Growing into the Digital Age: A Small Academic Library Confronts the Practical Challenges of Transition

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Growing into the Digital Age: A Small Academic Library Confronts the Practical Challenges of Transition

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Abstract

This paper outlines the recent history of the Benedictine College Library and traces the development of the library's digital collections since 2006. The librarians have worked to provide an integrated search solution through the EBSCO Discovery Service and streamline off-campus access through EZPROXY. As the library's electronic resources have grown, we have continued to support its historic core collection in the humanities as well as some unique and eclectic special collections. A range of issues are discussed: integrating electronic resources, ensuring 24-hour access, working with IT staff and the impact of the institutional culture on the college library. The challenges that this transition have posed for the library staff will also be discussed. It is hoped that librarians in similar situations can learn from our experiences.

Keywords: discovery services, electronic resources, special collections

Overview
Benedictine College is a small liberal arts college located in the northeast corner of Kansas. Founded in 1858, it is one of the older institutions of higher learning in the state. As an institution of higher learning, Benedictine articulates a strong mission-centered identity, summarized in the phrase, "educating men and women in a community of faith and scholarship". The mission is founded upon four "pillars": Catholic, Benedictine, Liberal Arts and Residential.

During the past fifteen years Benedictine College has experienced significant growth in its student body and consequent expansion in its physical plant. Since 2000, the FTE has grown from 1,000 to over 1,700. Since 2008, the College has added several new academic programs, including International Business, Nursing and Engineering. Student housing has been expanded by seven new buildings between 2005 and 2014.

Benedictine College Library's core collection of print holdings is comprised of over 250,000 items, particularly strong in the humanities. This collection includes the holdings of St. Benedict's Abbey, one of the College's sponsoring institutions. The Abbey continues to purchase books and periodicals, principally in the areas of monasticism, theology and philosophy.

Our special collections include a 14th century manuscript and two volumes of a Gutenberg-era Bible from 1486. We also house a children's collection from the late 19th and early 20th centuries as well as government documents from the survey period. The vast majority of these materials were acquired by Saint Benedict's Abbey over the course of its 150 year history. A large segment of the collection includes theological works and translations of the Rule of Saint Benedict in various languages. We even have a Catholic Catechism written in a Native American language. These special collections are considered a valuable patrimony and will continue to be maintained.

A few years ago, a student, writing in an online survey, commented on our print holdings, "it is a great collection for the 1970's." I did not take offense at this succinct remark. It was absolutely true!

Moving from Print to Digital: Purchases
The college administration fully supports the development of digital resources. There is also an expectation among students and faculty that a significant percentage of materials be available online. Younger faculty members who have often completed their degrees at large research institutions have come to expect that resources in their field are in electronic format. Most are not shy about suggesting purchase of needed materials, another vehicle that has continued to push us forward.

Benedictine College has belonged to the Kansas City Library Consortium (now the Kansas City Public Library Service Program) since 1992. The program maintains our SIRSI-Dynix Integrated Library System. EBSCO research databases, to which we have subscribed since the mid-1990's, has provided the foundation for expanding our digital holdings. EBSCO also services most of our 300+ periodical subscriptions. We have chosen to stay with EBSCO, mainly because we are happy with our service, and our core constituencies, students and faculty, are very comfortable with the EBSCO interface. As enrollment and our online resources have increased, so have overall usage. EBSCO databases, principally Academic Search Premier and Business Source Premier, remain our most heavily used databases. The chart below displays the number of full-text article downloads for our EBSCO research databases from 2008 to 2014:

