



# Making the Cut: Do Faculty Want to be Involved in Library Database Cancellations?

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## **Abstract**

Because of the recent economic crisis, a number of academic libraries have faced the possibility of having to cancel database subscriptions. As a major user group of academic libraries, faculty have a history of being involved in collection decisions, but it is unclear to what extent they want to be involved in cancellations. Also, while the library literature outlines a variety of processes that libraries have used to involve faculty in their serials cancellation decisions, very little is written about eliminating databases. This study examines whether the strategies outlined for involving faculty in serials cancellations are applicable to database cancellations. We surveyed tenure-track and full-time faculty members at Towson University to determine their preferences for involvement in database cancellations and to determine if those preferences are a function of knowledge about the library and/or discipline of study.

**Keywords:** collection management, databases, faculty, cancellations, subscriptions, marketing, collection development

## Introduction

With the recent economic crisis, numerous academic libraries have seen stagnant or even decreasing budgets. As a result, library and university administrators have been left with the difficult task of determining how and where to make budget reductions. Many libraries are taking the money out of their resource budgets with database subscriptions becoming recent cutback targets. Faculty members, however, are one of the main user groups of academic collections, and the literature suggests that they have been and will continue to be involved in collection decisions to varying degrees. While there are numerous articles in the library literature suggesting how to involve faculty in serials cancellations, little is said about databases. This raises the question of what is the best way to involve faculty in database cutbacks. In February 2010, Towson University's Albert S. Cook Library faced the prospect of having to make major database cutbacks, so we surveyed faculty to ask which of the methods detailed in the serials literature they would prefer for making database cancellations. This paper details the survey results and how the Cook Library administration involved faculty in database cutbacks.

Towson University is a public university located in suburban Baltimore, Maryland. Towson was founded in 1866 as a teacher training college and has expanded to also include programs in the arts and sciences, communications, business, health professions, education, fine arts, and computer information systems (Towson University Relations Office, 2011). The university has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 17,000 students and a graduate enrollment of about 4,000 (Towson University Relations Office, 2011). This is an increase of over 4,000 students since 2003 (Towson University Office of Institutional Research, 2003). Approximately 75% of undergraduate students live off campus and 10.5% of undergraduates are over the age of 25 (Towson University Office of Institutional Research, 2010).

Albert S. Cook Library is Towson University's only library. Cook Library contains approximately 600,000 volumes and provides access to approximately 250 databases (Towson University, 2010). While some of these databases such as LexisNexis Academic contain resources that are applicable to various departments and disciplines, most, like Communication & Mass Media Complete, contain resources that are discipline-specific, such as peer-reviewed journal articles in a discipline like communications. The library is part of two statewide consortia and spent about \$1,000,000 on databases in 2009 (M. Gilbert, personal communication, February 15, 2010). The funding for these products comes primarily from the library's budget and the provost, but a handful of academic departments do contribute to the cost of resources out of their own departmental budgets. In addition, the library has

a 50-person staff, 20 of whom are librarians (Towson University Albert S. Cook Library, 2010). Most of the librarians serve as liaisons to academic departments, meaning that they teach course-related information literacy sessions to students and assist faculty in recommending library resources for purchase. Typically library resources such as databases are purchased after a faculty member recommends the resource to his or her department representative to the library (each academic department has a faculty representative to the library). Then that resource is approved by the Assistant University Librarian for Content Management, the Assistant University Librarian for Public Services, and the University Librarian for purchase. Thus, the Cook Library administration has always had the final say in what resources are purchased.

For the handful of database cuts that have been made, the library administration, after looking at cost per use data and overlap with other resources, has suggested resources to be eliminated. Next the library liaisons to academic departments that would be impacted by the cuts ask the faculty from relevant departments to comment on the potential effect of the cut. The library administration takes the faculty feedback into consideration, but ultimately the library administration has the final say on the cuts. For example, in 2009 the library cancelled a major business database and replaced it with another less expensive major business database using this process. A few faculty members expressed disappointment at the cancellation and replacement while others, seemingly not aware that the cancellation and replacement had taken place, failed to update their syllabi (S. Gass, personal communication, December 10, 2010).

As the current economic crisis worsened into late 2009 and 2010, Towson University and Cook Library were facing the possibility that budgets would be cut substantially and that a large number of library resources, including databases, would need to be eliminated. In September 2009, the University System of Maryland announced that Towson University's budget would be cut by \$2.6 million dollars, and it was unclear at that time if those reductions would impact library budgets and if additional, larger cuts would follow (Dash, 2009). If a large number of databases needed to be cut, a process would need to be put in place to ensure that the university community would be aware of and accept the changes. Given the results of the 2009 cancellation and replacement and the potential for large-scale budget cuts, the library administration became interested in investigating possible alternative methods for making future database cuts.

