WMU’s 21st Century Libraries

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Over the last 20 years, developing the University Libraries’ collections for Western Michigan University’s students and faculty has been an adventure racing into the future, embracing the past, and striving to meet the challenges brought about by technology. Collection development has gone beyond selection of a book or journal with the expectation of seeing it in the library’s stacks. Technological advances and the increasing availability of online books, journals, music, and databases have expanded the options for developing collections.

The challenges for an academic library continue to be many and are sure to become even more challenging in the future. The means to “access” print resources may remain the same (purchasing outright, subscribing, borrowing, etc.) or, as occurs more and more often, the option for online access is increasingly available. For online resources, one must be able to negotiate pricing, license agreements, or contracts with multiple publishers and vendors who exist within several competitive markets. Within such agreements are issues of identification of authorized users, number of users, technical requirements, copyright and legal use for electronic reserves, archival rights, course packs, interlibrary loan, and usage statistics. Always at the forefront is how to provide the resources needed to support WMU’s academic programs and research whether offered on campus, at extended university sites, or through distance education.

Print AND Online in Today’s Library

Traditionally published books, that is, printed “paper” copies, continue to be the main format in the University Libraries. However, for over a decade, e-books, notably NetLibrary and eBrary and, more recently, Books24x7 and Safari Tech Books Online, as well as several other sources, supplement the print collections and are used for electronic reserves and research. During the same period, the Libraries has acquired several print collections of note. Two such collections are (1) the Sternberg collection of books of art, exhibit catalogs, and auction catalogs, and (2) a large collection of books on the history of China. Both the Archives and Regional History Collections and the Special Collections and rare books department continue to acquire primary source books, manuscripts, and collections in print. These highly desirable print titles bring unique research materials to University programs and curricula.

Electronic resources have greatly improved access to library materials without a user setting foot in the University Libraries. The Libraries’ Web site is open 24/7 and provides the night owl and off campus student options not previously available. Even more important is the fact that the depth and breadth of collections have been enhanced with primary source database collections such as those offered by the Alexander Street Press’s North American Women’s Letters and Diaries, North American Immigrant Letters, Diaries and Oral Histories, and Black Thought and Culture. Music collections are now available online from the Naxos Music Library, Classical Music Online, Smithsonian Global Sound, and African American Song while the online Sanborn Maps 1867-1970 provides access to 300 Michigan towns and cities drawn at a scale of 50 feet to the inch, including street blocks and building numbers.

Ever-expanding Accessibility

Cooperative collection development in the online environment has become a way...
to expand library resources beyond the library budget. Participating Michigan academic libraries cooperate in the provision of several electronic journal collections by pooling their subscriptions allowing each library access to the online holdings of the other institutions in addition to the institution’s subscribed journals. Examples of such collections include the multidisciplinary journals published by Blackwell Publishing, Elsevier Ltd., Springer Verlag, and Wiley Interscience. On a statewide basis, the Michigan eLibrary (http://www.mel.org/), developed by the Library of Michigan, provides access to multiple electronic databases to all the citizens of Michigan. On a national basis, academic libraries throughout the United States participate in a cooperative license agreement for access to the LexisNexis Academic Universe database.

Cooperation in other areas of collection development has been a standard principle for many years. Western Michigan University Libraries is a member of the Center for Research Libraries, a consortium of North American universities, colleges and independent research libraries. “The Center’s mission is to support advanced research and teaching in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences by ensuring the survival and availability of the knowledge resources vital to these disciplines.” (www.cri.edu) Consortium members annually submit and vote on proposed purchases of materials too expensive to purchase individually yet are held by fewer than five libraries. All Center material are available to members through interlibrary loan. Through its membership in the Center, the University Libraries also has participated with other members in the cooperative acquisition of Digitale Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker, an electronic edition of the Bibliothek deutscher Klassiker, which contains the highpoints of German literature.

Resource Building Principles & Practices

The University Libraries houses diverse collections of printed and electronic materials that complement the programs and research of the institution, WMU, that it serves. The Libraries also supports the acquisition of unique collections related to the programs and research needs of the southwestern Michigan community in which the University is geographically located. Thus, the Libraries serves as a depository for regional materials, and, in so doing, provides a unique archival source for materials that would otherwise be lost. For example, the manuscript records of southwestern Michigan and regional governmental records are held in the Archives and Regional History Collections library located on the East Campus. As a result, this special collection provides unique access to the history of the region. The Special Collections and rare books department, Waldo Library, acquires rare and unique resources in a number of areas that are closely tied to University programs. The Cistercial and Monastic Studies Collections, the Medieval Studies Collections, the Historical Children’s Collection, and the Carol Ann Haenicke American Women’s Poetry Collection are just a few of the special collections that have a strong relationship to the University and local research needs.

Digitizing and Building for the Future

The uniqueness of the Library’s resources as described in its online catalogs and databases means that rare and fragile materials are more easily located. Some materials are very fragile or deteriorating and here is where collection development librarians to:

- develop experience in licensing and contracts,
- gain significant knowledge of copyright law,
- secure knowledge of archival rights management and access,
- develop knowledge of digitization,
- work easily in a team environment for subject collection responsibilities, and
- have extensive skill in budget management.

“Digitizing and building for the Future” is an important aspect of the University Libraries’ mission. The proliferation of information in all formats has charged collection development librarians to:

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In summary, the digitization and building for the Future involves multiple competencies, seldom if ever taught in graduate library and information science programs, when it describes the 21st academic library world of collection development. If almost two decades of experience can be encapsulated, my final comment would be that “The life of this collections development librarian has been interesting, exceptionally challenging, and very rewarding!”