Notes from the Library Committee

23 October 2014

Present: Amanda Wilcox (Chair), Dave Pilachowski (Director of Libraries), Jochebed Bogunjoko, Brent Heeringa, Eric Knibbs (compiler of these few minutes), Ben Nathan (a late arrival), Quinn Pitcher, Chris Winters

Also present: Robin Kibler

Absent: Griffith Simon, Dinny Taylor, Bob Volz

AW opened the meeting by reviewing her plan to approach the FSC for time at the next faculty meeting, and summarizing her concerns over privacy issues raised by the recent updates to Adobe Digital Editions.

RK and DP began their presentation on the library budget. They explained that it is the Committee’s responsibility to review and sign off on collections allocations for FY 2015. DP noted that, currently, budgeting for monograph acquisitions is the simpler problem, as all requests from librarians and faculty can be met easily with available funds, whereas it is the recurring expenses, particularly those related to electronic acquisitions, that pose greater challenges.

RK explained that the Committee had before them an account of both resource allocations, and allocations stemming from endowments and gifts, which are tracked separately (as endowment and gift funding is necessarily limited in its application). She noted that allocations can be conceived of as either recurring (in the case of serials and databases), or one-time (in the case of monographs and the like). Allocations are divided among Divisions 1, 2 and 3; the allocations are most considerable in Division 3, and the expenses there are mostly recurring.

This year, the library has received a 4.25 percent increase in its budget from the provost. The plan is to distribute this increase evenly, for the most part, though some shifts are envisioned as the various departments and divisions may not spend all the funds allocated to them, and it is a goal of library budgetary planning to avoid both overspending and underspending. There are thus separate end-of-FY expenditures. Robin provided further details on a specific endowment available to Political Science for national security databases, and elaborated on the peculiarities of the Asian Studies allocation, which has recently received additional external funding (not detailed in the budget) from the provost.

BH asked how the 7.07% reduction in the library budget from 2010 to 2011 was achieved, and what its enduring effects might be. DP clarified that this reduction was realized, in large part, by reviewing journal subscriptions, an exercise that had not been undertaken since the early 1990s. He also explained that monograph expenditures were reduced from 20% to 15% of the budget. He added that, this year, the library budget has finally re-attained its 2008 spending levels, though only nominally; in real dollars library spending has not recovered. DP added that he thinks Williams libraries are doing at least as well, if not better, as peer institutions, and added that maintaining our consortium relationships and ILL partners have, in part, reduced the pain of lost journal subscriptions and restricted acquisitions.

BH asked how the new building might burden the budget in new ways. DP reported that additional expenses associated with the new building began in 2008, just before the era of budget cuts. A major expense at the moment is the Library Storage Facility, which currently requires the services of 4 permanent FTE (formerly 1 permanent FTE and 3 temporary FTE, as the precise staffing needs were unclear pending additional experience operating the LSF). Additionally, Chapin, the College Archives and Sawyer now enjoy merged spaces, which has provided the Chapin and Archives with new visibility and popularity, and may at some point require additional staff to deal with increased demand. DP also clarified that Schow traffic has remained high; people have migrated to the new Sawyer from elsewhere on campus, but not necessarily from other libraries. So increased supplies may also be a consideration for the coming FY. (DP clarified later by email that “staffing in other departments will also need to be reviewed as we gain experience in the building [the new Sawyer-Stetson].” )

RK explained that the biggest budgetary unknown, at the moment, surrounds ebooks and their associated expenses. The two major ebook vendors, at the moment, are Ebrary and EBook Library (EBL), with the latter providing extensive access to a broad range of material that is then selectively acquired by the library via a demand- and patron-driven process. At the moment, ebook lending provides significant cost savings over other alternatives; an electronic loan through EBL costs about $8, as opposed to $25-$30 for the average ILL loan. In response to AW’s question, RK clarified that ILL expenditures are a part of the operational costs of the library and not a part of the FY 2015 allocations currently under review by the Committee. In response to BH’s question, RK clarified that ILL expenses are on the decline, along with broader use of the ILL system.

DP reported that Williams libraries are very active consortium and ILL participants, with a two-to-one ratio of lending vs. borrowing, higher than most other consortia participants.

RK reported that EBL was introduced in 2010, and includes a wide array of both scholarly and popular content. Data provided by the vendor shows that the academic content of EBL, a subset of the entire collection, is primarily what Williams patrons use. RK also explained that the contents of EBL are constantly shifting, and that a lot of data must therefore be added and removed to Francis every month, a significant problem that EBL might be able to help with.

The student members of the committee were asked about their attitude towards ebooks. BN said he “thrives off them,” while JB expressed a preference for printed materials, and explained that it was sometimes unclear whether Francis search results were leading her to an electronic or a physical research. RK explained that there are ways to refine Francis searches to yield only physical or electronic results.

In response to AW’s question, RK explained that the $8 cost per electronic loan is expected to increase. Publishers who deal with EBL are driven to increase short-term loan charges insofar as they perceive that ebook lending is undermining their profits elsewhere. Other publishers aim to sell ebooks that can only be accessed by a limited number of users simultaneously, which can compel libraries to purchase multiple electronic copies of the same item. The increasing costs of short-term loans can also lead to administrative problems, as there is a $50 threshold beyond which loan requests require review.

