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We're on a Roll: Transforming E-Book Acquisitions in a Shifting Budget Landscape

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We're on a Roll: Transforming E-Book Acquisitions in a Shifting Budget Landscape

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Abstract

In response to the challenging budget landscape in 2015–2016, the University of British Columbia Library took a new approach to e-book acquisitions. The Associate University Librarian, Collections, established a working group with a mandate to develop and implement a strategy for library-wide e-book purchasing. Members of the group were drawn from both campuses and represented public and technical services and a broad spectrum of disciplines. In this presentation, we will briefly review the factors that led to the formation of the working group, then discuss the steps taken in the analysis, selection, and purchase of e-books. The committee's two-pronged approach—the purchase of large e-book packages and participation in evidence-based acquisitions programs with Cambridge, Wiley, Taylor & Francis, and CRC Press—will be explored in depth. We will highlight the benefits of cross-unit collaboration, the vendor and publisher relations, and the effective use of limited funds. We will discuss the many challenges around discovery and access, evaluation and decision-making, and transitioning the program into the current fiscal year. We expect that our presentation will contribute to the broader picture of how large academic libraries can address rising costs, limited budgets, and the variety of publisher e-book offers.

Background

The University of British Columbia (UBC) has two main campuses, one in Vancouver (UBC-V) and the second in Kelowna in the Okanagan Valley (UBC-O). UBC is a large research institution that has a wide diversity of programs including law, medicine, First Nations and Asian studies, and many science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) and humanities and social sciences (HSS) degrees. UBC Library is challenged to meet the information needs for these diverse areas of study.

For a Canadian academic library, the collection budget is susceptible to two important variables that can push it into negative territory. The first is common to all academic libraries, namely the yearly serials increases levied by publishers. The second is mostly important to Canadian academic libraries and is the CAD/USD exchange rate. This is important because over 80% of UBC Library's collection budget is invoiced in USD; a 1 cent drop in the value of 1 Canadian dollar to 1 U.S. dollar is a loss of over $100,000 CAD from our budget.

The UBC Library had an English language approval plan and a demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) plan, both through GOBI Library Solutions from EBSCO (GOBI), formerly YBP. In fiscal year (FY) 2014–2015, the Canadian dollar began to drop in value, adding stress to both monograph acquisition strategies. On top of this, many titles in the DDA program were coming up on four short-term loans (STL) and being triggered for purchase, and the cost of STLs had increased significantly. These factors resulted in both the approval and DDA plans being discontinued in December 2014 because the allocation was fully expended.

By the beginning of FY 2015–2016 (April 2015), the Canadian dollar had dropped significantly, and we found we had lost 25% of our buying power. Because of these financial strains, our then Associate University Librarian (AUL) Collections took a different approach in allocating funds for monographs. She convened a consultative meeting in April 2015 with librarians involved in collections work from both campuses. The group worked

through the allocations for the collections budget, and after prioritizing money for serials, inflation, and the exchange rate, it became clear that the monographic budget would be severely reduced from the previous year, nearly $600,000 CAD less. For this reason, we needed to be very strategic in purchasing material to be able to get the most out of our spend.

As a result, the AUL Collections established an e-books working group charged with developing and implementing a strategy to purchase large multidisciplinary packages and participate in new models of e-book purchasing. A decision was made to not reinstate the DDA program or the approval plan, shifting these allocations from UBC-V and UBC-O (a total of $360,000 CAD) to a central e-book fund. The working group was comprised of representatives from both campuses, as well as from public service and technical service units. The group reported to the Collections and Information Resources Standing Committee (CIRSC) that had final approval for purchases.

Purchases for 2015–2016

The e-books working group developed the following criteria for evaluating e-book purchases: Demonstrated usage, broad subject appeal, timeliness of content, discoverability, digital rights management (DRM)-free (ideally), and perpetual access. We identified publishers of interest based on librarian expertise and demonstrated past usage, including those observed in the DDA program.

After negotiating with publishers, the e-books working group selected the following frontlist packages: Columbia and Harvard on the De Gruyter platform, Project Muse, Elgar Law, and Palgrave MacMillan Business and Management. Packages were purchased through GOBI to obtain machine-readable cataloging (MARC) records and simplify invoicing. Earlier in the year, the library's purchases also included the Association of Canadian University Presses (ACUP), Springer, four presses from University Press Scholarship Online (UPSO), and other smaller packages.

