



Benchmarking database access in U.S. academic libraries

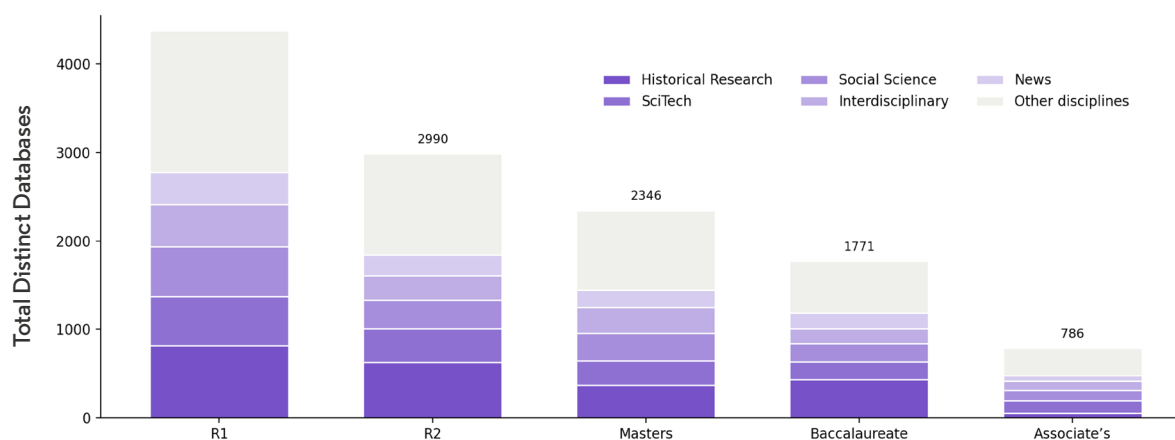
How institution type and funding shape
resource diversity and research support

Executive Summary

Academic libraries strive to provide equitable access to the digital resources their users rely on for successful research, teaching and learning. This whitepaper presents a comprehensive analysis of library database holdings across 171 U.S. higher education institutions, segmented by Carnegie Classification and IPEDS funding ranges. The findings reveal significant patterns in resource diversity, discipline coverage and the impact of institutional type and funding on database access.

Not surprisingly, key insights show that R1 institutions — those with the highest research activity — consistently lead in both the breadth and depth of database holdings across all disciplines, particularly in Historical Research, SciTech, Social Science and the Arts. Masters and R2 institutions also demonstrate strong diversity, especially in interdisciplinary fields and health sciences. In contrast, Associate's institutions have markedly fewer databases, reflecting narrower curricular focus and resource constraints.

Funding levels play a critical role: institutions with \$10M+ in annual funding have the greatest access to databases in every discipline. Disciplines such as Arts, Social Science, and Historical Research maintain broad representation across all segments, though the highest counts are found in top-tier institutions.



By visualizing these trends and providing actionable insights, this whitepaper aims to provide a resource for academic libraries seeking to benchmark their holdings, identify gaps and advocate for strategic investments. The data underscores the importance of collaboration with both vendors and other libraries, along with targeted funding to ensure that all institutions — regardless of size or mission — can support robust research and learning across the academic spectrum.

Methodology

With the permission of participating libraries, ProQuest, from Clarivate, analyzed the number of distinct databases held in their A to Z eResources list, organized the data by discipline, included the institution's Carnegie Classification, and assigned each institution to one of five budget tiers based upon reported IPEDs spend (from under US\$500,000 to over US\$10 million). This methodology provides a robust framework for understanding how institutional characteristics and funding levels shape access to scholarly resources.

Key Findings

This analysis reveals clear patterns in how academic libraries access and invest in digital databases across disciplines, Carnegie classes and funding levels. The following findings highlight both strengths and disparities in resource distribution:

1. R1 institutions lead in database diversity

R1 universities — those with the highest research activity — consistently hold the greatest average number of distinct databases across all disciplines. This leadership is especially pronounced in Historical Research (18 databases), SciTech (12), Social Science (13), and the Arts (7). R1s' broad access reflects their robust research infrastructure and commitment to supporting a wide range of scholarly needs.

