

A Tale of Two Serials Cancellations

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A Tale of Two Serials Cancellations

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Abstract

Beginning in 2016, both Western Washington University (WWU) and George Washington University (GWU) found that they needed to make significant and similar reductions in continuations costs over the next five years. In response, this past year, both institutions took independent, significant steps toward these ends, developing systematic, sustainable procedures for addressing these reductions. The approaches taken by the two institutions will be compared and contrasted in this presentation, particularly with respect to the following questions, which both libraries encountered:

- What defines a successful cancellation process in 2016?
- What are the most effective approaches to cancelling serials?
- When do cancellations do "least harm" to students and faculty? After cancellations, how is access to content affected to the smallest degree possible?
- Did the cancellation process have the appearance of fairness to stakeholders? How does a library foster university buy-in?
- What do successful negotiations with publishers look like?

Members of the team will discuss:

- Criteria for possible retention or cancellation
- Different assessment methods utilized
- Communication with subject liaisons and disciplinary teams
- Outreach to and response from faculty

The panel will also address lessons learned from their efforts, as well as future plans in a continuing flat budget scenario.

A Tale of Two Serials Cancellations

This is the story of two serials cancellations, one which takes place on the East Coast at George Washington University, and one on the West Coast

at the University of Western Washington. In this paper, we will compare and contrast the approach taken at these two institutions, in the hopes that it will provide some insights for others also faced with serials cancellations projects of their own.

Table 1. Institutional profiles for George Washington University and Western Washington University.

Institutional Profiles	George Washington	Western Washington
The Universities...	A private, nonsectarian institution; doctoral-granting; the largest institution of higher education in the nation’s capital.	Best public, master’s-granting university in the Pacific Northwest and second in the West.
Location	Washington, DC; two fully integrated campuses, the Foggy Bottom campus and the Mt. Vernon campus, in DC; a third in northern Virginia.	Bellingham - 83,000 residents, 90 miles north of Seattle and 55 miles south of Vancouver, BC
FTE	22,653 students, of which 10,724 are undergraduate and 11,929 are graduates	15,332 students, of which 95 percent are undergraduates
Cancellation Project: % to cut	7.5	15 (estimated); actually: 11 (FY17)
Cancellation Project: Years Projected	5	5

As you can see, a key similarity here is that both institutions were charged with carrying out significant cancellations projects over the next five years. Both have completed year one of their projects and are in the early stages of the second year, so both institutions needed to develop systematic and sustainable processes to address their expense reduction mandates.

In this presentation, the approaches taken by the two institutions will be compared and contrasted. In looking at our practices, we will highlight three major themes:

- Effective approaches
- Communication
- Lessons learned/assessment

Effective Approaches

For a project to be successful, it is useful to define the goals of successful completion. In looking at the two schools’ processes, their definitions of success were similar.

- Meeting cancellation financial savings goals.
- Doing work that makes sense in the long term: 5-year projections.
- Communicating effectively with stakeholders.
- Doing the “least harm.”
- Realizing an opportunity to develop an optimal collection.
- Achieving an optimal balance between one-time and continuing resources.

Effective Approaches at George Washington: Divide and Analyze. For GWU, what were effective approaches to cancelling serials? We had conducted serials reviews for four of the last five years. In 2016, we learned that we would have a flat budget for the next five years. For 2017, this would require us to cut 7.5% (\$350,000) due to the observed inflation rate of our serials in past fiscal years; the projected inflation rate, information from our EBSCONET account, and our reading of the latest *Library Journal* serials pricing article. To handle the project of developing a response for the first year and looking toward the next four years, we formed a serials review subgroup out of our collection development steering committee. The subgroup consisted of our serials manager and three subject selectors (the three GWU members on this panel). The subgroup recognized that if we were to meet our 7.5% cancellation objective, there were several factors that we would need to consider, so we divided the serials review by different components and analyzed each; that is, we took a multifaceted approach. The three main components were: Individual subscriptions (included standing orders, online, and print), journal packages, and databases.

Individual Subscriptions

Standing Orders. We first focused on individual journal subscriptions. Because we had conducted serial reviews for four of the past five years, we looked for pockets of titles that had the potential to have been more overlooked in previous reviews. One such pocket was our standing orders (mostly print), which we would cancel as subscriptions, allowing individual issues to be acquired at the discretion of the selectors as one-time firm orders.

Print Titles. A second area that had not been as heavily reviewed were print titles. Although each year we had examined these titles for possible conversion to online access, because of the lack of usage data, they weren't as closely examined during serials cancellation projects. We found we had 221 titles. Although we had no usage data, anecdotally, we rarely saw users in print stacks. We decided that titles with annual costs of over \$360 would be cancelled unless clear justifications for retention could be made by the faculty in those areas and their selectors. The \$360 cost represented one use a month at \$30 each use, with \$30 being our expected cost of an average interlibrary loan (ILL). This

standard seemed reasonable; it acknowledged some print use and also identified higher cost titles.

