

The promise and perils of evidence-based collection management

By Linda Woodcock.

This session was a two-pronged look at the application of evidence-based librarianship. Jean Blackburn, Collections and User Experience Librarian at Vancouver Island University, opened with a review of the decision-making process which led to dramatic changes in the size and composition of VIU's print monograph collection. Barbara Jo May, of Okanagan Regional Library, explored the question of whether there is promise for the use of evidence-based librarianship in public libraries.

Blackburn cited three key factors driving the need to alter their approach to collection development at VIU: continuing flat budgets, the steady shift from print to electronic resources, and the growth in the range of programs coupled with great expectations on the part of students. Students expected collections that met their vision of a university library, yet the print monograph budget only allowed for the acquisition of a very small number of titles from the total publishing universe. VIU made some decisions based on negative evidence, what was not happening. Circulation of print collection was continuing downward and 50% of ILL requests were not being filled because the titles were only available electronically. Blackburn observed that libraries have a tendency to build and preserve, but that since VIU was not a library of record, a model that privileged access over ownership was the best option in VIU's context. With this in mind they decided to shift their purchasing to heavily favour electronic books through both subscription packages and Patron Driven Acquisition. To support this they pointed to the low cost per title of \$2.25 per title for eBooks as compared to the much higher cost of traditional print title acquisitions.

Blackburn noted that decisions are often made based on professional wisdom, but stressed that if this is integrated with evidence we will be better able to support our decisions to our users. To further illustrate this Blackburn shared the decision-making rubric VIU uses to evaluate electronic resources. It is a formalized checklist of criteria that are used when considering cancellations of electronic resources. The use of this rubric allows collections librarians to make it clear to faculty and other stakeholders all of the details that were considered when a decision is

made to cancel. Though this rubric served them well they still encountered some sacred cows, resources that users were emotionally tied to and were not ready to part with, even when faced with clear evidence. In these cases, they backed away from their decision to cancel, believing that it was not worth the risk of damaging relationships. Quantitative data is often negative data, such as turn-away numbers for e-resources and downward trends in traditional statistical measures, and as such will not always be enough. Qualitative data is also needed and Blackburn believes the best way to measure whether you are meeting the needs of your users is through interactions on the reference desk and on Askaway.

When first asked to contribute to this session, Barbara Jo May carried out a literature search around evidence-based librarianship. She found the majority of the activity was occurring in the academic library world. She noted the work of Denise Koufogiannakis of University of Alberta and Virginia Wilson of the Centre for Evidence Based Library and Information Practice at the University of Saskatchewan. She found the language used in the literature could be quite theoretical and intimidating, but agreed that the practice of evidence-based librarianship was certainly of use in the public library setting. Public libraries do gather a lot of data. ILS systems provide statistics and various public bodies gather and publish statistics annually. Yet, May noted, "often the things that are easiest to measure are not the things that matter most."

In talking with collections librarians, May found there was a strong concern about the capacity to do it right in the face of increasingly fragmented collection budgets. The need to provide popular in-demand titles in multiple formats, limited the ability to search out and acquire niche and local materials. Tools that support evidence-based decision-making might help with this, says May. Collection HQ is one such tool that held a lot of promise for helping libraries to make strategic collection decisions. May observed that she has seen little evidence around whether this tool actual delivers on this promise and encouraged users to use the data more fully and report on its value.

She sees a need for us to build a better community network among collections librarians to share our approaches to the use of evidence in collection building and to develop our analytical skills. We should encourage data campers inside our walls and perhaps even start an evidence-based librarianship interest group within BCLA.

Yes there is a place for evidence-based librarianship in the public library environment said May. The more we question our assumptions, state what it is we want to know and what we need to find out, and then do this mindfully, the better our results will be. May closed with a reference to a Will Manley piece about his scientist father's constant refrain, "where's your data," to which Will Manley would reply, "Data is overrated, this just doesn't feel right." May asked us to remember that collection building is both an art and a science.

Further reading:

Blackburn, Jean, McFarland, Dana and Reed, Kathleen. (2013) [Culling the Herd in Hard Times: Implementing an Evidence-Based "Big Deal" Cancellation Support Tool at Vancouver Island University Library](#). Poster session presented at the 7th International Evidence Based Library and Information Practice Conference, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.

Wilson, V. and Grant, M. J. (2013), Evidence based library and information practice: what's in it for you? *Health Information & Libraries Journal*, 30: 89–91. doi: 10.1111/hir.12031

Koufogiannakis, Denise Ann. (2013) *How Academic Librarians use Evidence in their Decision Making: Reconsidering the Evidence Based Practice Model*. (Doctoral thesis, Aberystwyth University), Retrieved: <http://hdl.handle.net/10402/era.36868>

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