Establishing a model for evidence based collection management

Denise Koufogiannakis

Collections & Acquisitions Coordinator, University of Alberta Libraries

Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Introduction

This paper is a preliminary examination of a model for evidence based collection management. Simply put, evidence based collection management is a way of approaching the management of a library's collections by incorporating published research and local data into your decision making. This model is meant as a guide for collection managers in overseeing the information required to drive forward collection decisions and answer questions.

The library literature provides many examples of approaches to collection management, but none of them from an evidence based perspective. As well, there are many examples of collection management practices that incorporate research and assessment, but these are targeted to specific aspects of collection management. What this paper aims to do is to set out a model for collection management decision making that incorporates an evidence based approach. Rather than a prescription for which type of evidence is best, this model aims to be a general guide for a way of thinking about collection management and how an evidence based approach can benefit libraries while being flexible to their unique needs.

The Setting and Method

The model for evidence based collection management was developed for the University of Alberta Libraries (UAL), a large academic library system in Edmonton, Canada. The general model can be applied to other libraries regardless of type. Examples from UAL serve to illustrate practical use of the model and how it can be implemented in practice.

The author began a new job as Collections & Acquisitions Coordinator in September 2005. After a year of learning and observation of current practices, the time was right to begin redefining how UAL approached collections work, and implement aspects of evidence based practice within the library's collection process.

A complete review of collection management decision making was undertaken. An examination determined what types of collections questions selectors ask on a regular basis, what things librarians should consider when making acquisition decisions, and the possible sources of evidence to aid selectors. A focus group session was undertaken wherein subject selectors were asked to reflect in small groups about their information needs, and feedback from staff was incorporated into the model. The approach was also allied with institutional directions, focusing on a user-centered approach.

In the past, collection management was done purely by librarian expertise and feedback from faculty, with the occasional use of data as it became available, but without a concerted effort to systematically review data and base collections decisions on what that data was telling us. There are overarching questions to which a traditional EBL model may be used to provide insight and answers, while at the same time there are day-to-day decisions which rely on local data and placing that data in the hands of selectors in a timely way and in a useable format. Information needs must be matched with available data sources, or new data sources sought. The information must be delivered in a way that it can be easily used and turned into a part of the selector's normal decision making process.

The Model

The model posits that there are two paths of information needs that collection managers incorporate into their decision making process. These are outlined in Figure 1. The first type is referred to as *Core*. Core information needs are those that are central to everyday practice and decision making. These types of information needs are embedded within the day-to-day operations of collections work. Core questions are likely to be directly relevant to subject librarians and collection managers daily work, wherein there is a continuous evaluation of

collections processes that impact purchase decisions. The collection management approach for these types of questions would be to integrate the necessary data as part of normal workflow and that information would come from local data that is relevant to the needs of selectors and collection managers.