Cook Library was not alone in its need to think about how to make substantial resource cuts. News reports and surveys suggest that the current economic slowdown has had a significant impact on academic libraries' budgets. In April 2009, *Library Journal* reported that a number of Association of Research Libraries from across the country were planning substantial cuts (Oder, 2009). The article notes that Yale University Library announced it would need to cut \$4.6 million

from its budget, leave 35 positions unfilled, and cut travel costs in half (Oder, 2009). Likewise, the University of Washington Libraries prepared for cuts of between 8% and 12% which would mean a reduction of between \$2.45 million and \$3.7 million from their budget (Oder, 2009). Often librarians make these reductions in the collections areas of their budgets. The Centre for Information Behaviour and the Evaluation of Research (CIBER) (2009), a research group based at the University College London, conducted a global survey of libraries and found that a little over 40% of academic libraries planned to cut their budget lines for resources, compared to 30% who planned to cut staffing and 19% who planned to cut services. In some cases, libraries' reductions to their collection budgets have been quite substantial: California State University East Bay Libraries (2009) said they needed to reduce their 2009-2010 resources budget by \$300,000 or 30%. With academic libraries having to make such substantial cutbacks in their collections, many libraries have announced that they will be forced to eliminate subscriptions to databases. For example, University of Tennessee Library Dean Barbara I. Dewey noted that they planned on "eliminating redundancy and examining usage statistics for our database collection" in order to help make the necessary 8% reductions to their budget (Oder, 2009). On a more global scale, CIBER's (2009) survey found that, on average, libraries said that they were likely to eliminate databases in the next two years.

As one of the primary user groups of academic libraries, faculty members have a history of being involved in library collection decisions. In his review of the literature on faculty/librarian partnerships, Gary W. White (2004) notes that in the 1930s faculty were doing a majority of the resource selection for academic libraries. By the 1990s, the liaison system had arisen and decisions are now made primarily by librarians with input from faculty. The extent and nature of this faculty input, however, is fluid and the level of involvement a particular library should seek is unclear. Tucker, Bullian, and Torrence (2003) note that faculty could be limited in their contributions to collection decisions because of time and expertise constraints. Thus, it might be unrealistic to expect faculty to provide substantial input into collection decisions. Dowd, Evangeliste, and Silberman (2010), however, point to how academic librarians involve faculty in the evaluation and marketing of electronic resources as a model for other libraries. This suggests that faculty are involved and want to be involved in collection decisions. Likewise, the Association of College & Research Libraries' Research Planning and Review Committee (2010) notes that one of the top ten trends in academic libraries will be patron-driven collection development--which implies that library users, such as faculty, will play an even larger role in future collection decisions.

Since libraries have a variety of options for determining the extent to which they can involve faculty in collection decisions, the question of how involved faculty should be in cutting

collection resources inevitably arises. The library literature details a variety of ways, ranging from giving faculty almost complete ownership of the decisions to simply asking for their feedback, that different libraries have used to make their serials cancellation choices. In 2003, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire needed to reduce their serials budget by 15%. They sent each department chair and each department bibliographer a list of titles in their subject areas and use, price, and cost per use data for the titles (Carey, Elfstrand, & Hijleh, 2005). Faculty then ranked the titles on those lists according to priority for cancellation; high-priority print titles were eliminated, although some titles were reconsidered when faculty learned that they were embargoed in databases (Carey, Elfstrand, & Hijleh, 2005). Overall, however, they found this process to be satisfactory in making cancellations while still maintaining good relationships with faculty (Carey, Elfstrand, & Hijleh, 2005).

At Hofstra, biology serials cuts were made by having the departmental faculty create a list of suggested titles to cancel and then holding a face-to-face meeting where the faculty and the library administration, in the presence of the Faculty Senate Library Subcommittee Chair, could iron out the cancellations (Srivastava & Harpel-Burke, 2006). Srivastava and Harpel-Burke (2006) mention that they encountered the problems of faculty members suggesting titles that had already been cut or suggesting interdisciplinary titles for cancellation. Ultimately, however, they describe the Hofstra process for serials evaluation as time consuming, but successful (Srivastava & Harpel-Burke, 2006). A weak dollar prompted Trinity University to cut their serials by providing departments with suggestions for how to take budget and inflation information into consideration when making cuts (Chamberlain, Caraway, & Andrews, 2006). Chamberlain, Caraway, and Andrews (2006) also provide alternative methods of making cuts such as having librarians make the choices when faculty will not and meeting with department chairs to discuss cancellations. Thus, a library has a variety of models to choose from when attempting to decide what process is the best for involving faculty in making cuts in their collections.

