Collection Assessment and New Academic Programs

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Abstract: At Oregon State University a library collection assessment is a required part of the review process for every new academic program proposal. Over time, this assessment has moved away from a brief statement regarding the adequacy of the collection to support the new program to a more thorough evaluation and report. These assessments also provide a basis for including collections as a component of the cost of university support for new programs but seldom result in sufficient increased funding. Their true value may be in the opportunity for dialogue on information literacy and the future of scholarly communication.

Keywords: library, collections, assessment, academic programs

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INTRODUCTION

A dilemma for academic librarians is how to reconcile the diminishing purchasing power of budget dollars with the fact that colleges and departments continually propose new educational programs. For each new program proposal at Oregon State University (OSU), the Libraries must complete a collection assessment. A disconnect between approval of new programs and a sustained increase in funding for the Libraries is a common outcome. At best, funds are made available for a few years to fill gaps and perhaps begin, but not maintain, additional journal subscriptions. For such on-going expenses, the assumption seems to be that a new program will supplant an old one. In reality, programs are seldom dropped when new ones are added or at least not in a timeframe that allows the Libraries to reallocate money from one program to another. This then begs the question, “If a collection assessment doesn’t always help provide adequate funding to support new programs, what are the benefits for participating in the program reviews?” This paper examines the efforts of one university library in addressing library acquisitions for new programs and provides suggestions for other libraries that would like to be a part of the new program review process.

Oregon State University Libraries (OSUL) serves a Carnegie RU/VH: Research University (very high research activity) of more than 19,000 students enrolled in 11 colleges and a burgeoning extended campus. As a land grant research institution, pedagogical changes at OSU often follow the evolution of research areas. In many disciplines these changes are rapid and often result in new program proposals. Believing “everything is online,” faculty and administrators often disregard the effect new programs will have on campus libraries tasked to support them. The library assessment built into the new program review process can serve as a venue for OSUL to inform faculty and administrators of this linkage as well as to discuss issues such issues as the role of faculty in
enhancing open access to scholarly communication.

Collection assessments are required for all new programs proposed for the public universities in Oregon. In considering this paper, we were unclear as to whether the Oregon University System (OUS) requirement for a library assessment was unique to Oregon or was in common practice. Informally we contacted some peer institutions (i.e. University of Montana and Colorado State University) and found our situation somewhat atypical. Initially, we assumed we were reflecting the experience and terminology of most OUS institutions. However, as we contacted our counterparts at these seven schools, we discovered that each institution had taken its own path with collection assessments for new programs (Avery, personal communication). Had we not made our initial assumption, that there would be little variation among OUS institutions, we might have conducted a more rigorous survey.

While the literature is replete with articles on collection assessment and assessment techniques with regards to collection management, our literature review focusing specifically on new programs found few. We noted with interest an article that discussed mechanisms for realignment of academic library budgets to better accommodate changes in institutional mission (Schwartz 2007). The author comments that developing research collections that are equitable across all disciplines may best be accomplished when there is a university-wide structure for collection assessments. We noticed similar concerns regarding tying library budgets to the strategic plan of the university voiced in more recent articles on allocation formulas (German and Schmidt 2001). Finally we found some cautioning in the literature that hand wringing about the plight of library funding is not received well by university administrators (Lynch et al. 2007). Only one article (Sinha and Tucker 2005) was directly relevant to our topic. This article described how collection assessments are performed and reported
for new programs at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Our intention is to extend Sinha &
Tucker’s discussion by describing the process used at OSUL, and discussing benefits and caveats
drawn from our experiences that may be useful to other academic librarians.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

For over 25 years Oregon State University Libraries (OSUL) has participated in the evaluation of
library resources for all academic program changes within Oregon State University (OSU). At OSU,
curricular changes fall into two categories: major changes, such as adding a new degree program,
college or department, which require a full proposal, (Category I) and minor changes, such as adding
or dropping a course, which require a brief proposal (Category II) (Oregon State University. Office
of Academic Planning and Assessment 2008a, 2008b). Category I proposals require approval by the
Oregon University System (OUS) and the Oregon State Board of Higher Education, whereas
Category II proposals do not.

