September 2012

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Recommended Citation
Hoppe, Elizabeth and Seymour, Courtney (2012) "Going Above and Beyond: Building an Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research Collection via an ILL POD Program," Against the Grain: Vol. 24: Iss. 4, Article 10.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.6178

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Going Above and Beyond: Building an Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research Collection via an ILL POD Program

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Purchase-on-demand (POD) via Interlibrary Loan (ILL) is a hybrid model of collection building and borrowing that can serve library users on at least two levels: providing just-in-time resources to a single patron, and (if the items are added to the library’s holdings) growing the collections for use by future researchers in similar subject areas. Each library must evaluate its own population to develop an approach to POD, if one is warranted at all, but speedy turnaround times and relevant acquisitions would seem to be two reasonable goals of such a program.

At Schaffer Library, we performed a case study in POD collection development and an exploration of whether these goals were met by this experimental project. This study investigated turnaround time and undergraduate interdisciplinary research applicability of print monographs purchased during a two-year pilot POD project.

POD programs generally cite speed of delivery as an important, if not essential, element. Perdue and Van Fleet’s (1999) POD study, the first on the topic, involved rush ordering of in-print titles. “Shipment within one week from an online bookseller” was a criterion of Purdue University Libraries’ landmark Books on Demand program (Anderson, 2002), and one they maintained through a decade of POD ordering (Anderson, 2010). Bracke (2010) also set a one-week shipping cap, and a publication date requirement, the latter being a parameter other institutions have used to target recently published (i.e., immediately shippable) materials (Anderson et al. 2002, 2010; Ward et al. 2003; Comer and Lorenzen 2005; Campbell 2006; Coopey and Snowman 2006; Gibson and Kirkwood 2009; Fountain and Frederiksen 2012; Herrera and Greenwood 2012; Schmidt 2012).

Recorded turnaround times, vendor selections, and the extent to which they are described in the POD literature vary. Before the availability of online ordering, Bucknell’s average delivery of in-print and in-stock rushed items in 1990 was 2.5 weeks (Perdue and Van Fleet 1990). Amazon was the preferred vendor for several individual projects (Ward et al. 2003; Comer and Lorenzen et al. 2005; Coopey and Snowman 2006); average delivery times ranged from 3.88 to eight days. Amazon was also the top bookseller for POD programs in the Pacific Northwest’s Orbis Cascade Alliance, with Alibris and “Other” tied for second (Fountain and Frederiksen 2012). The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign rush-ordered available YBP items in an average of three days (Wiley and Clarage 2012). Anderson et al. (2010) and Hussong-Christian and Goergen-Doll (2010) employed patron satisfaction surveys to assess turnaround times; the majority of responders agreed that their items arrived in a timely fashion.

Borrower type and disciplinary use are other ways of evaluating POD programs. Ward et al. (2003) and Anderson et al. (2002) found that the overall distribution of POD user statuses was comparable to patterns seen for traditional ILL at their institutions. Bracke (2010) discovered that many POD volumes at Purdue were interdisciplinary between two subject areas, applied to a wide range of disciplines, or addressed an emerging area of study. POD patrons were also unexpectedly borrowing outside of their designated disciplines with greater frequency than they were within them, suggesting an interdisciplinary component to research and highlighting the way POD can uniquely address cross-departmental studies (Anderson et al. 2002). Bracke (2010) and Tyler et al. (2010) observed that the majority of POD borrowers were graduate students in the liberal arts; for the latter, “interdisciplinary studies” was a category of disciplinary affiliation recorded in their purchase statistics.

Anderson et al. (2010) hypothesized that graduate students may be exploring more cutting-edge research than their faculty counterparts and are fueling the trend in interdisciplinary book requesting.

Background

Union College is a small, private, liberal arts college in Schenectady, N.Y., specializing in undergraduate research and interdisciplinary programming. Union serves 2,133 full-time undergraduates on a ten-week trimester system. With strengths including “close faculty-student interaction; emphasis on student scholarship …; strong departments in liberal arts and engineering; [and] interdisciplinary programs and majors” (Union College 2008), Union promotes original undergraduate research via its mandatory Sophomore Research Seminar (SRS) and cross-curricular senior theses and capstone projects.

