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Collection Development 2010: Making the Cut, Part III, A Serious Look at Serials

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For the past fifteen months, the academic law library in which I work has been engaged in a comprehensive collection review with a focus on continuations. Fifteen months is an awfully long time; it is approximately the gestation period of a rhinoceros.¹ And in truth, it has felt a little like carrying and then giving birth to a rhinoceros—an angry one with a fully formed horn.

Actually, it hasn't been that bad at all. In fact, it has been instructive in so many ways that I am grateful for the opportunity to have undertaken such a process collaboratively with the wonderful group of librarians that are my colleagues here at the University of Tulsa. In December of last year, I wrote about our adventures in periodical evaluation and the resulting cancellation of approximately 2/3 of our print legal periodical titles. We are, of course, still engaged in an open-ended evaluation of our cuts and the impact they have had and will have on those we serve. And while the periodicals project alone was a mammoth undertaking, most of the work on it was completed within the first eight months of our review.

The serials review we have undertaken has been a somewhat more onerous task, involving the title-by-title review of over 550 different serial publications in our collection. It is really this individual review that has been the most labor intensive, and it is my sincerest hope that some portion of what I share about our experiences will be useful to you in your own review of your serial collections. I should begin by noting that our review was shaped in part by a public access Westlaw agreement we entered into with West a few years earlier to provide access to a select slice of Westlaw to all of our library users, separate and apart from the academic password access enjoyed by our faculty and students. The public access agreement, like many of West's library maintenance agreements, ties significantly reduced prices on select print titles to our continued purchase of the public access Westlaw subscription. Under the agreement, cancellation of any of the "Westpacked" print titles would result in the loss of the discounts we receive on a number of other print West serial titles. Thus, we began our review by deciding to postpone individual review of the print serial titles currently covered by the agreement.

With a vast number of our subscribed West serial publications off the table for the moment, we set about examining every other serial publication in the collection one-by-one as we received regular updates for each title. We collected as much information as we felt we would need on each title, including the approximate annual supplementation charges, number of supplements per year, online availability in our existing electronic resources, routing or check-out to faculty or administration, circulation data, and reviews of the publications. In gathering much of this information, I am heavily indebted to Ken Svengalis's excellent resource, the *Legal Information Buyer's Guide & Reference Manual*.² I have seriously considered creating bracelets that say WWKSD (What would Ken Svengalis do?) for all the members of our review committee!

We decided early on in the process that we would use our library mission statement as the guiding principle behind the decisions we made in keeping or cancelling each resource. As a private law school library with a limited patron base beyond students and faculty, we felt that our most critical duty was to preserve a core collection that reflected the depth and breadth of our curriculum and faculty scholarship. We were also careful to minimize duplication of resources in various formats whenever possible. With a few notable exceptions, we cancelled print subscriptions to titles provided in electronic databases to which we were already subscribed.³ Of the titles we retained in duplicate format, the most common reason for maintenance of the print was the degree to which the print was more user-friendly than the electronic version. A word of warning is appropriate here with respect to this particular strategy. Be aware that some print titles may be tied to the subscription price your library pays for the electronic version of the title. Make sure you enquire with the publisher regarding the ways in which print cancellations could ultimately impact what you pay for electronic access to the same resources.

Another substantial consideration in our cancellation decisions was the target audience of the resource. Treatises geared toward highly specialized attorney practitioners were much less likely to fall into the "keep" category than were treatises that featured applications for academic work as well as law practice. Of course, the subject matter of the treatise was also a critical element of our review, and we gave strong preference to materials that dealt with areas of the law in which the University of Tulsa has a strong curriculum, certificate program⁴ or clinical program. We took this opportunity to scrutinize the scope of our collection development in some subject areas as well. With respect to our International and Native and

Indigenous Peoples collections, we crafted priority statements detailing what types of materials should be considered critical to our collections, what areas of study were beneficial, though not imperative, and which subject matters, formats or items could be considered lower priority. Not only did these priority statements help us make decisions about cancellations, they also assisted us in moving forward with our continued collection development decisions in new purchases of monographs and other resource materials.

One particularly revealing method of soliciting feedback on our choices for cancellation was a process we devised for physically “wrapping” the titles slated for cancellation with notes indicating that we were considering ceasing updating them. We then left plenty of writing room for comments and requested that users who wished for us to keep updating the material leave us a note on the wrapper. Each wrapper was then checked 6 months after it had been placed on the volumes. I expected that we would receive a number of requests to maintain materials, and I presumed that most of these requests would come from our faculty. Instead, we received only a single comment on a single publication during the entire 15-month process. Interestingly enough, that comment was just a note to let us know that a section of the loose-leaf was missing. In many ways, this total absence of feedback eased my mind about our cancellations. Perhaps it indicates that we are making appropriate selections and that the resources slated for discontinuation were in fact those getting the least use in our collection. Only time and continued attention to patterns of use in our facility will tell.

Ultimately, it is that continued attention, evaluation and critical scrutiny that we rely on to determine the effectiveness of projects of this magnitude. Have we begun to decrease our expenditures in serials? Absolutely. Of the titles we have reviewed to date, we have cancelled precisely 299 items. I suppose that if you stacked up all those titles and weighed them, they might weigh just about as much as a baby rhinoceros. And as complicated, difficult and downright painful as this process has been at times, I am genuinely proud of the work we have done and the things we have learned. This kind of critical review of the library collection is an ongoing process, and every step of the process provides another opportunity to re-evaluate who we are as an institution and the purpose we serve for our users. This is but one stretch of a much longer journey, and I promise to keep you posted.

¹ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s.v. “rhinoceros” <http://0-search.eb.com.library.utulsa.edu/eb/article-9063434> (accessed May 26, 2010).

² Kendall F. Svengalis, *Legal Information Buyer's Guide & Reference Manual* (Barrington, R.I.: Rhode Island Law Press, 2009).

³ By way of example, we made the decision to continue a print subscription to *Nimmer on Copyright*, regardless of its presence in our electronic resources repository. Based on feedback from our faculty, it became clear that this was one of several titles that were simply more user-friendly in print than online.

⁴ The number of certificate programs offered by the College of Law actually changed during the course of this project, and our committee did return some titles to our “keep” list to reconsider mid-stream.