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M. Brooke Robertshaw

Oregon State University, brooke.robertshaw@oregonstate.edu

Michaela Willi Hooper

Oregon State University, michaela.willihopper@oregonstate.edu

Kerri Goergen Doll

Oregon State University, kerri.goergen-doll@oregonstate.edu

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Finding the Silver Lining... in the Serials Budget Crisis

by **M. Brooke Robertshaw** (Assistant Professor & Assessment Librarian, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331)
<brooke.robertshaw@oregonstate.edu>

and **Michaela Willi Hooper** (Scholarly Communication Librarian, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331)
<michaela.willihopper@oregonstate.edu>

and **Kerri Goergen-Doll** (Resource Acquisition and Sharing Director, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331)
<kerri.goergen-doll@oregonstate.edu>

Most readers are familiar with (and indeed weary of) the long-running serials crisis: budgets have stagnated as the cost of serials for STEM disciplines continues to rise (Bosch & Henderson, 2016). These circumstances force libraries to cancel journals, affecting researchers' instant access to articles. Nearly two decades ago, **Mobley** (1998) identified university faculty as important players in this drama and called upon librarians to galvanize and educate faculty. The stage has become even more complex in the intervening years, as the preponderance of subscriptions have become digital. Librarians have considered a variety of factors in their attempts to make journal cuts as painless and equitable as possible. Such factors include usage, cost, impact factor, discoverability, and uniqueness (Williamson, Fernandez, & Dixon, 2014).

Librarians have included the voices of faculty during journal cuts in a variety of ways. **Williamson et al.** (2014) surveyed science librarians and found that they frequently consult with faculty one-on-one concerning cancellations. The **University of Wisconsin Eau Claire** library sent departments spreadsheets with cost and usage data so they could rank the necessity of journals identified for deselection (Carey, Elfstrand, & Hijleh, 2006). **Purdue University** appointed two faculty members from each academic department to an ad hoc committee that recommended criteria for deselection. The library then created lists based on these criteria and sent them back to the faculty for final review (Nixon, 1999). When yet more journals had to be slashed in 2009, **Purdue** librarians reached out to faculty via newsletter, met with a group of department heads, again sent lists to departments, and finally met with entire faculty departments. **Nixon** (2010) reflects that, if she were forced to do cancellations again, she would work with lists of all titles and send them to all faculty members, rather than breaking out by departments. Librarians at **Hofstra University** also relied on faculty to vet lists of suggested titles for cancellation, collaborating with their Faculty Senate Library Subcommittee (Srivastava & Harpelburke, 2005). At **Trinity University**, **Chamberlain** and **Caraway** (2006) met with department chairs to provide context about journal cuts. These meetings became broad-ranging discussions about scholarly communication and library issues.

When **Oregon State University Libraries (OSUL)** was faced with a potential budget shortfall in excess of one million dollars over 2008 and 2009, a divide and conquer method

was used to identify which serial titles would be cut. Subject liaisons were sent with subject-based lists to garner input into the cancellation process from departments. Negotiations took place and faculty that spoke up to defend their access to a specific journal usually succeeded in sparing a title from cancellation. Over the years, smaller cuts have occurred leaving the library with only core content.

In 2016, **OSUL** foresaw another potential one-million dollar shortfall if budgetary changes weren't made. This was due to flat budgets and serials inflation. Because of changes in the subject liaison model at **OSUL**, and because we were only left with core content, the library opted to not ask each college or department for input. Instead of having conversations about the individual title level needs of each department, the library had conversations with faculty about the underlying problem of journal costs as it related to the ability to provide a wide range of access, the role the library plays in their research process, and their role as research producers. Due to the complex nature of the process, a team from across the library was formed. This team included librarians from the teaching and engagement department, the resource acquisitions and sharing department, the center for digital scholarship and services, the **Guin Library** (a branch library at the **Hatfield Marine Science Center**), and the assessment librarian.

The library reached out to the faculty community to schedule five lunch-time conversations; food was provided in appreciation for faculty members' time. To engage participants in the topic being discussed, participants were asked what activities in the publication cycle they participate in (creation, evaluation, publication, dissemination & access, preservation, reuse) and in what parts of that cycle they see themselves the most. They were then asked how library services, particularly collections, fit into their research process, how library collections make their work easier, and how it could be improved. The participants were then given an information sheet with a summary of the issues facing library collections. The information sheet used figures to visually convey the library budget, a comparison of our library budget to peer institutions' library budgets, the increase in library spending on serials, and a summary of how much of the library serials budget goes to different pub-

lishers. The participants were then asked their reactions to the information sheet, and what we should be telling their colleagues about the information shared.

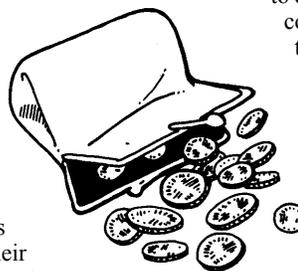
The goal of these conversations was to gather feedback from faculty members about how they use the general collection in support of their research and teaching needs, their understanding of the roles they play as creators, peer evaluators, editors, and consumers; their perspectives on how to balance their individual needs with the needs of the entire **OSU** community; and what solutions faculty may have to increasing serials costs based on their perceived roles in the market. While these conversations also provided an opportunity to discuss with faculty open access, copyright, and library budgeting, those issues were secondary in nature. Since faculty members are a primary stakeholder group for the library, we felt that learning about their perspectives and ideas was imperative as we move forward with decision-making.