Online Titles. This subset consisted of approximately 1,200 titles. These were titles that were not in packages. We decided that in order to equip our selectors with useful information for analysis, we would need to provide cost/use data for each title. To gather this data, we began with open order information extracted from our ILS (Voyager), consisting of title, ISSN, and cost data. The usage data came from other sources, largely from COUNTER-compliant JR1 reports run in the serials solutions Intota module.

A major challenge in obtaining usage data remained with the long tail of titles whose usage data was *not* collected by Intota, but again, because of our need to find those "hidden" titles, we needed a process for working with those titles. For those, there was the time-intensive process of going to individual publisher websites and/or contacting publishers to send usage data. To prioritize, we sorted our journals by publisher and started working with those with the most journals, sorted by price, and started with those with the highest cost.

We then pulled the per title usage data from these various sources into the Voyager report by linking with ISSNs, using the VLOOKUP function in Excel. We were able to include per-title cost data and usage data in one report and thereby calculate cost/use for each title. We then forwarded this spreadsheet, sorted by fund code, to our selectors and asked them to consider the per-title cost/use aspect in their reviews.

A difference this year was rather than focus on measures such as impact factor or importance in the field, the subgroup mandated that if the per-title cost/use was more than \$30 (the expected ILL cost), we would cancel the title unless there was a strong justification focused on reasons to expect higher usage in the coming year.

By focusing on individual subscriptions, electronic and print, and cancelling standing orders, we were able to cancel 188 titles, \$131,898, or 38% of our cancellation goal (\$350,000 or 7.5%)

Package Reviews. George Washington University does not subscribe to as many "big deal" package as

many other institutions our size, but we were able to review 13 packages. Package reviews consisted of three levels of analyzing usage statistics across the entire package versus the cost of the entire package. Several issues to be wary of in conducting these reviews included ensuring that the titles reflected in the usage data matched the titles paid for in the package. In several cases, we discovered that titles on the platform were not part of the package and were being paid for separately, either by us or by other entities on campus. The first level of analysis was a straightforward cost/use for the entire package. Second, we sorted titles within the package by use to determine how far down the long tail of usage we would be able to get if we purchased titles separately outside the package and calculated the cost of interlibrary loan for those downloads that would be lost if we cancelled the package. Third, we calculated the true cost for each title by taking the overall cost/download and applying it to the number of downloads per title. This last analysis was helpful in looking at titles that have low use, since it can easily be seen they are not costing much in terms of the overall package. In the end, we cancelled only one package deal so far.

Database Reviews. Simple cost/use analysis could not form a significant basis for review. Because we had gone through the cancellation process several times before, GWU did not find enough individual journals or packages to cut to meet our financial cancellation target. This pointed to database cancellations to reach our target. Databases cannot be replaced via interlibrary loan, so decisions to cancel access to content, even bibliographic, proved difficult. Rather than cost per use, we focused on low usage overall, overlapping or redundant content, and whether or not the database provided unique full-text content or bibliographic indexing only. Our primary concern, in support of doing the least harm, was to continue to provide access to as much content as we could. We were aware that the primary alternatives to any cancelled databases would be alternative databases (where there was overlap) or travel to other area libraries with subscriptions to the databases.

Similar to journal subscriptions analysis, our process utilized our ILS (Voyager) cost data, ProQuest/Serials Solutions/Intota for overlap analysis, vendor sites for additional usage data and titles lists, and communication with vendors for questions and details about usage data.

Overlap analysis focused on the obvious, where major databases would likely have the same content and provided alternative scenarios of content lost, including lists of journal titles. Overlap analysis is imperfect as ISSNs are not always present, and comparisons can become questionable. Overlap analysis did not consider dates of coverage due to time constraints and shifting content. For a few bibliographic databases where overlap could not be run, ISSNs were compared in Excel.

For usage data, we employed both Intota and vendor sites to be certain of search and session usage, often running usage reports multiple times on databases where low use/high cost could mean automatic cancellation. It is worth noting that usage data was not a justification for major databases with redundant content. All had high usage, so the content overlap was the major consideration. Some nonacademic databases, such as in business, do not utilize COUNTER statistics and provided unique content. They can also carry the highest cost and vary in usage, so retention decisions became more difficult. Other unique databases with high cost and low use were cancelled. This process has been and will continue to be ongoing. With each database renewal cycle, usage data will need to be collected and overlap analysis run to determine the current value of each resource.

