Data-Driven Decisions for Library Liaisons: Exploring Strategies for Effectively Managing Diminishing Monograph Collections

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Abstract: Many academic libraries have liaison programs as a means of building relevant and useful library collections, and to promote library resources to campus users. Librarians have long served as liaisons without the benefit of much data to guide decisions. In this age of library budget cuts, librarians need to make every dollar count. What collection and use data helps liaisons build a quality monograph collection that better meets the needs of library users? This paper offers some ideas for providing the data needed by liaisons for more informed decision making and collection management, and ultimately, ensure that library materials purchased are needed and used.

KEYWORDS liaisons, monographs, data, data-driven, collections, use statistics, University of Alaska

INTRODUCTION

The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) Rasmuson Library is located in Fairbanks, Alaska, which has an area population of 82,000 and is located in the Interior region of Alaska. The University of Alaska Fairbanks has an enrollment of more than 5500 students and 311 faculty members at the main campus in Fairbanks; there are more faculty and students at the other 6 branches of the UAF system, as well as many distance students and faculty in a variety of academic programs. UAF is a land, space, and sea grant university offering doctoral, master's and bachelor's degrees, as well as a number of associate's degrees and certificate programs. As the main library for the UAF campus serving all of these diverse programs, the Rasmuson Library is also the largest library in the state of Alaska, with 1.1 million volumes and access to more than 54,000 online journals.

Just like many other academic libraries, Rasmuson Library has long used a “liaison” program to fulfill a number of purposes, including collection management, the focus of this paper. Our program includes a Collection Development Officer (CDO - myself) who oversees the subject fund allocations in the monograph collection, and heads a group of 12 liaisons in selecting journals and online resources. Specific guidelines for the program were formalized in writing in 2003 and distributed to all the liaison librarians. Until recently however, the only form of data routinely provided to assist librarians in making collection decisions was a conspectus report, which gave some indication of subject strengths and gaps in the collection according to specific collecting goals by conspectus category. At that time of course, conspectus was a state of the art tool, providing a highly detailed look at the monographic materials actually owned by the library, in comparison with other libraries in the state of Alaska.

As good as conspectus was however, it did not provide guidance on how to address collection gaps, or even if they needed to be - or could be - addressed at all. Many other pieces of information were missing, such as information about patrons’ use of sources outside the library, actual collection use data, data on what needs were being met through Interlibrary Loan, or the patrons' views of the adequacy of the collection to meet their needs. In order to figure out the latter, liaisons had in the past to rely solely on their relationships with individual department faculty and the individual feedback they provided. As has been widely discussed in the library literature, the success of liaison relationships relies not only on the ability and inclination of librarians to reach out to faculty, but on the willingness of department faculty to participate in providing feedback to the library. In both cases – librarians and faculty – it sometimes doesn't happen, for many reasons, not to be addressed here. Evidently, making an evaluation about the adequacy of monograph collections from liaison relationships alone is not advisable.

Stepping into the role of CDO in 2007, I wondered what kind of data would be more effective in measuring patron satisfaction, how we could better examine patron use of the collection, and how we might determine whether or not the subject gaps we observed through traditional collection analysis, i.e., conspectus, were really of concern. What other measures would also be helpful for liaisons' collection decision-making? What data would better inform and how could it be collected? Finally, what is the response of the liaisons to getting this additional information? We needed to assess not only patron use and satisfaction, but whether or not the liaisons would use the new information effectively in building and maintaining their portions of the collection.

In this paper I will describe the specific tools we use to gather this additional information and how it is provided to liaisons. The data include comparisons between peer and UAF monograph collections, statistical analysis of the use of specific collections, interlibrary loan reports, current and historical budget figures and recent responses from two triennially-produced campus-wide library surveys. I have included in this paper the results of a brief survey distributed to the liaison librarians, to determine which of these data they believe are most useful in making collection decisions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of liaison programs for collection building, among other goals, are standard fare at academic libraries, as the library literature evidences, given more than 50 published articles on the topic, from the 1980s to the present. Although there are different rationales for creating such programs, the model is often used to distribute subject collection responsibilities among librarians, just as it is at the UAF Libraries.

