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The Balance point: Finding the delicate balance: Serials assessment at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Abstract

In the spring of 2003, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas libraries conducted a Serials Assessment Project (SAP) combining technology and effective communication between library users and subject librarians to successfully identify journals which could be cancelled, should they be necessary due to budgetary constraints. Although the Libraries had conducted similar assessments in 1998 and 2000, it was necessary to take a fresh look at the way in which such assessments had been conducted in the past and as a result, with an innovative approach, the project and experience proved to be tremendously positive for both the library and its users. This article describes the process by which the UNLV Libraries designed and conducted the 2003 review of UNLV's serials collection, comparing it to methods used in the two previous assessments.

Introduction

The University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV) is a relatively young metropolitan university that was founded in 1957. It offers approximately 200 degree programs; 93 undergraduate and 95 at the graduate level. Currently, UNLV student full-time-equivalent (FTE) is approximately 18,000. The UNLV teaching and research community is served by the UNLV Libraries that are comprised of the Lied Library and its three branch libraries for Architecture Studies, Music, and Curriculum Materials.

The Libraries' main source of funding is from the State of Nevada, whose legislature appropriates money to the university system each biennium. From 1996 through June of 2003, the library acquisitions, or collections, budget experienced a flat growth rate, staying static at approximately \$3.3 million per year for library information resources. Of this amount, approximately \$2.1 million was spent on serials, both print and electronic.

Despite a flat budget, during the same period of time, essentially, the Libraries' journal collection has grown significantly, primarily by leasing access to the full text content of

scholarly journals through consortial agreements and/or subscriptions to publisher electronic journals collections. This is in keeping with a stated operating within Collection Development for electronic-only as the preferred format for journal content, whenever possible. Currently, the University Libraries' serials collection provides access to the content of approximately 12,000 serials with over 7,000 electronic journal and/or database subscriptions and 3,800 print subscriptions.

Setting the Stage for a Serials Cancellation

The UNLV Libraries selects serials for its collection utilizing a method that is similar to other libraries that have a pool of subject specialists or faculty liaisons who, along with library users, recommend serials and other information resources for the library's collection. Requested serial resources are evaluated and then, generally, approved for subscription by the Collection Development department. At UNLV, the Libraries' approximately 18 subject librarians routinely forward requests for databases and journals to Collection Development and until January 2003, these requests were approved (or not) by the Head of CD and/or by a tally of votes by all subject librarians. In January 2003, however, a new group comprised of several subject librarians, Collection Development and the Electronic Serials Librarian was established to review serial requests in a more systematic manner twice each year.

While formed primarily to evaluate new serials requests, by February of 2003, it was apparent due to the budget battle taking place in Nevada's state legislature that university budgets could be negatively impacted, i.e., the Libraries could be facing a worse than flat acquisitions budget. The Serials Review Group was called into action as it became apparent that a serials cancellations project was imminent. While not certain of how much the budget would be reduced (or if it would be at all), it seemed that conducting such a review of the serials collection would be a constructive exercise, one that perhaps should take place annually, to some extent, regardless of a library's budget situation. With tense budget times on campus, it seemed that if there ever was a right time to get faculty on board to the idea of a serials assessment, this would be it, when all departments

were being asked to scrutinize their budgets for cost-savings. It seemed natural then, for the Libraries to also look at the part of its collection budget that represented such a large amount of funds. Despite the climate on campus, indeed, throughout the state, a serials cancellation project could be a hard sell to faculty, in particular. Two previous serials cancellations had taken place in 1998 and in 2000—these did not sit well with faculty who already perceived the Libraries’ journals collection were shallow, compared to those of older, more established university libraries. Also, at times through the flat-budget years, the library also had instituted the ‘add one-cancel one’ rule, that is, if you wanted the library to add a subscription, one of equal cost had to be cancelled. Whether a serials cancellation would be palatable to faculty became a moot point in September 2002 when the state of Nevada mandated mid-year budget reductions on campus; the UNLV library acquisitions budget was cut by 5%. As a result, Collection Development imposed a moratorium on all new serials. Even though the legislature was still months away from approving a state budget, with one budget cut already mandated, it became apparent to Collection Development that planning for another serials cancellation would be prudent.

