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# Communicating Collections: Strategies for Informing Library Stakeholders of Collections, Budget, and Management Decisions

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## Introduction

The management of collections in academic library settings often involves communicative infrastructures. The infrastructures, both formal and informal, are important in the delivery of information solutions to library patrons. Library communications can range from official memos distributed in committee meetings to the exchange of ideas among employees. Solutions to inquiries from library patrons can involve bits of knowledge derived from individuals performing specific functions as information flows through the library organization. In their research on library communications McClung, Gau, Blanton-Kent, and Johnson-Grau (2017) identify four strategies that academic libraries can use to build communication channels in their organizations including (1) enhancing internal communication in libraries, (2) building relationships between the library and its stakeholders, (3) building narratives around collections, and (4) establishing a communication assessment plan. Libraries that apply the strategies to enhance communications often use digital technologies to deliver information to patrons including webpages, e-mail, and social media messaging. The results of a survey examining how academic libraries used webpage communications to inform patrons of collections-related information are presented. This paper also reviews how librarians at the University of South Florida Library in Tampa, Florida, used diverse communication strategies to enhance collections information messaging to their patrons and the processes that library staff at the Arthur Lakes Library at the Colorado School of Mines used to communicate materials budget information to faculty.

## Strategies for Communication

Contemporary collection management practices in academic libraries involve different types of communications across library organizations. The communications are often associated with diverse processes associated with the life cycle of information resources. Communications can range from formal to

informal, including administratively approved messaging to casual conversations between co-workers. Given the extent of possible communications, it is important that effective internal communications be established in library organizations. Staff members require clear lines of communication between organizational units. Achieving effective internal communications can be challenging. Some libraries have emphasized forming groups with diverse membership to help with information flow, others have relied on using digital communications such as e-mail or even posting on webpages (Costello & Del Bosque, 2010; Cunningham, 2015; Jones & Arthur, 2019).

Maintaining good internal communications helps libraries form a sense of shared values and create effective messaging. Building on a foundation of competent internal communication channels, libraries can reach out to external stakeholders by forming stronger relationships. Stronger relationships with the library's external stakeholders can promote additional channels for successful communications. In an era of data-driven collection building there is a need for efficient communication channels between stakeholders; often library-facilitated solutions to collection issues are the result of the interactions between several groups both internal and external to the library. An approach used in enhancing relationships among groups associated with collection management at the USF Library is based on the notion of communities of practice (Abresch, 2018).

Developing a community of practice focused on collection management involved inviting several staff and faculty members to participate in a collaborative working environment. The goal of the endeavor was to create shared values in a collections and technical services focus area. Group members possessed diverse skill sets and knowledge including experience in acquisitions, metadata, and assessment. The group members also had subject expertise in specific disciplines such as geology, geography, and archaeology. Once established, the community of practice

in collections encouraged librarians to explore new ways of developing partnerships with faculty and staff across the university. The ensuing communications, interactions, and contributions from individuals in the community of practice helped to develop narratives and stories involving collections that affected library collection and budget planning. The approach also helped the library fulfill the university's strategic goals especially with student success and faculty research endeavors.

Collection-focused narratives were developed by librarians and communicated to stakeholders by using a variety of digital tools and platforms including Twitter, Facebook, e-mail, and webpages. The collection narratives included the building of extensive geoscience collections and the promotion of a textbook affordability initiative. The geoscience narrative illustrated how library faculty leveraged technology such as geographic information systems and three-dimensional modeling to create a number of successful outreach projects with community partners. The textbook affordability initiative described a combined effort that integrated diverse library e-collections and resources to offer low-cost information resources supporting student success. An additional narrative involved the building of a scholarly communication roadshow, which was a multifaceted library program aimed at supporting faculty research productivity.

An important component of building collection narratives involved the use of webpage-based messaging. In preparing webpage-based communications librarians at USF conducted a survey of academic library websites and their role as a platform to deliver collections-related information.

### ***How We Communicate***

After reviewing the scholarly and professional literature on collection management in academic libraries, the survey design focused on two highly referenced topics in collection management practice in academic libraries: the use of collection development policies, and sustainable pricing models. Collection narratives on the topics in academic libraries are usually framed by discussions about the costs of information resources such as journal subscription packages and budget reductions.

