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Cost-per-Use versus Hours-per-Report: Usage Reporting and the Value of Staff Time

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Cost-per-use vs. Hours-per-report: Usage Reporting and the Value of Staff Time

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Abstract:

Cost-per-use for electronic journals has become a common standard for judging the value of individual titles, but the reports needed to make such judgments can be complex and time consuming to create. Different options exist for collecting, collating, and reporting the necessary data. In 2013, time spent by staff at the University of Mississippi library on all of the processes to create a cost-per-use report for the library's subscription lists was recorded and a value in staff salaries was calculated. That cost was compared to the price for outsourcing the processes to various vendors. Additionally, other libraries were asked, via survey, about their experiences with the process and with using vendors. The responses to that survey were reported and compared to the experiences at the University of Mississippi.

Keywords:

E-journal management, collecting usage data, collection management reports, personnel

management, serials workflows, outsourcing

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The idea for this presentation started with the question, "which process is most cost efficient: gathering e-journal usage data in-house or outsourcing the process to a vendor?" Two other questions followed, "is vendor supplied data as reliable and consistent as in-house gathered data?" and "what about the costs of the other work involved in producing reports from that data?" In order to answer these questions, I collected time spent data from my department at the University of Mississippi during the spring of 2013 when we were collecting usage data from 2012, and I created and distributed a survey of librarians to ask about their experiences with collecting data and outsourcing that collection to vendors. The survey was distributed via listservs during the spring of 2014, consisted of 15 questions including an open comment question, and received 250 responses.

According to the survey, 96% of libraries responding have collected usage data at least once, and 59% of those libraries collected data on more than 75% of their collection. Nearly half of the respondents, 47%, use a third-party service to help with the collecting. The amount of data collected by the vendors varied widely, but the majority of libraries using vendors still do some level of data collection in-house as well. The large majority of the people doing data collection in libraries are professional librarians, though it is assumed that many libraries use a combination of people depending on their size and staffing arrangements.

The University of Mississippi is a Carnegie-classified high research institution with a continuing resources budget of about $4.2 million. The Continuing Resources department consists of two professional librarians, two library specialists, and two senior library assistants. All members of the department participated in collecting usage statistics during 2013. The

Electronic Resources Librarian was collecting only statistics for databases while working on an additional project, and her time was not included in the calculations for this presentation.

The time spent by the department on <u>collecting</u> e-journal usage data broke down like this: Librarian – 24 hours; Electronic Resources Specialist – 120 hours, Subscription Specialist – 3 hours, and both Senior Library Assistants together – 9 hours. The total cost in staff salary for these hours was $2,519. Together they attempted to collect usage data on 2,264 titles from 114 publishers or platforms. Forty-four platforms did not supply any usage statistics, 9 platforms supplied onlu non-COUNTER statistics, leaving 61 platforms that provided COUNTER-compliant reports. The Electronic Resources Specialist spent a majority of her time trying to contact the publishers and platforms that would not supply statistics, in case they would if asked, or the platforms that would only supply non-COUNTER statistics. The Librarian contacted the smaller publishers that would supply COUNTER-compliant statistics. Therefore, the highest paid members of the department spent their time on the most problematic platforms and those least likely to provide data. On the other hand, the largest title lists were on publisher platforms that were easy to collect statistics from. The largest list represented 18% of all the titles we were attempting to collect. The top six publisher lists, 10% of our COUNTER-compliant platforms, represented 67% of the titles, and the top twelve publishers represented 85% of the titles. These publishers were collected by the paraprofessionals who do not regularly work with electronic resources in twelve hours at a salary cost of $160.

Three vendors that provide a statistics collection product were contacted for information about their services and for a price quote. None of the vendors have a collection only product. One service does separate the collection costs, and they charge $100 per platform. All of the

vendors include some level of consolidation, smoothing of match points, and reduction of title duplication. Also, they all offer tools for loading cost and creating reports.

As part of the survey, respondents were asked to rate the reliability, accuracy, ease of obtaining, and value of data collected by vendors and of data collected by library personnel. The only significant difference between the two methods of collecting was that vendor-supplied data was easier to obtain. The other average scores were very close with in-house data being slightly more accurate and of good value.

For the open comment portion of the survey, respondents were asked to describe the difficulties they had experienced when collecting usage data. Those comments were analyzed and coded into different categories. Most comments mentioned more than one category. With the selected keywords, a word cloud was created to demonstrate the most mentioned difficulties.

