A SERIALS CANCELLATION PROJECT

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENTUCKY

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INTRODUCTION

What began as news in the early spring of 2004 that the University of Kentucky Libraries would once again need to reduce serials payments, particularly those for scientific, technical, and medical titles, was quickly recognized as a local example of the widespread and growing crisis in scholarly communications.

Prices of scientific, technological, and medical journal subscriptions have been soaring, especially for those from commercial publishers, but even for titles that are published by scholarly societies. Survey statistics from the American Research Libraries show that from 1986 to 2002, serials expenditures and serial unit costs for ARL libraries rose 227% while the number of serials purchased rose only 9% in that same time period. And, while prices per title are going up, more and more titles are being born, some of which are at first distributed at “no additional cost” to subscribers of the parent title, only to later demand their own separate, growing price, once a healthy readership is established. Commercial publishers by acquiring or merging with other publishers around the globe are building what resemble monopolies in scientific publishing, decreasing any useful competition between publishers and allowing journal prices to rise higher and faster. At the same time, as a product of growing specialization and specificity in
scientific, technological, and medical research, new titles continue to arise, and these are desired and needed by researchers. The trend is for fewer and fewer publishers in control of more and more titles.

Academic library budgets are generally traveling a far different path than that of serials prices. State supported academic institutions are adapting to the reality of state revenues paying for more and more services that are being shifted from the federal government without the corresponding shift in federal revenues. In the case of the University of Kentucky there has also been the mission to position itself as a top 20 public university, which is very difficult to do when the state, in this period under discussion, “takes back” funds that actually came from an increase in tuition rates.

BACKGROUND

This problematic publishing model has its roots in the post WWII surge in federally funded scientific and technological research. With money pouring in and the pace of research growing, scholarly societies were soon unable to keep up with the publishing produced by said research. Scientific publishing became profitable for commercial publishers in meeting the needs of research and academic institutions in staying abreast of the latest research. Tax dollars often fund this research as well as the subscription costs necessary for scholars to obtain the research results of fellow scholars.
At the University of Kentucky Libraries there are and have been other library-wide mechanisms in place to keep serials subscriptions going in the face of price hikes, such as getting rid of all duplicate subscriptions in the 15 campus libraries, earlier rounds of serials cancellations, and consortial arrangements with other institutions; but, fortunately at this time the library administration recognized the necessity of directly working with the problems inherent in the commercial publishing model. A Scholarly Communications Working Group was formed, the germ of which arose from earlier efforts of several University of Kentucky librarians to educate their fellow librarians and the teaching and research faculty on scholarly communication issues. In particular, see Mary Molinaro’s and Beth Kraemer’s article, “Scholarly Communication: Starting a Kentucky Dialog” in Kentucky Libraries, 67(3), pp 12-16. An earlier symposium on the subject arranged and hosted by Kraemer and Molinaro also explored issues behind the growing problem of skyrocketing serials prices. Medical librarian, Stephanie Aken, another working group member, was also already lending her expertise and passion for educating the library staff on the open access initiative, while acquiring open access journal publications for the libraries’ collections. Two other members of the working group, Mary McLaren and Nancy Lewis, continue to investigate institutional repositories and storage facilities, work that they began for the Scholarly Communications Working group.

The working group’s charge from the Dean included the following:

- Oversight of electronic theses and dissertation projects.
- Investigation of Institutional Repositories.
- Scholarly Communication Education.
• Development of Toolkit and outreach process for talking to faculty about forthcoming cuts to the materials budget.

In turn, the working group produced a list of desired outcomes:
• Faculty awareness of costs.
• Reaching and engaging the teaching and research faculty.
• Knowledge of issues for working group.
• Strengthened liaison with teaching and research faculty.
• Knowledge of issue for library faculty.
• Building a foundation for the future.
• Proactive faculty.
• Fostering of new ideas on alternative publishing.
• Community Plan.
• State involvement/education.

As part of its educational role, the work group created a web site www.uky.edu/Libraries/ScholarlyComm/faculty.html, including pages on Scholarly Communication FAQ’s, Key Issues in Scholarly Education, The Problem, University of Kentucky journal price information and usage statistics (see Table 1), and links related to actions by other University libraries.

