

The Shifting Nature of Academic Library Collections

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Academic libraries exist in a changing world full of challenges. Many of the changes and the challenges they present are out of our control. These challenges include things like hyperinflation. Journal prices today continue to rise at a rate that far out-strips traditional inflation measures, such as the Consumer Price Index,¹ creating tremendous on library budgets. There has also been a steady increase in research and development spending in the United States.² This is directly correlated with an increase in the number of journals published each year.³ Both of these increases easily outstrip any increases in library budgets.

While some of our challenges come in the form of things going up, we're also faced with declines in other areas. The use of physical collections at 4-year colleges and universities in the United States continues to decrease.⁴ We've also seen a significant decline in funding for public colleges and universities,⁵ and while funding at most universities has recovered since the recession,⁶ that increase in spending has not kept up with the increase in the prices of library materials.⁷ On top of that, overall, academic libraries have seen a steady decrease in funding as a percentage of overall university expenditures.⁸

At the same time these things are happening, opportunity is knocking. Technology, in the form of the internet and the proliferation of online resources, is providing libraries the opportunity to think differently about the services they provide and how they facilitate access to collections.

In the past libraries built stand-alone collections. We did this because it was the logical choice at the time. It was difficult to know what other libraries owned and it was expensive and time-consuming to get items from other libraries. So libraries attempted to anticipate users' needs, building comprehensive collections and purchasing items just in case they were needed in the future. This is why volume counts were so important in the past. The larger the collection was, the greater the likelihood that it would have materials in it that would meet a user's information need.

The problem with this approach is that data shows that libraries are not very good at anticipating users' needs. Allen Kent's study of collection usage at the University of Pittsburgh in the 1970s found that 40% of the books in that library never circulated.⁹ In a more recent study, Cornell University found that 55% of

books published since 1990 in their collection had never circulated.¹⁰ And in the most recent and largest examination of collection usage, Sustainable Collections Service looked at 82 million holdings in 212 libraries and found that 42% of books had never circulated and that 75% of books had 3 or fewer circulations.¹¹ It's important to understand that these unused books are not just sunk costs. The most recent study that looked at the lifetime cost of keeping books on open shelves placed that cost at \$4.26 per volume per year.¹²

Complicating things is how collections get used. In one of the most significant studies to look at this issue, Richard Trueswell found that only 20% of the collections at the University of Illinois' library accounted for 80% of the use.¹³ This so-called 80-20 rule persisted as a standard measure until it was updated by a study of the OhioLink library consortium by OCLC. That study, which examined a much larger and more diverse group of libraries, found only 6% of these libraries' collections accounted for 80% of use.¹⁴

When you take this fact—that an incredibly small percentage of our collections drive the vast majority of use—and combine it with the steady decrease in use of libraries' print collections, it is clear that we are faced with a problem. Instead of building traditional collections, libraries today need to figure out how to efficiently provide access to the resources that people want and need. In many ways libraries and publishers have been able to make this shift with journals, which today are primarily available online. While there are significant issues in the scholarly journal marketplace with publisher monopolies and price increases that continue to outpace inflation, easy access to journal content is significantly ahead of what we see compared to monograph collections and the models of access are far more mature and consistent. With that in mind, I'd like to take the balance of this paper to explore how some libraries are transforming their monograph collections and then take a look toward the future.

Leveraging Electronic Books

Increasingly, libraries are relying on electronic books (ebooks) to provide users access to information. Ebooks overcome limitations of time and place. A user does not have to worry if the library is open to access an ebook. They do not even need to worry about whether they are in the same city as that library to access the content. Ebooks can also be more cost effective than printed books when they are purchased in bundles with deep discounts or when libraries use data-driven acquisition models.

This is not to say that ebooks do not have their limits. Digital rights management software and licensing restrictions are major concerns for libraries.

Another concern is user preference. Surveys, such as the Ithaka S+R survey of faculty in the United States, consistently find that users express a preference for print content over digital.¹⁵ Yet at the University of Wisconsin-Madison we have found what users say is often different than what they do. We consistently hear from users that they prefer print books, yet the use of our print collections has steadily dropped for more than a decade. At the same time, over that same period we have seen an incredible increase in the use of ebooks.

