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Mapping Change: An Examination of Curricular Shifts and Collection Impact

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Abstract

Whether adding a new course or ending a program, curricular changes represent a formal notification from the university to the library that it must support. At American University, all curriculum changes require, as part of the approval process, a library review. While these reviews are shared with collection managers, there has never been a systematic review of the effect the changes have had on purchasing and use. One of the most prohibitive factors in undertaking such as review is that curricular changes are often difficult to map to collections because they reflect interdisciplinary adjustments or courses that push the boundary of what one might associate with a subject, such as cooking with chemistry. In this paper, we demonstrate a method of how to use Library of Congress (LOC) subclass terms to index curricular changes and how to map those LOC subclasses to our integrated library system and electronic resource holdings.

Introduction

The methods of evaluating the acquisition and usage of materials have undergone significant change in the last several years. Advances in data collecting, productivity tools, and computing power have meant that librarians no longer have to rely solely on simple cost-per-use formulas or laborious gathering exercises that offer interesting results but are limited in scope or difficult to maintain. Numerous recent studies on faculty engagement with materials in publications, evaluative rubrics, and usability of discovery tools have been the benefit of these changes. One area that does not appear to be explored in the literature is the impact of curriculum change on acquisition and use, perhaps because the question seems simple to answer" New courses mean new resources. However, do libraries respond to curriculum changes on a course or program level or at all? Also, do library approach curriculum change on a tactical or strategic level? Finally, does curriculum change affect library usage?

The authors of this paper sought to explore these questions at their former institution, American University in Washington, DC. Their goal was to understand how curriculum changes were handled in terms of collection development and acquisitions. To explore this question, curriculum proposals over the last 16 years were compared with acquisition records and any available usage data. The results of this review demonstrate that, through time, collection development did react to curriculum change but only in terms of expansion.

American University, the Library, and Curriculum Changes

Before discussing the process and results, some background information on American University (AU), the library, and how curriculum changes are handled. American University is a four-year, private, nonprofit university located in Washington, DC, with a student body of 13,198. Approximately 45% of the student body are graduate students. The university is tuition dependent and adapts its curriculum very frequently to attract and retain students. Over the period studied for this project, AU grew from eight to 10 PhD programs and had a significant change in its core research areas, the social sciences, business, and communications.

American University Library has seven Collection Managers, who each have budgetary oversight over specific subject areas of the library's collections. This oversight includes firm orders, approval plans, standing orders, and all subscription resources. They are also responsible for determining the policies for the long-term care, retention, and removal of materials, both within their subject areas and collectively. To facilitate the collective management of the collections, AU Library has a Collection Management Team (CMT). The team is comprised of the collection managers, as policymakers, and the unit heads from Access Services and Technical Services, who assist in the developing policy. The rationale behind this project was to provide the CMT with a longitudinal analysis of how the library collecting matched against the curriculum changes at the university over time.

A library review is part of the review process for any curriculum changes. Documents are shared with the library administration for initial review, and librarians serve on the faculty senate review committees, so any proposal goes through two levels of review within the library. One of the biggest challenges is that the cycle of proposal submission often coincides with the busiest times for the research librarians, and the turnaround time is very short.

Methodology

Due to limited overlap of data, our analysis was limited to the last five years. We also limited our initial review to course-level changes in the curriculum. We assigned LOC subclass heading(s) to each course change. To perform this analysis, we reviewed where the course was located (e.g., the department/college), and whenever possible, we reviewed the syllabus and/or the course proposal. We created a spreadsheet that listed the important information from each change proposal, and we added extra columns for a primary and a secondary subclass heading. Retroactivity doing this was time consuming, but moving forward, this could be worked into the existing curriculum review process without adding much to the existing workflow. We also created a subclass master list spreadsheet that listed all of the call number ranges from the corresponding subject terms that we assigned in the curriculum spreadsheet. For books, we used the master list to assign the subclass terms to a list of entire online public access catalog (OPAC) holdings to determine what in the collect could be considered relevant to the curriculum change, (e.g., tag all the finance books to the term indexed to a new finance course). For the OPAC records, we looked primarily at the data added and the circulation data to compare it against the curriculum change. In short, we hoped to see changes in number of titles acquired at certain time to correlate to changes in the curriculum. If this was not the case, we accounted for any changes related to the circulation data (though limited) that might speak to changes in demand over time. We also looked at journal and database subscriptions over the same time. With these subscription resources, there were justification notes, or they were discussed in the CMT meeting so the rationale for acquisition could be more easily determined. We did want to combine all materials changes, so we followed the same process and added subclass terms to our database and journal lists in much the same

way we did with books. In the end, we were able to collate the data together in a series of tables.

