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Good Enough: The New Face of Reference

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Good Enough: The New Face of Reference

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Good Enough: The New Face of Reference

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Abstract:

College students today flock to Wikipedia in droves, while at the same time academic libraries continue to pour time and money into print reference collections that are rarely used and take huge amounts of our libraries' limited space. While libraries have responded to space and access concerns by turning to electronic books, title-by-title selection is a time-consuming affair for a collection that sees low use. In this paper we examine the factors that have led to the point where libraries need to reexamine how they collect and provide access to reference sources. Through a content analysis of reference transcripts and transaction logs, an examination of usage statistics and interviews with librarians and library school students we illustrate how these changes have altered the way reference sources are collected and used at Grand Valley State University. We also outline 10 characteristics of the "new" reference collection and discuss how we see reference collections continuing to evolve in the coming years.

As at many libraries, through conversations and interactions with students the librarians at Grand Valley State University, a comprehensive university in Allendale, MI, with approximately 24,000 students, noticed a decline in use of the print reference collection. While anecdotal evidence pointed strongly towards decreasing use of print reference sources and an increase in the use of online resources, we wanted to look at statistics to see if the numbers matched our impressions. In this paper we discuss our analysis of reference transactions and usage statistics. We also examine the factors behind this change in user behavior and the characteristics of today's reference collection.

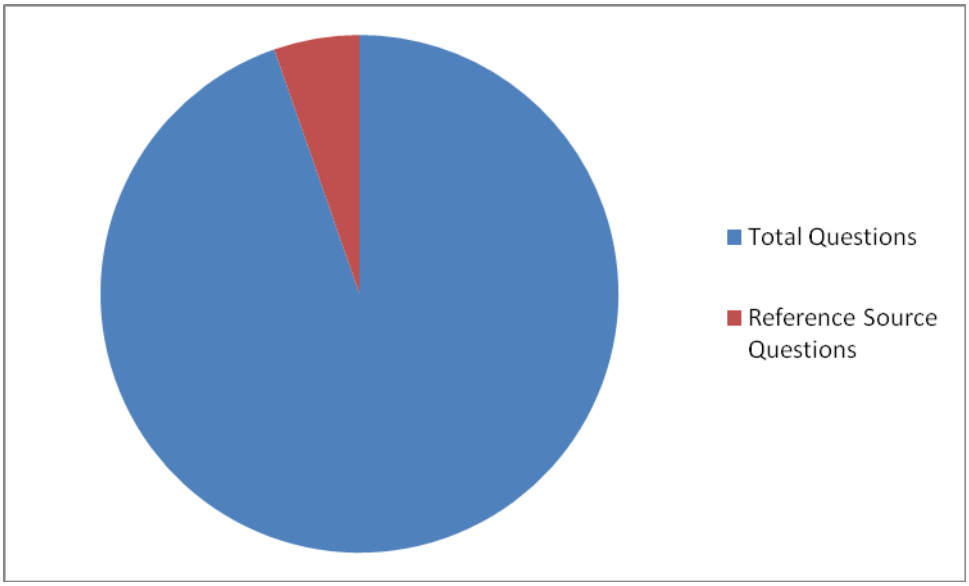
Reference Transaction Analysis

We used LibStats software to analyze questions asked during Winter Semester 2009. LibStats is an open-source program for keeping statistics on questions asked at service desks. It allows the user to enter in the question, answer, time, date, type of question, location and initials of the person answering the question. Users can then sort the data and get detailed information about interactions occurring at the reference desk.

We looked at questions from reference desks at all three university libraries. Our analysis determined that out of 4407 questions, only 249 mentioned a reference source (5.65%). The 249 reference source questions included 51 questions about an online source (20.5%). Of the 70 questions in which a librarian referred a patron to a source, half of them involved an online source. There were 172 questions in which a student requested a source, and only 16 of those questions involved an online source (9.3%). We assumed that students did not need our assistance in accessing online resources and these statistics seem to support that belief. Overall, about 46% of the reference source questions asked in Winter Semester were related to either dictionaries, questions about citations, or class related reference sources.

