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The Unknown Path—Evaluating Electronic Resources for Access-Based Collection Development

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Abstract

In 2015, the University of North Texas Libraries implemented an access-based collection development policy. This new policy, coupled with the increase of interdisciplinary studies at the University, dictated the necessity for a more exhaustive evaluation of continuing resources such as databases, journals, and standing orders before they are purchased. The collection development department created a rubric of criteria to address all aspects of the evaluation. This article will provide a brief description of access-based collection development and a detailed discussion of the rubric's criteria and how it will be implemented.

History

Formerly, University of North Texas (UNT) Libraries's collection development department operated on a traditional acquisitions structure. Selectors—usually public services reference librarians, who serve as subject librarians to assigned departments—selected monographs title-by-title to spend a small fund, which was allocated by department by a formula. These librarians usually have little exposure to or experience with financial or technical concerns. Collection development personnel did the actual purchasing after selectors communicated their choices.

The UNT Libraries have also experienced flat funding for the past several years. We have had to make very difficult decisions about what to discontinue and what to purchase. We began to ask ourselves: are we making the best use of the funds available to us?

We realized that the subject-expert librarians are not always in a good position to evaluate the added criteria that accompany Electronic Resource (ER) selection. There is much more to selecting ER's than simply content; there are also financial, usability, and contracting concerns. The traditional selection and acquisition model was not adapting well to the way we acquire ER's.

We believe, based on the literature and our own assessments, that the subject-expert's natural focus on narrow, traditional disciplinary subjects was neglecting the increasing importance of new, interdisciplinary areas of study. Some broad oversight of the collection was needed to address these collecting gaps.

A New Philosophy

To address these and other concerns, we adopted a new access-based collection development philosophy. We decided to choose access over ownership wherever appropriate, and take advantage of new acquisitions models such as demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) and pay-per-view. In sum, we are collecting for today's user rather than a someday user; and we think about collections as a *service* rather than an *object*.

However, the access-based approach wouldn't work if we continued allowing piecemeal selecting. We wanted to sculpt access on a macro level, then allow users to make the micro-level decisions within that framework. We decided to change the decision-making process. Under the old model, we more or less rubber-stamped selectors' decisions. We now take a team approach, with several acquisitions experts *and* the subject librarian guiding collection development decisions together. We see our

objective as holistic collection-sculpting rather than piecemeal selecting. This vision requires a new attitude about assessment: we're now practicing rigorous evaluation of ER's *before* the decision to purchase.

Increased evaluation led us to a new set of principles by which we make these decisions:

- **Evaluation** of many more features of electronic resources than mere content
- Aggressive **negotiation** with vendors, on price, licensing concerns, and more
- **Transparency**, or the ability to justify our decisions to stakeholders
- **Documentation** of the decision-making process

In order to manifest this new philosophy, we had to put in place some infrastructure. We developed an evaluation rubric that helps us meet all of these goals *and* adhere to our principles. Although we're focusing on holistic collection development, we still have to evaluate each product on its own and make those one-by-one decisions. We evaluate each product on content, financial concerns, usability issues, and contract criteria. We also want to incorporate feedback from others when making the decision. The rubric functions as a place to collect and record input of various types and from various stakeholders.

Rubric Overview

The current version of our rubric is formatted as a spreadsheet with ten rows of criteria that are based on key components of library electronic resources. These are:

- Trial results
- MARC record availability
- Accessibility
- Subject area liaisons' review
- Curricular support
- Subject coverage
- Vendor support

- The availability of an access-based model
- License/contract concerns and usability

As the evaluation of a resource is undertaken, each of these criterion will be assigned a rating of either excellent, medium, or poor.

Two of the criteria ratings—*License/contract and usability*—are based on separate in-depth evaluations. For the other eight specific components listed, the ratings are clearly but briefly defined so as to provide consistency from one resource evaluation to the next. For example, the ratings for *MARC Records* are:

- Excellent: Available, no cost
- Medium: Available, at a cost
- Poor: Not available

The rating for *Trials Results* is differentiated not only by how positive the trial feedback was but also how plentiful it was, as well as by trial usage. The Electronic Resources Librarian promotes trials widely and collects information by e-mail as well as through online surveys that are provided for each trial. Low usage or limited feedback implies lack of interest rather than lack of awareness. The ratings for *Subject Area Liaison Reviews* are rated similarly on the amount of as well as content of requests and feedback from subject librarians.

Both the ratings for *Curricular Support* and *Subject Coverage* are supported with data and input from our Assessment Librarian. *Curricular Support* is determined by mapping the collection or resource being evaluated to disciplines taught at UNT. This allows us to evaluate whether the resource supports multiple departments by being highly interdisciplinary or not. An overlap analysis provides the data needed to determine *Subject Coverage*: whether or not electronic resource contains content that is duplicated within the collection or if it fills a collection gap.

