

## Metrics and More: How Librarians Decide to Purchase or Cancel Your Journal

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Journal prices are rising, the number of titles is growing, and library budgets are tightening. In this session, a panel of librarians outlined some factors that influence libraries' subscription decisions.

In decisions to keep or discard journals, they agreed, faculty opinions hold enormous sway. Mel DeSart, head of the University of Washington Engineering Library in Seattle, said that he doesn't buy journals that no one asks for. Other librarians are also influential. DeSart reviewed the results of a recent survey of librarians conducted by the Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers (ALPSP)<sup>1</sup> to identify how and why librarians cancel journals. It indicated that final decisions were typically made by librarians only after consulting with faculty. Price and use were cited as important factors in journal cancellation, but faculty no longer requiring a journal was the top

item selected as "very important" (by 257 of 324 question respondents). Only 22 respondents identified impact factor as "very important", although 123 said it was "important".

Because of budget limitations, Debra Bailey, of Rice University, and her staff surveyed faculty to determine the most important journals to keep. With faculty input, the library staff created three lists of journals: "protected", "probationary", and "death row". All "death row" and most "probationary" items were cut.

When the budget cannot be stretched farther and some titles must go, librarians sometimes are locked into long contracts with bigger publishing companies and are forced to cut smaller titles first.

Concerning free content on publishers' Web sites or open-access archives, DeSart said that the ALPSP survey suggests librarians would cancel titles only if a very large percentage of journal content is available free immediately.

Audrey Powers, of the University of South Florida, in Tampa, created a method for librarians to evaluate electronic resources. Few libraries have such a system, and with budget cuts, rising costs, and duplication of databases, it is of growing importance. Powers' online survey system enables collection decisions to be made as a result of a collaborative process with objective results, evaluating cost, use, peer comparisons, content, unique content, ease of use, instructional quality, overall quality, and need. This customizable evaluation tool enables faculty and students to participate in the process when appropriate.<sup>2</sup>

DeSart said that librarians are beginning to consider a variety of best practices for purchasing electronic journals. Through the Engineering Libraries Division of the American Society for Engineering Education, he helped to develop a "punch list" of practices that publishers should strive to meet.<sup>3</sup> One "deal breaker" on the

list was the access authentication provision, a librarian preference that journal Web sites recognize subscribers through their institution's Internet protocol address rather than individual user names. Other items are cover-to-cover digitization of journal content, including advertising; monthly use statistics compliant with the COUNTER (Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources) Code of Practice requirements; and the opportunity for institutional subscribers to label ("cobrand") journal Web sites with their names to show that they are paying for subscriber access.

Bailey said that some small items can also influence collection decisions, such as the level of customer service provided by publishers. For example, she has been waiting 5 months to buy two mathematics journals; if she keeps being put off, she will stop asking, and the publisher will lose revenue.

Bailey said that discounts can also persuade her. Once when she was seeking a discount, a sales representative told her to check with someone else in the company's London office. Instead, Bailey purchased only online access when she also had been interested in print. "If the salesperson had even given me a 5% discount", Bailey said, "I would have said 'Fantastic!'" 

### References

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