Throughout the 1980s OSUL was asked to sign off on all curricular changes (both Category I and
II proposals). By the early 1990s this requirement was dropped, in part, because the Libraries’ input
was perceived as a barrier in expediting the process. Given the annual number of Category II
proposals processed during the past ten years, ranging from a low of 339 to a high of 585, it is not
surprising that streamlining and automating the process was a real concern (Oregon State University.
Faculty Senate 2007). By 2002, submission of Category II proposals was successfully automated.
While no longer a part of the approval process for these “minor” changes, subject librarians have full
access to a searchable database of these proposals for collection development and current awareness
purposes. The library evaluation remains part of all Category I proposals. The OSU Faculty Senate
Curriculum Council (FSCC) annually reviews an average of nine Category I proposals (Oregon State University. Faculty Senate 2007).

Like any relationship, that of OSUL and the FSCC has evolved over time. Several factors have influenced that evolution. These include:

- changes in the interpretation of the OUS library review requirement;
- faculty governance and a common misunderstanding on campus that librarians do not have faculty status;
- budget reality checks at the University level;
- changes in library leadership;
- tools available for providing a timely review of library resources.

The OUS requirement for an assessment of “reference sources” for new programs and “resources” for new certificate programs states the need to:

"…Describe the adequacy of student and faculty access to library and department resources (including, but not limited to: printed media, electronically-published materials, videotapes, motion pictures, CD-ROM and online databases, and sound files) that are relevant to the proposed program (e.g., if there is a recommended list of materials issued by the American Library Association or some other responsible group, indicate to what extent access to such holdings meets the requirements of the recommended list).

…How much, if any, additional financial support will be required to bring access to such reference materials to an appropriate level? How does the institution plan to acquire these needed resources?" (Oregon University System. Office of Academic Affairs 2002a, 2002b).
Twenty-five years ago, the statement of the adequacy of library resources for a new program was expected to be positive. Proposals often arrived at the FSCC with a short statement claiming the adequacy of library resources written by the proposing department. Not realizing this unwritten tenet in the late 1980s, a few new subject librarians erred on the side of assessment rigor and suggested that collections might need to be bolstered. These intrepid souls were encouraged by a new library administration, which was attempting to raise the visibility of the Libraries on campus.

Even in the late 1990s the fact that these library assessments were to be completed by the Libraries’ faculty came as a surprise to many on campus. When this connection was made, librarians were sometimes asked to review a proposal well in advance of its getting out of the College-level curriculum committee. On these occasions, receiving advance notice about curricular changes was helpful for the subject librarian. But for the collection development officer, allocating time and resources to the task of completing a full assessment for a proposal that might not make it out of the College was ill-advised. As a result, the Libraries adopted a policy of conducting assessments only after proposals have reached the Faculty Senate Curriculum Council. In doing so, the Libraries may have passed up an opportunity to communicate the range of library services needed to support new programs at an earlier stage. A restricted time frame has encouraged librarians to develop a well-defined process for these assessments.

Assessment rigor has been cultivated within OSUL, as has the importance of articulating specific resources lacking in the collection. However, placing a cost figure on mitigating marginal or inadequate collections was not done consistently until the Associate University Librarian for Technical Services took over as the designated ex-officio library representative on the FSCC in 2000. That leadership resulted in a linkage between the library assessment and the budget for new
programs. The 2000/2001 FSCC Annual Report noted:

“A task force … convened to flowchart the Category I process. A number of bottlenecks were identified including library liaison, approval from the Budgets and Fiscal Planning Committee, and problems resulting from the construction of the request. Discussions with the Library Committee raised concerns about inadequate funding in the proposals for journals, monographs, and other materials particularly when new degrees and programs were proposed.” (Oregon State University. Faculty Senate 2001)

By February 2004, the Curricular Procedures & Policies had articulated the process for allocating funds to the library for Category I proposals (Oregon State University. Office of Academic Planning and Assessment 2008c). As part of the assessment process, librarians evaluate the current library collections as “adequate” “marginally adequate” or “inadequate.” When they find that a collection is “inadequate,” they attach the dollar figure needed to cover the addition of specific titles (books, journals, databases, etc.). This figure must be added as a line item for the Libraries in the final program proposal budget.