Accessibility is an important concern in collection policy that we are currently looking at closely in order to improve and strengthen how our resources meet the needs of all of our diverse users. At this time, accessibility is evaluated based on the availability of Voluntary Product

Accessibility Templates (VPATs). These are forms completed by vendors that demonstrate how well a resource fulfills the guidelines put forth in Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. VPATs are available online at <http://uniaccessig.org/ua/vpat-repository/>. If a resource or vendor does not have a VPAT on file it may be possible to obtain one by contacting them.

Two criteria focus on concerns that are specifically important to the collection management team at UNT Libraries because of our specific interests and collection policies, but may not be applicable or valuable to all libraries. These are *Vendor Support* issues and whether or not *Access Based Models* are available. Finally, *Licensing Concerns and Usability* are important enough to each warrant separate evaluations, which we discuss in greater detail below.

Licensing Concerns

One way the rubric helps us to collect data and input from others is by helping us address contracting concerns. There is one criterion (or row) on the rubric that represents the entirety of contracting concerns. The Electronic Resources Librarian (ERL) guides and manages the entire evaluation process, but does not have time to review contracts herself without assistance—it is quite time-consuming. But it's also complex and high-stakes, so it needs librarian oversight. We outsource this responsibility to a staff person under the ERL's supervision. We created a checklist, explained in more detail below, to guide the staff member through the contract review.

Another element the rubric helps us to address is the timing. Formerly, the UNT Libraries negotiated license agreements *after* deciding to proceed with electronic resources purchases. There are many state, University, and library contracting requirements that require thorough review of all licenses. But we found that after committing to purchase, we had little leverage with which to negotiate license terms, and the lengthy review process delayed acquisition. Using the rubric to evaluate the license terms at the *early* stages of the acquisition process allows us to incorporate

licensing concerns into the decision to proceed with ER acquisitions, and also expedites the process.

State Requirements Versus Library Concerns

It's important to note that we are evaluating resources on many more criteria than what is required by the state. The state of Texas seeks to create a business-friendly environment, but still places protections on state-funded entities. The University also has requirements for our contracts. However, the state and University leave many things up to us, so we also evaluate contracts and licenses based on criteria of importance to us.

In each state, the contracting laws, oversight, and procedures for public institutions are a bit different. Your institution should provide you with guidance on how to review your own contracts, but you should *definitely* add your own library-centered criteria to your decision-making process.

Some examples of state law requirements in Texas include *governing law*, *term* (time limit), and *confidentiality*. The *governing law* policy addresses the geographic location of the law(s) that will govern the agreement. In terms of the rubric, "Excellent" language would list the governing law as Texas. No mention of governing law would fall in the "Medium" category—this would be acceptable, but not ideal. "Poor" language in an agreement would specify any governing law other than Texas. This is a deal-breaker and must be changed to Texas before our institution will sign a contract. The state of Texas wants to ensure its contracts will not be subject to the laws of another country or state.

The *term* criterion addresses the time period covered by the contract. It has to be exact, which makes sense for clarity's sake, but also it also affects our promise to pay for the resource in question. If the contract specifies an exact time period, and covers only one fiscal year, the contract earns a rubric score of "Excellent." If the contract extends beyond the current fiscal cycle, we must rewrite the language and be allowed to break the contract if funds are not appropriated

to the University (or are greatly reduced) by the state legislature.

Finally, *confidentiality* clauses create problems for the UNT Office of the General Counsel due to the Texas Information Act regarding Freedom of Information Requests. But as librarians, we actually care about this section a great deal as well. If we are not allowed to share details in professional contexts, it hinders our ability to negotiate, and to collaborate with other institutions. For this criterion, nothing is actually better than something, so an absence of a confidentiality clause would indicate “Excellent” in the rubric. Language conditioned by the extent permitted by the Texas Information Act would indicate “Medium” on the rubric. The rubric considers any confidentiality language with no conditioning statements as “Poor.”

Library Contracting Concerns

In addition to state requirements, the UNT Libraries also want to make acquisition decisions based on several library-specific and library usage concerns. Some examples of these concerns are *usage statistics* and *data mining*. The Libraries desire information on the *usage* of acquired materials. The rubric defines “Excellent” in this area as a license that promises the provision of COUNTER-compliant usage data. The rubric

considers language “Medium” in this area when the promise of usage statistics by the vendor does not specify the type of data provided in the reports. If the rights holder provides no usage data, the product would earn a “Poor” score on the rubric.

Likewise, *data mining*, the analysis of large datasets, has emerged as new area of concern in libraries. The rubric defines “Excellent” language as that which explicitly permits data mining, “Medium” language as that which makes no mention of it, and “Poor” as that which prohibits mining.

Recording the Contract Evaluation

Historically, we had as many as 2–3 people working on reviewing contracts. As time went by, and contracts and licenses became more standardized, the contracts review became more routine. We also went from a paper-based filing system to an electronic one. Reducing the number of people and amount of time spent on contracts made sense. However, we still have a need for documentation of the review and negotiations and communication between the staff person and the librarian who now work on contracts. We created a checklist to serve the dual purposes of documentation and communication.

| | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Interlibrary loan | <input type="checkbox"/> Rights permitted and method of electronic provision is not restricted |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Rights permitted but method of electronic provision is restricted |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Prohibited by license (flag) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Course packs | <input type="checkbox"/> Electronic permitted, no record-keeping requirements, and no deletion at end of semester |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Electronic not permitted; record keeping requirements; deletion at end of semester (flag) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Not permitted (flag) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |
| | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Perpetual access, if applicable | <input type="checkbox"/> Contains perpetual rights language and fees are specific |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Add perpetual rights language and specify fees (flag) |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

Figure 1. Contracts checklist.

