Introduction

Like most university library systems, the University of Maryland has been finding ways to maintain research collections including subscriptions to databases of scholarly material with an increasingly shrinking or flat budget. Due to the extraordinary rate of inflation with these materials, librarians have had to make difficult cuts to valuable subscriptions. Retention and deselection decisions are contentious and can lead to problems for all campus library users. This often leads to competitions and resource hoarding in order to avoid difficult and rigorous assessments of the materials. Typically used to gauge a database’s use in terms of access and cost-per-use of the materials.

Our project aims to add a qualitative assessment matrix to this process in order to enhance the meaning and context of these simple numbers in order to aid in the decision-making process and to provide a new level of accountability to the process by making the criteria for decisions transparent and available to colleagues and campus stakeholders.

This poster reflects our beta-stage of development including our proofs of concepts, trials, and feedback from our colleagues.

Mission: Provide librarians with collections management responsibilities the tools for a thorough analysis of resources in a systematic and robust way.

Goal: To be able to maintain a database of qualitative data to facilitate meaningful, accurate, and descriptive analysis and assessments of library resources.

So what? Our project looks at the use and added value of the tool for the building, reflecting, and analyzing connections between qualitative and quantitative data. This will allow for more meaningful justifications of budgetary decisions than compared to cost and use metrics alone. Given the necessity for meticulous review of continuing resources, our project addresses a request for enhanced transparency from the university faculty and library oversight body and serves as a useful tool for accountability and justification of impactful decisions for stakeholders internally and externally.

Review of Literature

Qualitative Evaluation of eResources in Practice

A handful of organizations have attempted to create tools to evaluate databases and other electronic resources using qualitative criteria. We have reviewed these tools and selected some features as possible templates or practices for our databases evaluation work.

eDesireta - http://edesireta.cs.illinois.edu/

eDesireta functions as a source of market intelligence information for research library managers to evaluate and manage electronic resources. Some of the seeds of this project came from the now defunct Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Academic Database Assessment Tool, a tool to assess databases journal coverage. Jacso (2010) provides a good overview of this tool and qualitative data available within.

eVALUE - http://www.evalute.oclc.org/

eVALUE provides a set of tools to help academic libraries develop their own evaluation practices for electronic resources. Some best practices around themes such as user experience, planning, management, and impact offer templated qualitative data collection and analysis tools. Dallas and McIntosh (2004) share details about the development and use of this tool.

Journal Review Tool - James Madison University (JMU)

The Journal Review Tool is an online survey tool to collect structured feedback from the JMU campus community including qualitative and quantitative measures. Duncan, C.J., & G. G., G. M. (2015) details the development and use of this tool to review electronic resources.

Description and Methods

Initially, we set out to create a simple spreadsheet to record simple data. It became clear quickly, however, that a more dynamic system was needed. As such, we put together a Qualtrics survey with a series of questions allowing librarians to both add and more comprehensively describe resources. For ease of use, the survey asks both direct questions about the qualities of the resources as well as open-ended areas for user input. This design accommodates two distinct goals:

1) The directed questions give librarians a chance to evaluate materials on an equal footing across disciplines by providing a clear set of value criteria
2) The Freedom to express "X" factors and value-added components of a resource including relative use forms indicate highly departmental impact despite relatively small usage numbers (e.g., a small Classics department with nearly 100 usage, vs. a large engineering department with a lower impact (percentage yet higher usage numbers))

As shown in the surveyed provided below, these questions seek to address the following concerns:

- Scope and completeness of content
- Core users and their institutional and research needs
- Exclusivity of content
- Resource mechanics
- Resource restrictions (and how this conflicts with other needs)
- Peer institution ownership

Each record is organized by the title of the resource. Using the clipboard icon on the right-hand side of the screen, we can drill-down into the specific record to view the full description provided by the librarian.

We can look at these results both as an individual record for a specific resource and as a full-view of all resources evaluated which allows decision-makers to understand a fuller context for the resources within the university’s holdings.

Demonstration

To address the specific questions we are looking to answer, very little literature provides direct guidance or evidence towards developing a tool to answer these questions. This work, however, addresses crucial aspects needed for evidence-based practice and accountability to our campus stakeholders supporting the decisions made about shared resources.

Challenges

Because of the importance of this project and the one-time nature of its purpose, greatly value the feedback we have received from our colleagues in the library. The feedback has generally fit into the following areas:

- Technical
- Other colleagues have provided the exact opposite response indicating that they are happy that resources are given a clear set of metrics for equal evaluation
- Understanding
- The majority of the feedback we have received has been generally positive, but with minor reservations or suggestions for improvement. Very few librarians have expressed true hesitation and there has been clear that consistent, accurate, and illustrative communications is a vital component to this project.
- Excitement
- Our other colleagues have provided the exact opposite response indicating that they are happy that resources are given a clear set of metrics for equal evaluation

To be able to maintain a database of qualitative data to facilitate meaningful, accurate, and descriptive analysis and assessments of library resources.

CONCLUSIONS

There is still work to be done to ensure the long-term usefulness of this tool. Additionally, more work is required to better define a scoring and coding criteria in order to enhance and justify the resources being evaluated. One of our biggest obstacles has been, and likely will continue to be, messaging and librarian buy-in as some librarians have questioned the need for such a tool and have expressed concern that this tool will remove aspects of librarian agency.

We have designed this tool not to take away from core areas of librarian knowledge, but to better express these factors for a non-library audience and to help justify difficult decisions to campus stakeholders by illustrating a fuller picture of the resource by combining quantitative usage data with qualitative feedback and to do so in a fair and equal way across subject areas. This project works to contextualize the sometimes misleading and never complete picture that the vendor-supplied usage data provides by investigating the relative weight of these numbers by providing more specific facts about the users and the use of the resources (even by the size of a department), the importance to the users, and the scope within the library’s collection policies, aspects of usability, vendor relationships, competing products, and more. Equipped with more data, librarians can more effectively and fairly defend resources from cancelation or support deaccession decisions with further depth and demonstrable evidence of the resources’ impact and their own expertise.

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