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## **“Money Doesn’t Grow on Trees”: Using a Data-Driven Review Process to Add New Resources With No Budget Increases**

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# “Money Doesn’t Grow on Trees”: Using a Data-Driven Review Process to Add New Resources With No Budget Increases

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## Abstract

At Drake University’s Cowles Library, increasing budgetary pressures, combined with improvements in gathering and analyzing usage data, compelled the library in 2014 to reassess its collection development philosophy and approach. This new philosophy—that the value of a resource is directly related to its usage—necessitated a more systematic and analytical process. The library has developed an annual review process that uses data-driven decision making for canceling and acquiring electronic resource subscriptions.

The steps in this process are as follows:

- Reviewing cost-per-use data
- Generating candidate deselection lists (“watchlists”)
- Soliciting faculty feedback via a library liaison process
- Communicating and marketing
- Canceling low-use items
- Identifying and acquiring new resources on a yearly cycle

With a more deliberate process, the library was able to save \$175,169 over a three-year period. Combined with reallocated book acquisition funds, these savings allowed for the coverage of inflationary costs and the acquisition of new electronic resources requested by faculty for unmet curricular needs. This process, including both the challenges and the timeline, will be covered in this paper.

## Background

Drake University is primarily a master’s-level, teaching-focused institution located in Des Moines, Iowa. Drake University has over 5,000 undergraduate and graduate-level students in both liberal arts and sciences majors and professional programs. Some of the fields in which professional programs are offered are in the fields of business, pharmacy, occupational therapy, education, and journalism. Cowles Library is the main library that serves the campus, with the exception of the law program, which has its own Law Library. Cowles Library is staffed by 13 faculty librarians and 8 full-time staff and has an active two-way library liaison program. With the library liaison program each librarian is assigned a subject area, and a corresponding subject faculty member is assigned as a library liaison for his or her disciplinary area.

Cowles Library has an annual acquisitions budget of \$1.3 million. With the addition of new programs over the past few years, there have been some additional monies allocated for spending on library resources for some of the programs, but not all. Overall, the library budget for the original programs has not increased over the past five years. This had made collection development conversations difficult with subject faculty as, with increasing costs for resources and a stagnant budget, Cowles has had to institute some restrictive measures. For the past few years, when faculty members asked for a new subscription for their department, they were told that they had to cancel an existing subscription of equal or greater value in order to start a new subscription. This created problems for departments that are using all of their current resources and wanted to purchase new resources. These procedures are enumerated in the Collection

Development Policy (<https://library.drake.edu/get-help/services-for-faculty/collection-development-policy/>).

In recent years there has been an influx of information on what library resources students and faculty actually utilize. COUNTER reports and other software have provided enhanced technological capabilities through the production of usage reports. With this enhanced access to patron-usage metrics, Cowles Library decided in 2014 to more actively use this information to make collection development decisions. Because Drake is a teaching-focused institution, the library's collection exists primarily to serve and support the curriculum. Therefore, Cowles Library decided that its operating philosophy, in the context of assessment, would be that the value of a resource is directly related to its usage.

### **What Is the Database (Journal) Evaluation Group [D(J)EG]?**

The Database (Journal) Evaluation Group, as it is currently constituted, was formed in 2012 with a stronger focus on assessment than the previous group that it replaced. The original charge for D(J)EG is as follows: "In the context of budget contingencies, coordinate ongoing review of database invoices in light of factors such as usage, cost, and curricular impact. Any recommendations for cancellations will be referred to Library faculty and liaisons." The stated outcome was: "Broader review and assessment of ongoing subscriptions (both individual titles and databases)." The original meeting schedule was on a monthly basis. The group's current membership consists of individuals from each of the following positions: graduate health professions librarian (chair), collection development librarian, electronic resources manager, cataloger, and acquisitions and information access associate.

D(J)EG's evolution/process: The group reviewed cost per use of all subscriptions on a monthly basis. However, this became very time consuming. Therefore, D(J)EG then switched to doing their review as invoices came in. The most impactful decision the group made was to align database subscriptions with Drake's fiscal year (July 1–June 30). As Drake uses an accrual-based accounting system, this change means that invoices no longer have to be split across fiscal years. For example, prior to making this change, if D(J)EG had a January–December invoice, it would have to assign January–June to one fiscal year, and July–December to the next, which made tracking expenses difficult. In addition to the ability to assign an invoice to one fiscal year, the additional bonus is that this method

allows D(J)EG to review almost all of the database renewals at one time in the spring. This makes it easier to compare cost and use within a discipline as well as across disciplines. While D(J)EG was able to change the subscription dates for most of the databases, the journal subscriptions still follow a calendar year subscription cycle due to publisher restrictions.

An important piece of the D(J)EG process is the yearly creation of a "watchlist" of poor-performing journal and database subscriptions. The purpose of the watchlist is to inform faculty that these resources could be cancelled if they continue underperforming. The watchlist is an awareness vehicle. The new yearly watchlist is shared at the annual Fall Library Liaison meeting via a Library Research Guide (Springshare), and discipline-based liaisons are expected to share the information with their colleagues with the intention that if the resource(s) are of importance they will increase usage and/or will inform library faculty of extenuating circumstances.