2. Funding drives resource access

Institutions with annual funding of \$10M or more have the highest average database counts in every discipline. For example, top-funded institutions hold an average of 28 databases in Historical Research, 17 in Social Science, and 16 in SciTech. In contrast, institutions with less than \$500k in funding have significantly fewer databases, particularly in Historical Research (6) and in SciTech (6).

3. Masters and R2 institutions show strong coverage

Masters and R2 institutions also demonstrate substantial database diversity, especially in interdisciplinary fields, health sciences and the arts. These segments often serve large and varied student populations, making broad access essential for supporting teaching and research.

4. Associate's institutions face gaps

Associate's institutions consistently have the lowest average counts of distinct databases, reflecting narrower curricular focus and limited resources.

5. Discipline-level trends

- **Historical Research (which includes primary source, historical news and historical periodicals collections), SciTech, Social Science and Arts** are the most well-represented disciplines in terms of database access, especially in R1 and well-funded institutions.
- **Interdisciplinary and Health Sciences** show strong representation in Masters and R2 institutions.
- **Business, Government and Literature** are broadly covered but with notable disparities between top-tier and lower-funded institutions.

6. Equity and coverage

While there's overall growth in digital holdings, there are significant differences in access across institution types and funding levels. Top-tier institutions offer much more comprehensive access to content than smaller and less-funded institutions.

Chart 1: Distinct database counts by discipline and Carnegie Classification

This grouped bar chart displays the average number of unique databases available in each discipline, segmented by Carnegie Classification (R1, Masters, R2, Associate's, etc.). The visualization highlights the following:

- **R1 institutions** consistently lead in database diversity across all disciplines, with especially high counts in Historical Research, SciTech, Social Science, and the Arts.
- **Masters and R2 institutions** show substantial coverage in interdisciplinary fields, health sciences and the arts.
- **Associate's** institutions have noticeably fewer databases, reflecting narrower curricular focus and resource constraints.