Accompanying the increased acceptance and use of ebooks is a shift in collecting methods by libraries. Libraries are moving away from title-by-title selection as they begin to see that just-in-case collecting is not effective and that it leads to large, underused collections. Title-by-title selection is also very time-consuming for librarians who are seeing increasing and emerging demands on their time. By relying on just-in-time and purchase-on-demand acquisition models for collection development, libraries are freeing their librarians to focus on emerging tasks and priorities.

Just-in-time and purchase-on-demand collection development practices are also freeing libraries from the need to purchase items in advance, on the chance that a patron may need that item. Libraries have been purchasing items on demand for patrons for a long time. For example, most libraries will purchase books requested by patrons and many libraries automatically purchase patrons' interlibrary loan requests that meet certain criteria. The difference between these kinds of purchase-on-demand programs and just-in-time acquisitions is technology. Technology allows libraries to purchase and receive from online retailers a book requested through interlibrary loan (ILL) within twenty-four to forty-eight hours, much faster than it could request and receive that same item from another library through traditional ILL. Technology allows libraries to print and bind books in a matter of minutes using an Espresso Book Machine. And technology allows libraries to implement large-scale purchase-on-demand ebook programs.

These kinds of ebook acquisition programs allow libraries to make large numbers of books available to patrons at a comparably lower cost than print and only pay for those books that are used. The models can vary widely. In one model books that receive a specific amount of use or certain kinds of use, such as printing or copying and pasting text, are automatically purchased or leased. In another kind of model, a library makes an up-front spending commitment to a publisher or vendor and is then able to make large numbers of titles available for use. The library then selects individual titles for ownership after seeing how each book has been used. In spite of the different characteristics, all of these models share certain

attributes. All of them allow libraries to make large numbers of books available to users that may never be paid for by the library, and in each model, purchases and leases of content are based on actual use. In addition, all of this is completely seamless to the patron. They do not know whether a library owns a book or not. They only know they have access to the content when they need it and how they want it. Moreover, because of the relative low cost of these kinds of programs libraries are often able to make more books available to their users than they would be able to do otherwise, while freeing librarians from title-by-title, just-in-case selection.

Cooperative Collection Management

While at times it seems like ebooks dominate discussions on the future of academic library monograph collections, the reality is that only 50% of books published today are available in an electronic format¹⁶ and libraries' shelves are filled with large collections of older monographs. Providing users with easy access to these materials is just as important as providing access to ebooks. Yet, libraries know from the studies mentioned earlier that the vast majority of books in libraries' collections see little or no use, and they know from other studies that there is significant overlap among library collections.¹⁷ At the same time libraries are under increasing pressure to reallocate the space that holds these little-used titles for other uses ranging from collaborative study space to offices to coffee bars. This creates a real tension between the need for this space and the need to preserve and provide access to these collections. Digital surrogates like the HathiTrust can lessen certain concerns about preservation, but they do not resolve the issue of ensuring access to monographs that are under copyright. To address these issues many libraries are turning to cooperative collection management solutions.

While some of these solutions are focused on the preservation of collections, many other projects are focused much more on ensuring access to content for library users. The Michigan Shared Print Initiative and the Central Iowa Collaborative Collections Initiative are two examples of partnerships among academic libraries to cooperatively manage their widely-held, low-use, legacy monographs.¹⁸ In these programs targeted books are retained by one or more libraries in the group, allowing partner libraries to withdraw these items with a high level of confidence that they will be available for their users in the future. The Big Ten Academic Alliance (BTAA), an academic consortium of the universities that make up the Big Ten athletic conference plus the University of Chicago, has a shared print journal program, which provides another example of cooperative collection management.¹⁹ The BTAA's Shared Print Repository program is aggregating 250,000 widely held print volumes of journals from

publishers such as Elsevier, Wiley and Springer. These volumes will be stored at Indiana University's high-density storage facility. Users will have access to the online versions of these journals, but if for some reason they need to access the print volumes, they are easily able to request and receive the print. Projects like these allow libraries to reallocate space, ease over-filled stacks and improve the usability of their collections, while ameliorating concerns about availability and access that often arise during deselection projects.

