

University Library Committee 1995-1996

Memo from Joe St Sauve re Serials Cancellation

The following is a memo from Joe St Sauver to the Provost and the President of the University Senate on 25 October 1995 regarding the possible serials cancellation project.

I am not accustomed to bothering either of you directly with my concerns about the University, but I am **profoundly** disturbed by a matter that I believe requires your attention, both due to the magnitude of the amount involved (half a million dollars) and due to the direct, severe, immediate, and ongoing impact this matter will have on University's research productivity and teaching readiness.

Specifically, today the University Library Committee decided to endorse the Library's recommendation that the Library serials budget be cut by approximately 20%, or \$500,000.

I am apparently the only member of that committee with grave reservations about embarking on this course, or at least I am the only member who opposed proceeding with this proposal, but I am certain that my concerns are ones that other faculty throughout the University will share when they learn of this imminent reduction. In many disciplines, journal resources are rightly perceived as a bedrock of scholarly efforts, and a cut of this magnitude will cause an earthquake if implemented.

I'd like to begin by briefly summarizing the "problem," and then describe the means by which I believe the "problem" can be eliminated in a **non**-catastrophic way while operating within existing budgets. I apologize in advance for the detail/numeracy of this message, but we're dealing with financial information, and financial information requires numerical treatment.

- 1) Background... This year I was appointed to the UO Library Committee, chaired by Peter Gilkey of the Math Department. Other members of that committee are Frances Cogan (Honors College), John Gage (English Department), Lucy Lynch (CC), Bill Orr (Geology), Ted Palmer (Math), Leland Roth (Art History), Ray Weldon (Geology), George Shipman (ex officio), plus two political science students appointed by ASUO. Our first order of business (2 weeks ago) was consideration of the Library's request that the committee endorse \$500,000 in cuts to the Library's serials budget (total Library expenditure on serials currently run \$2,595,039/year, out of total Library expenditures amounting to some \$11,511,559).

Why does the Library believe such a drastic cut is necessary? Well, in publications as in other things, inflation has been taking its toll. This year, the price of journals will be increasing by an average of 13.35%, while in previous years, the serials inflation rate has ranged from 10.5% to 8.5%. (In round numbers, let's assume that inflation will cause approximately a 10% increase in prices/ year). Assuming 10% inflation, no cut in current periodicals purchases, a 3% budget increment in the Library's budget each year, and no reallocation of resources to acquisitions from other areas of the Library, the following scenario results:

* NO CUT IN SERIALS: *

YEAR	TOTAL ACQUIS	SERIALS	MONOGRAPHS	"MISC"	TOT ACQ LESS SERIALS
95/96	\$4,719,077	\$2,595,039	\$1,424,639	\$699,399	\$2,124,038
96/97	\$4,860,649	\$2,854,543		\$2,006,106	
97/98	\$5,006,469	\$3,139,997		\$1,866,472	
98/99	\$5,156,663	\$3,234,196		\$1,922,467	
99/00	\$5,311,363	\$3,557,616			

This scenario results in a lower level of monographic purchases than Deb Carver and other Library staff generally consider to be desirable, and that motivates their desire to make a half million dollar cut in their serials purchases.

Explanatory notes concerning this scenario:

- a) The last column, total acquisitions less serials costs, reflects what's left for the purchase of non-serials (i.e., books) and "miscellaneous" acquisitions (undefined in the materials available to me) after subtracting the inflated cost of the current serials subscriptions from the annually incremented Library acquisitions budget.
- b) Monographs are acquired on both an "approval" basis (just like ordering postage stamps on approval for your stamp collection as a kid), and on a discretionary basis. Currently approval purchases run about \$425,000/year, with the remainder being discretionary purchases made in response to requests by patrons, recommendations of subject area specialists, etc.

For the sake of argument, what would the picture would look like if serials *were* to be cut by \$500,000 this year (taking effect in 96/97), assuming all other factors are left unchanged from the other scenario (i.e., the same 3% budget increment, the same 10% inflationary factor applied to serials, and no reallocation of resources from other areas of the library)? Well, it would look like:

* WITH \$500,000 CUT IN SERIALS THIS YEAR: *

YEAR	TOTAL ACQUIS	SERIALS	MONOGRAPHS	"MISC"	TOT ACQ LESS SERIALS
95/96	\$4,719,077	\$2,595,039	\$1,424,639	\$699,399	\$2,124,038
96/97	\$4,860,649	\$2,304,543		\$2,556,106	
97/98	\$5,006,469	\$2,534,998		\$2,471,471	
98/99	\$5,156,663	\$2,788,498		\$2,368,165	
99/00	\$5,311,363	\$3,067,348			

I don't know about you, but I do not consider this second scenario to be materially preferable to the no-cut scenario laid out previously.

- 2) Some Historical Context: A Second \$500,000 Cut in Serials Today, Just *Two Years* After the Last \$350,000 Cut in Serials done in 1993...