Average distinct databases by discipline and Carnegie classification

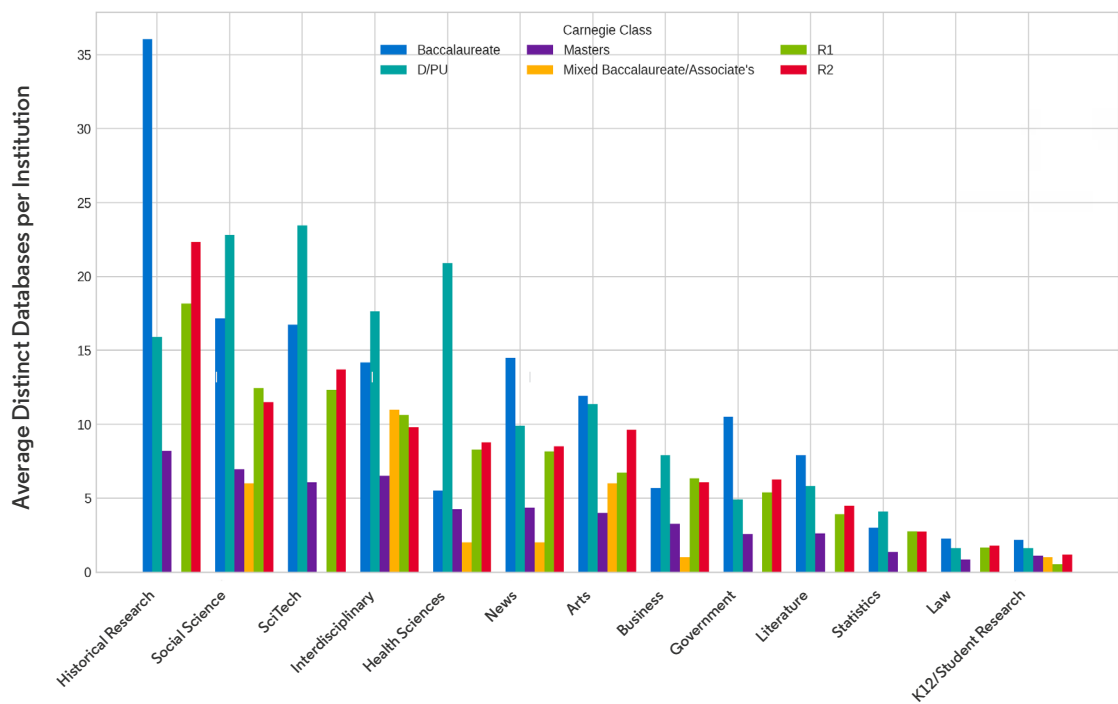
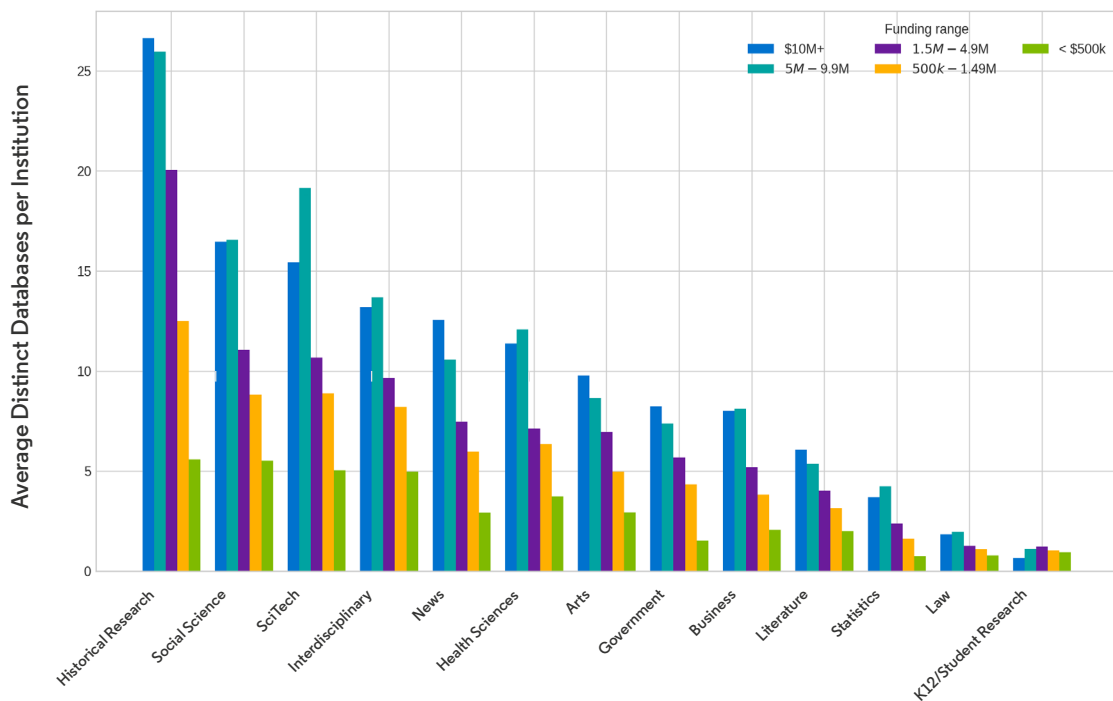


Chart 2: Distinct database counts by discipline and IPEDS funding range

This grouped bar chart presents the average number of unique databases by discipline, segmented by IPEDS funding ranges (<\$500k, \$500k–\$1.49M, \$1.5M–\$4.9M, \$5M–\$9.9M, \$10M+). Key insights include:

- **Institutions with \$10M+ funding** have the highest average database counts in every discipline, underscoring the impact of financial resources on access.
- **Historical Research, SciTech, and Social Science** are the most resource-intensive disciplines, with top-funded institutions providing the broadest access.
- **Institutions with <\$500k funding** face significant limitations in database diversity, especially in research-heavy fields.

