



Are Serials Worth Their Weight in Knowledge? A Value Study



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 6 May 2015

Accepted 15 July 2015

Available online 8 August 2015

Keywords:

Value
Serials
Journals
Library
Libraries
Academic

ABSTRACT

The researchers aimed to use qualitative measures to define value as applied to print and electronic serial publications held at Sam Houston State University. Researchers examined faculty key activities—namely, *Research, Publishing, Course Preparation and Development, Service, and Personal Interests*—and also asked about the perceived extent of support that library journals provided for these key activities. The results of a survey sent to the faculty of two major colleges, Education and Criminal Justice, emphasized the importance of electronic over print serials for research, publishing, and teaching. Many respondents reported that they never used print serials for key activities but have recently used electronic serials. The print serial collection was reported to provide only minor support for the key activities whereas the electronic serials collection was reported to support those to a major extent. Most faculty respondents reported that they would drop subscriptions to personal interest journals if the Library obtained electronic access.

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INTRODUCTION

A value study of print and electronic journals was conducted for the collections held at the Newton Gresham Library of Sam Houston State University, classified by the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education as a Doctoral Research University, in Huntsville, Texas, approximately 60 miles north of Houston.

At the outset, the researchers wished to pursue an avenue of research that was less than traditional, and not rely wholly upon statistics and mathematical calculations to determine value. We wanted to evoke truer, clearer evidence of value by allowing our faculty to, in a manner, *tell* us how they value the Library's journal collections. The task was more difficult than it seemed, as our profession, as well as academia in general, has a long history of counting, calculating, analyzing, crunching, and reckoning data; we have some amazing tools with which to work, and we do it all very well! Ask us to measure value *qualitatively* and we get nervous. For the purposes of our study, we decided to elicit qualitative information using a faculty survey.

Please note that the terms *serials* and *journals* are used interchangeably. Additionally, we defined *value* as the degree to which the Library's journal publications affect the teaching faculty's achievement with regard to *Research, Publishing, Course Preparation and Development,*

Service, and Personal Interests. These categories were selected because they closely align with the University's requirements for achievement of tenure and therefore would be areas in which professors were most likely to seek and apply information. We focused on two colleges: Criminal Justice and Education. While the pool of survey respondents was small, the findings are informative.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There is little doubt in the minds of teaching faculty and librarians in colleges and universities that the serial collections in academic libraries have value. *Oakleaf* (2011) encourages librarians to participate in library value research in order to demonstrate that "value is not about looking valuable, it's about being valuable" (p. 206). *Volentine and Tenopir* (2013) found that scholars in all disciplines agreed on the value of reading scholarly articles for research; and also that scholarly reading was the basis of all academic activities, even those not related to teaching. But how might libraries measure the value of their specific journal collections?

Serial collections in academic libraries have been evaluated using a variety of methods. *Bucknell* (2012) evaluated using the cost per download model to gauge the value of electronic journal articles. *Tenopir* (2010) suggested the return on investment (ROI) model to appraise the value of serials; and *Volentine and Tenopir* (2013) surveyed faculty to determine their use of scholarly publications.

Currie and Monroe-Gulick (2013) analyzed the citations of University of Kansas faculty in the Social Sciences, Humanities and Science/Technology. They found that journal articles make up 66% of all citations

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used by faculty. The University of Kansas library provided access to over 90% of the journals cited by their faculty. Based on these findings, the researchers inferred a high positive value of their library's serial holdings.

Bucknell (2012) identified potential complications with cost per download and usage statistics of e-journals as definitive measures of value. Complications such as the confusion generated by serial title changes, price changes, and publisher changes can impact formulating an actual cost per download dollar amount. Usage statistics can be skewed by convenience factors such as: platform design, usability of the interface, and the availability of pdf versions of journal articles. Additionally, the reliability of vendor provided statistics must be questioned. Vendor usage statistics may be subject to technological issues and the algorithms to calculate usage statistics can vary, rendering these statistics suspect. Bucknell urges the cautious application of cost per download and usage statistics for decision making and assessments of the value of e-journal collections. Wood (2006) suggests that combining these usage statistics, such as electronic "hit trackings," with user surveys could provide enough information for making collection development decisions.

Tenopir and King (2007) reported a favorable demonstration of ROI after interviewing faculty in the US and Australia regarding the use of e-journal collections. Return on investment is the most common business profitability ratio and is usually net profit divided by total assets. In assessing library serial holdings, ROI compares the actual cost of library provided e-journal articles to estimates of alternative sources for the same article. Not surprisingly, they found that "comments from both faculty and students speak to the value of collections in terms of time saved, increased productivity in work, and convenience" (p. 203).

