Commonplace • Series 1.3: Global Transition to Open

A Tiny Piece of the Whole: Narrowing the Information Gap on a Tight Budget

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As a small liberal arts college library with limited means, Wyndham Robertson Library at Hollins University in Virginia has grappled for many years with the challenge of maintaining a collection that is a valued and important resource for our students, faculty, and staff. We know that the proportion of materials that we make available to our community, in proportion to the total amount of materials accessible to them, is a tiny piece of the whole, and becomes smaller every year.

Even if we just think about scholarly sources, it remains true that a significant portion of the content available to our community, particularly contemporary content, is available to them not because of any particular action we have taken. Instead, these resources are available because of actions taken by an author (to post an open version of their article; to pay an author processing fee for open access), a publisher (in choosing to make a journal open access), or a third party (such as a government requirement that funded research be made accessible). The searches our students conduct to find these resources are also not necessarily centered on our library's collection, but instead take place on a wide variety of available search engines.

Given this environment, what is our responsibility to our local collection? In tandem, what is our responsibility to improving the depth and breadth of content that both our local community, and the wider community, can engage with?

Reflecting on these questions has pushed the Wyndham Robertson Library to incorporate discussion of open access support into our collection development budgeting meetings, as we *seek a scholarly communication system that can both provide more content to our institutional community and narrow the information gap for all*.

Let me dissect that statement. We must first support a system that can *provide more content to our institutional community*. Our small liberal arts college is focused on teaching, not on faculty research. Our library is focused on building and maintaining a collection that matches the college curriculum. Thus, any resource we choose to purchase, or lease, or support for open access development, must provide materials that are important to our faculty and/or students.

Our first-ever funding decision in support of an open access initiative is an exemplar of this mission. By virtue of an encounter in an exhibit hall at the American Library Association 2016 Midwinter Conference, we became aware of an opportunity to help fund the digitization of a collection of alternative press content from the twentieth

century, in [Reveal Digital's Independent Voices project](#). Based on our knowledge of course assignments and student interests at Hollins, we knew these materials could support our students' research. We shared this resource with our faculty, and almost immediately we had students writing papers based on the alternative press publications in this resource, including a 2017 winner of our Undergraduate Research Award. Gina Wiese's paper, [Coming Together as ONE: How a Los Angeles Magazine Fostered the LGBT Community](#), could not have been written without the Independent Voices project. As Wiese wrote in her award-winning submission essay:

"The database Independent Voices, a collection of independent magazines, opened up the possibility of seeing the topic through the eyes of LGBT Americans. This database provided access to a number of local newsletters in which LGBT folk described their experiences during the lavender scare. These newsletters changed my focus from the nature of the oppression LGBT people faced in the 1950s to the ways the community survived and grew from their challenges, in which they laid the groundwork for the gay rights movement... Structuring my research around LGBT voices was significant to me as a bisexual historian."

Second, we must *narrow the information gap for all*. As an institution devoted to the education of women since the mid-nineteenth century, Hollins University has a deep-rooted commitment to social justice. As the [Hollins mission statement](#) declares, one of the "hallmarks of a Hollins education" is "independent inquiry and the free exchange of ideas", which in turn is reliant on scholarly communication occurring outside the walled garden of academia. As our student body has become more racially and socioeconomically diverse, this aspect of our mission has grown in importance. Just as we ended the practice of fining students for overdue books in 2016 to ensure students wouldn't be blocked from checking out needed library materials, we seek to make more accessible the much larger universal corpus of academic content for anybody who wishes to gain knowledge.

We understand this cannot take place without financial support. Authors should be fairly compensated for their work, and there are costs to creating and hosting content. Thus, our support must go beyond moral.

Increasingly, we find ourselves empowered by this welcome turn toward openness in the scholarly communication system. For many years, we have felt ourselves to be a fairly passive actor in the scholarly communication system, as "readers" working with a limited budget. Now, however, we see opportunities coming before us on a regular basis to do more with our money than make a resource temporarily available to our

current faculty and students (who will lose access to most of this information when they transition to alumni).

This doesn't mean we haven't faced challenges to providing meaningful support for open access over the past several years. At times, the move to open seems to be driven by and attuned to the needs of larger research institution libraries. This focus is understandable -- after all, that is where most of the money is, and where most scholarly content is produced. But when it costs a minimum of thousands of dollars to support an OA initiative, or when every other article about open access focuses on "read and publish" agreements, a smaller liberal arts institution may be left wondering why it should bother paying attention to open access initiatives. Isn't the future of scholarly communication in the hands of the research library down the road?

Thankfully, consortial partners have risen to the occasion to highlight opportunities for smaller libraries to contribute, and to begin bringing like-minded institutions together to harness their support. For us at Hollins, the work of VIVA, the academic library consortium of Virginia, and LYRASIS have been particularly important. We contribute to the [Directory of Open Access Journals](#) through VIVA; through Lyrisis, we have supported an [open access book fund](#) and an [open access journal](#).

Consortial efforts are important for curation and vetting of relevant opportunities, and for increasing the impact of our contribution by pooling it with others' financial support. The consortial approach also enables us to work together with like-minded institutions and learn from each other. The strength of VIVA lies in its network of colleagues, and the subsequent relationships that support growth across all participating institutions. Learning from others is just as critical when supporting open access initiatives as it is when considering how best to integrate information literacy into a general education curriculum.

In addition to joining state-based consortia like VIVA, becoming a member of Lever Press has allowed us to learn from another group of like-minded institutions. When the press, originally an Oberlin Group initiative, welcomed supporting members from outside, we joined. We were enthused about both [Lever Press' mission](#), to produce high-quality scholarship grounded in the liberal arts through open-access monograph publishing, and the opportunity to become partners with colleagues already working to further open access. Member meetings help us to see challenges and opportunities that may present themselves within open access initiatives.

Ideally, what we learn from our colleagues can then help influence our institutional decisions. When we meet as a collection development team to decide how to best spend our funds to provide more relevant content for our institutional community, we get closer to narrowing the information gap for all. For example, we learned from others the importance of building our open access support into our policy documentation, so we added a paragraph to our [collection development policy](#) explaining why we “financially support third parties who curate open access resources that will be of use to the Hollins community.”

As I reflect on our journey of open access support thus far, I am struck by the need to take open access discussions beyond our library and to our larger campus community. Within the library, we are carefully weighing open access support. Within our academic library community, we are having conversations about best practices for open access initiatives. But we have yet to build a community of like-minded faculty and administrators on campus. We just built a [web page detailing our open access support](#), but our publicity efforts have previously been limited to contacts with specific faculty noting resources of interest, usually focused more on the available content than the open access mission. To move beyond the margins of our budget (the single-digit percentage of our budget we’ve been devoting thus far to open access) will require concerted outreach and development of a university-wide philosophical commitment to open.