The second type of information need is called *Innovative*. Innovative needs are more occasional than Core, and relate more to overall direction of the collection and the way the library does things. These may be large level questions about collection development processes in general, or aspects of collection development may be changing. This category also incorporates new projects that you may be considering implementing. These types of information needs follow the established evidence based process of Ask, Acquire, Appraise, Apply and Assess, in order to ground the project in research that may be found in the library literature. As with any collections-based decision, local data should also be taken into account. When beginning a new project, assessment would be integrated from the beginning, ensuring that the data you will collect is driven by predetermined indicators of success.
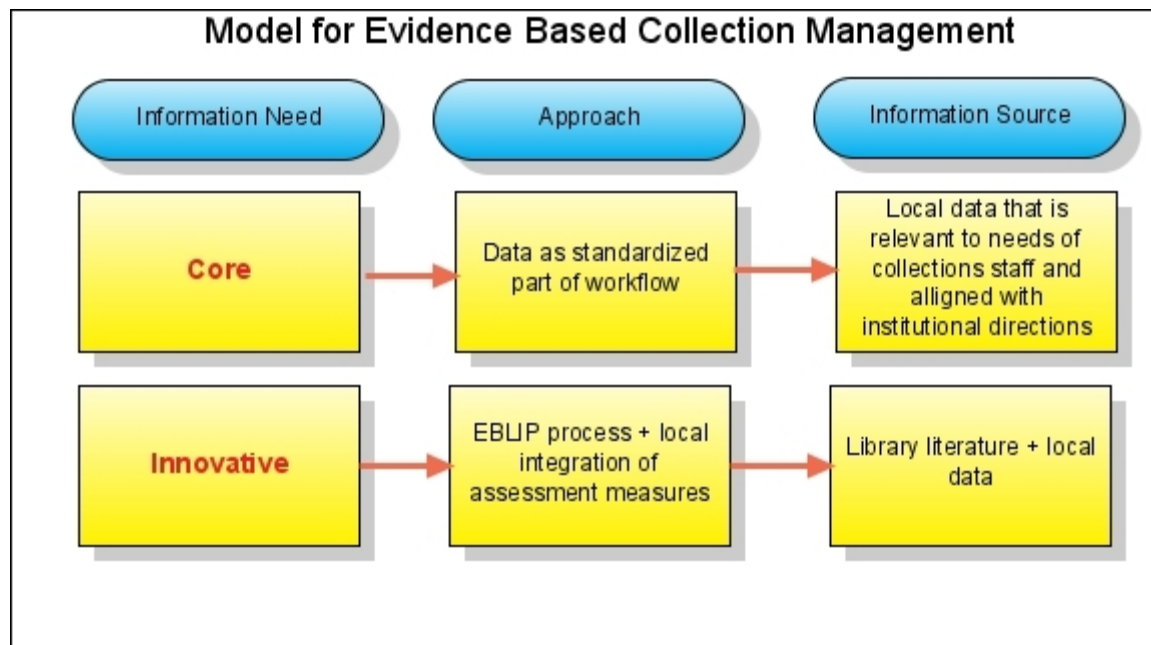

Figure 1. Model for Evidence Based Collection Management

A fundamental part of this model is that Core and Innovative needs will change over time, as collection needs shift and questions change. This cycle of changing information needs is illustrated in Figure 2.
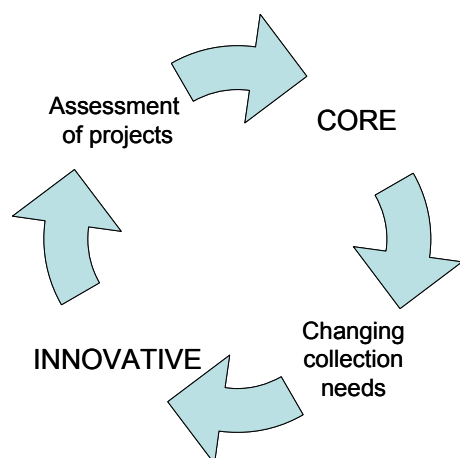

Figure 2. Evidence Based Collection Management Cycle

Once Core collection information needs are identified, decisions will be made using that information on a regular basis. In the process of this conscious, evidence based decision making, practices will be questioned and over time, collection needs will change. In recognizing changing needs and new directions, some Core aspects may no longer be necessary, and Innovative questions will arise, leading to a review and renewal of collection practice in a particular area. Likewise, Innovative projects or decisions, will need to be monitored over time, and if successful, will no longer be considered Innovative, instead falling into the continuing day-to-day function of collection management, becoming Core functions. This cycle is essential to growth and renewal within collection management.

Implementation of the Model

Implementation of this model requires reflection on current library practices, needs, and desired outcomes. There must be a willingness to embrace change, and to use the information you obtain. This involves both providing for the day-to-day decisions of your library and looking at the big picture. The model can be adapted according to institutional directions and determination of what the important measures of success are for your institution. There are no absolute areas of

information and all information needs to be grounded in a direction and reason for use that fits with your institution's overall goals.

Core

When considering the Core information needs of collections staff, a collection manager should consider the following:

- What information does your collection staff need to help with collection decisions on a regular basis?
- What institutional goals/directions will this information assist with? How will the information be used?
- What resources can deliver the required information?
- How will the information be delivered to appropriate collections staff (frequency of information need)?

At the University of Alberta, our Core information needs were grouped into the areas of Monographs, Journals, and Databases. Staff indicated that they required regular information in areas such as circulation statistics and numbers of holds placed on books. Examples of these identified needs are illustrated in Table 1.