Designing the 2003 Serials Assessment Project

The ‘Feel-Good’ Factor

Central to selecting the appropriate method for the 2003 Serials Assessment Project was the experience, perceived or real, that UNLV library users and subject librarians had with the earlier assessments. Suffice to say, the previous SAPs had not been pleasant for library staff –subject librarians, primarily—or for faculty. Still, it was clear that with a liaison model in place for collection development, subject librarians would be key to success of SAP 2003. While communications would also have to be sent from Collection Development and also the Dean of Libraries, explaining the needs for yet another assessment, it would have been confusing for Collection Development to circumvent established communication channels between academic departments and subject librarians for this project. It is a fine line to walk for Collection Development—while it is always beneficial to have faculty consult with their subject liaison on such critical

issues, it gave this head of Collection Development an uneasy feeling to ask her colleagues to directly bear the brunt of faculty ire, inevitable whenever the words ‘serials cancellation’ are uttered. Ultimately, a balance seemed to be achieved, with most of the official communications originating from Collection Development and an understanding that the head would step in at any time, if requested to do so by a subject librarian to address user concerns.

Another way for Collection Development to extend an olive-branch to UNLV faculty and to the subject librarians on whom Collection Development was so heavily dependent for the project’s success was to offer something in return for undertaking this critical but difficult exercise. It was announced to subject librarians, that if indeed the budget stayed flat and if serials were cancelled, enough to save approximately \$25,000, the funds saved would be reinvested in new serials that had been pending as requests from faculty for a number of years. Since the budget situation for fiscal years 2003-2005 was uncertain (no cut had been mandated yet) and since the Libraries’ serials collection was being ‘assessed,’ not reduced, it seemed appropriate that the results of the serials assessment could result in a different, more current and in-scope mix of serials.

To-Review or Not-To-Review?

The next step in designing the 2003 SAP was to develop a project that could be completed in, essentially, two months, using a Collection Development staff of 3 full-time staff (2 librarians and an assistant). Several options were available, the most obvious—do exactly what had been done in the previous two SAPs. This meant that UNLV academic department heads were given a list of journals in their discipline. These department heads would be asked to distribute the list to their faculty for review and, by the stated deadline, feedback would be returned to a subject librarian. The lists included journal use data and each serial’s annual cost. While it would have been the simplest to choose this tried-and-true method, it was well known that students and some faculty in each department hadn’t seen the list, particularly in those departments where the chair responded on behalf of the entire department. There were also interdisciplinary journals

that didn't appear on a given departmental journal list, causing some concern that the appropriate faculty were not given the opportunity to provide feedback to the library. It was also well known that while the old method had produced a list of journals that were cancelled, the SAPs had also produced some ill-will on campus. Something would have to change for 2003.

A decision also needed to be made regarding which titles were to be reviewed in 2003. Should the library review the entire collection of serials, print + electronic, databases and journals or just a subset of serials? If only a subset, which group of titles? Print only? Journals only (no databases)? Individual titles only (no e-journal collections)? Would it be practical for the subject librarians to create a list of core journals for each of their areas; a list of titles that the library must keep in order to support research and teaching in those disciplines? Should the library review only the most expensive journals since budgetary constraints were paramount? What about use? Perhaps the least used journals should be targeted for further scrutiny? There was also a feeling that with two recent SAPs, perhaps the titles retained from each should be off-limits this time around also.

