Shared Journals: Save Space, Improve Access with the Maryland Shared Distributed Journal Collections Project

Barbara J. Snead, Associate Librarian for Collection Services, Goucher College

Providing adequate storage space for growing collections is a perennial challenge for all types of libraries, but especially for academic libraries which often try to preserve materials in perpetuity. The advent of online journal publishing and its rapid proliferation in recent decades suggest a ready solution to the journal storage challenges of college and university libraries. Despite the alluring promise of converting existing journal collections to electronic format, most academic libraries are not positioned to take this route in the short term. Lack of availability of online surrogates for less mainstream titles is one factor, but budget constraints pose the greater obstacle to purchasing expensive online journal archives.

Larger university libraries typically have addressed this problem by relegating low-demand materials to offsite storage facilities. As of July 2007, there were 68 high-density library storage facilities in North America (Payne, 2006). Whether owned individually or shared among institutions, these brick-and-mortar repositories are expensive to establish and operate, and their capacity nonetheless is finite. More recently, a new model offering an alternative to remote storage warehouses has emerged. In the so-called “virtual repository,” archiving occurs by distributing the retention of journals among a group of libraries. Two well-known large-scale virtual repositories include the Western Regional Storage Trust (WEST) and the Chesapeake Information and Research Library Alliance (CIRLA) Shared Journals Project. The former, comprising both university and college libraries, received support from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, while CIRLA serves exclusively ten members of the Association of Research Libraries.

Inspired by these new models of virtual journal repositories, academic librarians in the state of Maryland collaborated on a plan to share their rich archival collections of print journals in a distributed fashion. In simple terms, each library identifies a number of journal titles that it promises to retain for a certain period and to lend with high priority to partners in the plan, thus freeing others to withdraw these runs if they so choose. This paper draws upon the author’s experience as a member of the founding task force to describe the project’s inception, implementation, assessment, and future challenges.

The situation at Goucher College illustrates the need to seek create solutions for storage of collections. A small liberal arts college of about 1400 undergraduates in a northern suburb of Baltimore, Goucher College undertook an ambitious architectural project when it decided in the early 2000s not to renovate its out-dated library, but to move forward with an entirely new multi-function facility, the “Athenaeum,” showcasing the library at its center. As the library took shape through many versions of blueprints, original plans to accommodate substantial growth of collections were scaled back and revised to fit into a more affordable budget and a more realistic footprint for the campus. The option of remote storage was considered early in the process but was quickly discarded as prohibitively expensive.

Therefore for many months prior to the “big move” in the summer of 2009, the library staff mounted a large-scale weeding operation of its roughly 300,000 volume collection. While monographs were scrutinized in the project, journals became the main focus for obvious reasons. Not only could many journals be supplanted by electronic versions, but withdrawing one title could yield much more “space per effort” than could be achieved by withdrawing one monographic work. Fortunately, this task was greatly aided by the availability of JSTOR, which by the mid 2000s had become a trusted, high quality surrogate for many journals. During the phase of evaluating journals, some
titles were offered to other libraries in the state and subsequently transferred. By opening day in August 2009 in the new library space of the Athenaeum, the shelves were much less tightly packed than in the former facility. Knowing that this achievement was made possible only by their vigorous weeding efforts, the library staff realized that future growth would be limited. Ironically, the splendor of a new building made the librarians more receptive to new options for reducing physical collections.

Though quite small in size, the state of Maryland comprises over 60 institutions of higher education. The largest cooperative organization available for academic libraries is the Maryland Digital Library (MDL). Formed in 2000, MDL began as a collective “buying club” emphasizing subscriptions to electronic databases. Initially funded by the state’s budget, the consortium lost that support after only 2 years. Administratively, MDL originally was run by staff employed by the library at the University of Maryland, College Park. When this arrangement succumbed to state budget cuts, members decided to contract with Lyrasis to handle its vendor negotiations and product purchases. Thus MDL has operated for a decade without state funding, and for 3 years without an administrative staff, which sets it apart from many similar consortia in other states. Not daunted by the lack of statewide administration or funding, members of MDL nonetheless continue to pursue cooperative arrangements, all orchestrated by volunteers from member libraries.