Currently OSUL enjoys a rather high profile within the FSCC. FSCC membership has always required the University Librarian, or designee, in an ex-officio capacity and as a conduit to the subject librarian. In 2006, for the first time, a subject librarian was selected to be a voting member of the FSCC. If other Faculty Senate Committees are any indicator this will become a precedent for continued representation by a library faculty member in a voting capacity. This increased visibility of librarians within the FSCC serves the Libraries’ assessment process as well. Category I proposals are discussed in depth at FSCC meetings. By having a subject librarian participating in these discussions, information about how the library assessment was received can be brought back to the Libraries. This informal feedback may affect the evolution of the current assessment process.
ASSESSMENT PROCESS

Category I proposals that are approved by College curriculum committees, are submitted to the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, which places them on the docket for review by the Faculty Senate Curriculum Council. The Libraries have negotiated with the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment a two week timeframe in which the librarians must conduct and submit their assessment prior to review by FSCC. The Head of Collection Development tracks Category I proposals as they are submitted to the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment and assigns subject librarians to work on the library assessment. The complexity of the assessment depends on the magnitude of the proposed curricular changes. For new interdisciplinary programs that may cross multiple subject areas, several librarians may be assigned to a single proposal.

The collection development officer prepared guidelines and a suggested process for subject librarians, particularly new subject librarians, working on Category I library assessment reports. (Oregon State University Libraries 2004). Previous Category I assessments are available for librarians to review and use as templates. The last full conspectus of the OSUL collections was completed in 2000, so when subject librarians approach a new Category I proposal, they can use that conspectus as a baseline for a current collection analyses of particular subject areas.

In addition to the process guidelines and above-mentioned resources, librarians have an assortment of tools and techniques at their disposal to locate the information needed to enable comparison and analysis of OSUL collections. Subject librarians gather collection information for peer institutions’ libraries in the subject areas defined by the new program. Often the Category I proposal will name peer institutions offering a similar or related program; if this is not part of the proposal, librarians will use a list of peers compiled by the OSU President’s office as part of the strategic plan of the University. Where once it was necessary to search the online catalogs of several institutions to gather the peer information, as of late 2006 librarians use the WorldCat Collection Analysis tool to analyze...
and compare OSUL collections with those of its peer institutions. To assess how well OSUL has kept pace with collecting in appropriate subjects, rates of publication are determined using Blackwell Book Services’ Coverage and Cost Study (Blackwell Book Services 2008). Serials comparisons are enhanced by using lists of core journals, when available, or by using Thomson Scientific’s *Journal Citation Reports*. Custom Local Journal Usage Reports from Thomson Scientific show where OSU researchers are published and what journals they cite in their research. Lists of journals, books, media, or core reference materials can be generated using the “create lists” feature of the OSUL’s integrated library system, Millennium, supplied by Innovative Interfaces. Interlibrary loan statistics generated from the ILLiad system are used to understand gaps in serial and monographic collections. Online databases, both bibliographic and full-text are considered, and librarians may use *Gold Rush*, an electronic resource management system developed by the Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries, to compare the journal coverage overlap of different databases in order to make recommendations. Librarians also assess whether or not OSUL provide adequate access to different media (audio and video files, spatial and other datasets, etc.), if they are important for the new program.

Regional collections are a piece of the collection assessment puzzle, as well. OSUL is a part of the Orbis Cascade Consortium whose union catalog, Summit, effectively triples the number of unique monographs available via to faculty and students at OSU. It also makes available multiple copies of many titles. Loans are easily requested through the Summit catalog and delivered between Orbis/Cascades member libraries within three business days. When conducting an evaluation, librarians are making a judgment on how much to rely on regional collections to fill a local need. This judgment may rely on their prior liaison activities with faculty, the strength of library collections in comparable programs at peer institutions outside the region, and anticipated increases
in enrollment and new faculty hires.

Once a subject librarian gathers the appropriate information, s/he compiles it into a report that includes objective statements describing OSUL holdings and provides a cost estimate for collection-related expenses necessary to support the proposed program at the appropriate level. In recent years, OSUL experimented with including an estimate of personnel costs in addition to the projected materials costs. Personnel costs were determined by estimating the average FTE proportion needed to cover collection development, liaison and instruction for an entirely new subject area (e.g. water resources). To our knowledge none of these personnel costs have yet been funded.

After the subject librarian(s) finish the report, it is approved by the Head of Collection Development, reviewed by the Associate University Librarian for Collections and Content Management, and signed by the University Librarian. It is then sent to the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment and copied to the relevant departments or colleges. The full Category I proposals go through a chain of review culminating with the Oregon University System Office of Academic Affairs. When funding for library collections to support newly approved programs is granted as result of the Category I proposals, it comes from reallocation at the department and/or College level. These additional funds are allocated over the first three years of the new program only; they are not long-term increases for collections budgets. An example of a library assessment that resulted in additional funding for the Libraries is available beginning on page 55 of full category I proposal at http://oregonstate.edu/ap/curriculum/cat1sweb/2003-2004/Water_Resources.pdf. Examples of all Category I proposals from the past ten years are available at http://oregonstate.edu/ap/curriculum/cat1sweb/index.htm.