After the conversations were done, three of the team members separately looked through notes taken and then came together to talk about what stood out from the conversations. Based on our discussions, six lessons were learned that will guide our ongoing practices and may help others as well.

The first lesson learned was that there are some baseline assumptions you can make about research and publishing, but to convince faculty that you understand their research and publishing choices you need to understand the culture of their discipline. For example, participants from across disciplines expressed their beliefs in the importance of publishing in journals, and specifically peer-reviewed journals that would reach their peers in their discipline (or community). While our participants demonstrated that there are shared practices across academia, we also noted that it is within specific disciplines that the knowledge, practice and culture of the community is further defined. Through our participants' stories and examples, we saw that *one* clear way where the values and practices of a discipline are manifested is through the process that is involved in engaging with a core journal recognized as such by the entire discipline.

Lesson two: We need to understand faculty members not just as researchers, but also as

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authors, reviewers, and editors, and because of their different roles, they value more than just impact factor. Given the proliferation of journals, faculty members may have more opportunities to publish, but our participants also discussed how they feel overextended by the peer review process. They feel that the time they are able to dedicate to the peer review process becomes limited, which leads to questions about the quality of the peer review. This overextension caused some participants to question the quality of the research being published today. As Ziman (1968) pointed out, it is the peer review process that is *supposed* (authors' emphasis) to give "scientific authenticity" to research. This highlighted how the peer review process is connected to faculty participation in the publication cycle and ultimately, how peer review is connected to the promotion and tenure process. It raised questions about whether changes to promotion and tenure processes will impact peer review, the publication cycle, and serials publishing models. Furthermore, if the peer review process is compromised by the increasing number of journals, what is the mechanism for upholding, and building upon, community practices? Most importantly, what is the library's role in this?

Lesson three is where we learned that we need to be transparent and honest about library budgets and the external factors that shape them. When presented with the information about the current costs of journals there was a multitude of reactions among the participants. All were grateful for the information since the vast majority of the participants had not ever seen, or perhaps even thought of, how the proliferation of journals impacts the library and its budget. A lot of frustration with the current practices used by serials publishers was expressed. For example, faculty members questioned the bundling practices of publishers and their own participation in a system where they provide pro bono writing and review only to turn around and pay to see the work that was done for free. Faculty members also shared concerns that they do not understand copyright as well as they would like, and thus struggle to protect their intellectual property.

The fourth lesson is the need to listen with open minds to faculty experiences and concerns with library solutions such as open access and the institutional repository. While many around the room were cognizant of open access, which has been proposed by some as a solution to some of the issues raised here, there were mixed feelings toward this practice. As has been identified in other literature (Rempel & Robertshaw, 2016; Xia, 2010) problems with open access that many of our participants cited include article processing charges (APCs), especially when those charges are not covered by institutional budgets; pressures from more senior professors to publish in particular journals that do not have open access policies; and issues with the peer review process in many open access journals where

rigor is still suspect. There *were* those who actively embraced open access publishing and who viewed it as a solution to the ever increasing costs of journals.

Lesson five is about how these conversations can be used to promote library services as well as to identify misunderstandings about library services. During our conversations, faculty members proposed other solutions such as using inter-library loan (ILL) to access all research as needed or teaming up with other libraries to share the cost of journals or resist publisher price increases. At OSUL, as in many academic libraries, we have a robust ILL system and we participate in regional alliances to share resources. Because of the complexity of copyright law, and that ILL still relies on institutions having access to resources, it is not a panacea to the serials crisis. When the faculty brought up collective action and resource sharing, this gave us another opportunity to engage them in discussions about our current practices and restrictions. The feedback and solutions offered in these conversation were helpful because they demonstrated a key reason why faculty and librarians need to continue to discuss these issues together: we have differing communities of practice.

Finally, lesson six: Don't assume anything and use these conversations to test assumptions about researchers' practices. In particular, we do not have complete knowledge of each others' practices. Faculty are not fully aware of the practices of librarians and the solutions that we have been working toward for the past several years to combat the issue of increasing serial costs. Similarly, librarians continue to learn about the publishing pressures and constraints of faculty members across a range of disciplines. Without having these discussions, our solutions will not include the breadth and depth necessary to solve the complex problems we have in front of us.

These conversations have had a range of impacts for our future decision-making. First, we learned that faculty members are interested in learning more about library practices, want to be involved in solutions, and understand the need for partnership with the library to solve problems. Second, these conversations have informed future discussions that the library will have with other stakeholders, including upper administrators, about the library budget. Third, our conversations have affirmed for us the importance of building bridges across different communities of practice and the possibilities of learning from one another about issues where we can explore them using diverse perspectives. While this may seem common sense, it takes time, resources, and patience to build bridges and learn from one another intentionally and purposefully. That affirmation is our silver lining in an otherwise gloomy situation.

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