### **The Academic Library Website**

For most academic libraries, the library website is a main hub for communication. Our student and

faculty patrons use the library website to locate and access the resources the library makes available. Here is where we provide information about our collections including the library catalog, database A–Z lists, and guides for use. However, the library website not only hosts access to our materials, it is our main platform for communicating about collections. The work of realigning library collections to enhance teaching and research or meet budgetary limitations is a communicative process. We need to inform our patrons of resource cancellations and coordinate alternatives. We still must have formal collection development policies and processes documented, but we also need to create an infrastructure where our audience can find answers about collection changes. We need to demonstrate the value of our resources. We need to share the data and show the results of our stewardship. We need to confirm that our community has access to the resources they require. And we need to show how we are doing it.

### ***Communicating Collections on Library Websites***

For the Collections and Discovery department at USF, our approach to communicating collections is a work in progress, adding bits and pieces but needing to structure the whole. We performed an informal survey of university library websites to see how everyone else is doing it. As with any research project, we had to narrow the scope. Not only is it time-consuming to search unfamiliar websites for specific information, but the elements of the search had to be refined into variables common to enough various websites to be worthwhile. Ultimately, we engaged in a pilot survey of 25 websites for a few key items, along with basic demographics. Two main data elements to locate on websites were selected: the classic collection development policy/process/strategy, and sustainable (affordable) pricing models. With standard cost increases for library resources and a lot of libraries with flat or reduced budgets, this is an important collections topic. In addition, media surrounding breaking Big Deal journal packages has generated faculty and administrative interest in this information. The survey was to look at data locations, types of pages they reside on, paths to find them, and the depth and detail of the data.

### ***Designing the Survey***

As is true of a pilot survey, the creation and execution of the survey design is a learning experience. University library websites were randomly gathered, then

selected to provide geographically diverse coverage. Some libraries from the SPARC Big Deal Cancellation Tracking list (n.d.) were selected to correlate the information on the library website. The purpose of this survey was more to find out how communication was occurring rather than to gather statistics about if it was occurring. Selected elements to note included the URLs for collection development policies and cancellation information pages, the relative locations of data on the library's site, the detail level of data, and the scope in years of the data elements.

### ***Search Strategies***

The search process was fairly basic, but surprisingly onerous. Start at the Home page. Click on all the menu items. Look at the Collections pages, LibGuides, and About page. Use the search functions of an external search engine and the library website. Look through the LibGuides for keywords for each topic such as sustainable, cancellation, budget, cost per use, serials, journals, Big Deal journal packages, serials review project, or just plain budget cuts, collection, collection development, collection management, and policies. As a nonautomated method, there is a large human factor and key items may have been left undiscovered. It was difficult to find the data elements among either a lot of possible content, or not enough.

### ***Results***

As designed, we had a good geographic distribution of the 25 institutions. Not all states were represented, and they were slightly weighted to the Southeast. Most were classified as Higher to Highest Research Activity, Carnegie 2015, and all were four-year public schools. The Unduplicated All Student Headcounts ranged from 4,300 to 68,400 and about half were land-grant institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016–2017).

- Collection Development policies were found in 76% of the websites.
- 56% had elements containing references to Sustainable Costs/Budget Cuts process/Big Deal journals/Collection Additions & Removals.
- 28% had detailed explanations of budget cuts or the selections process.
- Coverage years with data may have been sporadic or not current.

- Most common locations where data was found: About page, Collections page, and LibGuides.

### ***Challenges***

This research was not about how budget cuts and cancellations were being processed at institutions, but about how to communicate them. As you would expect, there was not a lot of consistency across independent university websites, so each search was unfamiliar and somewhat unique. It can really be quite difficult to find elements when they could be anywhere. Sometimes relevant data was available on sources outside the library's website: external news items, journal articles, in the institutional repository or in a newsletter or blog. Few had cost per use details, although some may have been limited to an internal audience for confidentiality. Or, maybe we just couldn't find them. It was easy to get distracted by the actual methodologies since this is very interesting, relevant, and valuable information. The Colorado School of Mines' Arthur Lakes Library's website hosts a particularly good example of a well-documented library collection budget assessment process.