BH suggested making the varying costs of ebook loans (the greater costs of a seven- versus one-day loan, for example) more transparent to users, who might elect to save the library money by choosing cheaper options.

RK emphasized that EBL is not the only option for the library, and suggested that Springer Ebooks, which provides DRM-free copies of books as plain .pdf files, is a more attractive model. Other vendors, including Project Muse and EBSCO, also have advantages over EBL that may be worth exploring. RK hopes to assess the costs and consider other models this year. DP clarified that this re-evaluation is motivated by the recent EBL twofold price increase, for which the library had only 30 days’ notice. The feeling within the library administration is that EBL cannot scale, though the experience gained from our relationship with EBL so far has been instructive, as the demand-driven features of EBL have provided a great deal of data to the library about users’ needs.

RK explained that EBL, when it was first introduced during the period of budget cuts in 2010, was also used as a cost-saving measure. Books available in EBL but which would likely otherwise have been purchased in print amounted to $75k during the first year that EBL was available. Instead, the library allowed demand to determine whether such titles would be acquired. Now there are concerns that terminating the library’s relationship with EBL will result in some holes in collection.

In response to AW’s question, DP clarified that Williams was one of the earliest adopters of electronic lending services like EBL, and emphasized that the library will purchase print copies of books available in EBL or other electronic formats upon request. AW said that it would be useful for departments to know their respective budgetary allocations when making purchase requests; DP and RK affirmed that the relevant library liaisons have this information and can make it available to individual departments.

Responding to a question from CW about the comparatively large allocations for Biology, Chemistry and Physics, DP explained that departmental allocations are particularly problematic in the face of large bundled resources, particularly the journals that are so central to scientific enterprises. BH asked about the “Cinema” allocation, as “Cinema” is not a department; DP explained that several departments with a common interest in Cinema, including English, make use of this allocation. BH asked about possibilities for streaming feature-length films. RK explained that fair use concerns have so far limited the library in this regard, but that recent legal decisions have allayed many concerns, and the plan is to begin ripping at least some DVDs and making their contents available in streaming format to specific courses. DP added that a third of the Oberlin group provides streaming access to film content behind a password wall for specific courses.

AW asked whether users should be aware of the difference between electronic and physical loan costs; DP emphasized that faculty should not hesitate to request print material if there is a preference. RK added that over 4 years, the library has purchased around 800 titles from EBL; these purchases were triggered automatically (as is the rule after the fourth loan request). In response to a question from EK, RK and DP clarified that there is no review of the automatic EBL purchases, only of loans that cost more than $50.

AW referenced widely publicized privacy concerns over Adobe Digital Editions and asked whether OIT had any involvement in this use. She also asked whether there are ways to avoid using ADE when accessing electronic resources. DP explained that ADE is really only necessary should a user wish to download an electronic edition for use offline; one can read EBL books online as web books and avoid ADE entirely. AW asked whether the budget was sufficient for ebook pricing, and RK said the answer was unclear, and that is why the library is reviewing the issue. Major changes to scale back our use of EBL will be necessary, and a switch to a different vendor is possible.

AW expressed concern over demand-driven acquisitions and the potential loss of “engineered serendipity” (the experience of accidentally stumbling across cool books that you didn’t know you wanted whilst hunting for a more known quantities). RK suggested that there are “serendipitous possibilities” in electronic browsing of electronic material as well, as the broader EBL collection (to take an example) is not itself demand-driven, only the specific subset of patron-driven acquisitions.

AW then called for a vote to approve the budget. The committee voted unanimously in favor of approval.

DP then briefly summarized his experiences at last week’s meeting of the Oberlin Group. He explained that Williams enjoys an advantage over other OG institutions in terms of collaborative library spaces, now that new Sawyer is online, and reported that the directors of the OG voted to take their 2016 meeting to Williams College—the first time the OG has come to Williams. DP reported that the other major conversation at OG concerned publishing and open access, and specifically how to provide open access and negotiate the (very related) problems of copyright and publishers. He suggested that faculty strive to retain the copyright of their publications, particularly their articles, so that they can more widely distribute them online.

BN then raised a series of “minor quibbles,” in fact three of them. He worried that the microfilm room, with only two machines, could not always accommodate demand; DP and RK said they would look into expanding facilities. He inquired about the “arcade” on the second floor of Stetson, facing Old Sawyer, and whether it would be opened to students or made available for events. DP explained that there were fire code issues, but that this looked possible. Finally, BN complained of harsh lighting in the Old Reading Room (the former faculty lounge on the north side of Stetson). DP made a note of the complaint, and reported that the pedestal under the Scholar’s Stone had also drawn some criticism and that WCMA was in the process of considering how to replace it.

JB returned to the issue of sound travel between group study rooms, which she had raised at the first meeting. DP assured her that adjacent rooms are indeed sealed off from one another. JB asked whether the technological apparatus in the collaborative study rooms had activated and whether OIT was capable of providing tech support for its use. DP explained that technology is still a work-in-progress elsewhere in the building, but that the facilities in the collaborative study rooms should be up and running.

The meeting concluded at 5:38.

Compiled with diligence and some fatigue,

Eric Knibbs