While there is a large body of literature on how to involve faculty in serials cutbacks, little has been published about how to make database cutbacks. Databases are similar to serials in that while many contain content that is discipline-specific, some are interdisciplinary. One key difference, however, is that more is at stake when a database is cut because an academic library may subscribe to a handful of databases in a particular subject area compared to numerous serials titles in that same subject area. As a result, a cut to the library's database subscriptions in a subject area would be a substantial reduction in resources which may have a significant impact on faculty research and teaching and even student research. When Cook Library was faced with the prospect of hundreds of thousands of dollars in budget cuts including database cuts, we wanted to know

what would be the best process for involving faculty in database cancellation decisions. Since the literature is unclear about the best processes for involving faculty in database cutbacks and the faculty would be greatly affected by any cancellations, we surveyed faculty about their preferences for involvement in potential database cutbacks.

## Methodology

To determine how involved faculty would like to be in potential database cutbacks, we created an eleven question survey on QuestionPro.com and e-mailed a link to the survey to 630 tenure-track and full-time faculty members on the university's faculty listserv on February 1, 2010. Library liaisons were asked to follow up with their departments and encourage their faculty members to take the survey. The survey questions asked about perceptions and knowledge of library happenings, opinions about procedures for making database cutbacks, and demographics. To gauge faculty members' preferences for how to make cancellations, we asked respondents to rank three options for making database cutbacks in order of preference. These options were created by adapting the suggestions made in the serials cutback literature to fit the library's existing processes. They included:

- The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives **all faculty the opportunity to comment** on the list. The library administration then takes the faculty's feedback into consideration, but the ultimate decision about what to eliminate lies with the library.
- The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives **a group of faculty representatives the opportunity to comment** on the list. The library administration then takes the faculty's feedback into consideration, but the ultimate decision about what to eliminate lies with the library.
- The library administration and a group of faculty representatives each make their own initial lists of databases to be eliminated. The library administration and the faculty representatives then **meet face-to-face** to discuss what databases should be cancelled; however, the ultimate decision about what to eliminate lies with the library.

To minimize the possibility that the respondents' ratings reflected a bias toward the item at the top of the list rather than their own views about the items themselves, the survey was set to randomly order the cutback options.

We also wanted to investigate if faculty opinions about involvement in cutbacks were simply a reflection of how knowledgeable faculty were about the library. Thus, the survey asked faculty how well they thought the library communicated about resource changes, if they had heard of specific library events and resource changes, frequency of database usage, and how much they thought the library spent on databases in the last academic year. Faculty were given a time frame of two weeks to complete the survey.

## Results

The survey was completed by 167 faculty members; this was a response rate of over 25% for the survey. Overall, faculty preferred the option of having the library administration create a list of proposed cuts and then provide all faculty with an opportunity to comment on the list (see Table 1). Next, we examined if any of the knowledge measures were related to their rankings of the three cutback options. We found that faculty opinions about how the library communicates about resource changes, the extent to which faculty knew about library happenings and the cost of library databases, and how frequently faculty use databases were not significantly related to their rankings.

**Table 1:**  
**Overall Faculty Preferences for Methods of Cutting Database Subscriptions**

Option	N	Average Ranking
The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives <b>all faculty the opportunity to comment</b> on the list...	167	1.75
The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives a <b>group of faculty representatives the opportunity to comment</b> on the list...	162	2.14
The library administration and a group of faculty representatives each make their own initial lists of databases to be eliminated. The library administration and the faculty representatives then meet <b>face-to-face</b> to discuss what databases should be cancelled...	160	2.16

*Respondents were asked to rank the three options in order of preference with 1 being their most preferred option and 3 being their least preferred option.*

We did find, however, that the faculty in two areas of study significantly differed from their colleagues in how they ranked the cutback options. Survey respondents from the College of Education ranked the option to give a group of faculty members the opportunity to comment on a list of database cuts proposed by the library administration as their most favored (see Table 2). There was a significant difference between education and non-education faculty on their rankings of the option to have all faculty comment,  $t(165) = 2.65, p < .05$ , with non-education faculty giving this option a more favorable ranking. In addition, there was a significant difference between education and non-education faculty on their rankings of the option to have a group of faculty members comment,  $t(160) = 2.12, p < .05$ , with education faculty giving this option a more favorable ranking.

