

This Is a Story about a Collections Budget

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Part I

Never mind that our senior leadership team spent months puzzling through how to live with a leaner operating budget. We scrutinized the organization from every angle, challenging ourselves to run difficult scenarios, to disagree, and then to commit to a plan. There were trying moments, but together we resolved to lead from a place of courage and optimism. The fiscal climate challenged us to be as imaginative as possible even though reductions were unavoidable.

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But this is not a story about laying people off. This is a story about one piece of the overall budget pie. A portion that was exempted from cuts: a special, protected slice. Given that, one might assume this is a story of success, a happy story. It’s not.

Or at least it wasn’t in the beginning.

This is a story about a collections budget.

Part II

At first the exemption from cuts to collections brought measured relief. It was good to know that the message about runaway inflation had been understood by university administration. We planned renewals spending using cost-per-use metrics and other data. In the interest of stronger fiscal stewardship we worked hard to integrate decisions about areas of library collections that had often been treated separately. Breaking down communication silos was a goal, so we experimented with several modes

of teamwork. We worked toward this and other aims with diligence early in the budget cycle. This year, we knew we had to spend every penny in every line.

In the past, endowed funds allocated to support the collection had routinely rolled over from year to year. We identified this as something to change in the interest of good fiscal stewardship and accountability to our donors. We were ready to effect change although we were aware, generally, of previous challenges exhausting the full budgeted allocation. This knowledge might have cast a longer shadow than it did. Perhaps we put too much stock in the power of our good intention.

As an associate university librarian in my first months at the university, I sought every opportunity to communicate about the need to meet the spending deadline. The message included these ideas: “In the past, budgeting and spending everything wasn’t a high priority, but now it is. Our budget is a reflection of our priorities and need. If we don’t exhaust our allocation, it might seem that our collection has everything necessary, but we know that’s far from true.”

Our collections strategist and research services directors did the same. We heard the question, “Why?” often. “Even endowment payouts?” librarians asked. “Yes. It’s a new day,” we replied. “Our budget climate creates a different moment: It’s imperative that we spend our drawdown. Not to do so reflects a lack of need. These funds are protected from cuts. We explained the inflation situation and we were heard. We succeeded! Now we get to work.”

Once the spending plan was in place, I and other leaders turned our attentions to the burning issues—thinking and rethinking how we would serve the needs of the university with an overall reduced compensation and operations budget.

And so, in the end, when the rate of spending didn’t keep pace with the plan, and when invoicing lagged in the final month of the fiscal year, it

was all the more painful to see that we were not going to exhaust the full allocation. On a scale of one to ten, it was tempting to feel like zero.

But how had we failed exactly? It wasn't a clear picture, because as it turns out, the same thing had happened the year before. And the year before that. It might have been tempting to chalk it up to a retirement in the finance office. But we knew that wasn't the truth. The truth was much more complicated.

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We could see that good intention and force of message do not clear invoices on their own. They don't move licenses through an approval process. They definitely don't resolve bugs in the integrated library system or create visibility between that system and the enterprise finance system. We were going to have to do some real work to understand why our plan to spend everything did not come to fruition. What happened next, for us, was game-changing.

Part III

At this point in a case study, a reader might pause, reflect, and suggest a course of action. So I'll ask, if this were your budget, what would you do? Would you “recall” unspent allocations from individuals at a designated deadline? Would you take more of the process into your own hands? Cross your fingers and hope it all didn't happen again? Would you delegate to a few smart people, frame some goals together, and then take a step back? How would you build confidence that things could be different?

We knew that success in the coming year would require doing something no one could remember doing before—spending all of our allocated funding within the fiscal year. We had some hypotheses about why this wasn't easy, and what was holding us back, but those hunches

needed to be tested. To do this, our collections strategist proposed the formation of five teams to test and iteratively develop complementary facets of a solution.¹ The mantra we came up with was inspired by the simplicity of Michael Pollan's guidance presented in *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 2008). Pollan opens with the line: "Eat food, not too much, mostly plants." Our framing of our goals was less elegant, but hit the essentials: **Spend all the money, on resources of highest value, on schedule, as a team.**

The last part is where we started on our path to do better than before.

Working collaboratively, the directors in our Research and User Services department and our collections strategist identified five individuals to lead the teams and develop project charters. The leaders surveyed librarians with collection development responsibilities and (this turned out to be key) other librarians and staff to solicit interest in the teamwork, and to identify places where people without technical or subject matter expertise could nonetheless be assets to teams. The teams ranged in size from three members (Serials Acquisition Workflow) to six (Negotiation). Additional teams formed to focus on Serials Budget Planning, Communication & Data Visualization, and forecasting Demand-Driven Acquisition.