A number of recent articles attempt to assess library liaison programs in various ways, all from the perspective of the liaisons and not the departmental faculty with whom they liaise. In a recent Reference Services Review article, the authors describe a survey given to their library liaisons in order to determine the activities librarians think are the most effective in the liaison-faculty relationship. But their primary conclusion seems to be that "developing effective liaison relationships is more an art than a science." A later article in Reference Librarian describes the development of their library liaison program, again consulting with liaisons and not patrons to try to conclude what does and doesn't work. At the time of writing, the authors considered possible ways to assess the liaison program but hadn't yet apparently tested these methods.

A number of articles, including and , emphasize that communication skills are among the most important assets of library liaisons, but don't actually attempt to systematically evaluate their liaisons' communication effectiveness. In one example from a number of years back, the authors state that "a good library liaison fosters better communication between the library and the academic units," and that this communication can "facilitate the development of a strong library collection," but does not really assess whether or not the liaisons really have the skills to do this work effectively, nor do they define a measure for a "strong library collection." In fact their survey instrument showing responses from both liaisons and department faculty confirms that the communication process is actually a weakness of the liaison program overall, and indicates that it would require substantial effort on both sides to make it workable. Interestingly, going back almost 20 years to the ARL SPEC Kit surveying existing liaison services communication skills are very low ranked in comparison to other qualifications for liaisons, such as a second master's degree. Are academic libraries changing the way we build collections, once focused on librarians' subject expertise, and now on extracting this information from our patrons through liaison communication efforts?

In another recent article the authors conduct an interesting survey of participants in their institution's liaison program, and unlike many other assessments, survey department faculty as well as librarians. Their results clearly show that communication within the program is a problem. In a more recent article the authors discuss the "sustainability" of library liaison programs, highlighting skills and attributes necessary to the role of liaison, including "confidence, communication and presentation skills of a high order," and a number of other personality traits not likely to be evenly spread among any given 10 librarians. Will subjects covered by liaisons with less effective communication skills be less useful and utilized by patrons?

Based on the sheer volume of articles on liaison programs and collection development, it is clear that the liaison program is assumed by most librarians to be the best model for doing academic library collection development. Throughout the literature however, writer after writer examines the issue from different perspectives, and finds that their programs need improvement, and that often the fault lies with communication issues, either on the part of liaisons themselves, or the faculty in the departments they are trying to serve. The writers then recommend improving the communication, with the unstated and unproven assumption that this effort will pay off in a better, more utilized collection. I question whether liaisons without these skills can effectively obtain them through training, and whether such an effort really would yield results worth the effort required to make such a program work.

Instead of emphasizing liaison communication with faculty in academic departments, a method which might not be successful for many liaisons for a variety of reasons, why not look at other aspects of collection development which might help the librarians make better selection decisions? Rather than focus on an unproven supposition that better liaison communication will equal a better collection, why not explore other means of collection building, leaving the service awareness and outreach efforts to those best suited to the task of marketing the library and its resources? After reviewing the substantial volume of literature on liaison programs, and finding that very few programs can claim unqualified, proven "success," I propose an alternative.

BUILDING MONOGRAPH COLLECTIONS WITH LIAISONS

The UAF Libraries currently have 12 employees doing liaison work, including 11 MLS librarians, and one classified staff member. Most UAF liaisons are not subject specialists with degrees in the field they represent, but instead have been assigned subjects in which they have interest or some experience, or for which there was a significant need and no one otherwise qualified to fill it. With UAF having more than 70 undergraduate majors, 60 master's programs, and 18 doctoral degrees, and a considerable geographic differential in our ability to recruit librarians with multiple degrees, the library's budget simply does not allow us to cover all subjects with degreed experts. Liaison librarians at UAF vary in communication skills and interest in developing personal relationships with campus faculty, but all are committed to building a strong monograph collection for their respective subject areas.

How then, to build a collection without experts, and which does not rely exclusively on the liaison relationship for results? One of our library's past strategies for addressing the lack of subject expertise of selectors was to heavily rely on monograph approval programs, built to match our conspectus priorities – and campus research programs - as much as possible. From 1998 to 2008, the percent of monograph funding dedicated to approvals varied from a minimum of 30% up to a whopping 70% of the book budget, with greater amounts spent in subjects whose liaisons had less subject knowledge. Despite very high levels of approval spending in specific subject areas, faculty in those departments, when asked in user surveys, departmental meetings or other informal contacts, often indicated the library did not have sufficient books in those fields. Reaffirming this perception, the circulation figures in those subjects have decreased rather than increased despite the growth of the collection. For example, in one high approval year, the library purchased $55,000 worth of books in engineering; 5 years later, fewer than 10% of those books have ever circulated, and some engineering faculty still complain of insufficient book coverage in their specialties. Other articles in the library literature have focused on comparing the usage rates of approvals versus firms and the results are mixed. But clearly, throwing money at the "problem" of building a comprehensive collection is not the answer, especially with less and less money to "throw."

