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### Budgeting in Crisis: Responsive Decision-Making in Academic Library Collections

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# Budgeting in Crisis

## Responsive Decision-Making in Academic Library Collections

*Braegan Abernethy*

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*A key takeaway for library managers encountering similar fiscal realities is the intrinsic value of flexibility and creative-problem solving when faced with seemingly devastating budget reductions. This spirit of ingenuity will be needed as the ongoing economic impact to libraries from the COVID-19 pandemic is realized in the coming years.*

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### Introduction

When faced with a crisis that impacts academic library budgets, libraries must by necessity reduce expenditures. Frequently targeted areas for reduction are operations, staffing, and collections. Some libraries are mandated to cut across the board, while others are given more latitude in selecting how the reductions are distributed.<sup>1</sup> Collections budgets often take a sizable cut during such times, as library administrators look to align spending priorities with strategic plans.<sup>2</sup> The Great Recession, occurring between 2007 and 2009, particularly impacted academic libraries, as “library budgets as a percentage of total institutional spending shrank, and in some places never fully recovered.”<sup>3</sup> Reduction and stagnation in collections budgets continued years after the recession’s economic downturn.<sup>4</sup> In early 2020, just prior to the beginning of the global COVID-19 pandemic, *Library Journal* reported:

Although spending on higher education has improved since the Great Recession, many institutions are not funding their libraries to the same extent as in previous years, and many libraries are opting to allocate their moderate budget increases to new services rather than collections.<sup>5</sup>

Facing this reality and encountering a new crisis, the global COVID-19 pandemic, the library collections budget at Georgia State University (GSU) began fiscal year 2021 (FY21) with an overall 12 percent budget reduction and a one-time reduction of an additional 19.5 percent for a total 31.5 percent budget cut. In the years prior to the pandemic, the GSU Library experienced stagnant or reduced collections budgets, but this cut was an unprecedented reduction. Not even the Great Recession had dealt such a severe blow to budget planning and implementation at GSU. COVID-19 prompted a reexamining of the acquisitions and collections processes and required cross-departmental collaboration. This collaboration led to the ongoing development of a responsive collections strategy to meet users' needs while confronting a historically overstretched budget. Tactical rather than strategic decision-making took precedence as the library navigated urgent research and resource demands alongside fiscal responsibility. This chapter explores the recent history of crisis-led collections budget management in academic libraries, examining specifically how the GSU Library responded during the Great Recession and COVID-19 pandemic and revealing insights and implications for future collections management in crises.

## The Great Recession and Academic Libraries

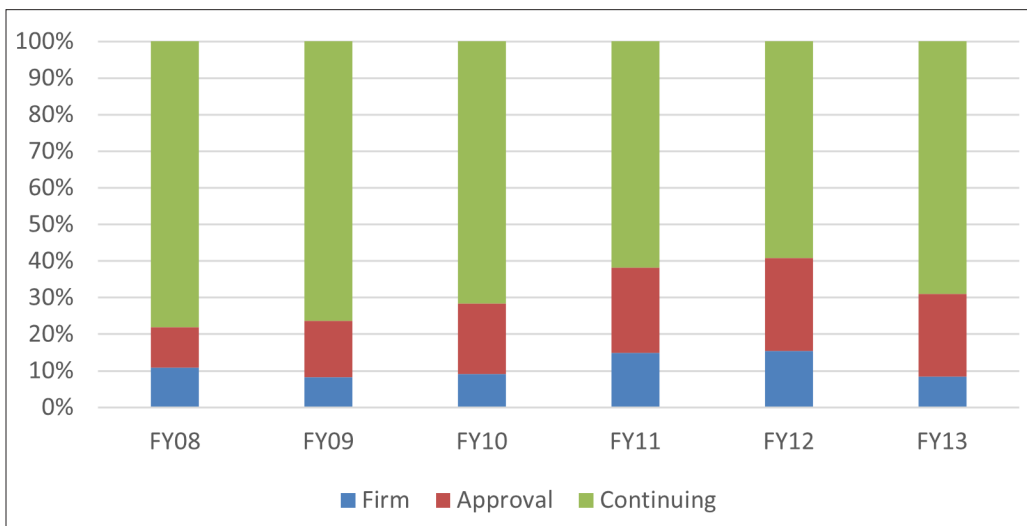
The COVID-19 pandemic is the largest mass-scale public health crisis since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. The building of academic library collections, however, did not begin to increase to modern scales until the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> An accurate comparison of library collections budget management during crises can be made only by studying more recent examples. Thus, the most relevant event of financial upheaval in recent history is the Great Recession, with effects that lasted much longer. Academic libraries across the United States experienced budget cuts and stagnation for years during and after the recession. An Association of Research Libraries (ARL) study conducted in 2009 showed that 70 percent of respondents anticipated budget cuts for their 2009–2010 fiscal year, and 60 percent of those expected a cut of 5 percent or more.<sup>7</sup> Articles published amid this economic crisis were generally pessimistic in their outlook, with one author commenting on the “more subsequent and longer-lasting impact” the recession would have on library collections budgets.<sup>8</sup> This prediction proved accurate, as shown in a follow-up ARL study, where 52 percent of responding members reported flat or declining acquisitions budgets. In the fiscal year 2011–2012, 89 percent of reporting libraries had budgets that did not keep up with inflation—meaning they “increased less than 3%, remained static, or were reduced from the previous year.”<sup>9</sup>