At Schaffer Library, our service goals are centered on meeting the information needs of undergraduates. As a curricular support center at a fast-paced trimester institution, we are always looking for fast and reliable ways to connect our patrons to valued resources. While for borrowing through the ConnectNY Consortium we have a dedicated courier that promises delivery of print materials within three days, the majority of our print ILL requests are filled via UPS or USPS. Over the period from 1 June 2008 to 1 June 2010, the average turnaround time for loans through ILL was 10.78 calendar days, or around a tenth of our trimester length. Premium acquisitions services offering rush shipping are becoming more common and at more affordable price points. We suspected that we could reduce the turnaround time on certain ILL print titles by purchasing them in this manner, and we were willing to spend more for the added-value service. Thus began our POD pilot project.

Rumors

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into Chinese: the Encyclopedia Britannica and Cambridge University Press’s Science and Civilization in China, the life project of Joseph Needham. The next will be the Berkshire Encyclopedia of World History, 2nd edition, edited by William H. McNeill, Jerry H. Bentley, David Christian, et al., published by Berkshire Publishing Group in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. The translation is being undertaken by SDX Joint Publishing (Shanghai) Co. Ltd. and will take three years. Like Wow!!! Congratulations, Karen and Berkshire!

Y’all know what is so great about editing ATG and running the Charleston Conference? It’s people like y’all! I am always getting notes from old friends and new friends. It makes life fun and worthwhile! Anyway, today I heard from Roger Press <roger@academicwrightpress.com>. Remember him? He was one of the driving forces behind Classical Music Library one of the earliest databases of streaming media for libraries, in an academic format. Classical Music Library is now owned by Stephen Rhind-Tutt’s Alexander Street Press. Anyway, I remember vividly like it was yesterday when I was on the ALA exhibit floor ten years ago, and I heard this wonderful classical music wafting through the crowd. I followed it and ran into Roger and CML! Continuing, I just got an email today from Roger who is developing a new type of database which was launched in June 2012. It is called Academic Charts Online: International Popular Music and provides...
From a collection development perspective, we had modest hopes of adding titles to the collection that would support particular undergraduate initiatives: the original, often interdisciplinary, research being conducted by students at Union, predominantly in our Sophomore Research Seminar (SRS) and senior thesis programs. We, therefore, anticipated trends in requesting that would be reflective of these initiatives: for example, more borrowers in their sophomore and senior years of study or of materials on SRS or other research subjects not anticipated by our Collection Development Office. We didn’t foresee a large number of titles coming to our shelves through POD (the number of print monographs borrowed via traditional ILL in the year of the first pilot was 553, compared to the 6,944 we added to the collections via traditional acquisition streams), but we wanted to build the collections collaboratively to address the unexpected needs of our researchers in a timely fashion.

Methodology
We settled on the parameters (Table 1) and workflow (Figure 1) of the one-year pilot. After our experience with this first year, referred to as phase 1, there were several areas that we felt needed to be tweaked. One was the turnaround time, which was not as fast as we had hoped. Another was more regulated processes and data so we could retrieve statistics about these transactions after the fact. The total number of POD books ordered was even smaller than predicted, so we decided to be more flexible about criteria for inclusion in the project. Revised parameters (Table 2) and workflow (Figure 2) were established for the second pilot (phase 2).

Results
During the two-year pilot, 104 titles were ordered according to POD parameters. The mean turnaround time for phase 1 was 23 calendar days, with a median of 13 days. The phase 2 mean was 2.68; the median was three days. The total cost of purchasing 44 titles in phase 1 was $3056.11, before shipping. The pre-shipping cost of the 60 phase 2 titles was $2316.36. All titles were checked out at least once, with several titles being checked out up to five times.

Of the total requesters of these items, around 45 percent were faculty (Figure 3). The remaining requests were initiated almost entirely by students, with sophomores and seniors requesting in larger numbers than freshmen and juniors. In each of the phases, there were more senior borrowers than sophomores.