Coordinated Collection Development

While cooperative collection management efforts revolve around ensuring users have access to legacy print collections, coordinated collection development is focused on limiting the number of duplicate print copies of books acquired by member libraries, while ensuring access to newly published print content. Libraries have been taking a number of approaches to accomplish this. One approach is to use a shared approval plan where a single copy of a book that is covered by the approval profile is sent to one library in the group with the other libraries relying on that single copy for access.²⁰ Another model that is used by consortia such as the Orbis Cascade Alliance is the soft cap or threshold approach.²¹ In this model, the consortium members attempt to limit the number of books acquired within the group by agreeing upon the maximum number of copies for any single title within the group. Once that cap or threshold has been met for a given title then theoretically additional copies of that work are not acquired within the consortium.

Looking Forward

Technology seems to point toward additional opportunities in coordinated collection development. Approaches like shared approval plans or the soft cap can work to minimize the amount of duplication in a collection, but there are times when duplication is actually needed to meet user demand for high-use titles. As libraries move from stand-alone integrated library systems to newer cloud-based systems from vendors like Ex Libris and OCLC libraries should be pushing for the development of tools that take advantage of this shared infrastructure and data sets to automatically determine when additional copies of works are needed within a consortium and to also tell libraries when there are excess copies of a title in a consortium. Public libraries have been taking this kind of data-driven approach for years.²² Academic libraries need to take this same approach in managing their local and collective collections, freeing librarians from making obvious decisions regarding acquiring high-demand titles and withdrawing low-demand titles allowing them to instead focus on other priorities and connecting users with collections.

Resource sharing has long been a key service libraries provide, but an increased emphasis on collective collections necessitates a rethinking of resource sharing. If libraries are to be reliant on collective collections they must make it easier for users to become aware of shared collections. Libraries should integrate shared holdings into their online catalogs or discovery layers and make it just as easy to retrieve a book from another institution as they make it to retrieve a book from a branch library or an off-site storage facility. Cloud-based integrated library systems with their open architecture are providing libraries the opportunity to do just that, but in many cases this still requires significant investments in time and resources to leverage APIs and build bridges between systems. Equally important is getting books from other institutions to users quickly and allowing them to have extended access to those books. Books from a shared print collection should be available just as long as a book from a local collection, and users should not be expected to wait one to two weeks for a print book to arrive. This requires the coordination of borrowing terms and investments in infrastructure and services to quickly move books between libraries.

A New Course

Many libraries are starting to transform their collections to meet users' expectations as they pivot toward a model that looks to leverage technology and our networked environment to maximize both access to information and libraries' limited resources. However, many more libraries continue to operate much as they have in the past with few changes to the core of how they provide access to information resources. In some ways, it is easy to see why that is the case. Each of the practices discussed above carries a certain level of risk. Companies we rely on can go out of business. Publishers can withdraw content from third-party vendors. Partner-libraries can break their promises. Patrons can, and do, lose books. Yet, a greater risk than any of those things is the thinking that libraries can continue on as they have for the last one hundred years. In some ways, with all the challenges and pressures that libraries face, the greatest threat of all comes from libraries themselves. Libraries are too often unwilling to change or give up any measure of local control and are driven by fears of "what if" and the unknown. Instead of taking any risks, they choose to do what is easy and what they perceive as safe.

The reality is that libraries are at a fork in the road. They can take the familiar path that is focused on continuing to build collections in the same way they have done throughout the Twentieth Century and risk, at best, a diminished ability to meet their users' information needs, and at worst, marginalization and

mediocrity. Or they can chart a new course for themselves. By shifting the focus of their efforts from the collection to the user, taking advantage of technology, being willing to take risks, implementing more efficient collections practices and working with partners to provide access to content libraries can make better use of their resources, saving time, money and space. When libraries do that, they create opportunities for the new and the unknown—those services and spaces that they were never able to consider or address in the past. In this era of information abundance it is not libraries' collections that will make them stand out in the 21st Century. Instead, it will be those services and spaces that build upon their collections. Those services and spaces they are able to offer because they moved down the road toward a new model for providing access to information resources.

Notes

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