
Building a Serials Collection in an Academic Library:

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One observation about building a serials collection in an academic library that can immediately be made is that it is a very difficult task. Or to be more precise, it is difficult unless the library has enough financial support to purchase all the serials that are wanted and needed for the collection. In view of the number of titles published worldwide and the costs of these titles, are there any academic libraries so endowed today? Assuming that there are not, all of them will find themselves having to choose between title A requested to support academic department X and title B recommended to enhance a course taught in department Y. These are tough choices that must be made on other than a subjective basis and that must be justified.

Part of the difficulty of selecting serials for the collection stems from the very nature of these publications. They are ongoing and so is the commitment made when a decision to subscribe is reached. When new serials are added to the collection, the length of the list of titles on subscription increases as does the amount of money expended for them. Without regular review and evaluation of the serials collection, resulting in cancellation of titles deemed no longer necessary to the institution's objectives, the expanding serials budget can result in reduced funds available for the purchase of monographs. Each library should have such a program of regular evaluation of its serials on subscription, to judge whether they remain useful to the institution's courses of instruction. If the initial selection has been made without the benefit of a sample issue, such examination is even more important. Many journals change title, issuing body, frequency, or subject matter over time; some do it within the first year, so that volume 1, no. 4, may be quite different from volume 1, no. 1, which was the basis for the decision to subscribe. In many academic libraries, the subscription continues automatically, despite both these changes and a steady increase in the subscription price; titles continue to be received and housed when they

may no longer be appropriate for the collection. Evaluation of the serials collection often comes only when forced by budget restrictions that necessitate the identification of titles for cancellation in order to buy new serial titles or monographs.

Building the serials collection is hard work, then, because of the decisions that have to be made and because, in most cases, of their lasting impact. The task may be more difficult because of the lack of a sufficient number of knowledgeable personnel to select materials from all disciplines in which classes are taught and research is done. Collection development, in the strict sense of the phrase, may be a myth in many libraries. For those that have had neither collection development staff adequate to select materials consistently in all subject areas over the life of the library nor written collection development policies and guidelines, the serials collection may be a product of the particular interests of the selectors, be they faculty or staff. The quantity, as well as the quality, of the serials collection in any particular discipline will be a result, in large measure, of the interest or disinterest of the selectors.

Faculty Selection

In past years, much of the collection development in academic libraries was done by faculty members, who took great interest in this activity and conscientiously built the library's collection in their subject areas. The majority of the present generation of faculty, however, do not consider the selection of library materials to be their responsibility and find themselves too busy with other duties to recommend materials for library purchase on a regular basis. Their selection is limited to an occasional title needed for course reserves or their own research. The responsibility for collection building, then, becomes the library's. In many institutions where selection of materials was primarily an activity of the faculty, library staffing is not sufficient to take on this extra duty. Staff time borrowed from the reference, circulation, or cataloging departments is likely to be inadequate for consistent, thorough collection building. A knowledgeable, thoroughly trained

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staff sufficient in numbers is required for this most important task. Identification and selection of serial titles is time-consuming and requires staff members the majority of whose time is dedicated to collection development activities. The selection, optimally, should be done by those who have taken the time to gain a feel for the total library collection—its strengths and weaknesses and its special collections.

Identification of new serial titles requires good communication with serial publishers who will be willing to send announcements of new journals in the library's fields of interest as well as sample copies. It requires reading the library

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literature, which frequently carries announcements of forthcoming publications, and the literature in the subject area for similar information. Interested faculty can also be helpful in alerting the library to new journals that they have learned about through colleagues who are serving as editors or authors. Though sources of reviews of new journals are few, they can be helpful as well.

Assuming that provisions can be made for the recommendation of serial titles to be added to the collection, where does the final decision-making responsibility lie? Is everything that is recommended ordered? Most likely not, unless the library is extremely well endowed. Because of the ongoing commitment made when a serial subscription is placed, review of recommended titles is usually more rigorous than that given to recommended monographs. There are a variety of options for making final decisions. Recommendations of faculty may be accepted automatically, whereas those of library staff may be reviewed. Final decisions may be made by one or more collection development officers, by a committee of library staff, or by a committee composed of library staff, students, and faculty. Whatever the mode chosen, the goal must be to provide a serials collection that supports the teaching and research needs of the academic institution—easy to say but much more difficult to effect when faced with decisions to be made about individual titles.

Questions

Some of the questions that each person charged with the responsibility of selecting from among recommended serial titles must answer

are the following: Does the library collect materials of this type of in this subject area (e.g., newsletters, Oriental music)? To what extent does it collect them? Will this title help to provide balance of opinions on this topic? Are there existing cooperative collection development agreements with other libraries that will affect this decision? Do we receive other serials on this subject that could be cancelled in exchange for this one? What is the quality of this title in relation to the others dealing with the same subject? What is the actual use of the other library titles on this subject? Does the college or university plan to develop a program of instruction in this subject area? Does the college or university plan to reduce the enrollment in this discipline? What courses would this title support? How many titles of this type (e.g., regional literary magazines) are needed in the collection? How many, and which, recreational magazines are needed in the periodical collection? Where is the journal indexed? Should the serial be retained permanently? Can the issues be bound, or are they made of newsprint? Should they be retained in paper copy and bound? Is microform available? Should the title be retained permanently only on microform? If it is published in a foreign country, should air mail delivery be requested?

The basic determination to be made through the posing of these questions is the value of a particular serial in relation to its cost, the other serials to which the library subscribes, and the institution's programs of instruction. Some of the questions may be answered in written, regularly

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updated collection development policies. Those concerning the plans of the institution can be answered through good communication with the college or university administration. Questions of the title's usefulness to particular academic departments can be answered through consultation with faculty members, who are usually quite willing to provide advice concerning specific serials even when they are not able to do selection themselves. Having an active library representative in each teaching department can be quite useful in this regard.

Some librarians have predicted that the serial as known today will not exist in the future.¹ They believe that journals will be published only

electronically. Those librarians who now focus their attention on building serial collections will instead in the future assist patrons in searching electronic databases for needed information, according to this scenario. One writer predicted in 1980 that it would be at least five years before there was any major shift from printed to electronic journals.² Considering the progress made to date and the many questions remaining to be answered about electronic journal publishing

Instructions for the Preparation of Manuscripts for North Carolina Libraries

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(copyright; rewards, both tangible and intangible, to authors; and standards for telecommunication), it is likely to be at least another five years before such a shift is made and unlikely that all serials will be published electronically. In the meantime, even as we plan for the utilization of electronic journals in academic libraries, we will continue to build serial collections. Consequently, we will continue to need individuals with good judgment, who are knowledgeable in the subjects in which they select, familiar with the existing collection, and alert to new or revised institutional programs. Serving as the foundation to this entire process is a comprehensive, frequently revised collection development policy.

References

¹Meredith Butler, "Electronic Publishing and its Impact on Libraries: A Literature Review," *Library Resources and Technical Services* 28(January/March 1984): 41-58.

²A.E. Cawkell, "Electronic Information Processing and Publishing—Problems and Opportunities," *Journal of Information Science* 2(October 1980): 192.

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Keyes Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings* New York: McGraw, 1965), 416.
Susan K. Martin, "The Care and Feeding of the MARC Format," *American Libraries* 10 (September 1979): 498.
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