Challenges

Gathering data posed the greatest challenge. The library does not have a data warehouse for any of its data, much less collections data. Due to system migrations and the lack of established data archiving procedures, the available data was limited. For example, AU Library has used Serial Solutions as its electronic resource management (ERM) system since 2009. The integrated library system for AU is Voyager, which only has records back to 1998. For tracking workflows, the library has relied on CORAL since 2011 as a tracking tool for e-resource requests. For records on the changes to the curriculum, we had access to recent proposals via the library's intranet, but older changes had to be manually pulled from the collection development librarian's file of analog annual reports. In the end, we were able to document that, in the past 16 years, AU has added 107 new courses, 82 new programs, 14 new centers, 63 change/revisions, and 36 new certificates.

Results

Our results showed that resources acquisition increased in correlation with the addition of courses, but it did not decrease when there were course cancellations. One possible explanation for this is the relatively small number of cancellations compared to additions. Upon discussion with collection managers, we found that cancellation was often initiated due to variable factors (e.g., budget cuts or faculty requests). We did find jumps in book acquisition in specific subject areas that did not correspond to individual courses. Figure 2 shows the acquisition for books in business.

The data showed an uptick in business communications materials purchases in 2010, which could not be explained by the business librarian. Looking at the curriculum changes, we determined there was a PhD program add at the same time in communications (see Figure 3).

In terms of usage, the data showed that course changes did correspond with increased use in some subject areas, such as environmental science and corporate social responsibility, but not in others. As with acquisitions, the usage change tied to cancellation was difficult to determine due to limited sample size. An examination of e-resources was also difficult to correlate to any curriculum changes (see Figure 4).
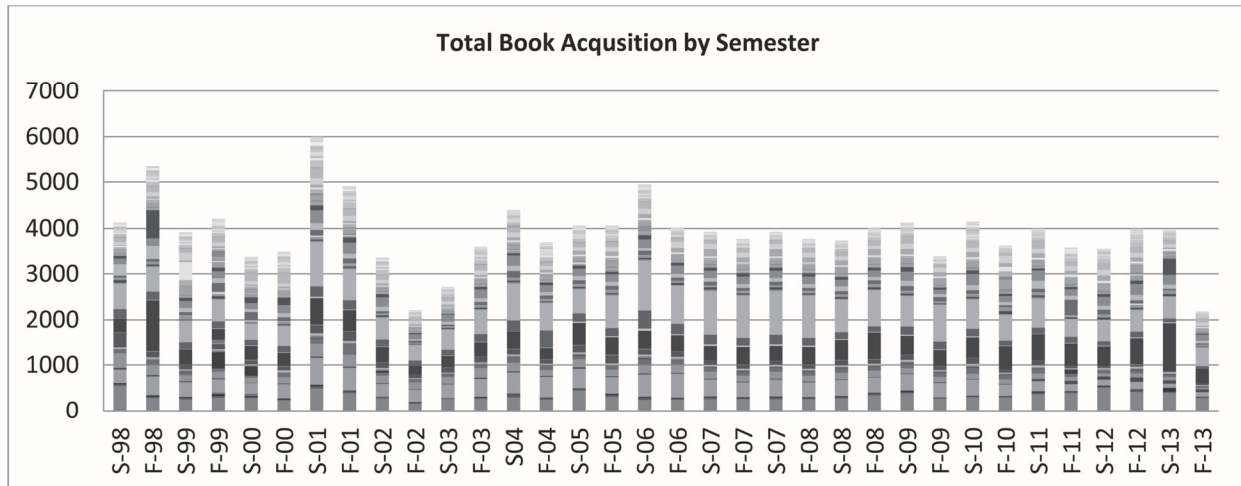
Total Book Acqusition by Semester