In fact, given that the Library engaged in a \$350,000 cut in serials subscriptions in 1993, I believe making a 20% reduction to our serials expenditures on an ongoing basis would reduce the University's core journal collections below the minimum level necessary for effective scholarship.

I base this opinion on the fact that just two years ago there was a thorough title-by-title review of the Library's journal holdings -- if there was any fat to trim in those acquisitions, presumably the fat would have been trimmed at that time. I also believe that the Library's subject area specialists are generally quite dilligent in pruning the grain from the chaff when it comes to their particular areas of collection development responsibility.

Thus, subject to evidence to the contrary that I've yet to see, I do *NOT* believe that faculty members will be able to painlessly identify 2500 journal titles that the University can do without to achieve the \$500,000 savings the Library desires.

- 3) Making Catastrophic Cuts Would Be Highly Divisive/Disruptive...

Note that I said that *faculty* would be unable to identify 2500 titles (or \$500,000) in serials that could be cut -- this is a decision which the Library wants faculty to be intimately involved with, much as they were two years ago.

The mere process of identifying on the order of 2500 titles to cut from already thin journal collections will be extremely divisive, pitting colleague against colleague and department

against department, as scholars attempt to justify, protect and retain titles particularly crucial to their own research and teaching needs.

Care to speculate how many hours of meetings will be spent deciding what cuts to endorse? How much faculty time will be diverted from preparing to teach, doing research, advising students, etc.? An hour a faculty member? I'd guess more on the order of two, three, or even four or more hours per faculty member...

Divisiveness may even take place on a 'meta level,' as departments quibble about whether the cuts should be made at a level rate across the board, or whether some collections or departments should feel deeper or more shallow cuts, due to differences in base journal collection size, differences in the importance of journals to that discipline vs another discipline, etc.

- 4) Cuts in Journal Holdings Are Difficult To Subsequently Overcome... Another aspect of the decision to cut journals that needs to be considered is the fact that series, once lapses in subscriptions result in gaps, are retrospectively difficult to complete (should resources later become available to reinstate dropped titles).

That is, unlike popular books, the market for replacement volumes of academic periodicals is not very "thick" -- most libraries that want a given title buy it on an ongoing basis, and filling in gaps can be both an expensive and frustrating experience since there usually is little demand (and scant supply) of particular missing volumes of academic journals. Scarcity translate to expense... but then again, maybe a declining serials budget is NOT something we anticipate being able to reverse in the foreseeable future, in which case the difficulty of completing a gap in a journal run may not be germane to this discussion.

- 5) Alternatives Exist That Have Not Been Explored...

What concerns me perhaps most of all about all of this is that I believe the need to make a \$500,000 cut in serials is to some extent an "artificial crisis," and represents a convulsion that the University can wholly avoid ... IF it wants to do so. By this do I mean that the University should give the Library more money? No, I think the Library already has adequate resources to discharge its core mission if it considers alternatives to this sort of catastrophic budgetary "brinkmanship."

Unfortunately, the Library administration (and the Library Advisory Committee, too, apparently) appears wholly unwilling to consider those alternatives, having embraced this apocalyptic cut.

What non-catastrophic alternatives do I have in mind? I think the range of potential alternatives is broad, including:

- -- transferring funds from other areas of Library operations into the acquisitions line items to preserve the serial collections,

- o -- cutting costs, and/or -- looking for alternative sources of revenues from existing library operations (this could range from charging for the computer training classes the library currently does (much as the Continuation Center and LCC currently does) to increasing the cost of photocopies to a level on par with what other institutions charge to charging rent for carrels to increasing the cost of community patron cards to charging for interlibrary loan requests that are accepted.

The process of helping the Library overcome its financial challenges is handicapped by the fact that the Library is unwilling to share detailed financial information with the Library Advisory Committee, yet the Library administration seeks the Committee's endorsement of financial recommendations that cannot possibly be understood or assessed viz-a-viz other possible alternatives without financial details.

We do not want to micromanage the Library's financial affairs, yet at the same time it is inappropriate for the Library Advisory committee to serve as nothing more than a mindless pep squad or pro forma rubber stamp providing a superficial level of political insulation. To do more than that, some minimum level of financial specificity is required in the information that is provided.

For example, the half page summary we received in today's meeting included a \$699,399 "miscellaneous" category, and a \$1,868,868 "other operating expenditures" category. The "other operating expenditures" category apparently includes:

- o -- Computer files and search services
- o -- Document delivery and interlibrary loan charges
- o -- Automated system hardware and software
- o -- Automated system maintenance
- o -- Bibliographic utilities, networks, and consortia
- o -- and "sther supplies and services"

(this list of inclusive items was mentioned as a footnote to the half page summary, but without dollar amounts).