Volentine and Tenopir (2013) analyzed two open-ended questions from a 2011 survey of faculty in six universities in the United Kingdom on the use of scholarly publications. The participants' comments did not directly correlate to the universities' serials collection as many referred to books, social media, and other types of publications. Responses indicate that faculty highly value scholarly articles for their research across disciplines. They also found that faculty specifically value the immediate and remote access to current and archival articles provided by academic library e-journal collections. They conclude from faculty comments that the quality of the university library's serial subscriptions contribute significantly to the overall quality of the university.

Value is subjective, and a serial collection deemed valuable by survey of faculty may not appear to be valuable using cost per download analysis, citation analysis or ROI study methods. Many methods are available to researchers for determining the value of an academic library's serial holdings collection. In order to rely on a specific method, each individual method must be considered within the context in which the data were gathered, the analysis applied, and the conclusions derived.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative survey designed to gauge faculty members' use of and reliance on library subscriptions to print and online journals. The survey measured recentness of use of library print and online journals for key activities—namely, *Research*, *Publishing*, *Course Preparation and Development*, *Service*, and *Personal Interests*—and also asked about the perceived extent of support that library journals provided for these key activities. The survey also asked participants about their requirements for undergraduate and graduate classes to use library journals; dropping of personal subscriptions in favor of library subscriptions for journals that support the key activities; and travel to other libraries to use journals in support of the key activities.

An invitation for the qualitative survey was sent to all tenured or tenure-track faculty members in the College of Education and the College of Criminal Justice; the survey was available for two weeks during the early fall 2014 semester, with the initial invitation going out on 23 September 2014, a follow-up email going out on 30 September 2014, and the survey closing on 7 October 2014.

The researchers wished to further compare faculty use of journals to the number of journals actually provided by the Library. However, in the end it was not feasible to compare historical journal subscription counts because of several complicating factors. Over the years, the Library has subscribed to a variety of packages (some now discontinued, and sometimes with overlaps between packages) as well as single-title subscriptions. Exact title lists for all those packages at historical points are not available. Although the Library's historical annual reports are available, the preferred method for counting journals varied over time, such that annual reports differ in their inclusion of components such as aggregated databases, periodicals on microfilm, periodicals in government documents, and so forth. Ultimately it proved almost impossible to accurately count or compare journals per year, prior to the past few years, and so this method of comparison was eliminated from the study.

RESULTS

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

A total of 122 faculty members, comprising all of the currently tenured or tenure-track faculty in the Colleges of Education and Criminal Justice, were invited to take the survey. Of these, 27 faculty members completed the survey, including 16 Education faculty members and 11 Criminal Justice faculty members, for an overall response rate of 22%.

Eleven of the respondents (41%) held the rank of Assistant Professor, while seven (26%) had been tenured and promoted to Associate Professor and another nine (33%) were ranked as full Professor. Nearly 82% of the respondents had been at the University for 14 years or fewer, while only five participants had 15 years or more of employment at the University.

JOURNAL USAGE FOR KEY ACTIVITIES

Of the 27 total survey respondents, two reported never having used the journal collections from the Library, though the majority (93%) of respondents had done so.

Participants reported distinctly less recent use of print library journals compared to online. In fact, for each key activity, anywhere from 40% to 87% of respondents said they have never used print journals; *Service* and *Course Preparation* led this trend with 87% and 68% reported non-usage, respectively. Usage across key activities was most commonly reported to have occurred one to three years past (see Table 1). Among the five key activities, *Research* received the most reports of use within less than a year (four respondents, 16%)—however, even this was still lower than the number of reports of use for *Research* within one to three years (8 respondents, 32%).

A strikingly differently usage picture is seen with online library journals (see Table 2). For all the key activities except *Service*, use was most commonly reported within less than one year, ranging from 61% for *Personal Interest* to 84% for *Research*. More than six years since use is almost unreported for online journals.

Regardless of the journal format, *Research* and *Publishing* stand out as the key activities most likely to precipitate library journal use, as one might expect, while *Service* is least associated with library journal use: 87% and 50% of respondents reported never using print or online journals (respectively) to support *Service* activities.

PERCEIVED EXTENT TO WHICH JOURNALS SUPPORT KEY ACTIVITIES

Faculty were also asked to report to what extent (minor, moderate, or major) library journals supported their work in the key activities. With regards to print journals, the number of participants indicating support to a major extent was very low across all the key activities; instead, the majority of respondents reported either no use of print journals for that activity or support to only a minor extent (see Table 3).

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