**Table 2:**  
**College of Education Faculty Preferences for Methods of Cutting Database Subscriptions**

Option	Group	N	Average Ranking
The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives <b>all faculty the opportunity to comment</b> on the list...	Education	20	2.20
	Non-education	147	1.69
The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives a <b>group of faculty representatives the opportunity to comment</b> on the list...	Education	19	1.79
	Non-education	143	2.19
The library administration and a group of faculty representatives each make their own initial lists of databases to be eliminated. The library administration and the faculty representatives then meet <b>face-to-face</b> to discuss what databases should be cancelled...	Education	20	1.90
	Non-education	140	2.19

*Respondents were asked to rank the three options in order of preference with 1 being their most preferred option and 3 being their least preferred option.*



Survey respondents from the College of Fine Arts and Communication also ordered their preferences differently from their colleagues (see Table 3), and they gave the option to have all faculty comment a significantly more favorable ranking than their colleagues,  $t(165) = 2.32, p < .05$ . These results suggest that while knowledge about the library does not impact the database cutback strategies favored by faculty, the discipline of the faculty does play a role and should be considered when deciding how to implement significant database cutbacks that might impact faculty in these disciplines.

**Table 3:**  
**Fine Arts and Communication Faculty Preferences for Methods of Cutting Database Subscriptions**

Option	Group	N	Average Ranking
The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives <b>all faculty the opportunity to comment</b> on the list...	Fine Arts & Communication	25	1.4
	Non-Fine Arts & Communication	142	1.81
The library administration creates an initial list of databases to be eliminated and gives a <b>group of faculty representatives the opportunity to comment</b> on the list...	Fine Arts & Communication	24	2.33
	Non-Fine Arts & Communication	138	2.11
The library administration and a group of faculty representatives each make their own initial lists of databases to be eliminated. The library administration and the faculty representatives then meet <b>face-to-face</b> to discuss what databases should be cancelled...	Fine Arts & Communication	23	2.15
	Non-Fine Arts & Communication	137	2.15

*Respondents were asked to rank the three options in order of preference with 1 being their most preferred option and 3 being their least preferred option.*

## Discussion

Surveying faculty about their preferences for involvement in database cutbacks allowed Cook Library to be prepared to make substantial cancellations using a process that faculty approved. Ultimately because of some additional one-time funding provided by the university in late spring 2010, the library did not have to make extensive cancellations to its database subscriptions. In order to be proactive about rising costs, however, the library administration did decline to renew three databases (a general news database, a performing arts database, and a business database) with low usage statistics. They made the decision to cancel these databases after consulting with the librarians who serve as liaisons to the subject areas covered by the databases and the faculty representatives from those subject areas to the library. Although this method was not the most preferred of the faculty, the library administration decided to use this process because they were faced with a tight renewal timeline and this process would take less time to implement than gathering feedback from all faculty members. Since the survey results demonstrated that the faculty did not strongly disapprove of consulting with a group of faculty representatives to make cancellations, the library administration was comfortable using this method to make a small number of database cuts. In the end, the process of consulting a select group of faculty seems to have worked well; although the faculty's preferred method for making cutbacks could not be used in 2010, the library did not receive any substantial negative feedback about the three cut databases.

Besides providing the library with information about faculty preferences for making database cutbacks, this survey had an unintended educational effect. After the survey was launched, a number of faculty members contacted the library or spoke with a librarian about the financial situation of the library. They wanted to know how much the library actually spends on databases, whether the library was actually facing a funding shortfall, and what the survey results were. Librarians gave the results of the survey to faculty that asked and explained how the library's budget needed one-time funding from the university. Thus, the survey became a vehicle for not only finding out faculty opinions about library processes, but also a way to educate faculty about the library.

Although the library did not have to make extensive database cutbacks in 2010, by surveying faculty about their preferences for how to involve them in database reductions, we gained a sense of the need to involve faculty more in cutback decisions, as well as an opportunity to educate faculty about the library. The survey results demonstrated that, for the most part, faculty do want to play a role in database cancellation decisions even if they are otherwise minimally knowledgeable about library events and resources. Also the discipline of the faculty

member should be taken into consideration when choosing a cutback method. By conducting this survey, the administration of Towson University's Albert S. Cook Library gained a better sense of how to engage faculty if extensive database cutbacks are needed and is considering effective ways to involve faculty in any future database cutbacks.

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