Pragmatic Assessment for Sustainable Collection

ABSTRACT

Academic library collections budgets continue to be strained at many institutions, as the prices of electronic resources continue to inflate while cost control imperatives from University Administrations continue to proliferate. At our mid-sized, research intensive, doctoral-granting institution, we looked to gather evidence that our inability to keep up with communication, and implementation cycles, we found that our strategic directions continually needed to shift even more radically if we desired to actually implement a sustainable collection plan that would assist our stakeholders both now and into the foreseeable future.

CONTEXT AND FIRST STEPS

Illinois Institute of Technology’s Paul V. Galvin Library has been facing austerity for a number of years, and had an essentially static collections budget from 2007-2017. The inability of the budget to continue meeting the needs of the stakeholders threatened research, accreditation, retention and persistence of students and faculty, and was having a noted impact on the undergraduate curriculum as well. Over those two years, in addition to constantly dropping lower use electronic resource subscriptions, Illinois Tech Libraries had reduced full-time and student work-study, reduced the maintenance and replacement of technology and furniture, ceased purchasing plans for monographs and standards, and closed a branch library. As a result, the expendable non-salary budget of the Galvin Library had become almost entirely maintenance and replacement of technology and furniture, ceased purchasing plans for monographs and standards, and closed a branch library. As a result, the expendable non-salary budget of the Galvin Library had become almost entirely expenditure and took three options to the library liaisons for a discussion on possible paths forward. Dividing the databases up into tiers helped us understand that the inflation was coming primarily from our top tier of the Big Deal model seemed to be generally advantageous, although 20% of faculty rejected the premise of picking their three most important journals, we were able to gather enough information to discern that subscribing to individual journals would have been a wasteful expense. All of the Big Deal publishers of interest had creative price negotiation and pricing structures that made a lot of sense, and had been able to situate a number of strategic decisions as the natural progression of our cost/use data.

COMPREHENSIVE COLLECTION ANALYSIS

The third option was chosen as it was the most popular among faculty. In addition to some lower cuts, comprehensive collection analysis allowed for the renegotiation and downsizing of the largest two subscription packages, allowing the Library to stay under budget for FY 2016 and FY 2017 despite continued price inflation. This analysis was sanctioned and enhanced by the installation of an Open Access ERMS (OAREMS). This gave us a more estimated access to use and cost/use data. Additionally, I experimented with two unique metrics:

Creation of a What We Value metric: I had liaison Librarians rank their top three databases for each of their areas, and compared those rankings to what was actually appeared in their LibGuides. Then I used those rankings to create a What We Value metric to help resolve some of the issues that inevitably come up regarding interdisciplinary utility, etc.

WHAT-Metric: total Liaisons top two score / number across subject areas = number across number or Libraries / Usage / traffic (relative ranking)

Creation of Academic Size Index:

Another index I tried to create to understand why we were proportionally supporting various academic units with the Academic Size Index (ASI). I excluded research centers and the Law School (and their Library’s expenditure). I compared the percentage of the faculty, courses, undergraduates, faculty and graduate heads to create a metric to compare the size of each unit (such as the Armour College of Engineering, or ACE) to the Library expenditures that supported each area.

FURTHER AUSTEREITY

An unexpected financial downturn for the university in the Summer of 2016 required us to find a solution for FY 2016. The CARE team, convened by the Assistant Dean for Assessment and Scholarly Communication, analyzed the e-Resources commitments and expenditures and took three options to the Library liaisons for a discussion on possible paths forward. Dividing the databases up into tiers helped us understand that the inflation was coming primarily from our top tier of the largest commercial databases – an incredible 80% of the cost. The options were:

I. Cut the largest package entirely (Science Direct) – by far the most expensive, but also highly used and valued.
II. Cut all of the smallest, low use packages – this had been the default model for the last ten years.
III. Identify the weakest performer in each of the databases that are a staple of those packages.

CLOSING THE LOOP WITH AN ALL-FACULTY PRESENTATION

Leveraging the initial conversations spearheaded through academic departments and the Research Council into a more formalized communication with our Faculty Governance body. As budget freezes and austerity continued, we were able to give this conversation to a point where we were invited to give a presentation to a joint meeting of all faculty and university administration.

In addition to being able to articulate the inflationary and scholarly communication crisis as well as clarify the above findings, we were able to impart the financial sustainability of the current situation. We also were able to communicate the plummeting subscription with Library subscriptions in LibGuides and other Campus-wide surveys, and discuss our proposed strategies to move forward. The presentation was positively received, and University administration committed to taking the collections budget of the library for that year and the next.

STRATEGIC OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Although the ‘wolf at the door’ had been temporarily shushed away, the continued inflation still required a more strategic mindset, and the Library worked with our Faculty Library Committee to refine several options for a new Collection Development Plan. I began meeting with representatives from (almost) every Academic Unit to discuss these options and brainstorm new possibilities.

We found intriguing feedback about all the options, as well as now suggestions:

Faculty feedback on options:

- Preventing as much access as possible was preferred, but discussions suggested that unbundling might be appropriate.
- Support for the Curricular or Scholarly Societies was very mixed.
- A surprisingly widespread amount of support for Open Access was present.

- Unpopular concepts discussed:
  - Strong support for ILL, particularly for enhancements.
  - Support for expanded access through consortia.
  - Faculty welcoming of Library outreach and awareness campaign.
- Increased funding should be sought through multiple channels.

Looking Forward

The Galvin Library was able to meet new Collection Development Plan with the data, and has been able to institute a number of strategic decisions for the natural outgrowth of these conversations. Additionally, the increased funding we received has not yet been reinvested in the current financial environment.

- Consortium access: We were able to get needed resources for lower prices by joining new consortia (including consortia for OA publishing).
- Review Negotiation and Unbundling: We have found agreements approach vendors with more of an ability to walk away, to least access to specific disciplines, not entirely unheard of. This has taken some of our ILL borrowing increased for that publisher (~8%), but has not yet seen a discernable negative effect on our other ILLs. This has inflated the inflationary pressure on our budget for the next year, and we will continue to push in this direction by gaining the needed "swing space" to transition to the new environment.
- Advancing Open: The Galvin Library launched a site in 2016, has begun to support several new campus journals through Gold, and is actively working with Faculty Governance to develop DORA and other APC grants for OA publishing.
- Further Assessment and Communication are imperative.

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