Furthermore, the library began participation in four evidence-based acquisitions programs: Cambridge University Press, CRC Press (select subjects), Taylor & Francis, and Wiley. Evidence-based acquisitions (EBA)

is a program where for a negotiated amount of money a publisher provides access to a specified amount of content for a specified period of time. During and/or at the end of the program, the library selects a list of titles to own with perpetual access that is equivalent to the dollar amount negotiated. Selection decisions are typically based on usage; UBC Library expanded that and used the following criteria: Usage, librarian and faculty recommendations, course readings, and balance across disciplines. Expected benefits included increased access to a publisher's content, a predictable spend for the year, selections based on demonstrated usage, and potentially time savings for librarian selectors. We made the decision to use ProQuest Serial Solutions and 360 MARC to manage our records for all the programs, since we wouldn't own everything right away and do not have the staff capacity in technical services for large record loads. Titles were discoverable in Summon and the local catalog.

Since it is not possible to include details in this paper for all purchases, what follows is a description of our experience with UPSO and the four EBA programs, including successes, challenges, and lessons learned. We conclude with our plans for FY 2016–2017 and a wish list of improvements to strengthen e-book purchasing.

University Press Scholarship Online (UPSO)

The primary reason for selecting a large multidisciplinary package such as UPSO was that it addressed needs for a variety of program areas; it also allowed for cost-sharing between the campuses. The library had purchased portions of this package previously, but during our first year as a working group, we chose four university press packages for 2015: Oxford, Chicago, Stanford, and Yale, as these were publishers that had shown high usage in the past. We purchased these knowing that the content was not the complete output of the publishers, as is the case with many packages.

When selecting the 2016 content, we realized the cost of Oxford titles alone exceeded our budget. It was important to purchase at least some Oxford content, so we shifted to purchasing subject packages that included all presses. To decide which subjects to select, we reviewed the title lists to ensure they matched the teaching, learning, and research areas of either campus. A significant

drawback was that we would no longer be getting the complete UPSO Oxford coverage that we had in the past, but we saw this as an opportunity to offer our users access to a more varied pool of university presses in relevant subject areas.

We acquired the 2015 and 2016 packages through GOBI. This allowed us to continue our relationship with them but in a new way, and it provided certain advantages, including the provision of MARC records for expedited discovery and notes in the GOBI ordering system that showed selectors what titles had already been purchased. One drawback was that the timing of our purchase didn't match the publishing cycle and caused some duplication in purchasing. Finally, our purchase of only 19 of the 30 possible areas in 2016 caused issues with workflow at the back end, requiring title lists from publishers and manual activation in our knowledge base.

Successes and Challenges of Packages

Frontlist packages offer several advantages. In comparison to purchasing titles through other means such as EBA, DDA, or single title selection, frontlist packages typically offer discount pricing. Additionally, the broad subject coverage that can come with large packages may appeal to institutions with a wide variety of programs. On the flipside, there are certainly many publishers that focus their packages in single areas, an approach that may appeal to institutions with very specialized programs. Finally, they allow institutions the opportunity to create consistent acquisitions and access workflows for a large amount of content that can be replicated across other similar packages, or at least from year to year.

When purchasing frontlist packages, there are also some common challenges. The overlap with other publisher packages will be a concern for institutions, as will duplication if the time of purchase is later in the publishing cycle. Another downside is that many publishers do not make all their content available as e-books or in packages. They hold back individual titles, specific types of resources (i.e., handbooks or textbooks), and certain imprints, and this creates confusion for the institution. These parameters are not always well defined, and receiving an explicit title list of what is expected to be published is not always possible. Again, this may result in duplicate purchasing by selectors or concern that certain titles

by a valued publisher may be missed in single-title selection.

Cambridge University Press EBA

The Cambridge Books Online EBA was our first program to run from start to finish and was also the first EBA in Canada for Cambridge. We made one single payment, which gave us access to five times (multiplier access model) the amount of content per the value that we paid. The first program ran for a total of nine months with access to titles from 2015 and 2016. We found that the duration of the program was not long enough to provide meaningful usage statistics and made it more difficult to make selections.

Our decision to use Serial Solutions and 360 MARC meant having to get monthly lists from the publisher to manually update the knowledge base with titles that were part of the program. This activation method created delays (four to eight weeks) in the records making their way into our local catalog, which contributed to the slow uptake of the content by users.