Since 2000 the Libraries have conducted 25 Category I library assessments. Of these, we have
rated the collection adequate to support 10 proposals, marginally adequate to support 12 proposals and inadequate to support three proposals. We provided a dollar figure for specific enhancements for 13 of these proposals, a practice which is now standard for these assessments. In only two case have we have received funding from the University.

It is a frustration for subject librarians that funds may only be requested for “inadequate” collections, and not “marginally adequate” collections, and that funding is increased only for three years. Despite the cessation of funding after the initial three-year period, OSUL accrues a number of benefits from this process.

**BENEFITS**

*Opportunities for campus dialogue*

The Category I proposal process creates an opportunity for OSU librarians to learn about new research and teaching trends and to plan for future collections and services. Responding to requests for evaluations gives librarians a platform to inform and educate campus leaders about library issues and to engage in meaningful dialogue about the future of access to scholarly information and its preservation.

*Introducing information literacy into new courses*

The Head of Collection Development tracks Category I proposals even before they come to the Libraries for an assessment, so there is a conduit for informing subject librarians about forthcoming...
proposals. Although Category I proposals are well developed once they are submitted to the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment, chances are the specifics of each new course has not been fully fleshed out. This is a prime opportunity for librarians involved with information literacy to talk to faculty about how the Libraries can fit into the curriculum. Once a course or curriculum has been implemented, it can be difficult to get the Libraries involved. Getting a foot in the door early can help the Libraries to become a major player within the program.

**Venue for discussing archival issues, Institutional Repositories**

When the Libraries do its assessment, it can be a good opportunity to discuss how the research and reports that are created from a new program can be archived. Faculty, and perhaps their students, will be doing research that should not be lost. Libraries are in an excellent position to explain how this scholarly output can be archived, preserved and made accessible. OSUL have created an institutional repository for the scholarly output of the University. If discussions regarding archiving scholarly work begin early in the program design process, then it is more likely that a new program will adopt a system for archiving their research. Once a program begins, and the day-to-day operations of running the program is the focus, faculty may be less likely to embrace a new way of disseminating their scholarship. Libraries have the opportunity to shape how the faculty think about the work that they create and how they want that work to be captured and made available.

**Open Access**

If a proposed program is a significant departure from the programs already on-campus or is, for example, a doctoral program where only a bachelor’s program existed, then it is very likely that new
money will be needed for the Libraries to bring its collection up to the level that is needed. In the sciences, the major resources needed are journals. Journal subscriptions can range from inexpensive to very costly, and it is possible that a new program may not have the money for the Libraries to purchase new journals. As noted earlier, the Libraries will receive funding from a new program when collections are “inadequate”. But as funding is only for three years, paying for new journals, though needed, is problematic. When new journals are purchased with this money the Libraries must take on the burden of continuing to subscribe to these journals even if they may only be important to a small number of individuals on campus at that time.

With the escalating cost of journals, Category I proposals are a chance to discuss the Open Access movement with faculty. By educating the faculty on the importance of publishing their scholarly work in journals or other venues that are publicly accessible, they can strengthen the reputation of Open Access journals. A shift to Open Access journals can allow libraries to have more purchasing power with their budget and subsequently support new programs.

*Learn about future of own collection*

For years libraries have assessed their collections in many different ways and for many different reasons, so the idea of doing an assessment for a new academic program would not be fundamentally different from the standard business of libraries. Instead of doing retrospective collection assessments, Category I proposals allow OSUL to look forward and be more strategic on how to shape their collection to the curriculum.

Doing this type of prospective collection review provides librarians with an opportunity to learn
about their own collection in a methodical way. New librarians or those who have taken on new subject areas for collection development are also given the chance to critically look at the collection and to assess how it will fit into the current curriculum and the proposed changes.