After teaching faculty and graduate students were contacted by both the dean and their academic liaisons concerning the libraries’ scholarly communications efforts and the necessity of
canceling titles, their liaisons worked with them to further their understanding of the problems
that libraries continually face with soaring serials prices, explosion of new titles, and the growing
power of the emerging publishing empires. The teaching faculty and the graduate students were
each asked to name twenty titles necessary to their work and the format they preferred.

**COMPLICATIONS AND VARIABLES**

Apart from such problems as getting the faculty’s attention before the summer break, most complications in the process were unique to the world of serials publishing. Use statistics (both print and electronic) were needed to provide guidance on selection of those serials titles not named as necessary by faculty. Electronic usage statistics provided by publishers ranged from several useful statistics available per title (number of full text articles downloaded, citations downloaded, and so forth), to one statistic for a complete package of titles, which was relatively worthless.

Continued electronic access to archived issues of a cancelled paper title, was also inconsistent from publisher to publisher. Sometimes access to all previously accessible issues would remain, while with other publishers all access would end with cancellation of the paper copy. Also, canceling paper and relying completely on electronic access leaves the subscriber at the mercy of electronic access embargo periods, and these too, were inconsistent from publisher to publisher. Many titles reviewed for possible cancellation came “free” with other titles or in packages and so were not worth cutting unless the less expensive alternative of purchasing only
the main title was available, usually from a different vendor. At the same time numerous packages were adding or subtracting titles as titles were being evaluated for cancellation.

Unpredictable price increases were another problem; one vendor in particular had low prices during the window for cancellation/renewal, only to raise them substantially once subscriptions were locked in. Service charges were raised as well in response to serials cancellations, with no explanation available of how these increases were determined. Pricing models also varied from publisher to publisher and from vendor to vendor, including free online with print, extra for online if subscribed to print, charge for first format with an additional charge for additional format, and so on.

Theoretically, a title could, in the beginning of the selection and cancellation decision process be part of a consortial arrangement, have statistics available that only related to its package downloads, be from a small foreign publisher on the other side of the globe (making phone consultation difficult if not impossible) with no known email address. That title might be dropped from its package and have a “free” title attached to it that can only be obtained by purchasing the first title, while that price (in a foreign currency) goes up, and the service charge is raised an unpredictable amount because of cancellation of the publisher’s other titles. In addition, the ability to cancel it at all may need to be part of a larger negotiation with the publisher or vendor.

Other issues arose that were specific to the particular circumstances at the University of Kentucky Libraries, namely the concurrent reorganization of the library system from a flat
structure with little accountability and substandard communication to a more tiered framework with redesigned work flows and responsibilities. The scattering of 15 libraries across the campus also contributed to communication and accountability issues as did the addition of this education and cancellation process to the work load of staff who were also attempting to keep up with their regular job responsibilities, sometimes in already understaffed work centers. During this project, technical processing in the library system was still decentralized, so that the addition of the numerous work steps that are part of any cancellation process (in cataloging and acquisitions particularly) was very difficult to work into the flow, especially for very small work groups.

**OUTCOMES**

A total of 1,186 Titles were cancelled in at least one format, and 756 were cancelled completely, for a savings of $568,228. Outreach to the teaching faculty was largely successful both in getting feedback on necessary titles and in the strengthened ties engendered by the full sharing of the academic serials issue and its ramifications. The hope of educating the teaching and research faculty and the library community was partially met and laid a foundation for further cooperation and problem solving.

The efforts of the Scholarly Communications Working Group also strengthened the framework for future scholarly communications efforts at the university, which will be necessary to further extricate itself from the grasp of today’s mega-publishers.
An unintended, but expected, outcome was reduced access to scholarly information which can be partially offset by increased use of interlibrary loan services.

QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS

What exactly is lost when print is given up and only electronic access is kept? Currently it may be difficult to see the value and importance of lost print ads, letters to the editor, and other material that doesn’t get picked up in electronic access. But, these are part of the information package and do hold value for some users. The question also arises of how to sustain the motivation and energy required to actively involve the teaching faculty in the issues of the serials crisis when the direct need for communication, cooperation and education has temporarily eased. The work flow of the technical processing also needs to be evaluated and reworked for the next such effort. And, a primary question is “Were enough titles cancelled?
REFERENCES