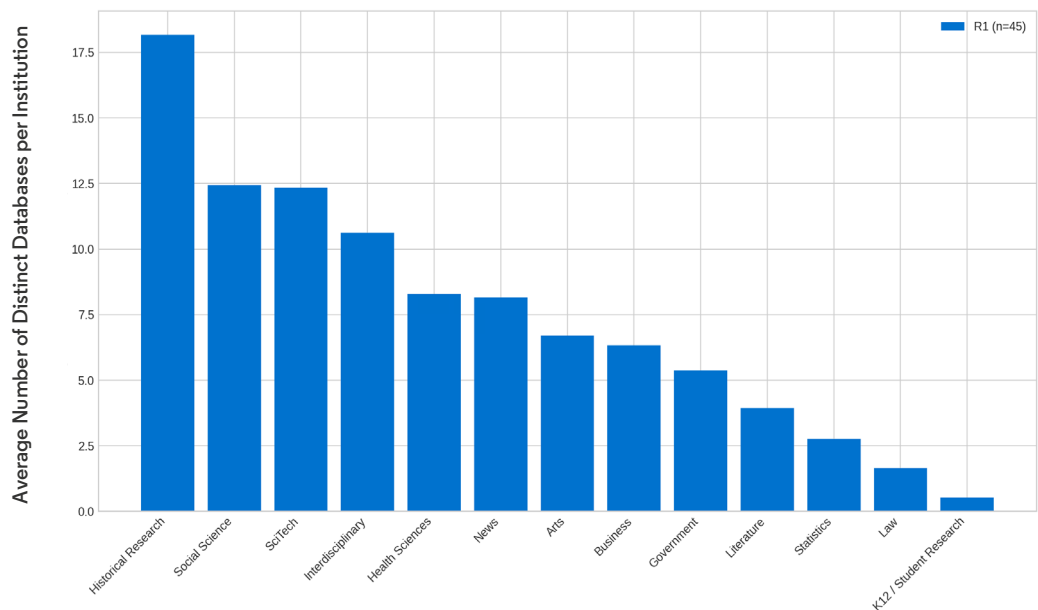
Average distinct databases by discipline and IPEDS funding range



Disciplinary collection patterns across Carnegie classifications

Across Carnegie segments, a clear scaling pattern emerges: as research intensity rises, database holdings expand in both breadth and depth, while teaching focused institutions concentrate their investments in the fields most aligned to curriculum and workforce needs.

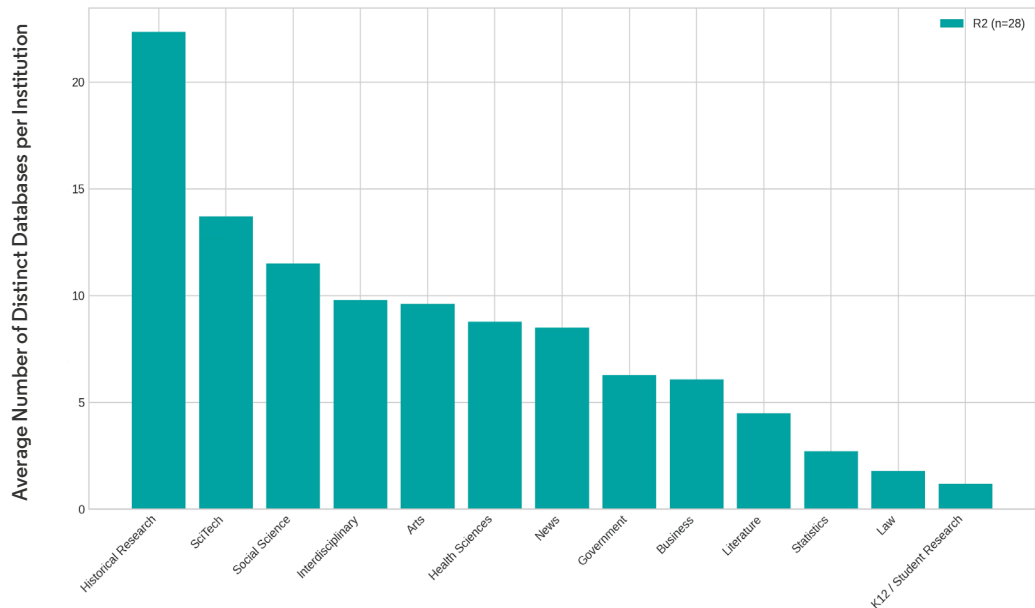
Average of distinct databases by discipline for R1 institutions