During the last few fiscal years, the funds available for new collection purchases have been severely reduced due to flat university budgets, and the steep rise in subscription cost increases. In a working collection such as that of the UAF libraries, with a minimal amount of funds now dedicated to print monographs, we simply can no longer buy books to fulfill the detailed subject expectations of a conspectus approach; we can no longer buy "just in case" researchers may one day need them. Measuring the success of our collection using only the conspectus goals we used to apply would mean failure in almost every subject area, since we simply cannot purchase so many books any more. Although this almost certainly means we are currently underfunded for print monographs, to be practical in buying more of the "right" books, we must use other means of measurement and analysis.

NEW STRATEGIES FOR MONOGRAPHS, USING DATA

The UAF libraries are employing a variety of evidence-based strategies for assessing and building our monograph collections. Because we use a number of software tools to gather this data, this section of the paper will be organized by tool, rather than the type of data retrieved.

Collection and ILL Data Using World Cat Analysis and ILLiad

Before liaisons can make any monograph purchase decisions, they need to know what we already have. Using World Cat Analysis, an overview of collection by subject can be produced; these reports are provided to liaisons with an overview of their subject areas, showing total numbers of books and publication date ranges. World Cat Analysis is also useful for peer comparisons. Comparisons to UAF's stated institutional and aspirational peers have been found not to be as useful as reports that specifically compare our library collection with collections at institutions with academic programs identified by faculty as peers for our programs. For those interested in peer comparisons, using World Cat Analysis we have created lists of titles owned by peers but not held by the UAF libraries; librarians have used these lists to build our collections for recent publication years. We compile these reports only every few years, using only the most recent publication dates. It is possible to look also at prior imprint years, but given that we have limited book funds to spend, a retrospective project isn't likely in the near future without special need. I have worked with several of our liaisons to do these special peer comparisons, but most of the liaisons have not taken advantage of these peer comparisons to date, probably given the complexity of selecting appropriate peers and analyzing the resulting data.

World Cat Analysis also makes is possible to compare special "selection" lists with our collection. These comparisons, such as "Outstanding Academic Titles," or "Library Journal" titles, have also provided selection lists for liaisons in specific subject areas. The main drawback to these special lists is that just like with approval programs, the lists are only as good as the bibliographer who creates them; we find that many of the titles on these lists would qualify as "popular" rather than "academic" in our collection policy, and therefore be collected by the local public library rather than UAF. Still, they have proven to be an acceptable selection source for a few titles in specific subjects, and the reports are easy to generate.

World Cat Analysis has a third type of report useful for building monograph collections, the "My library as borrower" Interlibrary Loan report. I have found that the easiest way to break this report down for ease of use by liaisons is to pull all the borrowing data for a subject area for a year's time, then download into Excel. I then separate serials from monographs by sorting, and put them into separate worksheets in a single workbook. The liaison then has the book title information available for review and judicious potential acquisition. Interestingly, some subject areas show no borrowing activity or very little; these same subject areas show very little use in the library's book collection. Looking at trends in borrowing and comparisons to circulation in the collection helps us to plan for areas of growth, and further assess diminishing need in certain subject areas.

We also obtain Interlibrary Loan data through our ILLiad system reports. ILLiad offers some advantages over World Cat Analysis in that we can track use by patron type and/or by academic department, rather than simply by LC classification. (But ILLiad does not allow the title-level reports offered by WCA, so both are used.) Analyzing ILL use by patron type highlights that most of our book borrowers are graduate students, and we need to develop new methods to assess and meet the needs of these students in building our book collections. In areas of high faculty borrowing, we may want to do more with our existing liaison relationships with academic departments, so that we are meeting the demand in a more timely fashion, with a better understanding of the research needs. Analysis of these lists also sometimes demonstrates that much of the borrowing activity serves a relatively small number of patrons, or even a single patron in a particular subject area, and may indicate a gap, or merely reinforce the existing collecting patterns, leaving ILL to efficiently meet a narrow and temporary esoteric research need.