I believe that there's a high probability that that \$2,568,267 total in "miscellaneous" and "other" expenses (a) merits scrutiny and (b) has great potential for reductions *before* the University further reduces already lean journal collections budgets. After all, the \$2,568,267 in "miscellaneous" and "other" is almost as much as we currently spend on serials (\$2,595,039)! There must be opportunities for savings (and I believe there are). One hint of this can be seen in the Library's Statement of Goals, Evaluation and Need Assessment, February 22nd, 1995, pp. 32, which notes: "The Library recently purchased three major bibliographic databases which are accessible through the Janus system. The initial cost was \$55,000; the annual costs to maintain access to these three databases is \$40,000. Another crucial system, CAS (Chemical Abstracts) online costs between \$30,000 and \$35,000 each year."

I would argue that the University has manfully struggled along without that \$70,000 to \$75,000/yr investment in these databases during prior years; if we are reduced to cutting half a

million dollars from primary research sources, such as journals, perhaps we should consider cutting all or part of that \$70,000 to \$75,000/yr instead. Would I like to have these databases and CAS online, given no budgetary constraint? Sure. But could I make do with non-electronic access to those resources if that \$75,000/year meant we could keep 750 serials titles at \$100/title instead? You betcha...

Similarly, Library salaries and wage expenditures total \$4,782,259 according to the brief summary we were given. Although there was no breakdown by position, I find it hard to believe that no savings can be achieved there. For example, in the Library's Statement of Goals, Evaluation and Need Assessment, pp. 27, they noted that "Most public service librarians work an average of 15 hours per week providing direct reference service either at one of the general service points or in one of the library's information technology centers. In addition to reference assistance, all public service librarians participate in collections development and departmental liason duties (10 to 15 hours per week), and library instruction, including credit classes and workshops (5 to 15 hours per week)."

I am of the belief that public service librarians need to be asked to return their attention to their primary role, that of acting as reference librarians, perhaps raising that aspect of their jobs to 30 hrs/wk while still leaving several hours each day to be dedicated to collection development, departmental liason, and instructional endeavors. Refocussing these professionals' attention on their primary professional responsibilities and recognizing that "lulls in the action" at the reference desk can also be used productively should allow:

- o -- MORE public contact between librarians and the constituencies they are there to serve, namely faculty, staff and students, while
- o -- LOWERING total personnel costs (as fewer staff cover the same staffing periods currently defined), and -- ELIMINATING the current insularity between patrons and staff that
- o is caused by the large non-public areas of the new library building.

How would tangible personnel savings be achieved? Apparently personnel turnover at the Library has been quite high (26 positions, or 50%, during the period from July 1990 and December 1994, per page 4 of the University Library's State of Goals, Evaluation and Need Assessment, February 22nd, 1995). One of my recommendations would be to take advantage of that high staff attrition by deferring replacement hires, thereby making available salary savings that can be redirected to offset the impact of inflation on serials.

I also know the Library has elected to voluntarily take on a broad program of instructional activities, but the reality is that the Library may need to refocus its priorities. If we are making catastrophically deep cuts in periodicals, the Library should not be devoting substantial personnel resources to non-essential functions such as the Internet Curriculum, particularly when the substantial effort devoted to that endeavor results in fewer total contact hours than one medium size lecture course taught by a single instructor in one of the regular colleges. (Part of this is a reflection of the small class sizes employed in the Internet curriculum, and part of this is due to the one-shot nature of the instruction, but the effect is the same: high instructor load for low classroom contact hours achieved).

Another area the University might want to consider is divestiture of its rare book holdings. It is difficult for me to consider elimination of working journal holding when library resources are being devoted to the acquisition and preservation of historical materials more appropriate to an archive than a research library. I certainly cherish rare books as much or more than the next person, and sure rare Oregoniana is of particular interest to those of us living in Oregon, but if it is a matter of putting bread and butter materials on the shelves or buying first editions, I think we must be clear in our priorities.

Similarly, substantial duplication of effort apparently exists between the Instructional Media Center and other units on campus such as the New Media Center in Research Park. In a perfect world the University would benefit from such redundancy; in a world of constrained budget, such activities at the IMC represent an opportunity for economization (assuming the New Media Center is to be the lead multimedia unit at the University).

In summary, I think it would be a **grave** error to make a \$500,000 reduction in serials purchases, an error that would leave no faculty member, department or graduate student untouched.

The serials budget **can** be inflation proofed using a combination of cost savings, alternative revenue sources, budgetary reallocations within the Library and yes, some **selective** reductions in serials (particularly where publishers are gouging or where the costs of selected titles have become unconscienable relative to their value.)

But should we embark on a broad and deep program of \$500,000 in cuts to the University's already struggling journal collections? Emphatically NO!

Thanks for hearing out my concerns. I sincerely hope we can spare the University yet another catastrophic reduction in serials, and all the internicine backbiting that would accompany such a program of cuts.

Regards,

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