Figure 1. Overall acquisition of books (1998–2013).
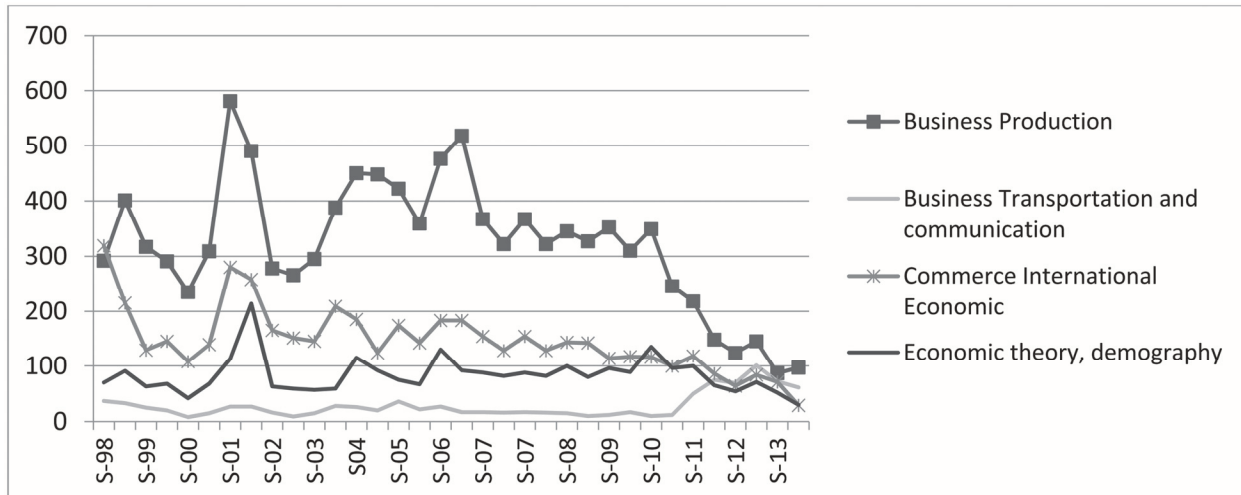
Figure 2. Acquisition of business books by LOC subclass.

			School of Communication		
3/12/10	New Program	Graduate	PhD	Communications	School of Communication PhD
3/29/13	New Program	Graduate	MA in Interactive Journalism	Communications	Proposal for a MA in Interactive Journalism
3/29/13	New Program	Graduate	MA in Media Entrepreneurship	Communications	MA in Media Entrepreneurship
5/2/13	New Course	Graduate	COMM 596	Communications	Establishment of COMM 596 (Political Advertising) as permanent
6/6/13	Change/Revision	Undergraduate	BA in Public Communication	Communications	Changes to the BA in Public Communication
6/6/13	Termination (any)	Graduate	COMM-517	Communications	Cancellation of COMM-517 History of Cross-Cultural Media
8/11/13	New Program	Graduate	MA in Political Communication	Communications	Proposal to begin a MA in Political Communication
9/18/13	Change/Revision	Graduate	COMM 898	Communications	Changes to COMM 898 and COMM 796 (SOC)
9/18/13	Change/Revision	Graduate	COMM 796	Communications	Changes to COMM 898 and COMM 796 (SOC)

Figure 3. Curriculum changes.

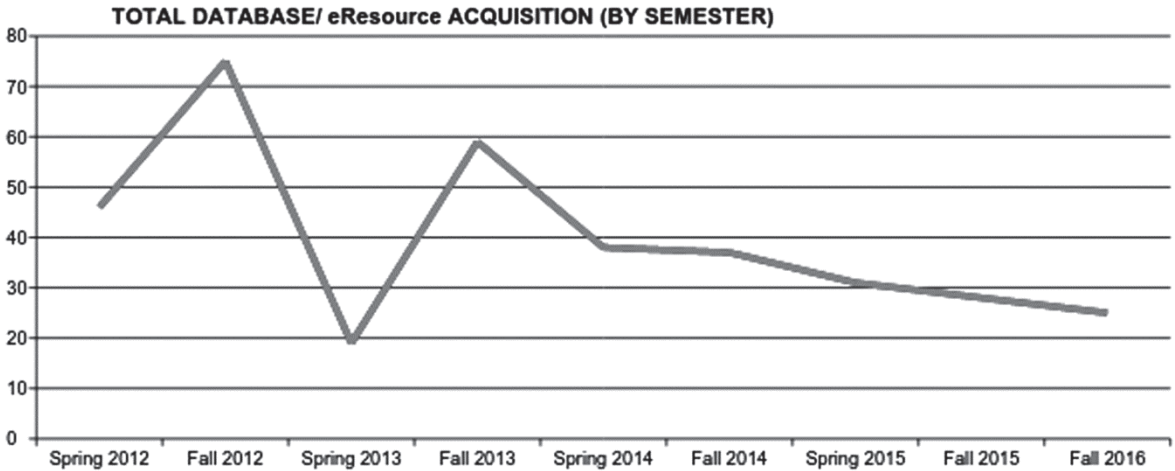**TOTAL DATABASE/ eResource ACQUISITION (BY SEMESTER)**

Figure 4. Database acquisition by year.

Next Steps

Although future use of the project data is limited at American University Library because both authors of this paper have since moved on to different institutions, we do believe that this type of curriculum-based analysis has value as an adjunct to popular methods of analysis. We are confident that a more extensive version of this pilot project could provide a basis for forecasting the impact of curriculum change on resource demand in other academic libraries. The methodology could be used as evaluative tool for collection development librarians to analyze how curriculum change impacts selectors and users.

Reference

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