EBSCO RESEARCH DATABASES ANNUAL USAGE – 2008-2014
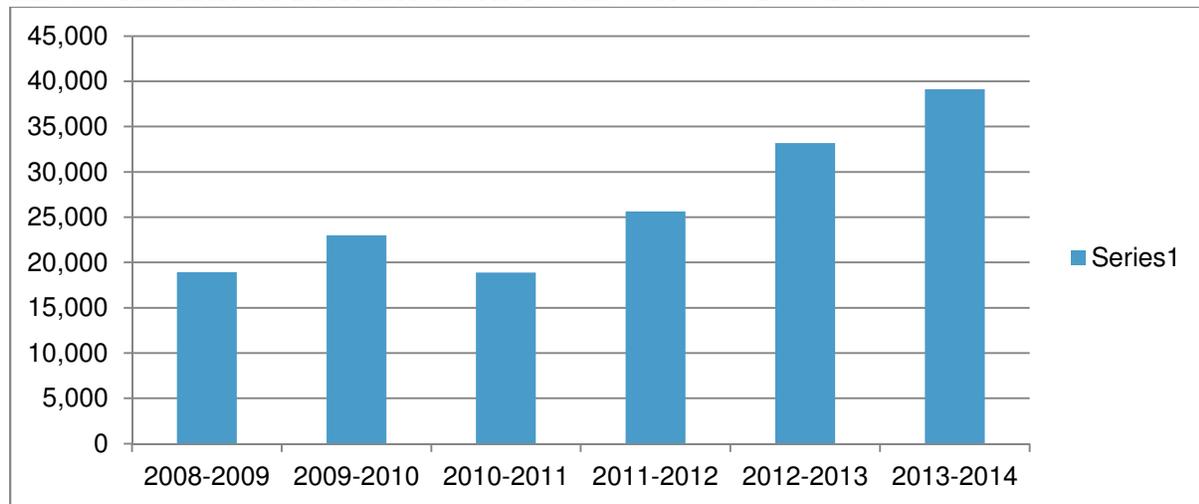
Between 2006 and 2014, the Library has invested in e-books, online journals and a growing number of full-text databases.

Our first foray into the world of e-books was the purchase of the Ebrary Academic Complete collection in the fall of 2006. At the time of purchase, the collection included 10,000 titles. As of this writing in June 2014, the collection includes 113,000 titles. A grant procured in 2009 facilitated the purchase of the first of several JSTOR collections. The chart below lists our most significant purchases of digital resources during the past eight years:

ACADEMIC YEAR	PURCHASE
2006-2007	Ebrary Academic Complete
2009-2010	JSTOR Arts & Sciences I GALE 20th Century Writers Online
2010-2011	JSTOR Music Collection
2011-2012	JSTOR Arts & Sciences II, IV, VI & VIII Health & General Sciences, Language & Literature Oxford English Dictionary Online Oxford Music Online
2012-2013	EBSCO DISCOVERY SERVICE
2014-2015	Oxford Medieval History EBSCO Academic Collection American Psychology Society (Psychological Science Package)

Budget
The library budget has increased 60% overall between 2006 and 2014. During that time the percentage spent of electronic resources has increased by 98 percent. The cost of electronic versus

print materials was 51 percent to 48 percent in 2006 and 62 percent to 37 percent in 2013. The chart below displays these changes:

BUDGET COMPARISON – ELECTRONIC TO PRINT 2008-2013
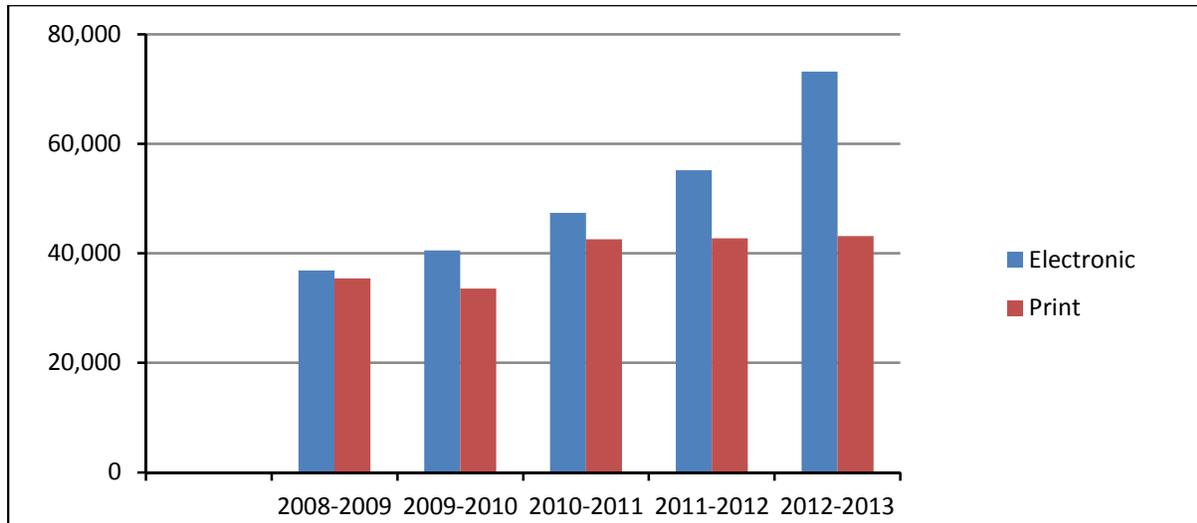
Resource Integration