Circulation Data Using Integrated Library System (ILS) Reports

One of those practical measures which academic librarians seem loathe to use, but which also seem ever more critical to take into account given budget shortages, is actual monograph use. A data-driven approach reflects a substantially different outlook on library book collections than a conspectus-driven approach. The data collected and provided to liaisons about collection use has met with mixed reviews at UAF, with access-versus-ownership at the heart of the controversy. Since this Collection Development Officer and this paper highlight the data-driven perspective, we will focus on the data available and its possible interpretation and use.

The UAF Libraries completed a major renovation project several years ago which required moving much of the collection to off-site storage. When deciding which books to store, we ran a number of system reports to examine our older material and found that approximately 60% of our pre-1980 imprint books had never circulated. In an area of tight budgets, in a library with a "working" rather than an "archival" book collection, it no longer seems acceptable to continue to buy books "just in case" when clearly, at least in the last thirty years, that "case" never materialized.

Examining circulation data for monographs for the last 7 years shows a steady decline, from 71,000 checkouts in 2003 to 45,000 in 2009. Anecdotally we learn from working with students at the public desks, and by reviewing course proposals and syllabi for new courses, that books simply are no longer being required for most undergraduate University courses. Except for the most advanced courses, most of the information students need is provided in textbooks or articles supplied by the professor. Reduced book demand may also be due to increased availability of online sources. Regardless of cause, our circulation and ILL statistics show that graduate students are now the biggest clientele for our print monographs, both owned and borrowed books.

In response to this information, we have shifted our monograph purchasing strategies, downsizing the collecting overall, and ventured aggressively into the ebook world, much in demand by graduate students. For the remaining print books we still buy, we are employing a number of strategies, some traditional and some more contemporary, to help inform liaisons on title selection.

Liaisons need to understand the changing patterns of book use by patrons, especially in the age of the electronic book, before making print purchase decisions. To that end, we have found a number of ways to illustrate use, so that book-buying can be focused in areas of need, or in areas of demonstrated high use, and ideally reduce the numbers of books acquired that will never circulate. Through a variety of custom-built ILS reports, liaisons have access to title lists of the most recently acquired books in their subjects, and the total number of checkouts for those titles.

These reports list both approval and firm order titles, and can be sorted in a variety of ways to get different perspectives on book use. These reports can also be re-run to reflect later use of a title acquired some years earlier. We haven't yet set an overall goal for circulation of purchased books, but as we monitor the data over time, we may decide to formulate a reasonable new-book circulation target for each subject area, with the ultimate goal to maximize collection use.

Using one analysis strategy we can compare different subjects and the total percentage of books that circulate. The reports consistently found for example that psychology titles tend to circulate fairly soon after acquisition, with almost 40% circulating the first year, and 60% circulating within the first 3 years. In other areas, chemistry for example, less than 10% of books circulate in the first year, and less than 20% in the first 3 years. In looking at the books that never circulate, there are sometimes discernible patterns in the subject areas that do not get used. For example, in psychology the reports highlight that theoretical material is much less likely to circulate, and clinical books much more likely to circulate. This isn't too surprising given that our Ph.D. program in Psychology has a clinical focus, but it does give us some direction in spending our limited funds.

Circulation reports can be tricky to analyze, and results must be combined with other information to avoid misinterpretation. If certain subject area books get little circulation, it may indicate a need to weed and replace older editions, rather than change the collecting focus. Sometimes the circulation of older books can be surprising, but may simply reflect that newer editions are not available for checkout; at least some of the student users will take what they can get, rather than requesting something more up-to-date. Our most recent library use survey (Fall 2010) confirms that much of our book collection is dated with frequent comments made such as "your books are old." Circulation/ILS reports are also useful for weeding projects, with lists of titles in specific areas that have not circulated provided to liaisons regularly. It is helpful to remind liaisons armed with these reports though, that circulation reports also never represent total use, since items used but not circulated will not be counted; at present the UAF libraries do not do in-house use measures, which is unfortunate, since technology has made this information easy to collect. Weeding reports simply provide a starting point for decision-making, with liaisons adding their collection and patron knowledge to the final verdict.

