OAT and reference platform resources. Finally, the CDLL recommended ten new journals that were approved for subscription, with the costs coming from the general fund due to a windfall of ongoing funding.

One of the largest recent collection enhancements was for business. This broad category supports the academic and research programs that included the traditional topics of accounting, finance, management, and marketing, as well as insurance, real estate, business law, decision sciences, operations and supply chain management, logistics, merchandising, hospitality, and tourism. The proposal for this enhancement was entirely for monographic content: 85 OAT, 80 reference platform titles, 220-plus ILL and peer-held titles, plus 160 titles in three packages from well-regarded business resource publishers, for a total of nearly 590 monographs owned outright. As expected for such a diverse range of topics, the CDLL identified over 730 titles to add to the library's DDA discovery pool.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the methods that we currently use for assessing our collections are in-depth and user-centered, they are currently limited to inputs and outputs, rather than outcomes and impact. We are investigating methods of effectively and efficiently assessing the impact of our collections on student and faculty outcomes, notably student achievement and success, and faculty research publication and success in grant applications.

We are also interested in evaluating our efforts by measuring usage of resources added to the collection through the enhancements. We identified these resources as having been acquired through the enhancement, which will enable us to compare the usage of these resources with those otherwise acquired during the same time period.

Conclusion

Like many libraries, we had collected information about our collections for years while struggling to apply it effectively. Once we removed barriers by reorganizing our budget and overhauling the way we manage selection, we were able to apply our data to collection development activities. We refined collection assessment activities to focus on actionable information and information important for reporting results. This ensures that our collection development activities are truly evidence-based. Macro decisions, such as planning enhancement project timing, budgets, and goals, are based on subjective and objective data gathered and considered by the team. Micro decisions, such as whether to purchase a specific product, are also based on evidence gathered and made available to the selector. Measures reported are more meaningful and accurate. We are able to make good use of collection assessment efforts by applying the collected data to practical outcomes.

Our collections are benefiting from the structured enhancements; through this method, we have purchased many materials previously considered unaffordable. We can identify gaps and address them in a timely manner, and we are able to support expensive requests more often. More importantly, we, as collection development librarians, are gaining confidence in our selection decisions. Every decision is defensible and thoroughly documented. While some stakeholders may disagree with our judgments and decisions, we can and do provide justifications based on evidence. We are able to deliver accurate and timely reports when requested, and provide information regularly to stakeholders about how we are developing the collection and why we made the specific decisions.

From a management standpoint, while the application of data has been challenging to coordinate, it has tangible benefits as well. We expend our budget more efficiently, while pleasing more of the patrons more of

the time. We have very good reasons for the decisions we make and can explain our decisions to patrons quickly and simply. The application of data to collection development activities allows the HCD to plan effectively and respond to unexpected events quickly. For example, last year, the provost gave a \$500,000 influx for new materials to the library—and there were only a few months remaining to spend it. Even though the resulting decision-making process was unplanned, we were able to quickly make evidence-based choices and justify them to administration.

The methods used to evaluate our collections consume a considerable amount of human resources. We, therefore, consider it important that the results of these expenditures are put to good use. We are able to make decisions about acquiring resources by applying the knowledge gained from the evaluations regarding strengths and weaknesses of the collection, as well as the direction of research and curricula of the related programs. The results of the evaluations provide direction for the CDLL on which to concentrate efforts or research resources. Thus, over three years' time, we have evaluated 17 collections covering 21 distinct academic programs, and enhanced 13 collections. We are able to contend that the decisions that we make regarding resources selected for enhancing the collections are well founded. This, in turn, demonstrates our judicious use of funds for supporting the university and the relevant academic and research programs.

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