Figure 1

Reference Source Questions

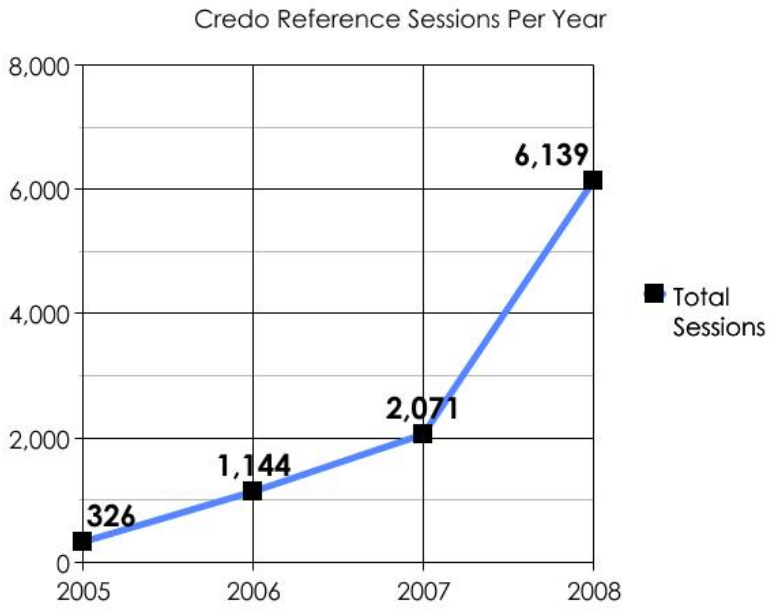


Use of Online Reference Sources

While our analysis of reference transactions demonstrated that the print reference collection has been seeing little use, an examination of database usage statistics shows that the Libraries have seen strong use of its online reference sources. During the Winter Semester 2009, semester 336 online reference books were accessed through the library's Credo Reference, Ebrary and Sage eReference Online products, compared to 125 print books that were used during that period. Looking beyond just book usage, during that same semester there were more than 16,000 sessions and more than 48,000 searches in the Libraries' different reference databases from Credo Reference, Sage Reference, Greenwood, Cambridge University Press, Gale and Oxford University Press.

The Libraries have also seen strong growth in the use of its online reference resources. For example, Figure 2 illustrates the increase in use of the Credo Reference database, which has seen the number of sessions double almost every year.

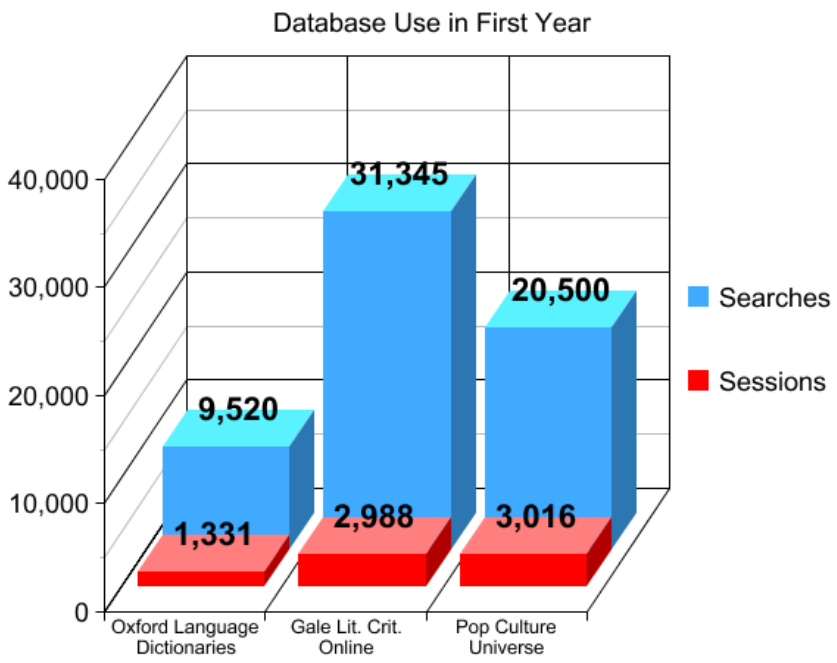
Figure 2



A third trend the Libraries have seen is the quick adoption of new reference resources. Figure 3 illustrates the searches and sessions for three databases in their first year. Each database was somewhat unique, but each saw strong use in its first year. Oxford Language Dictionaries serves a relatively small number of students in the university's Modern Language programs, but faculty and students quickly began to use the resource with it averaging more than 200 sessions per month during the first semester the Libraries had the resource. Gale's Literature Criticism Online was somewhat different in that it consisted of a resource that students and faculty in the English department were familiar with and they quickly began using the resource after it was acquired. Unlike the first two resources mentioned here, Pop Culture Universe has no