Costing out the value of library materials and personnel

In addition to assessing the collection, successful new programs incrementally raise personnel costs. Librarians often must take on new subject areas when new programs are launched. A library liaison program to each department and program has been in place for decades at OSUL, but it is often the case that faculty and administrators “forget” what librarians do for them in terms of services such as instruction, interlibrary loan, reserves, etc. Faculty and departments own their curricula but the effect on campus infrastructure of changing curricula is not readily apparent to them. Thoughts about the costs of library materials to support programs are subsumed by the many pressing concerns and responsibilities of teaching, research and funding for programs.

Communicate with campus leaders about library issues and services

Because Category I proposals are seen by all levels of the University’s administration on up to the statewide university system, the Libraries’ section can be an platform to raise awareness of other issues that may not be directly deal with collection assessment. Even if the collection is adequate to support a new program, the assessment can be written so that the other services offered by the Libraries are highlighted. If faculty and administrators only think of the Libraries in terms of the collection, this is a time to remind them of all that the Libraries have to offer them, their students and the program.
CAVEATS

Is there a need for follow-up?

New programs are reviewed by the university after a five year period, but library assessments are not part of that review. Subject librarians are usually included in program reviews required by professional accrediting bodies such as Society of American Foresters (SAF) or Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET). Not all programs within a department or college are accredited in this way. Ten year departmental reviews are conducted by the Faculty Senate Curriculum Council (FSCC) for programs that do not have an accreditation component, such as the History of Science. In the past, the Libraries have not been involved in these program reviews. In 2006, when the Libraries’ Head of Collection Development began serving on the FSCC in an ex-officio capacity, she saw that departmental reviews did not have a library assessment. Sensing an opportunity to get the Libraries more involved in the curriculum, she proposed that all departmental reviews have a library assessment, which was supported by the FSCC.

It is a positive development that subject librarians perform assessments for departmental reviews because it provides an opportunity for follow-up. But it may also have unintended consequences. For instance, if the focus of a department’s programs has changed significantly, the collection may no longer be adequate to support that change. We can foresee a situation where the University found a department to be “successful” despite a library assessment that revealed an “inadequate” collection. Would the influence of the library’s assessment be weakened? Could this undermine the role and value of the library assessment piece in subsequent Category I proposals? If programs can be successful in the eyes of University administrators with an “inadequate” collection, is there still an
argument to be made for additional funding for collections?

Too late to impact curriculum

By the time a Category I proposal comes to the Libraries it has been through a College-level curriculum committee. At this point the proposals have been well planned and communication with individuals and groups who will be affected by the new program has been completed. Librarians can talk with faculty about some of the issues discussed above, but for issues of information literacy, it may be too late. The curriculum for the new program has been well planned and the faculty involved may not be open to changing things. If it has taken a long time for a Category I proposal, especially for a program that is highly interdisciplinary, to go through the process, faculty may be frustrated with the delay and not be open to additional collaboration.

Predicting collection needs

It can be difficult to assess what needs to be added to a collection for programs that deal with new research areas. If monographs are not where the information is yet, but may be in the future, it can be difficult to estimate future costs. Monograph purchasing is typically more flexible than serials, but if old programs are not being dropped then the monograph budget is spread thinner. The timing of new programs could be a factor if journals that are important are not part of a library’s package agreement with a publisher. If these journals need to be purchased separately, they may cost more than if they were part of a multi-year deal purchase.
CONCLUSIONS

As Lynch et al. (2007) note, pointing out the symbolic value of the campus library is a non-starter in budget talks with upper administration, whereas promoting the library through its “practical role and participation in campus life” resonates with administrators. Collection assessments can be used to shine a light on the many ways that libraries quietly contribute to the academic environment. While collection assessment for new programs does not lead directly to a sustained increase in library funding at Oregon State University Libraries, it has served as a vehicle for raising the visibility of the Libraries on campus and communicating scholarly communication issues and their impact on library collections. The process gives librarians experience with assessment tools and a better understanding of their collecting areas. It provides a context for a conversation with teaching and research faculty regarding their library needs.

Small institutions may find the investment in staff time and collection development tools burdensome. In that case, starting with the resources available (the array of online catalogs for example) is a key. When librarians are familiar with the curriculum review process on their campus they can more readily identify ways to involve themselves in that process.

For libraries interested in being involved with assessment and review of new programs, having a presence and a voice on your university’s curriculum committee is extremely important. Having a voting member of the committee from the library is ideal in order to carry more weight. Whether this is representation is possible in institutions where librarians lack faculty status will no doubt be on a case by case basis. At the very least an ex-officio member from the library provides a vehicle for sustained communication about new programs.
REFERENCES