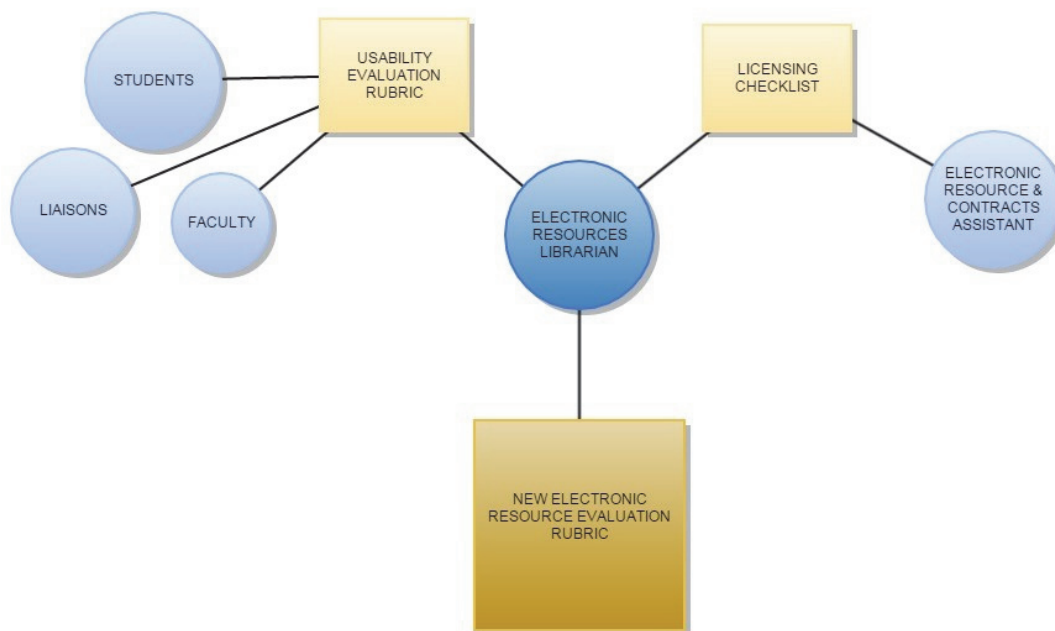


Figure 2. Evaluation workflow.

Here you can see a snippet of the contracts checklist (see Figure 1, “Contracts checklist”). It guides the staff member through the review, and through the rather complex process of various signatures and approvals. The checklist is then saved for documentation and submitted to the ERL for review. Benefits of the checklist include: it allows for outsourcing, provides two sets of eyes on a contract, and causes a natural pause for negotiation.

At the pause point, the ERL reviews the staff person’s evaluation, represented by the checklist, and determines what actions should be taken. Options include:

- **Evaluate** all criteria to get a holistic picture of the value of the resource
- **Negotiate** with the vendor on negotiable criteria
- **Dictate** changes in the language to adhere to state law
- **Decide** not to purchase

- **Communicate** desired changes in language, features, etc.

This last point brings us to another “outsourced” criterion—usability. Similar to contracts, we ask others for their input, which is then incorporated into the rubric.

Usability and Workflows

In focusing on the interface of electronic resources, we decided that it is important to include not only an evaluation of usability by the ERL, but also on evaluations from actual users. For this reason we developed a separate rubric for usability designed to be completed by students as well as by subject librarians.

Our usability rubric is designed to assess the perceptions of users, either students or librarians, of task success and efficiency as well as overall ease-of-use and the availability of features designed to improve user experience such as help pages.

This rubric also uses a scale of excellent, medium, or poor for each criterion. It includes assessment of content, functionality, and appearance.

One of the challenges of implementing an evaluation process like this one is managing the information and workflows that make it possible. The ERL functions as the manager of this process and coordinates with the multiple people involved in the process. It is also the ERL who initiates the evaluation process, saves and organizes all the files and paperwork associated with or generated by the process, and who uses the general evaluation rubric to collate the licensing and usability rubrics. A workflow (see Figure 2, “Evaluation workflow”) to define the ways in which information is shared and managed is key to making this possible.

Conclusion

The importance of carefully evaluating electronic resources before purchase is clear. When our collection management philosophy began to emphasize access-based acquisitions models we were further prompted to look more closely at our electronic resources and to communicate our needs more clearly to vendors. Furthermore, budget cuts have necessitated more careful acquisitions decisions. An organized, carefully planned evaluation process allows the library to evaluate the features of resources, provides information useful in vendor negotiations, and increases transparency and documentation of collection development decision-making processes.