Acquiring new resources was an essential and exciting step in developing our digital collections. As these resources were deployed, the need to streamline access through an integrated search or discovery layer became more paramount. Searching multiple interfaces may be a minor chore for librarians, but we found it to be an obstacle for most students and not a few faculty. Was there a way to simplify the labyrinth in which the average users often find themselves? Was such an option affordable for a college of our size? In 2010, when we were merely *contemplating* a discovery layer purchase, we made a small step at integrating our Ebrary collection with our print collection. Loading the MARC records for the Academic Complete collection into our Sirsi-Dynix integrated library system resulted in a dramatic increase in our usage statistics:

EBRARY ANNUAL USAGE 2006-2014
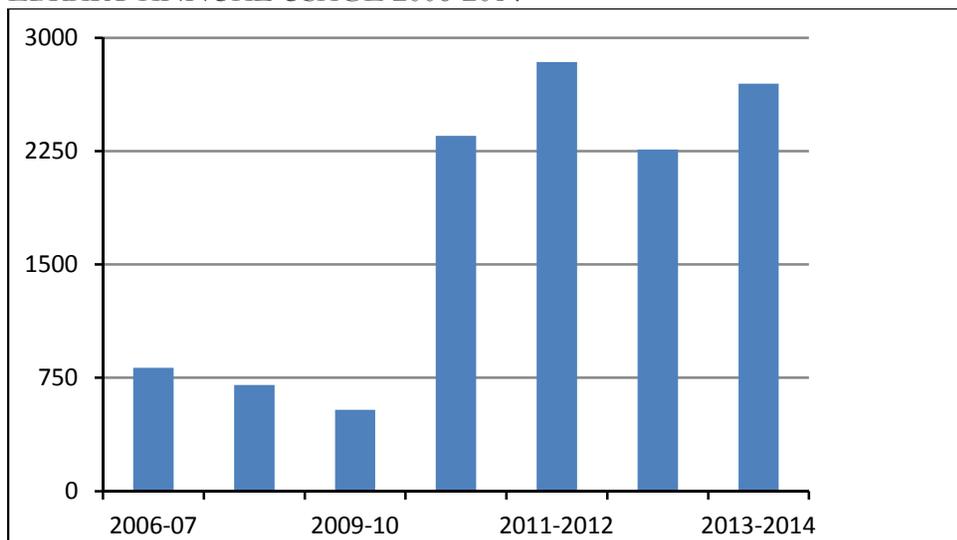
Lamothe's (2013) study, at least in very broad strokes, mirrors Benedictine's experience, albeit with some significant differences. The student population at Laurentian University is more than double that of Benedictine. Laurentian's data covers a longer period and is divided between student and faculty use. Regardless, there are parallels in the overall rise in usage patterns over time. I hope to apply the author's understanding and interpretation of statistical data to future analysis of our own usage statistics at Benedictine.

EBSCO Discovery Service
Our second and most significant step toward integration was the deployment of EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) in 2012-2013. The possibility of purchasing EDS opened up when the State Library of Kansas contracted with EBSCO for state-wide databases in the summer of 2012. The money saved from two databases provided through the State Library went to purchase EDS.

After the contract was signed in July of 2012, the process of configuring our EDS instance began. The implementation phase lasted from July to November 2012. We were assigned a project manager who was based in Ipswitch, MA, north of Boston. Perhaps the most challenging task was to load our SIRSI-Dynix holdings into EDS. KCPL-LSP staff, working with the EBSCO implementation team successfully completed this phase of the project by early October.

We were given access to a generic interface that initially linked only our EBSCO research databases. A series of staff meetings were held to review the EDS interface and identify customizations to request from EBSCO. Staff suggestions included re-labelling and re-ordering the limiters on the left-hand side of the screen. In some cases these suggestions could be accommodated by EBSCO, other times not.

As a small library, we were entirely dependent upon EBSCO to implement our requested customizations: we lacked the programming expertise to make significant changes or adjustments to the EDS interface on our own.

One example of a customization challenge involved a single search box that was added to the library landing page. The EDS wiki contained instructions for implementation. It worked wonderfully on campus, but we were unable to successfully integrate the search box with our EZPROXY off-campus authentication protocol. We are hoping to re-introduce the search box, but still face the challenges of limited resources and the effects of "silo" mentalities within the institutional culture.

Additional costs were incurred to link some resources, including Ebrary and WorldCAT, making them searchable in EDS. We are content with the customizations overall. The new discovery layer was locally named the "Raven Search," the mascot of Benedictine College. The color scheme reflects the Benedictine school colors and includes the official logo. We continue to review EDS for refinements and improvements.