[insert word cloud image]

The largest category was COUNTER, and that keyword really represented three different problems: platforms not providing COUNTER statistics, reports not really being COUNTER when they claimed to be, and the differences between COUNTER 3 and 4. Some publishers have already adopted COUNTER 4, and some have not yet. The differences make it difficult to compare data between different publishers and between different years. The next largest categories of problems were "staff time" and "tracking passwords", and other large categories were "publisher platform changes" and "navigating admin sites". All of these problems

contribute to the time it takes to collect usage data. Some of the specific comments were shared with the audience. An unexpected comment that was repeated several times was the concern that journal publishers may not be accurate reporters of usage. Announcements about technical glitches and widely varying statistics between years and comparable titles lead some librarians to be suspicious of the data reported to them. These problems were not found at database providers, though the different COUNTER versions were mentioned as problems found with databases.

Seventy-two percent of respondents to the survey created cost-per-use reports with the data collected, and ninety-two percent of those libraries did the matching of cost and use data in-house. This is clearly still a part of the process that librarians feel they need to do, or that they feel they do better. At Mississippi, two paraprofessionals worked on creating the spreadsheet containing cost and ISSN information. It took them 64 hours to get it complete, at a salary cost of $880. The Librarian collected and collated print usage from the ILS in 20 hours for a salary cost of $577, and the process of combining the multiple spreadsheets into one report and reviewing it for obvious mistakes and gaps took another 72 hours for a salary cost of $2,077. The final salary cost for collecting usage data on e-journals and print journals, collecting cost data, and finalizing the cost-per-use report was $6,126.

Each of the three vendors that provide usage consolidation and reporting products have different pricing models and methods. Vendor A priced by FTE with an one-time set up fee. Vendor B quoted a price for their consolidation tool and charged $100 per platform for collecting data. Vendor C based their price on the number of platforms being collected. [After the presentation, a representative from Vendor C clarified that the cost included monthly

collections of data, not just annually, as was compared in the presentation.] The cost

comparison for data collection, matching, and reporting on 60 (COUNTER-compliant) platforms

between the three vendors and the in-house process at Mississippi in 2013 appeared this way.

Vendor A: $11,450

Vendor B: $8,705

Vendor C: $21,320

In-house: $6,126

For Mississippi, it is still most cost-effective to produce the cost-per-use reports in-house. Also,

by reviewing the process, ways can be found to further decrease the in-house costs. More

COUNTER-compliant platforms can be contacted by less-specialized paraprofessionals, and

subject specialists seeing this data might be willing to accept reports that are less than

comprehensive, only asking for missing data if they really have a concern about a particular

title.

Another section of the survey asked about who saw the usage data and who made

decisions based on that data. It was clear that data is being widely shared with library

administration, librarians, library committees, institutional administration, faculty, and staff.

Librarians and library administration are the primary decision makers with library committees

and faculty also contributing at many libraries. A quick, one-question survey of subject specialist

librarians at Mississippi showed that of the reports created by the Continuing Resources

department the cost-per-use report and the list of titles with online format available were

equally used and valued. Some librarians wanted more data, but others thought they could

make decisions with less data.

A final question on the widely-distributed survey asked respondents to estimate how much time was spent on the different phases of the resource review process, from collecting usage data to making decisions. Survey respondents averaged 40% of the process spent on collecting usage data, while actual time tracking at Mississippi showed that 47% of the process was spent on that part of the process. Overall, the collecting of usage data is a major activity in the decision making and collection development process.

A few conclusions can be drawn from the staff cost analysis and from the responses to the survey. For the University of Mississippi, it is still more cost-effective to collect usage data and produce reports in-house rather than outsourcing the process to a vendor. Vendor-provided data is considered just as accurate as in-house collected data, but e-journal publishers are not always considered reliable reporters. Most librarians are still doing the matching of usage and cost data to produce reports in-house, even though vendors also provide this service.

Comments after the presentation pointed out that libraries also need to consider the relative value of other projects and processes staff could be addressing if usage data collection and reporting was outsourced. Libraries cannot simply shift staff salaries to pay for outsourced services; the other projects must be just as valuable to the library. Representatives from the vendors with these services commented that they also experience the same difficulties in collecting usage data as the librarians reported in the survey, and they would need good communication with the libraries to be successful.