

On the Dublin Core front

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Crisis Management

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ABSTRACT

This article describes the challenges libraries face in light of the global economic crisis. It describes effects seen at the author's institution, as well as in the larger library community. The article notes a recent statement distributed to the publishing community by the International Coalition of Library Consortia . It concludes by questioning whether library excellence is measurable.

KEYWORDS

economy ; crisis ; serials cancellation ; journal cancellation ; International Coalition of Library Consortia ; ICOLC ; excellence

*The fact that ... my 15 minutes of fame has extended a little longer than 15 minutes I think is somewhat surprising to me, and completely baffling to my wife.*¹ - Barack Obama

Leafting through a recent issue of *Time*, I was drawn to an article on the demise of media companies. The author suggests that traditional means of dispensing information through print and television outlets are being superseded by the Internet.² He contends media companies haven't figured out how to make money off the Internet, and therefore the price of information is dropping fast. This is happening forcibly in the newspaper business, as the Tribune company has recently filed for bankruptcy, and *The New York Times* is in dire straits.^{3,4} Ironically, I've spent much of the last few weeks thinking just the opposite, that is, information's high cost and rapid rate of growth. You see, my library is preparing for a serials cancellation project. Although smaller-scale measures to stunt the rate of serials expenditures have been deployed during my tenure here, it's taken this calamitous economy to bring about the type of significant cancellation project so many less fortunate libraries perform regularly. Despite the above contention that the price of information is plummeting, as well as information's alleged desire to be free, the information that matters most to my faculty and students is expensive.

I've read several articles from individuals who have managed large journal cancellation projects successfully in their libraries. It's been helpful to learn about the criteria, challenges, and processes they have used. Particularly helpful was a piece written by Paul Metz detailing thirteen mistakes not

to make during a serials cancellation project.⁵ Among his words of wisdom are to be flexible, honest, and transparent. Metz's pragmatic suggestion for gaining but containing faculty input is priceless:

*The library will be better able to structure the process and ensure an equitable outcome if it takes the lead in nominating titles, thereby setting in motion an inexorable process that all can see will culminate in cancellations. The fear some faculty have of what those idiots in the library might do if left to their own devices can be our most powerful source of leverage in motivating faculty participation.*⁶

My hope is that the pain of making such deep cuts will be lessened a bit by lower-than-usual inflationary increases. Publishers must recognize that libraries will not have the buying power they held prior to the global economic crisis, and prices, therefore, must be held in check. The International Coalition of Library Consortia (ICOLC) recently addressed this concern in a statement endorsed by 84 members.⁷ The ICOLC statement is two-prong: it seeks to forecast the effects of the current crisis on library collections now and into the near future, followed by a series of recommendations to publishers on how best to price their products given the expected reductions in library budgets. The authors of this statement are correct in suggesting the budget reductions libraries are enduring will be steep and lasting; that is, fiscal year 2010 will not be an anomaly but rather a preview of things to come. Publishers are encouraged to adopt flexible pricing options, while helping libraries retain the content presently licensed. According to ICOLC, if libraries and publishers can work together towards a mutually-beneficial end, the result may be a "system that will more efficiently produce and disseminate the growing output of global scholarship."⁸

MEASURING EXCELLENCE

*We need to internalize this idea of excellence. Not many folks spend a lot of time trying to be excellent.*⁹

As if the upcoming serials cancellation project wasn't enough, my institution is in the midst of reaccreditation. As part of this process, the library was asked to describe how it achieves excellence. Excellence is a term used casually when describing library collections and services, yet how does one measure it? An excellent collection, for instance, might be one developed in tune with the institution's curriculum, budget, and mission. It may be one that meets the research needs of the faculty, lacks outdated volumes, and is physically well kept. This is only the beginning. Why, then, have I only thought of excellence during this period when it must be demonstrated? If, as the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) contends, achieving a culture of assessment is valuable, aspiring for excellence, however intangible and daunting, must be the goal.

CASUALTIES OF THE ECONOMY

Like collections budgets, institutional support for travel is also being curtailed due to the troubled economy. Attending the recent American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Meeting, I saw the effects on travel support first hand. Two members of a committee on which I serve were not able to attend due to institutional cutbacks. In speaking with colleagues, my committee was not alone in suffering losses, and worse times are ahead. It seems to me organizations like ALA may need to reconsider the way they do business, starting with in-person meetings and their frequency. Unlike many other library associations, ALA holds two meetings per year: a winter meeting to conduct "business" of the Association, though an increasing amount of business, a clear majority in my view, is conducted virtually throughout the year; and a second, its annual conference, which plays host each summer to programs. The latter is far more widely attended, generally by a ratio of more than two-to-one. Tough times will call for tough decisions, and those librarians who retain some level of

financial support for travel will need to choose discriminately. I suspect attendance at national meetings will fall off, while regional events may see a surge. I hope the library associations, like publishers, will adapt their practices to these difficult times.

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