To-Review and Must-Keep

Once this spinning wheel of questions slowed down a bit, things became clearer and defined the scope of the 2003 SAP. Each option described above carried with it sound reasoning. For example, since this was an overall assessment of serials, it made sense to review the entire collection to determine if its scope and content were still relevant to the research and instructional needs of UNLV faculty and students. This was, however, a daunting task given the sheer number of subscriptions for which data needed to be collated (and only three staff and one month to pull all the project elements together). Reviewing only certain titles was problematic, particularly if recent and accurate data was not available. For example, could use be the sole factor to determine which journals to look at more closely, if we were not absolutely confident about our data?

Ultimately, given the transition from a print-based to electronic, the pool of titles to review, to some extent, identified itself. First and foremost, consortial and other contractual agreements easily narrowed down the entire serials lists since the library had agreed not to cancel certain titles for the duration of the contract that provided electronic access. It was also felt that it would be redundant to review again so soon those titles that had ranked highly in previous SAPs, so another group of titles easily identified was eliminated. Another list of titles labeled 'must-keep' was those that virtually all subject librarians could agree were essential to a general academic university collection. This group included the weekly news titles, journals of local or regional interest, and any titles in our core collection areas (for UNLV, this includes hospitality, tourism, gaming and western Americana, to name a few).

Finally, as a last step in setting some parameters for the group of serials to be assessed, Collection Development set no quotas for the number of dollars to be cut or the number of titles to cancel. It was felt that users and subject librarians should focus on the titles under review rather than somewhat arbitrary and false boundaries. If, for example, 300 titles at a cost of \$15,000 could be found to cancel, was it necessary to find \$10,000 more just to meet a quota of \$25,000 to cancel? Likewise, if 150 titles worth \$25,000 were identified, it seemed foolish to keep looking for another 150 titles to cancel. It must be noted, of course, that if a library is instructed to reduce their materials budget by a specific dollar amount, due to budgetary constraints, it may not have this option. For UNLV, however, the 2003 SAP was to serve multiple purposes: to assess the currency and relevance of the serials collection, to educate library users that this was an exercise that would be undertaken periodically, not just when budgets were tight (we were *assessing* our serials collection, not simply finding titles to *cancel*), and to establish effective communication channels between the library, faculty and students particularly with regards to expensive resources such serials and databases, both print and electronic. Ultimately, a list of 1,900 journals to review, mostly print, was compiled. Most databases and other electronic resources were excluded since UNLV librarians felt two years' experience with most databases and e-journals was not enough experience on which to base a retention decision.

The SAP Web Site

After the list of serials to review (and by default, a ‘must-keep’ list) was defined, it became easy to identify the tasks involved to implement the SAP. The Collection Development department created a checklist of tasks and a SAP Timeline to keep department staff on track to meet established deadlines. It also became apparent that a large amount of information had to be communicated effectively, not only to the UNLV user community but also with the library to subject librarians and everyone else impacted by serials—acquisitions/serials staff, cataloging, document delivery services, administrators and research & information desk staff.

Once again, looking to the past was not very helpful since sending out lists of titles to academic department heads had not had positive results. A different method that would distribute the SAP information widely and easily was required. Again, it was clear to Collection Development that as the primary contact point between academic departments and the library, subject librarians were essential to the success of the 2003 SAP. It also became clearer, after some surfing on the WWW to see what other academic libraries were doing with regard to serials review, that the most direct way to get information out quickly and in a comprehensive manner, the library web site would need to be utilized as much as possible.

The SAP website was designed to communicate information about the project and the users’ role in the SAP, without requiring the user to interact with librarians, if that was indeed what the user desired. With most of serials data in spreadsheets already, it seemed natural to make available to each department, in an Excel file, its list of titles to be reviewed via the library web site (a twist on what had been done in previous SAPs). The file could be downloaded and edited easily so that faculty could rank each title using the following scale to describe its importance to research and teaching at UNLV:

(E)ssential

(Useful)

(M)inimally useful-document delivery will suffice

Finally, incorporating the idea that Collection Development was interested in hearing not only which titles faculty felt they could give up, but also where the collection may be lacking, the SAP website (and departmental Excel files) included a survey question asking respondents to list the five serials they felt were critical to their a) teaching and b) research activities.