### ***Case Study, Colorado School of Mines***

Colorado School of Mines (more commonly known as Mines) is a public university focused on science and engineering, dedicated to pioneering research that addresses the great challenges society faces today—particularly as they relate to the Earth, energy, and the environment—and committed to educating students who will do the same. Located in Golden, Colorado, Mines has a current enrollment of just under 6,000 FTE. The Arthur Lakes Library supports the campus and has 13 academic faculty and 9 administrative faculty and staff members. The library has two librarians who focus on outreach, but there is no formal liaison program. The library has an annual materials budget of \$2 million, with 93% allocated for subscription-based resources. The addition of new programs over the years has not come with monies allocated for spending on library resources. Overall, the library materials budget has increased at an average annual rate of 3.58% over the past decade. For perspective, there has been a 6% average price increase for serials since 2012 (Bosch, Albee, & Romaine, 2019).

The library's collection budget was not keeping pace with skyrocketing journals costs, and instead

of collection building, it was maintaining at best. Faculty, tired of hearing “no,” had simply stopped communicating their needs with the library and the administration was not responding to annual budget requests.

The library needed to reset the dialogue with faculty and with administration. The first step was to find out the history. Previously, the library was putting the pressure of decisions onto faculty, requesting that new subscriptions be accompanied by an equal cancellation. When communicating annual budget requests to the administration, the library had been using general inflation index reports, such as EBSCO’s annual report, as justification with mixed success. That changed in 2017 when the administration instead wanted the library to justify cancellations and subscriptions at the title level and provide granular cost-per-use data, in order to justify the annual materials budget request. While the library appreciated the thinking behind the request, it did not believe that the data requested was appropriate or ultimately informative for the administration.

### ***Data-Driven Decisions***

Based on the previously mentioned historical analysis it was decided that collection decisions needed to be reframed with data. The overall materials budget was first addressed by performing a comparison with peer institutions in regard to historical materials budget increases and a spend breakdown per student. Subscriptions in particular were addressed as they represented the majority of the materials budget. Instead of autopilot renewals, every subscription was evaluated for renewal based on its support of present academic curriculum or faculty research, the strength of the existing collection in the resource’s subject area, the existing or projected future use of library resources in the discipline, and cost. The need for multiple formats, such as print and online, was evaluated as well. A sustainable threshold was set for annual inflation increases and negotiations were initiated with vendors when that threshold was crossed. In order to meet the inflation threshold, multiyear agreements, consortia deals, and other tactics were utilized.

The materials budget request in 2018 was based on actual inflation rates as well as exact numbers for new funds requested. This satisfied the administration’s requirements for transparency and proved the request to be justifiable. The library views the management of library resources as a faculty

conversation, but the administration also needs to understand what the library is dealing with in regard to inflation, as well as the importance to faculty of certain resources to support research and instruction. Thus, having national data as well as having peer data was important. It was also important to remind them of what our historical budget has been, to help frame where it needs to go in the future. Part of the goal was to show that the library is not a cost center but a strategic investment that will help the university grow and thrive.

### ***Communicating with Data***

The library needed to show the campus a broad overview on where the collection budget stands and its relation to the overall landscape of academic publishing.

Communication channels utilized were a LibGuide, departmental e-mails, brown bag sessions on the collection, campus announcements via the daily newsletter, and updates to the Faculty Senate via a new Faculty Senate library committee, which also included student representatives from the undergraduate and graduate councils.

How collection decisions were made was reframed as a campus conversation that would be based on data. The library initiated cancellation suggestions, instead of requesting them from faculty, which were rooted in cost per use. New acquisitions were offered as options based on data such as Interlibrary Loan requests, turn-aways, and academic program growth.

### ***Conclusions***

The results of implementing these new collection strategies have been encouraging, but not perfect. In the initial year, the library made modest journal cuts, which freed up funds to start many new journal subscriptions and several new databases. The feedback from faculty about the cancellation process and subsequent usage of the new resources has been good. The second year of implementation saw an 8% increase to the materials budget and many more needed resources. The third year saw only a 4% increase, which was less than requested, but it was a tougher economic year all around on campus. Even with the inadequate budget allotment, there was a marked difference from years past. It was a very collaborative process between the administration, the library, and faculty with a healthy dialogue and greater understanding all around.

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