In addition to evaluating resources for continuing subscription, D(J)EG also considers criteria for the purchase or subscription of new resources. When requesting a new resource, faculty are generally directed to the library's home page, which includes links to a form for them to fill out. This form includes questions asking if the resource is multidisciplinary and what particular unmet resource need it fulfills. Further information on this page indicates that the library will decide whether or not to acquire the new resource based on several criteria, including budget availability, pricing model (one-time fees versus subscription), curriculum support, and feedback received during the trial period. These criteria were adapted from a previous Charleston presentation (Crawford, Miller, & Henley, 2015) (see <https://library.drake.edu/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files/2015/07/ER-Evaluation-Factors-Drake-version-final-10-19-17.xlsx>).

The document is not a traditional rubric and does not allocate points. Furthermore, not all listed factors will apply to all electronic resources, and not all factors are easily quantifiable.

Resources that receive more "Excellent" ratings are more likely to be acquired, while resources receiving more "Poor" ratings are less likely to be acquired. Because all electronic resource acquisitions depend upon annual budget availability, the most important factors library faculty consider are "Cost/Acquisition Method" and "Curricular Support."

## **D(J)EG in Action**

### **Data Cycle**

When D(J)EG was reformed, a calendar of processes was created that follows the academic year. Each D(J)EG meeting has a prescribed set of tasks to complete in order to keep the process moving forward. The breakdown is as follows:

#### **Spring (April/May):**

1. The committee reviews the prior year's watchlist after the electronic resources librarian updates the usage numbers. Because the watchlist is created in the spring, there is only a partial year of data available for that current year. Once end-of-year data become available, the electronic resources librarian updates the watchlist with these numbers. The committee then reviews the new numbers to see if any resources are "saved" by an increase in usage. Then D(J)EG makes final cancellation decisions.
2. The final cancellation decisions are shared at the Spring Liaison Meeting. Faculty liaisons review the updated watchlist to see what will be cancelled. New resource ideas are solicited.
3. Trials begin for the new resource ideas gathered at the liaison meeting. Feedback is solicited.
4. As invoices for databases come in (to be renewed for our July 1 fiscal year), D(J)EG reviews the pricing, usage, and cost per use of each resource. Based on this information, a new database watchlist is created.

#### **Summer (July/August):**

1. Once journal renewals arrive (usually early July), D(J)EG reviews the pricing, usage, and cost per use of each journal. The new journal watchlist is generated.
2. The research guide used to share watchlist information is updated privately to reflect the new watchlists. Once it gets closer to the fall liaison meeting, the pages will be made viewable to those who have access to the research guide.

#### **Fall (September/October):**

1. The watchlist research guide is shared at the Fall Liaison Meeting. Faculty liaisons are told to share these resources with their departments, as any resource that does not experience an increase in usage is likely to be cancelled.
2. Liaisons also learn about which resources the Library purchased over the summer with funds generated from last year's watchlist cancellations.
3. D(J)EG looks at the journal usage and cost-per-use numbers one last time with updated usage numbers before submitting the journal renewals. Even though the faculty have been informed months previously that certain journals are to be cancelled, since the journals run on a calendar year renewal, access has yet to be cut off. The committee double-checks that nothing has experienced an increase in usage.
4. A fall database trial period happens if there are any resource requests that come in.

#### **Winter (December/January):**

1. D(J)EG reviews interlibrary loan and document delivery statistics from the previous calendar year to determine if it would make better fiscal sense to start a subscription to any journal titles rather than rely on these services.

#### **Other/As Needed:**

1. D(J)EG aims to review print journal subscriptions every three years. Cowles Library does not circulate its print journals, so the committee relies on in-house use statistics, which are admittedly unreliable. However, the committee feels that it is still important to consider the print subscriptions in this process to make sure the budget is being spent wisely.
2. An upcoming project is a review of one-time purchase resources. These will include both resources purchased as a one-time resource and those purchased with a large upfront cost and hosting fees/access fees paid each subsequent year. While these are resources that would not get watchlisted due to low

usage, a review would help identify any that require more promotion and marketing.

3. The committee recently reviewed the library's list of 100+ print standing order subscriptions, some of which had been in effect for over 50 years. Librarian liaisons were given circulation data (going back 20 years) for standing orders that were assigned to their subject area. The library was able to reduce the number of active standing orders to approximately 30, resulting in an estimated savings of \$5,000 per year.