Academic libraries responded in various ways to the deep cuts of the Great Recession. Some turned to collaboration with peer institutions, forming consortia to leverage purchasing power.<sup>10</sup> Many libraries drastically accelerated their shift from acquiring print to prioritizing electronic resources.<sup>11</sup> Library professionals during this time argued that libraries were already operating under a “value deficit” prior to the recession. Thus,

they needed to begin an urgent analysis of their specific users while employing targeted marketing and more effective delivery of resources to stay relevant in the post-recession landscape.<sup>12</sup>

To respond to this urgency, many libraries began focusing on a just-in-time (JIT) collection development approach, concentrating on prioritizing resources with high use “that more closely matched local research and teaching needs.”<sup>13</sup> Forced by severe budget cuts and emerging methods of acquisition, librarians at the University of North Texas (UNT) adopted this strategy. They established the Access-Based Collection Development model, which, “views the collection as a service designed to meet user needs at the point of service.”<sup>14</sup> Adopting JIT collection development and budget measures allowed UNT librarians to be nimble in their ability to adjust and redeploy funds as necessary to support their service expectations. These examples are just a few of the many types of quick, tactical decision-making and innovative solutions that sustained libraries through the lean years of the recession and subsequent, albeit weak, recovery.

The GSU Library experienced similar measures during the Great Recession. Although the collections budget did not suffer a significant cut in FY09, it remained stagnant. Between FY10 and FY16, the budget had received a total increase of only approximately 2.7 percent. In response, GSU conducted annual serials reviews and cancellations to try to combat the effects of rising inflation and price increases. Librarians also drastically reduced the firm orders budget, with an overall 28 percent reduction in allocations from FY08 to FY13. The image in figure 5.1 represents the breakdown of allocations between firm (one-time) orders, approval plans, and continuing resources allocations (the majority of which include electronic and database resources). Like many peer institutions, GSU accelerated commitments to electronic rather than monographic resources during this period.



**Figure 5.1**  
Firm vs. continuing allocations

# Background

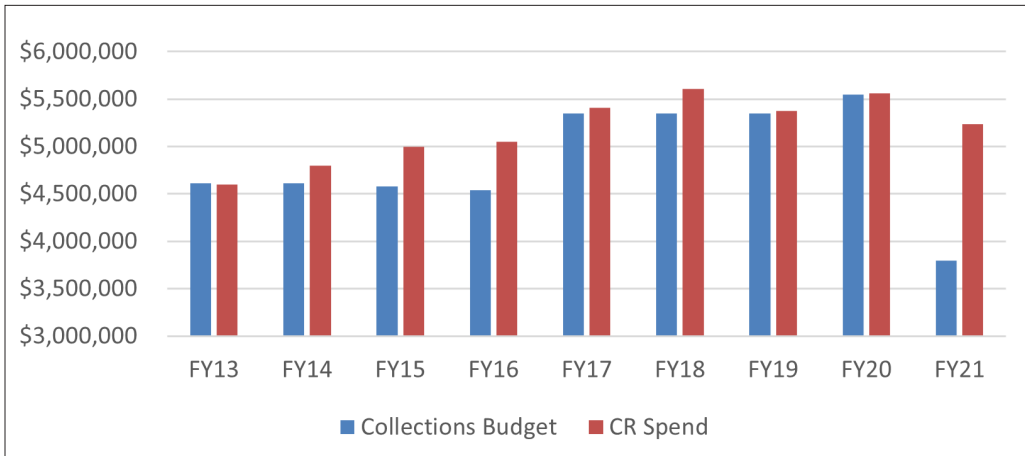
Understanding the library's budget circumstances requires some knowledge of the institution it serves. GSU is an urban, public research institution originally founded in 1913 as an evening school of the Georgia Institute of Technology and becoming a fully independent college by 1955. It is one of twenty-six institutions in the University System of Georgia (USG) governed by the Georgia Board of Regents, a body appointed by the state's governor. GSU has six campuses, with its main campus located in downtown Atlanta, Georgia. With an approximate enrollment of 54,000 students, it is the largest USG institution. The Georgia General Assembly allocates funds to the USG each fiscal year. State appropriations make up approximately 30 percent of the USG budget, with the remaining 70 percent comprising tuition, institutional fees, and federal funding.<sup>15</sup>