The idea for a shared distributed journals project arose from a discussion of priorities for improving services in the state which took place at the annual meeting of Maryland’s Congress of Academic Library Directors (CALD) in April 2009. The attendees placed high priority on devising a virtual repository for print journals to address the critical shortage of space for their collections. As a result, a call went out for interested librarians involved in serials, collection management, or interlibrary loan to form a task force to explore the idea. From the first organizational meeting through final acceptance of the plan by the MDL governance board, the process took only about 8 months. This timeline shows the evolution of the project:

- August 2009: Working group established and meetings held with members from Johns Hopkins University, McDaniel College, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Goucher College, and Salisbury State University
- September 2009: Draft document presented to MDL management, returned with comments, questions
- January 2010: Revised draft presented at MDL governance meeting
- April 2010: Document accepted by CALD members; general membership of MDL invited to implementation meetings
- June–August 2010: Representatives of interested libraries meet
- September–October 2010: Officially implemented with initial 14 members

The greatest factor contributing to the speed of implementation was the familiarity of two MDL member libraries—Johns Hopkins University and the University of Maryland, College Park—with the CIRLA Distributed Print Preservation Pilot Project, which went into effect in 2007. Because the MDL project would have to accommodate 52 academic libraries serving student populations from under 1,000 to over 37,000, drawing up the policies and procedures had to accommodate a wider range of constituents.

The task force included representatives from Goucher College; the Johns Hopkins University; McDaniel College; Salisbury State University; and the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, thus comprising a mix of public and private, as well as small and large institutions.

In just a handful of meetings in the summer of 2009, this committee developed goals for the project, established selection criteria, decided on a service model, and proposed a method of managing the process. These goals emerged from the work of the task force:
• To provide access to journal articles held in distributed collections across partner libraries;
• To save space in crowded collections;
• To realize cost savings;
• To provide rapid electronic delivery of requested articles direct to the user; and
• To preserve access to information.

After reviewing the first draft, the MDL governance group conveyed several questions to the task force:

• How would participation in this project affect the counting of titles owned by each member?
• What measures would participating libraries have to take to identify and secure the titles that they offer to provide?

The final draft was strengthened by addressing all of these concerns, resulting in its acceptance at the annual meeting of academic library directors in April 2010. Responding to the first call for membership were 14 libraries, including two community colleges, five independent colleges, and seven public colleges and universities. One additional private college joined in October 2012. Thus the 15 participants represent all types and sizes of academic libraries, but comprise less than one third of the members of the Maryland Digital Library consortium.

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Table 1. Members of the Maryland Shared Print Journals Project, October 2012
By signing the agreements, participants agree to these basic obligations regarding content selection and service:

- To select about 20 print or microfilm journal titles.
- Titles and holdings should be unique to the virtual collection; title duplication is allowed if holdings do not overlap.
- Electronic holdings may be submitted provided that the subscriber has permission to provide copies via ILL.
- To deliver articles electronically within two business days.
- To request articles through OCLC Resource Sharing.
- ILL staff will select the one library that holds the title for the project to fill the request by entering its OCLC symbol once.
- Staff will add the phrase “Maryland shared title, please expedite” to the borrowing note.
- To e-mail article directly to patron (and CC the borrower) when possible.
- To provide color reproductions for color originals.
- To retain the designated holdings for 10 years (until 2020).
- Not to lend print originals during this period.
- To maintain print or microfilm in environmentally secure space.

Lacking an administrative staff for the Maryland Digital Library consortium, the committee sought to simplify the means of oversight for the shared repository. Since the virtual repository depends on easy access to a central list of shared titles, the group decided to create and maintain the list using a master spreadsheet hosted by Google Documents. Members agreed to include the following data when adding journals to the spreadsheet:

- Title
- ISSN
- Core holding library (full name)
- Core holding library (OCLC symbol)
- Holdings—start date and ending date
- Media type (e.g., microform, e-journal)
- Gaps
- Overall condition
- OCLC System #
- Institutional price (if current subscription)
- Number of feet of shelves

The agreement does not specify the level or amount of staff involvement required, nor does it estimate costs for participating in the project, which presumably would consist largely of staff effort. Initial selection of titles requires input from librarians responsible for collection development; thereafter, the greatest burden of fulfilling the project falls upon the interlibrary loan staff. In addition, identifying the titles listed in the project requires updating local catalog records. Participants generally follow the suggested practice of adding notes in their catalog records indicating “Maryland Shared Copy” to their holdings of designated titles. This should alert staff not to deaccession their contributed e titles. Conversely, when a participant decides to withdraw a title held by another member, that library should offer all volumes to the designated holding library. Ideally it would also retain its catalog record and direct library patrons to its availability through the program.