### What Are Watchlists?

As previously mentioned, D(J)EG relies on watchlists to share cost-per-use data to librarians and faculty (a sample watchlist can be viewed at <http://research.guides.drake.edu/charleston2017>). A watchlist is a list of titles that D(J)EG is considering cancelling by the next renewal cycle if the usage does not improve. A watchlist includes information related to renewal cost total, usage for last three years (including year-to-date), cost per use (CPU) for the last three years, including year-to-date, and, for databases, a chart showing a trend line (ideal CPU vs. actual CPU). In order to provide all faculty with access to the watchlist, it is posted as a research guide within the library's Springshare LibGuides as faculty are familiar with this resource. The research guide is set to private; only people who know the direct URL are able to view it.

### Watchlist Criteria

The main criterion D(J)EG uses when considering adding a resource to a watchlist is cost per use. D(J)EG uses a cost-per-use threshold of \$25. Resources with a higher cost per use than this are considered for addition to the watchlist (further decision criteria are outlined below). The \$25 threshold comes from Cowles Library's average per-article cost through document delivery. The logic behind this decision is that it would make more fiscal sense for us to rely on document delivery if the cost per use rises above this price. For consistency purposes, D(J)EG uses this threshold for both databases and journals.

There are other factors D(J)EG considers before watchlisting a resource. First, the committee looks at trend lines. Since the committee considers 3–4 years of data at a time, it is easy to see if the resource

is improving or declining. If a resource is showing improvement over time, the committee will usually save the resource for another year in hopes it will hit the \$25 threshold.

Another factor the committee evaluates is if the resource aligns with any university initiatives. For example, when the Black Studies Center was performing poorly in terms of cost per use, the committee was hesitant to watchlist it because Drake University has several new diversity and inclusivity resource initiatives in place. It was decided to watchlist it so that faculty would become aware of its poor performance. Fortunately, cost per use significantly improved after it was watchlisted, so it was saved from possible cancellation.

Another criterion the committee must consider is accreditation requirements. The American Chemical Society is the accrediting body for Drake's chemistry department, and they require a certain set of resources when reviewing accreditation eligibility. This removes the possibility of cancelling these resources, even if they have poor cost per use.

A more nebulous factor D(J)EG considers is the size of departments and the number of resources assigned to each department. For example, Drake University has a fairly small mathematics department. The math faculty request only one database, MathSciNet. This is an expensive, specialized database. It is unlikely that nonmath majors and faculty will use this database. All that being said, D(J)EG still feels it is important to support the math department. While the cost-per-use numbers are higher than the desired \$25 limit, each year the numbers get better, so the committee considers this an acceptable situation.

A final decision factor is newly added programs. As Drake is adding numerous new programs over the next couple years, consideration is given to any poor cost-per-use resources that may have crossover potential with the new programs. This may prevent these resources from being added to the watchlist or cancelled until more statistics and feedback can be gathered.

### Obtaining New Resources

With the newly improved D(J)EG process, Cowles Library was able to save \$175,169 over a three-year period. This money was used to cover inflationary costs as well as fund the purchase of new resources.

For any new subscription requested, an assessment was made as to whether or not it would address an unmet curricular need and was appropriately priced. For pricing models, preference was given to one-time purchases versus subscriptions with the intention of keeping recurring costs down. If the newly requested subscription was acceptable within these guidelines, trials were started and requests for feedback were sent out. Depending upon other database requests for that year, as well as the responses from trial feedback forms, Cowles determined whether or not to purchase the resource at the end of the fiscal year. Some examples of resources that the library purchased over this time frame were APA Style Central, JSTOR Arts & Sciences Archive Collections, Visible Body, Statista, Mergent Archives, Springer eBook Collections (2010–2017), Women’s Magazine Archive, Nineteenth Century Collections Online, and Indigenous Peoples of North America.

## Conclusions

In a December 2016 meeting, the Drake University provost stated that “the Library is a model for data-driven decision making.” This showed that the administration of the university was acknowledging the work of the library and placing value on its approach to the process. While the D(J)EG process

has transformed how Cowles Library approaches subscription collection development, there were many challenges involved. For example, the D(J)EG group has found difficulty in determining the best way to market and promote its poor cost-per-use resources. The watchlist was the initial awareness tool, but D(J)EG tried marketing resources through links to blogs on a weekly university newsletter. However, the links to the blogs were rarely clicked. D(J)EG promoted resources on the library website on an as-needed basis while also reaching out to specific faculty members.

Successes and challenges aside, further into this process most of the “low-hanging fruit” or poor cost-per-use resources have now been cut. Presently, most subscriptions are highly used or fit into other special categories previously discussed (i.e., Math-SciNet, Black Studies Center). So, for this fiscal year, Cowles Library will barely be able to cover inflation. Therefore, while the new D(J)EG process has been extremely helpful at saving and redistributing money, it has set a precedent that the library can acquire new resources. However, realistically this is not a long-term sustainable model. Like all libraries, Cowles is still facing the issue of how to handle increasing costs, budget stagnation, and possible cuts in the future.

## Reference

Crawford, L. S., Miller, E., & Henley, M. (2015, November). *The unknown path—Evaluating electronic resources for access-based collection development*. Presentation at the Charleston Conference. Charleston, South Carolina.