Subject Librarians

Subject Librarians played a vital role in the success of the 2003 Serials Assessment Project. In previous years, the role of the liaison was more subtle, less proactive. The reason subject librarians played a greater role in 2003 was because evaluations of previous Assessment projects demonstrated a lack of communication between librarians and faculty members. This was extremely negative from a public relations standpoint. Faculty members felt confused, angry and disappointed. These negative reactions arose because of a perceived lack of communication, perceived absence of input for faculty and finally, a lack of context for cancellation of journals.

For the 2003 assessment, the mistakes of the previous assessments were noted and a new approach to this aspect of the assessment was used. There was an emphasis on the skills of Subject Librarians. Specifically, these skills revolved around liaison activities and focused on public relations and marketing. At UNLV, each librarian is responsible for selected disciplines. Each subject librarian works closely with their colleges and departments. Subject librarians have gone to great lengths to communicate with faculty using various methods including emails, telephone calls and meetings. Due to the fact that there is a direct line of communication between the liaison and the department, the new approach focused on taking advantage of these positive relationships. It appears that in previous assessments, attempts were not necessarily made to communicate in great detail with faculty. In 2003, the opposite approach was taken. The line of communication started from the top of the leadership structure on down. The initial contact for the SAP started with sending a list of journals under consideration to the Dean

of each college and each department head. Subject librarians emailed individual faculty and provided links to the SAP Website.

Liaison activities were also used to address the perceived problems of the previous SAP. The Libraries wanted to make certain history did not repeat itself. In discussions with individual faculty, subject librarians clearly explained the collection development process and highlighted issues that may affect the university. Next, librarians made sure to effectively communicate why the SAP is happening. In librarian communications with faculty, specific reasons for why the project was taking place were explained. Each librarian presented facts related to the library's budget, cost of serials and use statistics for journals. The success of the SAP hinged on establishing an effective serial assessment structure and subject librarians using this asset to their advantage.

Specifically, the structure of the assessment project benefited each subject librarian. It made our jobs extremely easy. The well-designed structure, as described in an earlier section, allowed subject librarians to carefully explain the process and allowed easy communication with faculty. Analyzing the structure, the subject librarian was directly involved with faculty participation, serials not considered for cancellation, serials to be reviewed and journal requests.

Faculty participation was the key component for obvious reasons. Format for faculty or Department review is extremely important. From the faculty standpoint, it was important to have a flexible, efficient means for reviewing journals. Also important was allowing two or more ways to submit journal reviews. Some faculty are techno-savvy, others are not. The next component was serials not considered for cancellation. From a subject librarians' standpoint, this list was extremely helpful. Having a list of journals that are not subject to review shows how the library is keeping the core titles for each discipline. This also illustrates that the SAP was not looking to cancel all journals and shows how much the library has invested in serials. The list is evidence for what the library is doing to help their research needs. The next component relates to serials to be reviewed. The choice to name this component 'serials to be reviewed' was vital because it did not

invoke the word cancel. The word cancel seems to stir bad feelings. Sending out a list of serials to review places the decision making process in the hands of the faculty and department. It also allows department to prioritize journals in their field. In addition, it helps subject librarians with future collection development decisions.

Results and Conclusions

The 2003 SAP was a definite success for UNLV Libraries. The reaction from both the faculty and academic departments was extremely positive. This was a result of wonderful teamwork within the UNLV Libraries and careful planning and implementation by the Department of Collection Development. The plan for the SAP effectively used library resources, both technical and non-technical. The use of the WWW to deliver information and title lists allowed faculty and librarians to complete the journal rating process in an efficient manner. The larger role of the subject librarians assisted UNLV Libraries in effectively communicating with faculty and departments, which resulted in a positive public relations victory for the Libraries. This innovative approach for a serials assessment project was made possible by building on past experiences of 1998 and 2000.