Effective Approaches at Western Washington. The process at Western Washington placed a strong emphasis on faculty involvement from the beginning. We were in the fortunate position to have strong interest on the part of university provost, who charged the faculty senate with appointing a committee to focus on this issue. This had the benefit to us of making our process a university problem, not a library problem. We created a presence for the project on the library website for the entire community to be able to review the process. Faculty and librarians were all involved in looking at usage data and cost/use calculations from the last 3 years, as well as information about where individual journal titles were covered in other subscriptions and in other formats. Similar to George Washington's process, Impact factor, Eigen factor, and other measures of value/significance were not included. Those journals with high cost/use were put on a potential cancellation list, which was circulated to librarians who reviewed titles for additional justification criteria. Our list included:

- Small and/or emerging disciplines
- New faculty lines
- Faculty-identified critical resources
- Accreditation requirements
- Funding dedicated to specific resources (e.g., “decision packages”)
- Relative journal costs across disciplines
- Lack of overlap with existing resources, especially for non-full-text resources

In order to allow for some journals to be rescued from the potential cancellation list, we created a list that was larger than the cancellation target.

Communication

Communication at Western Washington. Our process was highly focused on communication throughout the process. Getting outside the walls of the library to explain the process during many meetings across the university was productive. The dean and associate dean met regularly with the provost, vice provost, and other deans. The dean and I met with faculty senate executive council, faculty senate, and graduate council. I met with two colleges, two departments, and presented regularly at senate library committee meetings. I updated the library’s staff regularly, as the subject librarians updated their respective academic programs.

As a result, colleagues in the library (especially my staff, faculty librarians, the dean, and the associate dean, and communications folks), university faculty and administrators, and regional and national peers—so many individuals—respected the process, however distasteful it was.

Communication at George Washington. At George Washington University, we started our more formal communication process through several modes. First, we held a campus-wide town hall/faculty meeting publicized to all faculty to alert them to the need for the five-year project and solicit their feedback. At the same time, we created information on our website, created an easy to understand infographic, and highlighted the project in our GWU Library magazine *Visions*.

Internal communication was facilitated by having our selectors work in four cross-disciplinary teams. This was especially critical to support broader perspectives for interdisciplinary work, and when focusing on databases.

Individual selectors communicated with their specific departments to provide the direct personal communication about how the project would affect researchers in each department.

Lessons Learned/Assessment

In the end, how would we assess the outcomes of the first year of a five-year project? Did we meet our objectives?

Lessons Learned/Assessment—George Washington University:

- Did we meet our financial savings goal? We did on paper. We’re still working on the actual final renewals, with some titles coming in more expensively than we’d projected, so the final answer is still out there.
- Did our work make sense in the long term? We think we have some new strategies. We involved more people, and we included titles and categories of titles that weren’t included before. Our work on continuing resource/monograph balance will have to continue, and another area we’re focusing on building is consortial e-book purchases, which again affects the monograph side.
- When it comes to prioritizing across faculty and across departments, we learned that we may have to do a lot more talking at the dean level. Individual faculty and even individual departments have a hard time putting aside their specific needs and interests to see the needs of the entire university. Moving up to the school level can help get a broader view. We think we can do a lot more on communication, so we’re learning from our coauthor and from others at this conference. Strong liaison relationships, library leadership in communication, and continual evaluation of resources are three critical components moving forward.

- Doing the least harm? We hope we've been able to stick to fiscally sound principles for making our cuts. We aren't cutting off access to journals, just supplying them via ILL or document delivery when that is more cost effective. If our budget becomes unable to handle that, then we'll have to start charging back for ILL and copyright fees. We hope we're cutting databases with overlap and/or which can be accessed by travelling to another area library, but both result in more time spent completing research steps for our patrons, and, in some cases, the journal article or database will not be used.
- Our ILL statistics will probably continue to increase, but more faculty and students are talking about getting articles from friends in other schools, or going to the #canhasPDF or SciHub.
- Monographs have been protected a bit in our institution, so we may have a chance to balance that. Working within our strong consortial relationships, we're hoping we can form some win-win arrangements with publishers.
- With our databases, we learned that we need to allow lots of extra time for price negotiations. We found that after we decided on some cancellations, some publishers came back with lower prices, but

it was sometimes difficult to go back to the drawing board to find the extra money to take advantage of the lower price.

Lessons Learned/Assessment—Western Washington

It's too early to tell. Our cancellations will take effect primarily starting January 2017, and then we'll be better able to see the impact of the cancellations. The process in the first year succeeded insofar as it addressed the \$315,000 shortfall in the library's FY17 collections budget. The library looks forward to working with the senate library committee in the fall to evaluate the past year's process so that it may be improved for subsequent years extending to FY21.

My sense of the first year is that the university generally did the best that it could under the circumstances, but it's not for me to say. It is everyone else's opinion of the process that counts at Western. Did the university do as little harm as possible? Was access to the university, especially to students, affected to the smallest degree possible? Did the process have the appearance of fairness? Was any department unjustly penalized or privileged? The potential harm of cutting 15% from the collections budget may not be fully known until 2017 and beyond. For now, everyone at Western can agree that the result is unfortunate and undesired, but my hope is that everyone can also agree that the process was above reproach.

Reference

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