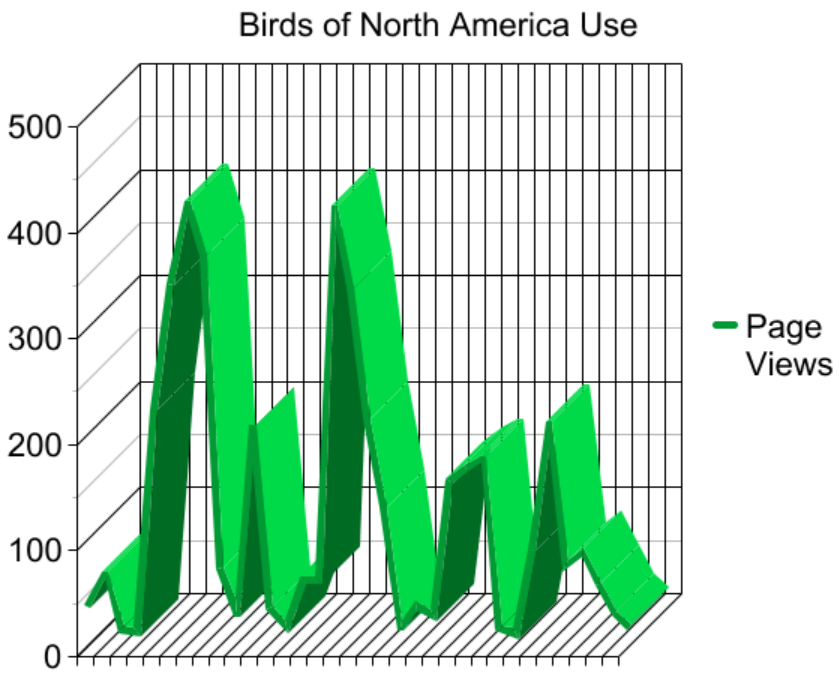
specific department that would use it, but still, it saw the highest number of sessions of the three products at more than 20,000 searches, illustrating that reference usage is not necessarily tied to assignments or disciplinary resources.

Figure 3



That said, as is the case with their print counterparts, assignments can drive the use of some online reference sources. Figure 4 illustrates the use of Birds of North America. In some months the database sees little to no use, while in other months the use is extremely high suggesting there are assignments requiring the students to use the resource.

Figure 4



Factors Driving Changes in User Behavior

The growth of online reference use and the decline of print reference use is not necessarily surprising when viewed in light of other changes happening in users and in their behavior. As has been reported in the literature, most students begin their research with a web or internet search (DeRosa, 2005). Perhaps equally unsurprising is the fact that the internet is as popular a starting point for faculty when they are conducting their research (Lippincott & Kyrillidou, 2004). Libraries have facilitated this through the addition of online content, like ejournals, and through the development of tools like link-resolvers that facilitate the acquisition of materials online. This has led to the perception among users that they can find what they need online.

When students cannot find exactly what they want online, they will settle for what they can get their hands on. Head and Eisenberg found that students realize the web does

not meet all of their information needs and that there are issues with some online tools, such as Wikipedia, but they also found that students felt they could identify and eliminate those sources that had reliability issues (2009). In the same way, students will also settle for an online reference source they can easily access over a printed source they may be familiar with or that may be recommended to them by a librarian or professor.

Students' need to settle is often dictated or exacerbated by their own procrastination. This practice, of course, is nothing new. Nathan described this widespread practice in her ethnographic study of college students (2005). Head and Eisenberg found that 80% of college students procrastinate and that students at larger colleges and universities with more extensive library resources were more likely to procrastinate because they could easily acquire sources that would be good enough to meet their needs (2009).

All of these changes in user behavior add up to create a fundamental shift in user behavior. Students' research is being conducted online and libraries are taking advantage of technology to make more resources easily available to students. At the same time, technology makes it easier for students to procrastinate and wait until the last minute. While this reliance on online sources may limit the universe of materials available, students believe the resources they need will be available online and that they will be able to identify appropriate resources. The questions that face libraries are whether these changes are entirely bad and whether they should adjust their collection development practices in light of these changes.