The Raven Search is popular with students and faculty, at least based upon informal anecdotal feedback. One faculty member, who was finishing his Ph.D., enthusiastically exclaimed "the Raven Search saved my life!" EDS is one-stop shopping, providing access, at least in theory, to all the resources offered by Benedictine College Library. At the same time, a single general search can generate an overwhelming amount of data. Refining a search requires a sophisticated use of the multiple limiters. This presupposes a familiarity with database searching and with the EBSCO

interface. Deployment of EDS has also changed our focus in Information Literacy classes, at all levels.

Chickering and Yang (2014) describe Rider University's process that resulted in their decision to purchase EBSCO Discovery Service. They also provide a thorough and useful review of discovery tools. In the final analysis, Rider has found, like Benedictine, that EDS meets the research needs of its constituencies, providing a single, powerful search capability.

Fallout for the Library Staff
At the time that the Raven Search went live, the library staff was made up of eight individuals. As a whole, we were all looking forward to using this new discovery layer. There was, however, a high level of expectations that EDS would create a world of green lights where database searching would be seamless and access problems non-existent!

In reality, as with any new experience, there was a learning curve. Switching between the EDS limiters is not an "intuitive" skill. Comparing print periodical holdings with database ranges can still be a two-step process. Links to open source journals often led the user to journals that prompted for the purchase of individual articles or volumes. Links to ILL forms (for citations) were inconsistent. Most of the time, a student could easily send an article request to our ILL staff. There were other times when the ILL option did not appear in the record.

EZPROXY
Another aspect of integration involved simplifying off-campus access to our digital resources. Benedictine College provides on-campus access through IP address recognition. Prior to 2013, off-campus access was facilitated through user names and passwords provided through the vendors. This proliferation of passwords regularly caused confusion among our core constituencies. Our protocol was to make a spreadsheet containing the logins available internally to students, faculty and staff.

For several years, we had looked forward to finding a single-login solution for off-campus access to our digital resources. Ultimately, we settled on OCLC's EZPROXY product. EZPROXY was implemented in the fall of 2012, and was configured to allow students and faculty to log into our online resources using their network user name and password. Our campus constituencies began accessing digital resources using their network credentials in January 2013.

Implementing EZPROXY has not been a seamless process. From the start, the library was confronted with multiple challenges that were well beyond our control. The campus IT department played a central role in configuring the EZPROXY software on a designated server and linking it to our digital resources through the user's network credentials. Librarians do not have access to the server.

As a former systems librarian, I am sympathetic to the challenges faced by IT departments at small colleges. I have learned that finding ways to effectively collaborate with colleagues in IT is essential. Nevertheless, collaboration, no matter how well-intentioned, can still be daunting.

The long implementation period can be attributed to several factors: IT staffs turnover, competing priorities, a steep learning curve, and a lack of allocated time for thorough technical analysis. The technician who originally assumed the task of configuring EZPROXY left the college before the

software could be adequately tested and deployed. To his credit, he did an excellent job with the basic set-up, but the time-line for testing was too short. In the aftermath of his departure, other IT staff, involved in previously assigned projects, was reluctant to take on another with which they were unfamiliar.

The EZPROXY configuration allows for a pass-through, where users are not prompted to log into the software on campus. Nevertheless, for over a year, through 2013 and into 2014, our patrons were prompted for a login both on and off campus. Finally, in the spring of 2014, one of the technicians discovered that several campus IP ranges had never been added to the EZPROXY configuration. Once the missing addresses were added to the configuration, the issue was resolved, and the pass-through command in EZPROXY worked properly.

Prior to the resolution of the pass-through issue, I approached OCLC about hosting our EZPROXY. This option raised security concerns for the staff of the IT Department, who was reluctant to give OCLC access to our LDAP server. (The LDAP server links directly to user credentials.) So, at least in the short-term, the hosted option has been put aside. I still consider OCLC hosting a viable option, particularly if access problems continue to arise.

Conclusion

The journey toward integrated, seamless access to our digital collections will continue. Even as technology improves, new challenges will inevitably appear. At Benedictine, I foresee continual growth in digital resources while it is likely that print materials will continue to decline. Ahead of a possible library renovation, discussions about off-site storage are underway.

Each academic library has its own institutional history and culture. Thus, strategic decisions will always be driven by unique institutional demands. That being said, it is hoped that this paper may offer some perspective to other small academic libraries that are facing similar challenges. Local conferences such as CULS provide opportunities for librarians to reflect upon how best to fulfill the missions and goals of their respective institutions.

References

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