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## Change – Watch for the Right Time Structuring Collections Budgets to Meet Current and Future Needs

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John P. Blosser, "Change – Watch for the Right Time Structuring Collections Budgets to Meet Current and Future Needs" (2019). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284317149>

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# Change—Watch for the Right Time: Structuring Collections Budgets to Meet Current and Future Needs

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## Abstract

Over the years Northwestern University Libraries has implemented various methods of allocating to the collections budgets, moving from traditional methods to ones that are more flexible and responsive to the needs of the times. The libraries have endeavored to keep the benefits of any previous allocation methods when thinking of new ways to allocate so that the important points of meeting the needs of the current research and teaching programs are still being met.

## Introduction

When I first thought of this topic, I was enthused that I had something exciting to share with everyone, but as I started to work on it, it started to be more ordinary than exceptional, more philosophical than matter-of-fact examples to be followed. I know this does not sound like a great introduction or the best selling point for what I am about to share, but if you take away anything from my talk, I hope it will be that you are encouraged to try different things with your budget structures and allocations.

I hope you will find that being confident in trying out changes, all the while remaining flexible in meeting the current and future needs of the budget, all the while bringing along that which works for you, that these are the points that will help you keep a working budget that meets the needs of your local programs to the fullest extent possible.

I have not prepared the usual institutional description of Northwestern as to size and programs, as I hope what I say can apply to any institution regardless of size.

## A More Traditional Approach

Some 20 years ago allocations were assigned by projected need based on bibliographer input, which was a fairly common and standard allocation rubric at the time. An annual call for budget increase requests was made through a multipage form. The allocations were built up historically year to year with no fund losing money. Bibliographers and selectors had a sense of personal ownership of funds, which carried a status with the level of accrual of the funds, sometimes both for the subject area and themselves.

The traditional budget request forms asked for the following information:

- Show current support across all funds plus the projected increase being requested.
- Make a statement of price trends for books and serials.
- Describe the disciplines and library clientele being served.
- Describe current collecting levels.
- Describe known changes in emphasis or priorities.
- Compare to other collections in the region that may offer support.

The next iteration of the form (mid-2000s) included:

- More analyses of consortial or regional collection development that might impact the local collection support
- Required the naming of any other support from grants and such, recent gift money
- Summary justification of the increase requested

## Transition to Less Rigid Process

The annual call for budget requests was revised in 2010. We did not forget the good points of the earlier forms like paying attention to new programs or priorities of the university. The call was different in respect to these items:

- The selectors were asked to submit a request only as the need indicated.

- Work was coordinated through the Collections Management Committee, which revised the form for 2010.
- The Collections Management Committee formed a task force (2008) on collections budgeting, which yielded the Collection Budget Allocation Process (CBAP) in 2011 (Lyons & Blosser, 2012).

The CBAP method was also the start of categorization of the collections funds in new ways. Northwestern came up with four groupings of funds:

- Off the top (Group 0): Big Deals; preservation; strategic commitments
- Group 1: constituent-based subjects
- Group 2: collections of distinction (three collections)
- Group 3: general and interdisciplinary subject areas

The way it worked is that new funding first went to Group 0 to cover contractual increases and strategic encumbrances. The remaining new funding was then assigned to Groups 1, 2, and 3 based on what percentage each of their total allocations were of the total of the three groups. Northwestern libraries' breakdown was:

- Group 1 total was 46% of the sum of Groups 1–3
- Group 2 was 14% of the sum of Groups 1–3
- Group 3 was 44% of the sum of Groups 1–3

Within Groups 1 and 3 new funding was distributed based on current programming growth, or new faculty, or new initiatives. Within Group 2 new funding was distributed based on what percentage each of the three collections' total allocations were of the total of the three collections within Group 2.

### How Did CBAP Perform?

The CBAP method made distribution of new funds easier and more transparent. The initial categorization of the funds in the CBAP groups also helped us to think of funds differently, thinking of where they go and later where they need to go. There was a deficiency in the CBAP system.

The fund levels did not change downward, which in some cases they should have. The individual subject

area support stayed much the same or just increased. The original CBAP methodology included a regression analysis element, which would help highlight funds that could be reduced based on support need, but the analysis was too complicated for our broad understanding. In our 3-year analysis cycle of how funding was supporting the subject areas, nothing really changed because the implementation was based on the historical levels of funding and few people wanted to release funds from their area to help another area. Funding levels still held a cachet of status.

### Transition Continues, 2015

To try to break from the historical levels of funding, no allocations were made to funds supported by appropriated funds. The idea was that liaisons (change of label from selectors) should not spend so much time managing funds, and that the liaisons would order only what was requested and what they felt was truly needed to support subject areas. We maintained the CBAP categories even though not strictly using them for allocations, which provided a good check on how funding was changing across categories or not.

During the 2016–2018 fiscal years we started to emphasize the collections budget as a whole belonging to all subject areas. During this time we maintained strong approval plans, and the success was made possible because the collections budget was receiving annual increases. It was obvious in the second fiscal year that the subscription load needed to be reviewed and reduced while looking to the future in order to consider subscription inflation costs.

Beginning with fiscal year 2019, due to a university-wide deficit reduction and spending containment plan, the libraries' nonpersonnel budget was cut and a spending limit imposed. The collections lost about 15% in spending capacity compared to the year before. About the same time I was assigned the CDO role so I had more say in the funding allocations. We continued the good points of previous allocations methods, like paying attention to new programs and priorities, keeping the CBAP categories as a check, and promoting the collections budget for all perspectives. We only funded requests of faculty and students unless there were discretionary endowment funds to support specific subjects. We started a major subscriptions review, striving for a targeted 8% reduction.

We attribute our survival to maintaining a flexibility of funding by making the best use of central

endowments and sharing them across subject areas, and suspending approval plans, a major video streaming PDA plan, and a STEM e-book subscription. We hope to continue to transition to a more flexible allocation model that allows for whatever changes are needed from year to year as well as continue to reduce the subscription spend, which will greatly help with funding flexibility. Our priority is to be in a position to support programming needs, faculty and student requests, and strategic initiatives. We will also continue to use assessment and analysis of collections to help us move in the relevant directions of our users.

### **What Has Been Most Helpful**

Looking at funds through categories has been most helpful. Grouping funds by various categories helped

### **Reference**

Lyons, L. E., & Blosser, J. (2012, August). An analysis and allocation system for library collections budgets: The comprehensive allocation process (CAP). *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 38(5), 294–310. Retrieved December 3, 2019, from <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2012.07.006>

me think about support in new ways. Funds can have multiple categories by which they are viewed:

- By a high-level grouping, like strategic, or constituent based
- By discipline, like humanities, social sciences, and sciences
- By area of need: rob from the rich and give to the poor

Nothing should be set in stone so change can be effective when and where it is needed.