Type of Material	Information needed	Why?	Resource	Delivery
Books	Titles with highest number of current holds	Selectors may decide to purchase an additional copy or an ebook to meet demand	Director's Station (ILS reporting tool)	Monthly
Journals	Titles requested via ILL	To assist with new journal purchase	Relais (ILL system)	Yearly in Spring

		decisions		
Databases	Turnaway stats for databases with simultaneous user limits	Possible targeted increases in user limits for high use products	Scholarly Stats or direct from vendor	Yearly before renewal

Table 1. Examples of Core information needs at the University of Alberta Libraries.

The result of a well developed data-set for core selection needs is that the information will be available when selectors need it; selectors can incorporate that data into their decision making, and are more likely to do so due to its availability; immediate selection needs are met, increasing user satisfaction. Data is not just compiled for data's sake, but is driven by need and institutional direction.

Innovative

In reality, one library's *Innovative* focus may already be part of another library's *Core* functions. The innovative label is meant to apply to each library differently depending upon your current collection needs and directions. As a collection manager, when you are questioning the way you do things or considering implementing something new, those types of things fall into the Innovative category for you and your organization. They could be new to all of librarianship, or just your organization. With Innovative information needs, the following evidence path should be taken by the collection manager:

- Ask yourself, what large level questions does our library have? What new projects are we thinking about implementing? What do we want to change?
- What research currently exists on this topic? Search for relevant information.
- Is the research I have found valid, reliable and applicable to my situation? Is there enough relevant research to make a decision, or is local data required? Is there any pre-existing local data that I can use to inform my decision making?

- What type of assessment should be incorporated at the start of my new project, and what outcomes should be measured?

With the beginning of any change or new project, move ahead knowing the project has been grounded in existing research and will go forward with local assessment measures in place. Evaluation and follow-up of the project are essential to determining its success and whether it should continue or not.

At the University of Alberta, an example of this type of innovative implementation occurred with a project we call *Patron's Choice*, which automates the purchase of books requested via Interlibrary Loan. With this project we wanted to continue with our recent focus on user needs and saw the area of books being requested via ILL as a low cost, high satisfaction method of acquiring materials our users needed. We knew that there was a yearly volume of books requested via ILL and that many of those books would have fit our selection criteria, but were not selected for whatever reason. A team was formed to explore the possibility of a purchase program further and one of the first things we did was search the library literature for examples of such programs that already existed. We did find articles from a couple of comparable institutions that were not research based, but were helpful in setting up our plan. We also contacted some institutions who had implemented this type of initiative already and were able to gauge approximate costs from them, but in this case, we did not have any pre-existing local data to work with in establishing this new program.

We moved ahead with the Patron's Choice project as something that was innovative for our institution. Upon determining out inclusion criteria, we incorporated assessment measures into the setup of the program. The most important measure for us in this case was turn-around time, from request to placing the book in the patron's hands, which we aimed to meet within 5 business days. We also wanted to record the numbers and types of books purchased, the subject areas covered, and the amount of use these books received. As such we coded the books upon cataloguing, so that we could track the circulation of these books as distinct from others, and compare their subject classifications. We also designed a spreadsheet to track turnaround time and number of requests fulfilled. This project only began in November, so the next step will be

to examine our success and determine if we want to continue the project for another year, and what changes need to be made before continuing. If it is successful, the information gathered will become part of our Core data, to be periodically reviewed by the Collections & Acquisitions Coordinator and the Access Services Coordinator. We will also publish our results as a case study so that other institutions can benefit from this information.

Conclusion

This model for evidence based collection management is broad enough to encompass many different library types and can be tailored to any library's specific needs. The model simply tries to present a way to approach collections work that can guide practice so that all levels of decision making become more evidence based. Grouping your collection information needs into the categories of Core and Innovative is a way to think about your internal process and what is required. Bringing previous research and local data and assessment together with information needs and institutional goals gives a sound direction for collection decisions. Determining practical details such as how to disseminate information and the best sources of information, allows information to become part of the normal process and empowers selectors to make more informed decisions. Evidence based collection management is an ever changing cycle that requires constant alertness in order to adapt to changing needs and directions. Ultimately, establishing such a process will lead to better decision making, impacting your users positively by providing what they require in a more timely manner.