The University Library encompasses six libraries, with its central library located on the Atlanta campus. Average weekly visits to the libraries in October of 2019 topped a combined 59,000.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, library users retrieved over two million full-text downloads from library-provided electronic resources in 2018–2019, with an average of one million visits to the library website.<sup>17</sup> These numbers demonstrate how vital the library is to the university community, both as a place and as a provider of valuable resources and materials.

In the summer of 2016, the library underwent a planning initiative to align the library's priorities more closely with the university's strategic plan. This initiative resulted in a document outlining a five-year intentional focus on student success, the research life cycle, content, community engagement, culture, and space. Collections were explicitly highlighted within the "Content" section of the document, emphasizing a goal to "develop, manage, and provide access to collections in support of teaching, learning, and research."<sup>18</sup> A new collection development policy was also created, with policies established for individual programs at GSU, all emphasizing support for the research and curricular needs of the university's faculty and students. This outward shift toward emphasizing student success in collections mirrored measures taken by other libraries in the years following the Great Recession, an essential action for demonstrating the value and worth of library purchases and how they correlate to specific research and curricular requirements.

In the years following the adoption of the library's new strategic intentions, the materials budget remained flat. There was no increase to take inflation into account between FY17 and FY19. Comparatively, in an EBSCO Information Services document detailing five-year journal price increases, the total increase for those three years averaged 5.67 percent, with a combined total of approximately 17 percent.<sup>19</sup> In 2018, the library conducted another serials review and canceled 280 journal titles (4 percent of the continuing resources budget) to respond to this stagnation. In FY20, the collections budget received a modest increase of 3.7 percent, but that marginal gain was lost in the coming fiscal year as the COVID-19 pandemic developed.

Like many academic libraries, the GSU Library has, for many years, worked with subscription agents to manage serials and large package deals with publishers. GSU began prepaying for these subscriptions before 2000 and still prepays a significant portion of annual serials costs. Figure 5.2 shows the library's collections budget compared to the amount spent on continuing resources for 2013 through 2021.



**Figure 5.2**  
Collections budget versus continuing resources spend

As the chart reveals, the cost of continuing resources is more than the library's entire collections budget, leaving no excess for monographs or other materials purchases. Prepaying for continuing resources frees up money within the current fiscal year for monographs and other firm order spending. Typically, year-end funds from both the collections and operating budgets of the library are combined to form the basis of the prepayment for the next fiscal year's continuing resources costs. The library implemented this prepayment process to combat the generally stagnant and often reduced collections budget that could not keep pace with annual price increases. While prepaying allows the library to maintain collections at an acceptable level to meet users' needs, it requires a complicated budget planning and forecasting process to predict spending in the upcoming fiscal year. With the upheaval wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic and past economic crises, the sustainability of this method of budgeting is questionable and requires developing a more nuanced collections strategy.

## COVID-19 and the GSU Library

When it became apparent that COVID-19 would impact the state of Georgia in early 2020, the GSU Library began an urgent planning process. Teams of librarians and administrators met weekly to develop contingency plans for maintaining as many services as possible in a closure scenario. During spring break, which occurred March 16–22, 2020, university officials decided to close campuses and finish the spring semester online. The library closed its physical locations to all but university employees. Many library faculty and staff with compatible positions transitioned to remote work. In contrast, others continued to work in the libraries under an essential employee authorization that allowed state employees to complete in-person work during the early days of the pandemic.