New Demands on Librarians

The GVSU Libraries are promoting the creation of more collaborative relationships with faculty. This involves working with faculty to create individualized instruction sessions, online tutorials, and research guides that address the needs of a specific class or assignment. Developing these relationships involves frequent in-person contact in addition to regular emails and phone calls. An effective collaboration means the librarian is also aware of the research being investigated within his or her liaison areas. The librarians also regularly participate in events on campus as a way to maintain contact with faculty and to be a part of the greater university community.

In addition to these traditional liaison activities the librarians have been working with faculty to develop awareness of scholarly communication issues. There is a lack of awareness among faculty of open access issues, in fact, a 2005 study showed that 69% of respondents said they knew little to nothing at all about open access (Rowlands & Nicholas). Liaison department meetings are an excellent opportunity to discuss the open access movement, author rights, and to introduce our institutional repository, ScholarWorks@GVSU. The repository at GVSU was started in 2008 and librarians have been talking with faculty on campus and identifying departments or campus groups that have content they would like to add. This process of education and the addition of scholarship to the institutional repository involves a significant time commitment.

Several librarians have also started offering workshops to faculty. These workshops started with RefWorks and have moved into other areas. In Winter Semester 2010, a collaboration between Instructional Technology and University Libraries has resulted in a suite of workshops for faculty: introduction to the library, incorporating

library resources into course management software, using RSS feeds for research, plagiarism, using collaborative web resources to enhance student learning, and research assignment design.

Finding the Time

Because of the new demands on librarians' time, we've tried to identify some areas to improve efficiency and hopefully free up some time. The LibStats data helped us recognize the relatively low number of questions related specifically to reference sources. Another group of librarians analyzed the LibStats data for content. For instance, what types of questions were being asked? Did those questions require input from a librarian or could a trained student or staff member answer them? An overwhelming majority of the questions were directional, or known item searches. It was decided that a librarian was not required to answer most of the questions being asked at our reference desks.

In Fall of 2009 we made the decision to take librarians off the reference desk and instead spend that time on other liaison responsibilities. We now have experienced students and staff who answer most reference inquiries. Librarians are still available for consultation on those questions reference staff feel requires the expertise of a librarian.

One other method for improving efficiency has been to streamline the collection development process. In a few areas we've started using approval plans to decrease the amount of time spent selecting books. Over the next year we'll be looking at several subject areas to determine if approval plans would be effective in those areas. Many of our reference materials are now purchased through bundles offered by publishers, and we've started a patron-initiated acquisition program through EBL that may eventually use

part of the regular book budget. All of these initiatives have reduced the amount of time needed to select books on a title-by-title basis while still providing the materials needed by our programs.

Changes in Reference Education

There seems to be a shift in educating librarians from a focus on individual reference sources to a broader view of the reference collection. Rather than using a specific encyclopedia or dictionary many librarians have started using the online reference aggregators like Credo Reference. In conversations with two current library school students, we've confirmed that the focus in their classes is on types of sources rather than individual titles. This means that the print reference collection is being used less frequently by librarians and patrons alike.

The New Reference Collection

In light of the low use of print reference collections, changes in user behavior and needs, increasing demands on librarians and changes in librarian training the GVSU Libraries changed how it collects reference sources. So what does the new reference collection look like?

The new reference collection is online. At GVSU, print reference sources, aside from dictionaries and citation sources, see little use unless students are required to use the source by a professor. At the same time, GVSU's online reference sources have seen increasing use. As we mentioned above, in the Winter Semester 2009, semester there were more than 16,000 sessions and 48,000 searches performed in the Libraries'

reference databases. Moreover, an examination of the type of reference books being used in databases like Credo Reference or Ebrary, show that all kinds of standard reference books were being accessed, including general encyclopedias, subject encyclopedias and dictionaries, biographical dictionaries and statistical works. This strong usage suggests that there is still a need for reference sources, but that students' preference for performing research online is driving their choice of reference sources.