We selected a total of 275 titles based on our set criteria: Usage, librarian and faculty recommendations, course readings, and disciplinary balance. In this case, course readings were not criteria we needed to consider because the program was so short, the titles were so new, and faculty had not yet started to use this content in their syllabi. We were able to achieve a balance across disciplines that occurred naturally. Some challenges occurred during the selection process. The BR2 (section downloads) usage reports from the publisher did not identify titles that had been previously purchased on Cambridge's platform, in print, or on aggregator platforms, so we had to do this duplication check manually. Cambridge required us to purchase all titles with five or more uses, a restrictive obligation that other EBA publishers did not have. Luckily, we could afford all titles with five or more uses and those recommended by librarians. In the end, the demonstrated usage and the diversity of subject areas convinced us of the need to extend the program.

Wiley UBCM

Wiley's usage-based collection model (UBCM) had some major differences from the other evidence-

based programs in which we participated. Pricing was based on the university's full-time equivalent (FTE), not on the multiplier access model. While others only provided access to frontlist titles, Wiley opened up its entire catalog of Wiley online books from all publication dates during the 12-month program; this simplified the workflow for staff because they could select the complete Wiley database in the knowledge base. Over 18,000 titles published between 1936 and 2017 were included, including 3000 frontlist books published between 2014 and 2017. Unlike Cambridge, Wiley did not require us to select the most highly used titles; the decision on what to purchase, while influenced by usage statistics, was left to the librarians.

During the year, individual selectors spent some time recommending titles of interest, but overall little work was required by selectors or the e-books working group in the access phase, but selection time was busy. About 6,700 titles out of the 18,000 were used during the program, but we only had funds to purchase about 5% of those titles. In the end, we purchased 377 titles, evenly split between the frontlist and the backlist. Selections were done at the end of the program based on the same criteria as Cambridge. Unlike Cambridge, we did factor in course readings because older content had been course adopted. Wiley reports were delivered to us only at the end of the program, with standard BR2 usage data. Wiley was able to indicate titles previously purchased on the Wiley online library platform, somewhat reducing the amount of time we spent manually checking for duplication in our collection. After initial selections, we reviewed the balance of subject areas being purchased and found the selections to be spread across the disciplines. Of the 103 titles requested by selectors, about 50% had been used during the program. Compared to typical use in a first year for firm-ordered titles, we feel that is good usage, but given that we ordered about 50 titles not used in the program but requested by librarians it perhaps indicates a continued need for librarian review of titles to round out the collection.

In the end, access to the complete catalog was both a benefit and a challenge. Workflow for staff was minimal, and the library had exceptional access to Wiley's online titles but there was significant usage of older titles during the year, creating an interesting dilemma when making selections. We had intended that the funds in the library's EBA program be spent only on frontlist purchases, but in the end, about 50% of the titles we purchased were older imprints.

CRC Press/Taylor & Francis EBS

The library entered into two evidence-based selection (EBS) programs with the Taylor & Francis group. With CRC Press, we selected six frontlist netBASE subject areas, and with Taylor & Francis, we selected a frontlist of titles in the social sciences and humanities. The 20-month program hadn't concluded at the time of this paper, but we can report out on one interesting discovery.

Although we won't make our selections until March 2017, we have done a preliminary review of the usage reports. With Taylor & Francis, we were initially very dismayed by the low usage of titles until we realized that, unlike other EBA publisher reports, Taylor & Francis provides only BR1 reports (whole book download) rather than BR2 reports (section or chapter downloads). This made us very aware that usage comparisons across programs can be misleading, with very large and understandable differences between BR1 and BR2 reports.

Successes and Challenges of EBA

In this challenging budget year, it was crucial that we could control costs, so having a known spend per publisher at the outset of the program was a success. This was a definite advantage for the EBA over the DDA programs. Although both provided access to a large pool of titles, only the EBA programs gave us a known spend at the outset. Other benefits expected and realized included access to DRM-free titles and broad disciplinary coverage. An unanticipated benefit was the increased communication and collaboration between the two campuses, which has continued with other collections work.

There were also some challenges and lessons learned with the EBA programs. First, we were surprised at the amount of work required at the various stages. On the technical services side, three of the programs required a monthly title load in the knowledge base. Furthermore, our decision to use ProQuest Serial Solutions and 360 MARC caused a delay in records appearing in the discovery layer and catalog, which was problematic especially for titles added near the end of the program. For the e-books

working group, gathering the appropriate data to make selections was also time consuming. Publishers provided usage reports before the end of the program, but we then had to gather and add in recommendations from librarians and course reserve titles and de-duplicate the selections with already owned titles. Based on our experiences, we would recommend allocating a minimum of two weeks at the end of the EBA to finalize selections, submit them to the publisher, and arrange for final invoicing. We also heard back from some librarians that there was no reduction in workload for them. They continued to monitor new titles for selection rather than letting usage determine selections; they felt that short-term usage was not always the best indicator of future needs for long-term collection development. In terms of cost, while a known upfront cost was a definite advantage, we paid full retail price for each title selected, unlike with our package purchases that provided discount prices. In the category of lessons learned, we needed to more explicitly define the terms of each agreement, including publication dates (print, online, and copyright); dates to make selections; how many uses trigger a required selection; what defines a use; and what pricing will be used in the final selections.