R1 institutions demonstrate the **broadest and most mature digital collections**, with especially strong coverage in research heavy areas such as Historical Research (avg. 18 databases), Social Science (12), and SciTech (12). These averages reflect the infrastructure required to support doctoral research and cross disciplinary scholarship at the highest level.

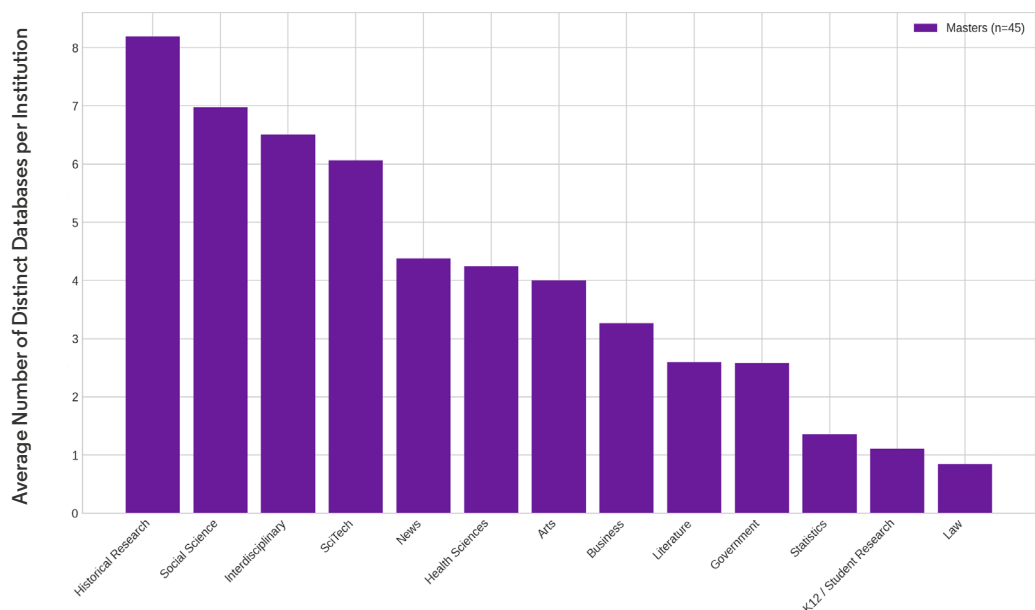


Average of distinct databases by discipline for R2 institutions



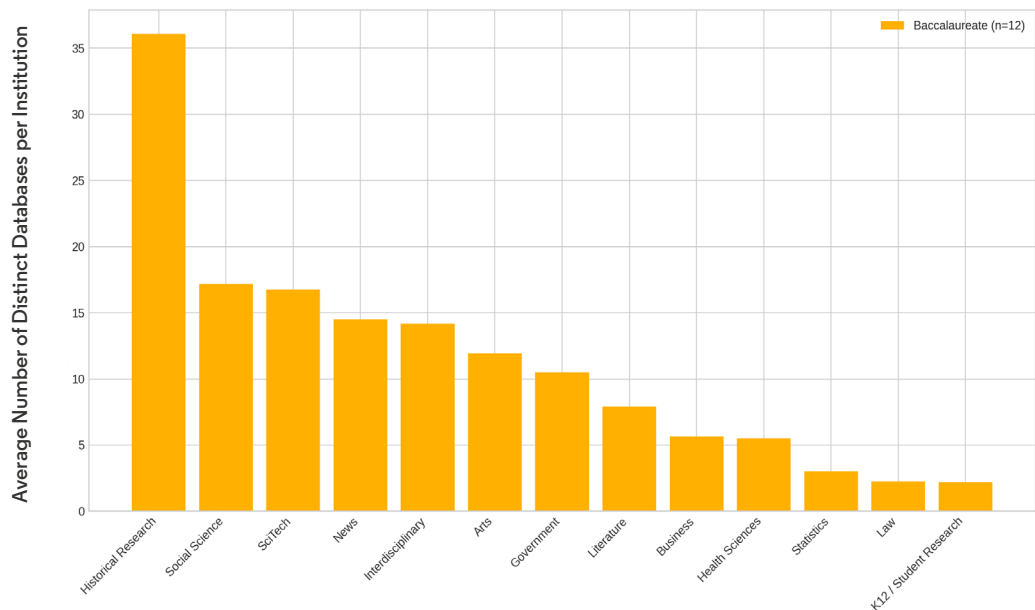
R2 universities present a profile that is **research active but more targeted**. Notably, R2s show the highest relative emphasis on Historical Research (22), exceeding even R1 averages—an indication of strong humanities and