The new reference collection is also aggregated and bundled. Aggregated reference products like Credo Reference and Oxford Reference Online allow libraries to acquire books from a variety of publishers or on a variety of topics without having to select works on a title by title basis. Bundled collections like Sage's eReference Online allow libraries to acquire all titles released by a publisher in a given year or period of time. GVSU has deliberately moved reference funds from purchasing items on a title-by-title basis toward acquiring aggregated reference databases and purchasing bundled reference collections. In the case of aggregated titles, the Libraries saw that their aggregated reference collections were getting stronger use than their print collections so the decision was made to put more financial resources into those kinds of resources. GVSU began acquiring the Sage eReference Online bundles after realizing that it generally purchased almost every encyclopedia released by Sage each year. Instead of taking up limited staff time to purchase these on a title-by-title basis, the decision was made to purchase the entire bundle of titles released in a given year. As a result of these kinds of changes, the Libraries' reference budget for firm orders has been reduced by 75% over the past few years. This move obviously has implications for those publishers that sell their titles on a title-by-title basis, regardless of the format, and it also has

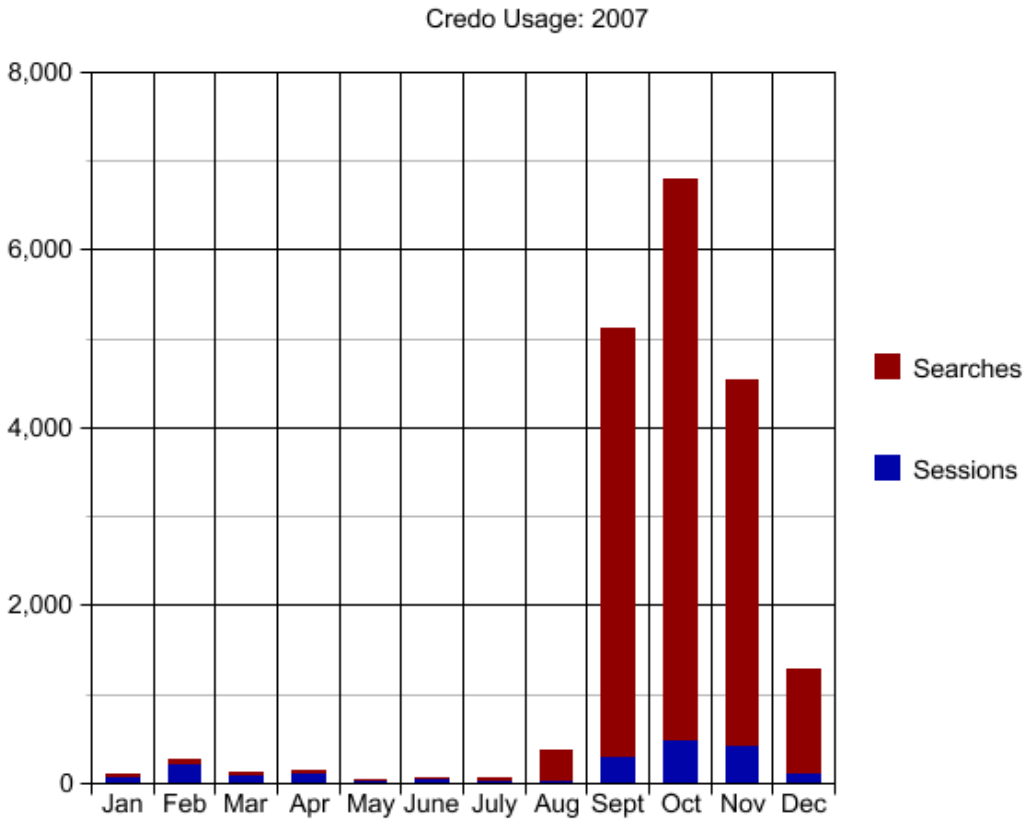
implications for the Libraries' reference collection as few funds for firm orders means less flexibility and perhaps an inability to acquire expensive reference works. The reality, though, is that it makes no sense to acquire expensive reference works if they are not going to be used, and in those instances when it is important to acquire an expensive reference resource, the Libraries have funds set aside that can be applied to those purchases.

Another implication of the move toward this kind of reference collecting is that a large portion of a library's reference collection is leased. Traditionally, libraries have been very concerned with perpetual access to library resources and there are still many libraries where this is an important part of their mission. At a comprehensive university like GVSU, though, the focus is more on building a current collection that supports the university's programs as they exist today. This means that reference collections are weeded regularly and while there are some titles where perpetual access is important, for the majority of the collection it is doubtful that it will be of value ten, fifteen or twenty years from now.