In order to assess the project’s success, procedures should guarantee that data can be collected at the end of each fiscal year. Written into the agreement signed by each participant are these expectations for record-keeping, which impose responsibility for tracking requests on the lending library rather than the borrower.

Each participating library agrees to abide by the following requirements

- To track the number and nature of titles withdrawn based on the titles submitted by the contributing libraries.
• To indicate the amount of space recovered by withdrawing titles.

• To track the number and nature of titles cancelled based on the titles submitted by the contributing libraries and optionally, to indicate the amount of money saved or re-allocated.

• To track the number of ILL requests for shared titles.

• To track the number of ILL requests filled and unfilled per title.

• To indicate whether the document was delivered directly to the end user.

Though several members signed agreements in the fall of 2010, most did not fully implement the provisions until January 2011. Thus, data collected in time for the chair’s report in April 2012 included about one year’s worth of figures. Fourteen libraries participated in the first year, sharing a total of 324 titles.

The results for the goal of withdrawing titles in order to gain space showed no actual withdrawals based on this program, but several members indicated that they were considering doing so. The fact that many libraries had recently withdrawn large numbers of print journals available in JSTOR and other secure archives may factor into this lack of activity. One library did report having cancelled a subscription to a title available through this program.

The results for the goal of filling interlibrary loan requests were more promising: of 185 requests placed through the program, 165, or 89%, were filled, with the greatest number having been processed by the public institutions. Concerning the goal of providing articles directly to the end user by e-mail, only 17, or about 10%, met that goal.

In her report to the governance committee of the Maryland Digital Library prepared in June 2012, Jessame Ferguson, chair of the project and library director of McDaniel College, suggested these areas for further development:

• Increase rate of participation: Currently only 15 (29%) of the 52 MDL members have joined. One public university’s library staff would like to join, but its legal counsel has raised questions about the commitment to not withdraw titles. Nine additional libraries have expressed interest.

• Increase the proportion of titles considered “core” to their disciplines: Ms. Ferguson felt that adding titles considered central to disciplines would spur utilization of the program. One way to accomplish this would be to encourage existing members to submit additional titles.

• Improve adherence to uniform interlibrary loan procedures: Ms. Ferguson conjectured that low interlibrary lending activity might be attributable to inconsistencies in the workflows of the various interlibrary loan departments.

While these statistics measure the project’s overall level of use, they reveal little about its impact on the individual member library. Noting the low impact of the program on the Goucher College library (no articles borrowed, and only two articles lent from the shared title list), the author investigated the nature of titles listed in the shared repository in relation to the Goucher library’s holdings. Of the 304 titles listed by participants, only 52 titles, or 17%, are owned by the Goucher library in print and would therefore be candidates for deaccessioning. This low figure is probably due in part to the large amount of weeding recently undertaken. The more surprising figure is that 186, or 61%, of the member contributions are unique and not held in any format by the Goucher College library. This not only indicates the wealth of the region’s unique resources, but may reveal an unexpected benefit of the virtual repository: expanded access to journals beyond the library’s own holdings.
Monitoring interlibrary loan requests for these titles might reveal whether this is an effective method of promoting the program.

After one full year of operation, the Maryland Shared Journals Collection Project can claim modest success for its primary goals and is positioned to improve in usefulness as its membership grows. Unlike the well-endowed programs upon which it was modeled, it was launched entirely by a volunteer task force, implemented quickly, and for the most part operates smoothly. Desirable enhancements include creating uniform practices for interlibrary loan, increasing the number of core titles in the repository, and improving discoverability of resources to library users. Because participants have committed to just a ten-year period, it is likely that the adoption of online journal archives will have increased significantly due to improved availability and affordability by 2020 so that fewer print journals will need to be retained. Until then, participating in a virtual shared print journal repository is a low-cost, low-risk solution for Maryland academic libraries.

References