Access, Access, Access: Moving to the (Mostly) Electronic Collection in a Small College Library

Angela Myatt Quick, Richard Hren, and Eugene A. Engeldinger

Abstract

Freed from the constraints of the "quantity equals quality" paradigm of the old ACRL collection standards, Carthage is migrating to a new collection model emphasizing full text, web based electronic resources that better support the mission of the library and college.

Introduction

The goal of the small college library is to adequately support the curricular research of undergraduate students in the majors offered by the institution, not necessarily to provide a comprehensive repository of scholarly knowledge. Previous accreditation and evaluation standards from ACRL have not addressed this issue, focusing instead on a paradigm that measures numbers, but not necessarily quality. With the change in ACRL standards to an assessment-based model, Carthage College has been freed to selectively shape its collection to support undergraduate study. Much as the real estate industry claims that the three most important factors in property value are location, location, and location, we claim that the three most important factors in collection value are access, access, and access. Consequently, we are weighting our collection heavily toward electronic resources while maintaining a smaller, focused core collection of print and media resources. Electronic resources bring the benefits of access from almost anywhere, reduced need for shelf space, ease of locating information, and cost effectiveness.

Re-thinking Collection Development

In light of rapid developments in information technology and their effects on potential information resources over the last decade, we decided to reassess our criteria for collection building. We believe that any revision should be done in light of the mission of the college. We needed to decide what collection development model would best meet the needs and expectations of the community. After examining Carthage's mission statement, administrative and faculty planning documents, and Academic Information Services' mission and goals, the collection development committee determined that the following criteria should be used to shape the library collection.

Angela Myatt Quick is public services coordinator, Richard Hren is head of technical services, and Eugene Engeldinger is vice president of academic information services library at Carthage College.

First, materials chosen should support undergraduate level students in each of the majors offered at Carthage. Second, as many resources as possible should be made available electronically over the campus computer network—electronic, web-based resources should be given top priority. Third, even though we are shifting the predominant format of our collection, we are determined not to sacrifice its quality. For example, the collection development committee continues to rely on critical reviews from accepted authoritative sources and on careful evaluation when making purchasing decisions. Fourth and finally, once resources have been purchased, use determines their retention in the collection. In short, just as potential use influences the selection of materials in the first place, so actual use determines if materials are retained or weeded later. As a general rule, if a resource is not current, is not recommended, and is not being used, it is withdrawn or the contract not renewed.

Advantages of Increased Electronic Resources

We have identified major advantages to incorporating electronic resources into the library collection.

Electronic resources improve access. Access to electronic resources is available anytime and anywhere there is a computer. At 2 p.m. from the library reference area, at 2 a.m. from a dorm room, or from a private home off campus on a Saturday, web-based electronic resources are available. This can't be said about any other format.

Electronic resources improve information currency. Electronic resources can be and are updated much more frequently and more easily than print.

Electronic resources greatly improve searchability for journal resources in electronic format and enhance it in e-books. Undergraduate students most often look for information by topic, and prefer keyword searching. Electronic serial databases are designed to use keyword searching, and are a good way to find relevant information in a number of sources. One search strategy can be broadcast across thousands of journals simultaneously. Results can be scanned by the patron, who can decide quickly which citations or articles to read or print. In the same way, electronic books can be scanned via keyword search for relevant chunks of information. Compare this to using print indices, which force users to adopt library-centric subject terms, where subject terms cannot be combined, where materials may not be available in the library (necessitating interlibrary loan) and where you must locate the titles on the shelves and photocopy the articles you wish to read. Consider too the relative inconve-

nience of using the library catalog to identify books likely to contain the information you need, then using tables of contents, indexing, or skimming to find the relevant sections. All this is usually much easier when done electronically.

Electronic resources can provide a distinct cost advantage. For approximately $45,000 a year we gain access to over 6,500 full text electronic journals. Our print serials budget provides access to 450 journals for $90,000. Last year, as a member of the Wisconsin Academic Consortium, we purchased access to about 2,300 e-books for about $3,000. In the same budget year, $60,000 bought us 2,500 print books. If we are concerned with bang for the buck (and we are), we get the biggest bang with electronic resources.

Electronic formats have other unique advantages. They do not require the same type of processing as print volumes, such as labels and pockets. They do not take up shelf space. They can't be lost, stolen, or mutilated. Since they can never be overdue, the library doesn't have to send out notices or collect fines. The cost and time invested in these activities can be considerable.

How Changes Have Reshaped the Collection

Over the decade the electronic serials collection has grown considerably and deliberately. We have three full text aggregator databases: ProQuest PA Research II, Infotrac Expanded Academic Index, and EBSCO Academic Search Elite. We also have two full text news/current events databases: Lexis-Nexis and Newsbank. We added three full text archival journal collections: JSTOR, Project Muse, and American Chemical Society Journals Online. We also added online, web-based, subject specific indexes that include considerable full text: *ABI Inform*, *Education Complete*, *ERIC*, *Business Source Elite*, *General Business File*, *PsychInfo*, *MLA Bibliography*, *ATLA Religion Index*, *Westlaw*, *Chemical Abstracts*, and about 45 others via a per-search FirstSearch account.

Our online reference collection is less impressive, but growing. It includes *Britannica Online*, *College Source Online*, *Biography and Genealogy Master Index*, *Contemporary Authors*, *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, *Books in Print*, *Grove Dictionary of Art*, *Grove Encyclopedia of Life Science*, *Access Science*, *Oxford English Dictionary*, and *American National Biography*.

The electronic book collection is still small, but is beginning to grow with titles we added through participation in the netLibrary Wisconsin Academic Consortium.

In order to accomplish the shift toward electronic resources, it was necessary to cut funds from the print and microform collections. For example, over the years we have

cut the current subscription list from about 750 titles to about 450 titles. We have shaved a number of titles from the microform list as well, particularly those that are included in the archival databases like JSTOR. To enhance the quality of the current print collection, we are engaged in a major weeding project and are eliminating material from the book and periodical stacks. The weeding standards are based on currency of material, authoritativeness, and use.

Collection Development and the New ACRL Standards

We made the decision to pursue this model before ACRL revised its collection standards. The old standards were based on quantity. They did not consider currency, authority, or use, nor how well the collection met the needs of its community. They may have discouraged weeding of outdated material by rewarding larger collections. Finally, they did not provide a way to count access to electronic documents in collection numbers. Had our new collection been evaluated under the old standards, we would have been penalized, even though the collection is now more carefully focused, actively maintained, and larger than before. The new ACRL standards, however, have abandoned the "quantity equals quality" approach in favor of an assessment based model. Because we have considered the stated wishes and goals of the College while creating a new collection development policy, because we are actively noting and evaluating the changes the new policy causes, and because we will be able to demonstrate the ways our collection meets the needs of the Carthage community, we are confident we will do well under evaluations using the new standards. We are relieved that the path we felt it best to take is now one that will be affirmed by ACRL standards.

Conclusion

In summary, the new ACRL standards give each institution the opportunity to shape its library collection to match the needs and expectations of its users without sacrificing a positive image of that collection. At Carthage, we have determined that a highly focused collection with as many electronic resources as possible is the best paradigm. The final result of our bold and ambitious initiatives will be a smaller print collection, but one which is a core collection of greater currency and authority tailored to the curriculum at Carthage. Because we have added thousands of electronic resources, our total collection is not only larger, but also easier to access and easier to use. By focusing on access, access, access, we provide the most, and most available, resources our budget can afford.