Another characteristic of the new reference collection is that it has often been repurchased by a library. Standard reference sources like the *CQ Almanac* or Gale's literature criticism series were collected at great cost by libraries over years and years and then are subsequently purchased again in an online format. While this can at times lead to consternation among some librarians, the reality is that libraries build collections to be used and if a library can transition to a format that will be used, then it should do so. Moreover, there are few academic libraries flush with space, and the ability to free up ranges of dusty shelves is a very enticing prospect.

The new reference collection is also a hybrid mix of old and new. While publishers are creating unique subject-specific databases like the *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* or Greenwood's *Daily Life Online*, the content of these resources is very much based on print resources. In some cases publishers will add portions of reference works to their databases and in other cases a resource will be made up wholly of complete books. This hybrid approach carries over to the use of collections where the catalog still drives much of the use of reference sources. While some sources like *Pop Culture Universe* see strong use even though the books in that database are not in the catalog, past experience has shown that adding MARC records to the catalog increases usage. Figure 5 shows what happened to the use of Credo Reference when MARC records were added to the catalog in September of 2007.

Figure 5



The new reference collection is still subject oriented, but in a different way. Instead of using the Library of Congress classification system many online reference sources will suggest subjects categories. Many of these online sources have the source type function as the subject. This means patrons are searching dictionaries and encyclopedias instead of finding their Library of Congress subject term or classification section and searching the shelves. This also makes the system more user friendly for patrons who can be intimidated and confused by library jargon.

Online reference sources are also extensively hyperlinked. While searching one entry in an online encyclopedia a user can easily click on an unknown term, find the definition, and then return to the original entry, all without having to change location. This method of jumping between sources is intuitive to users and facilitates the use of

several sources instead of just one. Hyperlinked browsing is similar to the way patrons are used to searching on the Internet and helps explain multiple searches per session in some online reference sources.

The new reference collection is disintermediated which means that users can access most of the information they need without needing to ask someone for help. The process of asking for assistance in the library is so stressful that Constance Mellon coined the term, library anxiety, to describe it (1985). Online sources allow users to use a single search box to find materials and they don't require the user to know individual titles. This disintermediation helps explain why our online reference statistics are so high, while print reference statistics remain quite low. Using an intuitive online source is much easier than making a trip to the library to inquire about an unknown reference source.

Online reference sources allow for multiple users. Many reference sources have multiple seats which means that more than one person at a time can access a resource. For assignment driven searches this can eliminate frustration and lost time when trying to find a print resource that has been improperly shelved or left on a table. This also means less staff time trying to reshelve or locate frequently used reference sources.

The good enough, or Wikipedia mentality, is well-known to librarians and professors alike. As mentioned previously, the online reference sources allow students to access information without having to ask questions or make a trip to the library. This is especially useful for those late night, last-minute homework sessions. What students probably don't realize is that they may be using a higher quality or more varied list of sources than they would have in the print reference era. Since so many of our reference sources are available online, students are able to use a wide range of quality materials.

They are no longer limited by the need to physically access a resource, and on last minute assignments this could mean that students are using a better set of sources than in previous years.

Conclusion

While the usage of our reference collections has clearly changed, our analysis has also shown there is still a strong demand among academic library users for reference sources. As we look toward the future, there are certain trends that seem clear. First, print reference is dead. Libraries with limited budgets will stop building print collections that see little or no use and reallocate those limited funds to go toward online sources that meet students' needs and practices. Moreover, we will see a dismantling of reference collections that see little or no use as the space demands on libraries continues to grow.

Second, we will begin seeing more and more libraries begin to pull librarians off the desk or eliminate the reference desk altogether. As our analysis of reference transactions showed, the online reference collection is much more accessible to end-users than the print collection ever was and as demands on librarians grow, more libraries will pull librarians off the desk to focus on endeavors that have a greater impact on their campuses.

Finally, we will see a continued move from just in case collecting to just in time access. Libraries will put more resources toward aggregated reference products and will also move toward patron-initiated collecting for their reference collections. In the end, use is king and if libraries are to justify their funding they must be able to prove they are good stewards of the money they are given. And if they are to stay relevant they must

prove to their users that they understand their needs and wants and are able to provide them with the resources they need, when they need them and where they want them.

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