Plans for 2016–2017

Being generally satisfied with the approach of buying e-book packages and running EBA programs, the e-books working group used the same strategies for FY 2016–2017. The initial budget was funded centrally by UBC-V and UBC-O, but as we identified other potential purchases, three branches opted to contribute additional funds from their book budgets. Packages included Harvard on De Gruyter, Princeton and U Penn on JSTOR, Elgar Law, and the Springer HSS content (formerly Palgrave-MacMillan). The first three packages were purchased through GOBI to obtain MARC records.

All four EBA programs were extended with some variation. Titles from 2015 and 2016 were retained in the pools for Cambridge, CRC Press, and Taylor & Francis because of an observed lag between time of publication and adoption in courses or use by our researchers. In addition, we negotiated a 12-month program for Cambridge to allow more time for titles to be used, and we added other subject areas to CRC Press. For Wiley, we used a hybrid approach. We still have access to the full catalog, but we have

committed the funds to buying the frontlist with an option to purchase older titles for an additional cost. One question that remains unanswered is whether we have the capacity to participate in other EBA programs given the staff time required to make titles discoverable and do the analysis for selection. We have also yet to experience the end of an EBA program and plan a transition strategy, including a process for MARC record deletions and communication with the community.

In an Ideal World

In general, our e-books strategy means that costs are predictable, we are able to provide access to a great number of titles to our users, and we are purchasing titles with demonstrated usage. In an ideal world, we would also see time savings, but that is not yet the case because of existing workflows in our library and we suspect for publishers and vendors as well.

Our goal is to have timely and efficient discoverability of content so that it has the chance to be well used and reduce work on the back-end. For the packages, obtaining records from GOBI has been beneficial. For the EBA programs, we thought that using 360 MARC was a good strategy, since many titles will never be purchased perpetually (and we were not set up well to load MARC records regularly), but it has caused delays in discovery and has been a lot of extra work for technical services. This could be ameliorated somewhat if the databases in the knowledge base matched the parameters of the EBA program; for example, if Cambridge, CRC Press, and Taylor & Francis titles were grouped by publication year. Another improvement would be more frequent new title feeds into the knowledge base so that activated titles are immediately discoverable.

The selection process could be streamlined with better usage reports. At a minimum, we require title, publication year, subject, cost, and usage. The report should also indicate whether a title has been purchased previously on the publisher platform or exclude those titles from the report entirely. Ideally the report would indicate if a title had been purchased previously in print or on another platform, but that is probably wishful thinking! The attempt at de-duplication is staff intensive, and some institutions may decide it's not worth the trouble. The individuals doing the analysis and

making the decisions should be aware of the different measures for e-book usage; for example, BR1 reports show downloads for the entire book versus BR2 reports that show section downloads.

Although we anticipated time savings for selectors, this is currently not the case as we continue to review GOBI notifications and must figure out whether a title is part of a package or EBA program before making a firm-order purchase. We offer a few suggestions to improve this situation. The first is to align decision-making and programs to better fit with fiscal and academic calendars. For example, the e-books group should be ready to make decisions about packages and programs as soon as the annual budget is confirmed and, where possible, avoid gaps in EBA programs. The second is to strive for well-defined parameters about which titles are included in a package or EBA program. It would help enormously if publishers, both commercial and the university presses, would offer a more comprehensive output of content. Otherwise, selectors are waiting—and waiting—to see whether a title will be published on the publisher platform or even as an e-book at all. For EBA programs, we have learned to be specific about the publication date both in the negotiation with publishers and in the communication with selectors. One issue that we have not resolved is how to more efficiently include selector's input into the selection process. Librarians still review notifications for titles from the EBA publishers in order to make recommendations for purchase. Instead could this be done at the time of final selection, or not done at all?

It is our hope that as one of many institutions now participating in new models of e-book purchasing that the libraries, publishers, and vendors will come up with solutions to address these issues.