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E-Resource Collection Development: A Survey of Current Practices in Academic Libraries

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Introduction

As the amount of money spent on electronic resources increases, it seems fitting that as librarians we examine the process we use for selecting such materials. Collection development policies for print collections and ordering processes for such materials have become commonplace at many, if not all, academic libraries. As the transfer from paper to electronic resources occurs, especially in the acquisition of serial titles, we felt it necessary to examine the process we and other academic libraries use to select electronic resources.

Purpose/Background

All libraries have experienced a tremendous shift in content from print to electronic. We are deluged daily by offers for electronic databases in a myriad of formats. Frankly the breadth and variety of what is available in e-format is overwhelming. So the question that naturally arises is how do librarians make decisions on what to purchase and what to cancel, simply stated how do we manage our e-collections? At the Kutztown University Library we find ourselves frequently playing "catch up" with all the e-resources offers. They come to us via email, listservs, regular mail, visits to conferences, and from faculty and students. We frequently feel overwhelmed trying to stay on top of all the offers and make the best decisions. Our protocol involves contacting the appropriate library liaison, getting input from faculty, meeting with the library dean, and making the best decision we can at that particular time. It frequently leaves us feeling dissatisfied and dismayed with the process, often wondering if we are really meeting the needs of our users. We thought there must be a better way, so the decision was made to conduct a survey of other academic librarians in Pennsylvania and determine how they were tackling the problem of "e-resource overload." What follows is the results of this survey.

Literature Review

Much of the literature in this area is devoted to the selection of Internet resources that are made available through library web pages. Very little can be found that is devoted to selection processes and criteria for online databases. Barbara Vignau, et al., suggest that the term "digital collections" should be defined (139). They also offer a five step process for collecting electronic (or "digital") material:

- Gathering of information contents
- Evaluation of information contents
- Organization of information contents
- Construction of digital collections
- Maintenance of digital collections (140).

The Kovacs Guide to Electronic Library Collection Development and Gregory's Selecting and Managing Electronic Resources are basically introductory guides to the topic of e-collection development and concentrate mainly on creating a collection of web-based resources, not subscription databases. The processes and criteria they provide could be applied to many types of electronic resources, however.

The type of information that is absent from the literature is a study of current library practice in this area and librarian input about whether the current process (or lack of processes) is an effective way to select electronic resources. More research is needed to demonstrate processes for e-resource selection that are currently in practice and effective and manageable.

Methods

The survey we developed sought to answer one basic two-part question: What process does your library use evaluate which electronic resources to purchase and cancel? This question was then followed-up by a series of other queries to determine the "how and whys." We chose to use the Pennsylvania Academic Library Consortium, Inc. (PALCI) list of electronic resources librarians as our survey sample. We did this because PALCI represents a broad variety of libraries across the state from small private colleges to large research institutions. A total of 72 librarians were contacted via email. We sent an initial email requesting a time to do a 10-minute interview. We also gave librarians the option to fill out the survey electronically. We had a total of 18 responses (a 25 percent response rate).

Results

The results of our survey generally supported our experience of electronic resource collection development. When selecting electronic resources there was some definite process and criteria involved some of the time, but most libraries reported having more informal processes in place for selecting such materials

Of the 18 libraries that completed the survey, 10 had no particular process for evaluating resources before purchase. Six had an informal process and two had a definite process. When asked who is evaluating resources, responses ranged from a committee of all librarians to one individual decision maker. The reference department and Two libraries have a specific collection development policy, and four libraries have an electronic resources collection development policy as part of the overall library collection development policy. Seven libraries do not have electronic collection development policies, and one library has format-independent policies.

The librarians at the surveyed libraries were almost always the decision makers. In one case one librarian made such decisions, but in all other cases a group or committee of librarians made decisions as a team. Two libraries reported having an Electronic Resources Committee. Whether or not librarians were on a committee to decide what materials are purchased, it was reported that librarians play a central role in the selection process at four of the surveyed libraries. Other libraries report that librarians recommend resources for purchase, serve on the electronic resources committee, manage the electronic resources for their liaison area(s), or even have final authority over which resources are purchased. Teaching faculty play a more minor role in the selection process. Generally, teaching faculty were involved in recommending resources and might be consulted for input or consulted when cancellation of a resource was being considered. Administrators had final say over which resources were purchased in 6 institutions, but in each case they relied heavily on librarian input. In one library the administrator provided a considerable amount of input about the resources, and in another institution the administrator

made decisions independently. Other libraries reported that the administrator played a minimal or no role in the selection process.