archival scholarship. SciTech (14) and Social Science (12) remain well supported, while Interdisciplinary (10) and Health Sciences (9) reinforce the balance of programs offered across master’s and doctoral tracks.

Average of distinct databases by discipline for Masters institutions



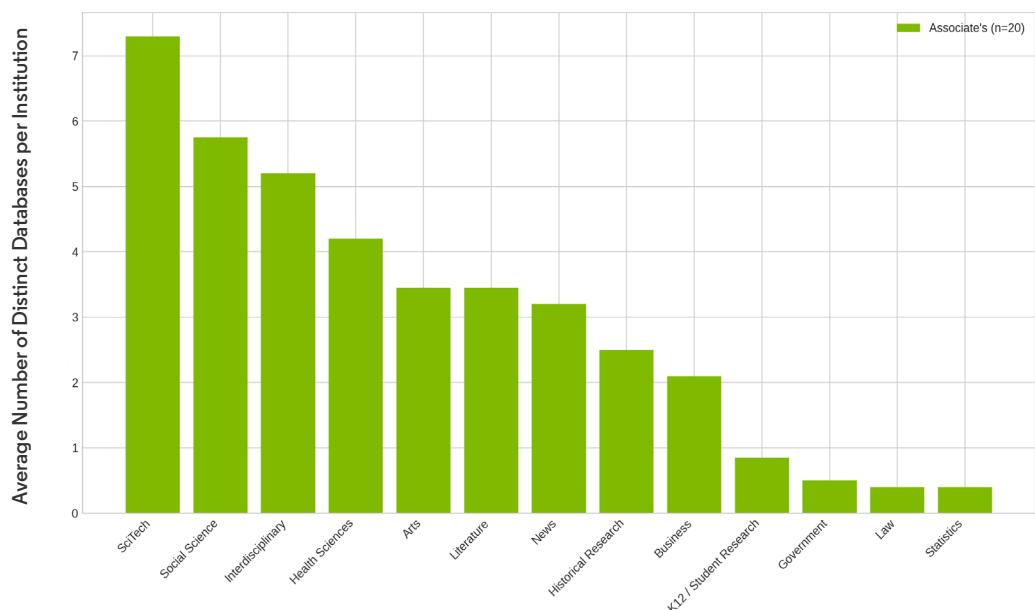
Masters institutions exhibit **broad but teaching centered collections**, aligned to graduate instruction rather than large scale research. Historical Research (8), Social Science (7), Interdisciplinary (7), and SciTech (6) form the backbone of their holdings, supporting a blend of professional programs and general education needs. Coverage is intentionally calibrated to curricular breadth rather than depth.