Fears emerged over the economic impact of the virus on the state's revenue going into FY21. Georgians faced record unemployment, peaking at 12.5 percent in April 2020.<sup>20</sup> The

state experienced decreased revenue as businesses closed and residents reduced spending during shelter-in-place orders. In April 2020, as reported in an article in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, local lawmakers feared a \$4 billion shortfall due to the decrease in income and sales tax.<sup>21</sup> The state responded to these dire financial predictions by passing a budget for FY21 that included a 10 percent appropriation reduction to the USG.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, GSU received an equivalent 10 percent reduction of state appropriations for FY21.<sup>23</sup>

As noted in the introduction, GSU administration mandated a 12 percent overall reduction to the library collections budget in FY21. In August 2020, the library returned an additional 19.5 percent in collections allocations to help fund a university-wide early retirement initiative. The university took this action to maximize personnel savings and address the state appropriations reductions impacting the entire university budget.<sup>24</sup> This additional cut resulted in the previously mentioned overall 31.5 percent reduction for the collections budget.

## Budgeting through Crisis

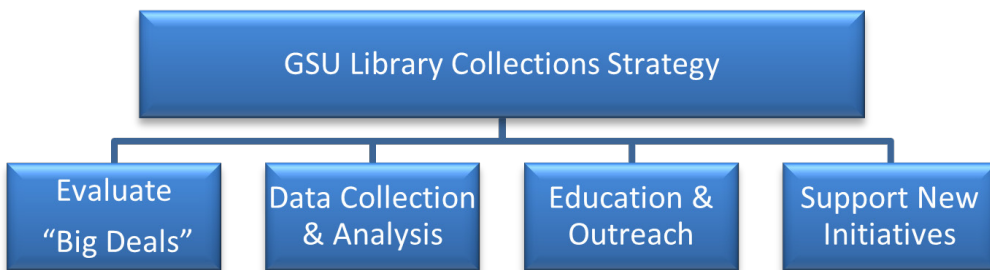
Before the library received its final budget for FY21, planning began between the library's Resource Acquisitions and Collection Development and Discovery departments. Estimated cuts as high as 20 percent were part of the planning scenarios as early as May 2020. Because of the slight increase and some year-end funds received in late FY20, the library provided a significant prepayment to its subscription agent to ensure access to its continuing resource commitments through FY21. With a substantial portion of serials subscriptions protected, librarians looked at ways to maximize actual FY21 funds available for spending while also looking toward FY22. Because the library relies on current funds for the next fiscal year prepayment, the significant reduction in FY21 funds caused by the pandemic and resultant revenue reductions for the state of Georgia would reduce the year-end money available to prepay for FY22 resources. If the library could not prepay for its continuing resource commitments for FY22, that fiscal year would see severe cuts across the library's budget that would have harmful effects on research and curricular needs.

In light of concerns regarding the FY22 prepayment, the library enacted a series of actions. Responsive decision-making, with an emphasis on preserving resources most needed by the university community, took precedence. The library was already over a month into the fiscal year when it received its final budget for the year. Librarians made decisions quickly but prudently, always keeping the values of student success in mind. The first action required a goal of cutting 12 percent from non-prepaid databases. Cuts had been made to the monographs budgets for years while the continuing resources budget progressively increased. During the lean years of the Great Recession, only minimal cuts had been made to continuing resources when the library was faced with budget stagnation. However, with such a considerable reduction in funds for FY21, the library began cutting more from its electronic resources lines out of necessity. Usage statistics, impact on program of study, and availability of content in other resources were significant factors in those databases chosen for cancellation. Second, monographs also received a 12 percent

cut from its FY20 allocation. Most of that amount was allocated to the approval plan and demand-driven acquisitions (DDA), with only 5 percent allocated to firm orders. In previous years, firm orders made up 30 percent of the monographs budget. With the expectation that many classes would remain online, maintaining e-book purchases through approval and DDA was crucial for supporting faculty and student resource requirements.