Each book was matched to at least one, and up to six, disciplines offered at Union. The majority of titles in each phase were associated with two or more disciplines (Figure 4). Requested materials represented a range of 33 departments and programs from across the curriculum (Figure 5).

In phase 1, turnaround time exceeded that of traditional ILL (10.78 days) by 12 days. This number was in part inflated by books ordered before publication. The median for phase 1 was 13 days. By altering the workflow to focus on Amazon one-day shipping, we were able to reduce the turnaround time in phase 2 to an average of 2.68 days, which is a 75% improvement over traditional ILL.

As suspected, the cost of the project was not prohibitive. In each phase we spent around 1% of our total budget for circulating monographs; the percentage of books acquired in each phase was also around 1% of total books acquired. From a circulation perspective we were pleased to see that all of the items were checked out at least once, and, in some cases, multiple times. This would seem to indicate that we were able to deliver these items “just in time” for patron use and that they were relevant to the studies of one or more researchers.

Unlike some large research universities whose POD patrons are mainly graduate students, we saw a roughly 50-50 split between faculty and undergraduate borrowers, which...
demonstrates our contribution to undergraduate research initiatives. We hypothesized that there would be a greater number of senior and sophomore borrowers than freshman and juniors, as the former are the intensive research years at Union, which was found to be the case. Some requests could be directly attributed to research courses offered at Union, such as a title on Malcolm X that was ordered during the term when the African American Protest Movements SRS was offered. We saw other titles that match submitted theses; an example is In Pursuit of Cultural Immersion, written by the student who requested The Handbook of Practice and Research in Study Abroad. This title, in particular, is indicative of the kinds of materials POD is best suited to acquire; while Union has a strong terms abroad program, the perspective on cultural immersion is something the student developed by combining her curricular interests. The Collection Development Office did not predict this need, but POD filled it quickly.

The interdisciplinary emphasis at Union is reflected in the nature of the titles requested. Not only did the majority of titles apply to more than one subject area, but the most subject areas were addressed by more than one book. While we cannot be certain of the precise need each title was filling, we did see some trends: a high match rate (26 books out of 104) on American studies, an inherently interdisciplinary program at Union; and an array of Asian studies program matches on books also about history, music, performing arts, sociology, visual arts, or women’s and gender studies, all requested by senior students in phase 2. Faculty requests add another five subject areas to the Asian studies program matches on the second phase, reinforcing the projects’ interdisciplinary connections. It also suggests that future undergraduate researchers will be supported in these fields of study, and that these POD materials will have applicability beyond their original requester’s work.

**Future Considerations**

As we discovered, one of the major areas of utility of our POD program is with interdisciplinary research projects at Union. Perhaps in addition to this just-in-time model of acquisition we could partner with students or supervising faculty to build these collections proactively. We should also question whether we should continue to consider faculty requests for POD. Our primary mission is to support the undergraduate curriculum, after all. Future investigations could assess whether faculty-requested titles are useful for students. 

One of the motivators for this project was to improve turnaround time and therefore user satisfaction. While we drastically cut average delivery time, we are unsure if this has completely met user needs. We should survey recipients of both POD and traditional ILL requests to determine if our users value the experience of the POD program. We could also ask about formats, to determine whether eBooks should be included.

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**Figure 2: Parameters for phase 2**

[Diagram of decision tree for POD request process]

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[Elizabeth Hoppe's biography and contact information]

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**Continued on page 32**
We should continue standardizing statistics-keeping between our ILL system (ILLiad) and our ILS (Millennium). This will allow us to look at longitudinal data to inform the direction of the project. Accessing student information from our WebAdvisor system would also allow us to track requests from SRS and other coursework.

The rapid turnaround time that we achieved with Amazon’s one-day shipping was ideal, and the cost was not prohibitive, but we should look carefully at any vendors who may provide rush shipping at a reasonable price. We have recently implemented an Amazon Prime membership, where two-day shipping is free and one-day delivery is $3.99 per item. This should allow us the flexibility to choose the best delivery option for each researcher at Union.

With these revisions and consistent assessment, we hope to develop a sustainable and thriving purchase-on-demand program.

References


Sensible: entitlement, procrastination.


Figure 5: Disciplinary matches by individual POD title