Campus-Wide Library Assessment Data

In Fall of 2007, with new campus and library management on board, and with an increased focus university-wide on assessment, we implemented a set of library user surveys campus-wide, using Survey Monkey and modeling our instrument after the University of Washington triennial surveys (with permission from UW). The surveys were designed to cover all aspects of library services, programs, and collections, and also to be repeated every three years to gauge the success in making substantive changes that would result in increased patron satisfaction. We used the results from these surveys, including user comments as well as aggregate data, to create lists of specific collection areas or items needed, address subject gaps, and reorient our collection toward electronic media over print. Liaisons received emails with any specific collection needs and purchases were made to address these needs. We recently (Fall 2010) completed our second set of surveys, and again will distribute information to the appropriate liaisons for making collection decisions, one more tool in the data-driven collection model. This time around, we will also be working to quantify and interpret the many comments made about the book collections; there appear to be many patrons in support of increasing the percentage of electronic books as compared to the number of print books. To see results from both surveys, see the link in References below.

Accounting Information for Liaisons

If liaisons are to make the most of the information they have about patron book needs, borrowing habits, and collection contents, they must have a full picture of the monograph expenditures and allocations available to them, and also know how much is dedicated to other subjects. Yearly acquisition reports of book titles and costs by subject, for both approvals and firms, are provided to each liaison. Subject allocations and spending updates are provided approximately monthly. Acquisitions procedures and budget data are placed onto a library "wiki" for future reference by the liaisons. Monthly meetings allow exchange of information gathered by all liaisons, as well as updates on spending and weeding projects.

PROBLEMS WITH DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS – THE LIAISONS' VIEW

Undoubtedly the greatest problems in using data for collection decisions involve extracting and illustrating relevant data, putting the information into context, and interpreting and using statistical information. In order to see how much of the data generated by Collection Development was actually being utilized by liaisons, or was believed to be of importance, I conducted a quick anonymous survey of the UAF librarians. The survey sought information about liaisons' collection building methods, the specific activities they use for outreach efforts, and most pertinent to this paper, their use of the collection and use data provided by the Collection Development office. Eight of twelve of the liaisons filled out the survey and all responded to a question specifically about the CD-supplied data. Half of respondents had not used any of the WorldCat Collection Analysis (WCA) data provided, although only one stated that they "won't use" this data in the future; most stated they simply hadn't done so at the time of the survey. Only one respondent rated the WCA as "very useful;" others were mixed on "somewhat," and "not very" useful, and one stated it was "not useful at all" for collection decision-making. The Interlibrary Loan data were more useful, as rated by liaisons; seven out of eight respondents rated it "very" or "somewhat" useful, and only one had not yet utilized the data in making selection decisions. Likewise, circulation data were considered more useful, especially the lists of never-circulated materials, with half of the respondents rating these lists as "very useful."

When asked how well the liaison program functions to build library collections of adequate depth and breadth for our campus, none responded with "very well;" most responded "somewhat well" and one "not very well." However none of the liaisons suggested any additional information that might support their collection-building activities. One suggested specific collection goals for each subject, another commented that our fiscal support has been the key variable to the success of our patron satisfaction with the collection thus far, and were not attributed to any liaison activities, data-driven or other. Another suggestion was to hire more librarians with subject background to be more successful in our collection-building, going back to the SPEC kit model. Several liaisons were also somewhat skeptical of the value of their outreach efforts to faculty, with one commenting "all our liaison activities seem to have very little impact at all." To see all survey questions, see the Rasmuson Library Collection Development blog cited in References.

CONCLUSION

Liaison reception to using data for collection-related decision-making has been mixed, as indicated in the liaison survey. Traditional collection development methods, such as using book reviews and catalogs, or waiting for input from campus faculty despite communication problems, are still very much favored; seven of eight liaisons indicated that they use Choice Reviews or other reviews for book selection, and seven of eight liaisons say they use email as the primary communication method with campus faculty to solicit purchase suggestions. It may be that with additional training on the use of statistical reports or assessment data these tools might be of more use to liaisons. Without more solid measures of the utility of the collection, such as statistically significant increases in circulation, building the collection with liaison librarians continues to be a mixture of guesswork and unproven traditional methods. As computer software programs make it easier to compile and use data to guide collection management choices, academic library collections may become more reflective of the direct needs of their users, and less a reflection on the ability of liaisons to make selection decisions. In a budget climate in which the building of library monograph collections is likely to slow significantly, in which "patron-driven" and electronic options now abound, and in which users have easy access to materials at other institutions, collections must prove their worth as never before, using any assessment tools available. While data-driven and patron-driven methods aren't likely to obviate the need for liaisons to assist in collection-building altogether, they are likely to be increasingly relied upon by libraries and liaison librarians facing staff and budget shortages.

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