Finally, the library's Big Deal agreement with SpringerNature was up for renegotiation for the calendar year 2022. The library decided to unbundle this subscription, choosing a more selective approach with a collection of titles that would most benefit the university community. Selection and negotiation of the new title-by-title package was completed by librarians in the Collection Development and Discovery department using various criteria including "download data, article citations by institutional authors, open access availability of articles, articles published by institutional authors, and the projected costs of alternative access to those titles."<sup>25</sup> While this process did reduce GSU's overall spend with SpringerNature by 45 percent, future considerations for unbundling Big Deals include gathering more faculty input about cancellations and working with vendors to negotiate custom title-by-title packages that include multiyear price increase caps.

With an established practice of evaluating resources for cancellation, reduction, or replacement begun during the years following the Great Recession, accelerating these actions represented an approximate 8 percent decrease to FY21 collections spending. This ensured less drastic cuts in FY22 and helped reduce the impact of the 31.5 percent budget cut. Furthermore, it prompted the urgent need for a more responsive collections strategy to deal with the unpredictable fiscal reality brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Figure 5.3**  
GSU New Collections Strategy

After formulating the plan for surviving FY21, a cross-departmental group gathered to reconsider the library's collections strategy. As illustrated in figure 5.3, four core themes emerged from an initial meeting. These included beginning a strategic dissection of large publisher packages to support a more specialized and nuanced grouping of titles that closely match faculty and student needs and usage. The library could no longer support Big Deal agreements that provide access to thousands of titles but at an unsustainable cost. This strategy closely aligns with an ongoing trend in academic libraries, as a 2019 survey revealed: "Of the 65% of respondents who indicated they had already broken up



a Big Deal, 53% indicated it was because they could no longer sustain journal inflation, almost 23% because of a mandated budget reduction.”<sup>26</sup>

Data gathering is another area of focus, with ideas for creating focus groups of librarians and university faculty and using surveying and other tools for analyzing library collections. Comprehensive reporting of trends in collections would also help decide what to retain and what is no longer needed to support collections goals. Education of the university community about the library’s budget and collections would be a priority moving forward. Ideas included a faculty discussion series, a LibGuide specifically focused on collections, and a generally more open and active push of collections strategies outside of the siloed library environment. This tactic is vital for university constituents to be more involved in the process and gain a deeper understanding and appreciation for library collections and their numerous benefits.

New collections analysis tools have emerged in the past several years, many of which the library has utilized. These include evidence-based acquisitions, collections analysis software, and streaming video platforms that utilize patron-driven acquisitions. Finding space in the budget for supporting these developing tools is an important goal for the library in its pursuit to remain relevant in a rapidly changing industry. Formulating a sustainable collections strategy is an ongoing process at the GSU Library, requiring continuous reevaluation as the library shifts to a more effective budget model.

## The Future of the Library Collections Budget

A key takeaway for library managers encountering similar fiscal realities is the intrinsic value of flexibility and creative problem-solving when faced with seemingly devastating budget reductions. This spirit of ingenuity will be needed as the ongoing economic impact to libraries from the COVID-19 pandemic is realized in the coming years. In a survey of periodical pricing for 2021, the authors wrote, “Many institutions are seeing or planning for permanent cuts between 9 and 13 percent to their base budget, a key difference from temporary cuts made after the Great Recession.”<sup>27</sup> Planning at the GSU Library will move forward with that possibility, likely requiring continued use of responsive decision-making to combat budget disparities while supporting university research and curriculum. One article describes this as an “agile development model . . . not a strategic planning process, but instead a tactical method libraries can use to quickly identify what works for users.”<sup>28</sup>

As predicted after the Great Recession, increased electronic and digital collections usage over physical collections will continue. Some favorable aspects may emerge from this acceleration, including “overcoming publishers’ limits on library access to ebooks and resolving user privacy concerns.”<sup>29</sup> Concurrently, a shift in budget priorities from the library as a physical repository to embracing an open, scholarly communications hub will significantly benefit the university community and help sustain academic libraries post-pandemic.

Characterizing the “most energized businesses,” one author analyzes the future of forecasting in the for-profit business world, explaining, “instead of reverting to plan, they have assessed their assets and resources and asked what will make them most relevant and valuable now... They’ve quickly cancelled what now feels obsolete and accelerated what has become urgent.”<sup>30</sup> Going forward, academic librarians will need to draw upon this model of business in their own forecasting, as they develop criteria for improved collections strategies and responsible budget and resource management. Executing this flexibility is what allowed libraries and librarians to meet the economic and public health challenges of the recent past, and utilizing this ingenuity will reveal they can continue to respond effectively to the crises of the future.

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