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Collection Development 2009:
Making the Cut, part II
A Periodic Debate

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

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I wrote the first installment of this column in May of this year, a mere three months into a comprehensive analysis of my library's collection. Though we had spent a significant amount of time deciding how to approach our task, evaluation of individual resources didn't begin in earnest until February. At the time, I was intently focused on the scope and structure of the project ahead, fixated on engaging in a meticulous and thoughtful review of every item in our collection that received any kind of regular updates. As I mentioned at the outset of this experience, I expected every decision on our journey to be the result of our best judgments based on the acquisition team's collective 78 years of experience at the University of Tulsa Mabee Legal Information Center. I was prepared for an Odysseus-style collection development adventure, one of both epic proportions and difficulty. And I was right ... on some counts.

In the intervening six months, I have discovered that much of what I envisioned and expected was right on target. Our work has been based predominantly on our library's mission, geared toward the needs of our students and faculty, with a watchful eye on the fiscal bottom line and an unwavering dedication to maintaining the highest levels of service that our users have come to expect. The continued open lines of communication with all our library departments has been critical to our success to date, and the commitment of our acquisitions committee (including our director, assistant director for reference and research, collection development and acquisitions librarians) has allowed us to make consistent and conscientious decisions. At the same time, I have been alternately surprised and dismayed at some of the obstacles we have encountered along the way.

Because the project we have undertaken is so large, I wanted to tackle it here a slice at a time beginning with the complete periodicals review I have come to think of as "the great periodic debate." Those of us in collection development are no strangers to the key elements of the debate, which include the sanctity of our print periodical collections, the increasing availability and convenience of our electronic databases containing both text and pdf periodicals, and the fundamental question concerning whether duplication of format in a single title is essential or superfluous. The short version of our story concludes with the discovery that there is no "right" side to the debate; every decision we have made has been deeply contextual. The long version of our story ends the same way, but it begins (as all good stories in librarianship should) with a list.

In truth, we began with a few lists. One list was comprised of every currently updated print periodical title in our library's collection. Another list was taken from the Washington & Lee University School of Law Library, commonly referred to as the Law Journals: Submissions and Ranking list.¹ The list generated from the Washington & Lee site was based on the combined score ranking of the top 1027 law reviews.² The third and most important list was the TU law librarians' discussion list, to which I sent regular updates and requests for help from our librarians. I simply can't stress enough the importance of the team effort in this process. Our first task was to take our list of current print periodical subscriptions and divide them into two categories. First, we created a list of those titles that were on the Washington & Lee list. By process of elimination, we were then able to create a list of our currently updated print holdings that did not make the Washington & Lee list.

For both lists, our librarians worked tirelessly to review each title based on the following factors: price per year; regular routing and circulation data; availability and format of online access in Westlaw, Lexis, HeinOnline, and other periodical databases; and inclusion in periodical indexes. Titles requested by current faculty members were noted, as were titles connected to existing package plans, exchange programs with our University of Tulsa law reviews, and various library memberships. I would be remiss not to disclose the fact that it took us nearly two and a half months to collect data on all the titles on both lists. However, when the data collection was done we were in an excellent position to begin looking at each title on its individual merits.

We began our evaluation with several basic (and flexible) rules. Titles in the top 100 on Washington & Lee's list would be considered last.³ If we simply ran out of time in deciding on our cuts, we believed strongly that keeping the top 100 on the list in print format would be an appropriate choice. Titles currently routing to faculty were automatically retained with a single exception. Titles in package plans we wished to maintain were not considered for cancellation, nor were titles received as part of library memberships. Also, law reviews received as part of an exchange program with one of our in-house law journals were retained. Finally, we agreed to maintain a print subscription to the primary law review from all accredited law schools. All other titles were open for discussion. Our goal was to complete the evaluation of our periodicals prior to our receipt of our fall invoice from our subscription agent, allowing us to communicate the complete list of cancellations for the upcoming year and receive an invoice reflecting only what we wished to keep.

As we worked our way through the lists, several questions stayed at the forefront of our conversations. How critical is the format of this publication to the kind of use it gets from our patrons? If it is available as a pdf, is that sufficient? How important is browsability in law reviews outside the context of symposium issues? How will our interlibrary loan statistics be impacted by our decisions? Will our library users who do not have academic Westlaw and Lexis accounts be negatively impacted by our print cancellations? Are there any restrictions on the cancellation of this material?⁴ Is this title critical to one of our certificate programs or to our professors' areas of individual research? We answered many of these questions as our acquisitions team sat around the table, while others required consultation with our faculty and other librarians.

In total, we took just over eight months to complete our periodicals review, wrapping up the project in mid-October. Granted, we were engaged in a simultaneous serials review that required an equal amount of our attention, but I'm not sure that added significantly to the time we took. The result of our work was a decrease in our projected print periodical expenditures of over 30% for the next fiscal year. Yet this is only the tip of the iceberg of impact that this project had on me as a young librarian. First and foremost, I have become considerably more attuned to what our users actually want when they are seeking assistance with legal periodicals. I ask questions about format and access preferences and keep what I learn for use in making future collection development decisions. I have also discovered that I have a far more intimate knowledge of that aspect of my library's collection than I used to, and it is difficult to overestimate the value of that level of knowledge. Knowing what we have and how it can be accessed gives me a better context for decision-making about what we should add to (or subtract from) our collection in the future.

The most compelling thing I have learned from the process thus far is exactly that—this odyssey isn't over. The next leg of our journey involves evaluating the impact our decisions have on those we serve. This part of the adventure will take me outside of my comfortable world of lists and data and into the nebulous world of qualitative analysis of our work. Each meeting at the reference desk involving periodicals will be an opportunity to see if we have reached our aims of achieving cost savings without sacrificing the quality of our service. Each staff meeting will offer a chance to see how the cancellations we have made are impacting our entire library system. And there is no projected deadline for this phase of the work. We will keep listening, learning and serving our users. Consider this a travelogue in progress. I promise to keep you posted.

¹ <http://lawlib.wlu.edu/LJ/> (accessed November 21, 2009)

² For a complete explanation of the methodology used to rank the journals, visit <http://lawlib.wlu.edu/LJ/method.asp>. (accessed November 21, 2009)

³ We ultimately decided to maintain a print subscription to the top 100 listed titles.

⁴ It turns out that a few of the titles we retained were connected to contracts entered into by our main campus library years before.