Because we desired to be responsive to emerging information in the course of moving toward our goal, our project management approach reflected "agile" principles. These included values of showing work in progress regularly to the relevant stakeholders and incorporating that feedback into forthcoming stages of the work. We agreed that we would try things that would be experimental and would "feel weird" at first. We agreed we might fail here and there along the way. And we agreed that none of those feelings or small failures would get in the way of our meeting our goal. We would be honest about what we learned and use that knowledge to be better stewards of university resources. We agreed we would think of ourselves foremost as university trustees.²

So, after an afternoon of training on the agile project approach—creating a workplan and roles of project leads, stakeholders, and team members; modeling formation of team agreements; and some practice with the Trello team-productivity app as a tool to capture it all—we were off.³

Each team developed its own character and its own cadence. Each delivered increments of work that could be reviewed and shared among the teams. Very quickly these small pieces of work began to provide us with insight into why the work of collections had proven so challenging.

There were unexpected twists and turns. Each team needed data—cleaner data than we had at first. The teams realized they needed many of the same data elements, and they discovered this fairly early in the process. Although data scrubbing was time-consuming, there was a larger group available to support the effort than otherwise would have been the case inside of siloed functional areas. Crucially, the Communication & Data Visualization team reprioritized their work to jump in, reduce duplicative efforts, and help prepare important data.

Not everything about our effort to improve collection development outcomes by working in teams was easy. Some teams clicked immediately, but others needed more time to hit their stride. We also surfaced some uncomfortable truths that we can now do the difficult work of confronting. The difference is that today we hold those truths in common, across the boundaries of departmental function. We are working to become less conflict avoidant, to share feedback more openly and directly, and to take collective ownership of all the work we do. In that work, there can be no “us” or “them.”

Did it work?

I eyed the spending burndown report nervously as we moved into the last quarter. I mentioned to our finance director that the remainder

left to be spent seemed higher than I was expecting. She laughed, “I’ve been moving things around to make sure we have enough to cover what’s in the pipeline. We’re good!”

It took a little while to sink in, but eventually it did. We had done it. The teams had focused effort on the right things and it made the difference.

Part IV

We staged two reflection sessions for all team members.⁴ The first, at the midpoint, was a chance to affirm what was working in the approach and to identify ways to modify the process. The second, at the end, provided a moment to identify which lessons we would incorporate into future work, and to celebrate both meeting our goals and the adventure of working differently.

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At the second reflection, teams sat together at round tables. Individual members wrote timed responses to three questions in a round-robin fashion meant to elicit deeper insight into the lessons learned about the teamwork itself. The three writing prompts were:

- What did I learn about being a team member?
- What did I learn about team leadership?
- How will I apply what I learned to future work?

The comments left me with hope for the future of libraries. The exercise was a safe space to reflect on the problem-solving process and the teamwork. The remarks were nuanced and insightful. The comments suggested that, given the right structure and support, we can solve exceptionally difficult challenges when we work together across boundaries. The obvious boundaries we bridged included departmental

affiliation and expertise. But other boundaries were less obvious and no less important—leadership style, orientation toward change, tolerances for ambiguity and risk.

We may not know what major challenge we'll be tackling next. What we do know is we can do hard things when we work together, and when we recognize that leadership lives throughout our organization, not only in certain boxes on the organizational chart. In the words of my colleagues:

[Leadership is] a shared responsibility. We all help lead from different places.

Leadership is not one thing. Good leaders must constantly adapt.

We worked hard to solve a problem, and we changed ourselves for the better. So maybe this isn't a story about a collections budget. Maybe it's a story about a group of people who decided the story could have a different ending and led the way there.

The author wishes to recognize team leads David Killian, Deborah Bezanson, Dolsy Smith, Cathy Zeljak, and Amanda Hanoosh Steinberg for their efforts overall, and specifically their willingness to try on the role of "product owner."

Endnotes

1. The collections leadership recognized that working differently would be part of our overall objective and would take time. We cultivated staff willingness to re-prioritize the work of collections in order to create capacity to solve this fiscal stewardship challenge. Collections strategist Dolsy Smith designed the overall approach. Peter Cohn, director of research services, gave direction to the process of prioritizing and coordinating decision-making around a "wish list." The wish list process was a companion to the work described here

and is deserving of its own paper covering the development of a new decision-making structure.

2. Credit to Dolsy Smith for developing talking points around this idea.
3. Matt Mihalik, director of scholarly technology & library IT, facilitated a retrospective to help identify desired process changes, and developed the initial training for the teams. Matt is a certified scrum master (CSM), a facilitator who ensures that the agile project team has the knowledge and tools they need to complete a project successfully.
4. Morgan Stoddard (CSM) facilitated the first retrospective, and was joined by Bill Gillis for the second. Both are directors of research and user services.

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