Average of distinct databases by discipline for Baccalaureate institutions



Baccalaureate institutions maintain **strong foundational collections**, with Historical Research (36) standing out as a disproportionately large area of investment—reflecting the centrality of humanities and general education at the undergraduate level. Secondary strengths in SciTech (17), Social Science (17), and Interdisciplinary (14) underscore the need to support broad academic exploration across majors.

Average of distinct databases by discipline for Associate's institutions



Associate's institutions illustrate a **focused, career aligned collection strategy**, with investments concentrated in programs characteristic of the two year sector. SciTech (7), Social Science (6), and Interdisciplinary (5) lead their holdings, reflecting strong STEM and general education footprints. Health Sciences (4) and humanities oriented areas such as Arts, Literature, and News (each 3) support high enrollment pathways. Lower averages in Business (2), K-12/Student Research (1), and near zero representation in Law and Statistics align with curricular emphasis and the absence of specialized research programs.

Implications for Academic Libraries

The findings from this analysis have important implications for academic libraries as they plan, advocate and collaborate to support research and learning:

1. Strategic planning

Libraries can use these data to make more informed decisions about resource allocation, collection development and identifying areas where additional investment may be needed.

2. Addressing gaps in access and equity

The disparities in database access — especially between R1/high-funded institutions and smaller, less-funded colleges — highlight the need for targeted strategies to close gaps. Many libraries serving resource-constrained institutions are addressing access and equity by pursuing collaborative and data-driven strategies:

- Using the power of **consortia** to share licensing costs and expand access to premium resources.
- **Advocating** with data and impact stories to secure institutional, government or grant funding, emphasizing the link between resource access and academic success.
- **Balancing access versus ownership.** Aggregated content acquired through subscription can be a powerful tool for expanding access within budget limitations. A variety of subscriptions are now available that include primary sources, news, videos, ebooks and other formats beyond scholarly journals. Broad interdisciplinary subscriptions such as [ProQuest One Academic Premium](#) and [ProQuest Ebooks](#) provide cross-disciplinary support with one resource, while ProQuest One Business and other discipline-specific resources that make up [ProQuest Central Premium](#) and [ProQuest Digital Collections](#) enable libraries to provide deep coverage in specific areas.
- **Prioritizing high-impact resources** by assessing faculty and student needs, focusing on core and interdisciplinary databases and adopting phased purchasing strategies.
- Supplementing licensed content with **open access resources**, including OA resources in information literacy instruction and workshops, clearly labeling OA resources on A-Z lists, and encouraging faculty participation in OA publishing and selection.
- **Improving resource sharing through technologies** such as Ex Libris Rapido to extend access beyond local holdings.
- **Using analytics** to identify gaps, monitor trends and benchmark holdings for strategic collection development.
- **Engaging stakeholders**, including faculty, students and departments in resource decisions and co-funding initiatives.

3. Monitoring curricula and research needs

Maintaining heightened awareness of changes in curricula and research ensures library resources are well aligned. Libraries can request a holdings review from ProQuest to help assess whether their current holdings align with the research and curricular needs of their faculty and students and seek opportunities to expand access in underrepresented areas.

4. Advocacy and stakeholder engagement

Data-driven insights empower libraries to advocate more effectively with institutional leadership, funders, and policymakers. Demonstrating the impact of funding on resource access can help secure the support needed to maintain and grow collections that meet the evolving needs of the academic community.

5. Continuous assessment and adaptation

The landscape of scholarly resources is dynamic. Libraries should regularly assess their holdings, monitor trends in usage and access, and adapt strategies to respond to changing research priorities, technological advances and budget realities.

Also see our first report, [Current trends in academic holdings](#).

[Request a holdings review](#) to see how your collections align to your institution's needs.

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