When asked about whether there was a specific set of criteria used to evaluate resources, three libraries reported that yes, a specific set of criteria had been developed and was used during the selection process. Nine libraries reported that they did not use a specific set of criteria for evaluation. The other reporting libraries had a semblance of a set of criteria, but nothing was used consistently. Although many libraries did not have a specific set of criteria, most libraries reported using very similar tools to evaluate resources. The criteria mentioned were faculty input, reviews from *Choice*, *The Charleston Advisor*, etc., overlap analysis (from Serial Solutions and others), librarian input, trials, student input, past experience with a company or product, and which other libraries have or subscribe to that particular resource. When asked whether the print collection was considered when evaluating a resource, ten libraries reported that yes, print ownership was a factor to be considered when evaluating a resource. Three libraries did not consider this, and the remaining libraries sometimes considered this.

Criteria for canceling resources were similar among most institutions and included usage statistics, budget, duplication and dissatisfaction with a resource. It is important to note that three of the libraries surveyed have not canceled any electronic resources.

Consortia usually play a major role in the selection process. Some libraries are only able to purchase through consortia or purchase most of their electronic resources through consortia because of the discounts that are available. Some libraries request that consortia look at resources they are interested in, and others use consortia to save on items they would buy anyway. Consortia are also a way for libraries to learn about what electronic resources are available.

Several comments received through the surveys were interesting and informative. Librarians mentioned the need more long-range planning and a structured committee process for electronic resource collection development. The need for a checklist of criteria for evaluation was also mentioned. The time to devote to the creation of such a process and selection criteria was mentioned as a problem for many librarians. Usage statistics were also a concern, as some librarians were unsure about how to apply them to a selection or cancellation process. "How much use is too little use?" was a posed question.

Overall the results supported our experience of being overwhelmed by electronic resource collection development and support our belief that a structured process with consistent selection criteria is necessary.

Discussion

The results confirmed our suspicions that we are not alone in feeling "e-resource overload." Most of the libraries surveyed do not have a defined procedure in place for selecting and deselecting e-resources. Instead they make decisions in a reactive way to various e-resource offers or suggestions. This is very disturbing given the large and growing percentage of library budgets devoted to e-collections. What follows are some suggestions for "best practices."

Be Proactive

Librarians need to be proactive in making e-collection decisions. We recommend keeping abreast of new programs and campus initiatives at your institution. Start by going to your institution's curriculum committee or better yet volunteer to serve on it. Similarly, ask department chairs what new programs or courses they are working on. Its also important to keep accreditation mandates in mind. The importance of this cannot be understated. As institutions of higher education come under increasing pressure to be accountable and profitable, only programs that are accredited will survive.

Develop an E-Collections CD Policy

We highly recommend developing a collection development policy for e-collections. This can be part of your larger collection development policy or a stand alone one. The key is to develop one that is in synch with your institution's mission and goals. Developing this policy demonstrates that the library is being proactive and also will serve to help the library justify decisions to cancel a resource or not get something that is requested.

Get Input from All Stakeholders

It surprised us how few librarians engaged faculty and students in the process. Students and faculty are the reason that we are purchasing e-resources. Hence it makes sense to include them in the process. Our suggestion is to determine priorities based on your collection development policy then contact appropriate faculty with budget guidelines. In this way you will not get hopes up for e-resources that are out of reach fiscally.

One library had an innovative way to involve students. They had a student library committee that would evaluate databases on trial. The students would meet in a library computer lab, use the resource, and submit comments via an online evaluation form. This input was considered in the decision making process.

Develop Criteria

Develop specific criteria for adding and cancelling e-resources. For example, use your overlap analysis tool and develop a cut-off (e.g. if over 50 percent overlap will not add or will unsubscribe). Make greater use of usage statistics to justify decisions. In the current economic climate libraries will be making difficult cancellation decisions. Having the data to back-up your decision is vital. Do a thorough analysis of what your library is currently subscribing to and what subject areas are covered. Most likely you will find areas of overlap.

Conclusion

As the world of information continues its march towards the electronic format, librarians need to be savvier in how we are handling our e-collections. Librarians would never consider adding a significant collection of printed books or journals without a thorough review process. Yet it appears that we often add electronic content without a rigorous process. This will have to change. Librarians need to treat e-content like printed content by developing a set of standards to manage e-collections. The authors plan to expand our survey by reaching out to a larger group of librarians and ultimately develop a set of "best practices" as a template for librarians to effectively manage e-collections.

Works Cited

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