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Is There a Future for Collection Development Librarians?

Thomas A. Karel, Collection Development Librarian, Franklin and Marshall College

Abstract

With many academic libraries making use of approval plans and demand-driven acquisitions (DDA) the traditional role of the Collection Development Librarian is changing and diminishing. But is this really true? I will describe the areas of collection building and management that still need to be carried out by a librarian. I will also identify those tasks that a Collection Development Librarian no longer needs to perform. Finally, I will consider the future direction of collection building in different types of academic libraries and will suggest new roles for the library in this process.

The objective of this session is to initiate a dialog about the role of collection development in the electronic age. Members of the audience will be encouraged to share practices and policies from their institutions and to brainstorm about new roles and responsibilities for librarians. Attendees will leave the session with a better understanding of current collection development practices and a stronger awareness of the central role a Collection Development Librarian can play.

I have been an academic librarian for 35 years, and for the past 10 of those years I have been primarily responsible for collection development. I work at Franklin and Marshall College (F&M) in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. F&M is a traditional small liberal arts college with a student body of around 2,300. It is an undergraduate institution with no distance learning programs and no MOOCs—yet. The library currently has over 500,000 books and access to thousands of journals in full text through a variety of databases. F&M is also a selective depository for U.S. federal documents. In short, we have a lot of stuff, and we are running out of space for all of this print material, like many other libraries. Because of this, we are now acquiring e-books and have started an ongoing weeding project. As the collection development librarian, I have been in the thick of planning these activities, and I envision such projects to have an increasing demand on my time.

I will be retiring in a few years so this is probably a good time to reflect on how my job has changed over these 10 years. I am doing some things differently than I did 10 years ago, and the collection decision-making process will probably change even more before I retire. So what has been changing?

The librarians and the faculty at F&M still select most of the materials for the library, but that

percentage is slowly decreasing. Why? There are two explanations for this trend. One is an expanding approval plan for books largely published by major university presses. Our initial small plan has exploded to 39 publishers. Two of those, Oxford and Cambridge, are limited to American and British literature titles as well as philosophy books. Several other presses are also restricted to philosophy. I expect that other subject areas will probably participate in the plan in the near future.

The second reason is the introduction of e-books into the library's collection. Academic libraries have reported varying degrees of success and satisfaction with e-book titles and packages. We have been slow (and very cautious) in pursuing e-books at F&M, but we now have purchased several collections that seem to complement our print holdings. These include EBSCO (7,000 titles), Springer (34,000), and Project MUSE (1,000). Additionally, we have access to over 75,000 titles in the Early American Imprints and several full-text reference sources. In the realm of patron-driven acquisitions (PDA), we started with a modest MyiLibrary package from Coutts and plan to expand that collection. We recently added records for 3,000 titles from JSTOR's PDA offerings. Very few e-books have been used or "purchased" at F&M, so the jury is still out on this experiment.

In both of these areas, the role of the librarians are significantly diminished in the selection process. With the approval plan, several librarians review the books as they arrive and reject those very few titles that are out of scope for our collection. We are alerted to some books that are blocked by our selection profile, and the appropriate liaison librarian makes a decision about those titles (these are usually reprints or later editions of a work). There has been much less librarian involvement with e-books since we are still feeling our way with these collections. If e-books become accepted by our users then we will certainly acquire more titles from more publishers or vendors. This might be an opportunity for more librarian input into the selection process. We will see.

The recent literature reinforces my concerns about the future of collection development. Witness these article titles from the past four years:

- “E-Books in Academic Libraries: Challenges for Acquisition and Collection Management” (2013)
- “Who Chooses Wisely? E-Book PDA Purchases: Librarian and Teaching Faculty Selections” (2012)
- “A Study of the Demand-Driven Acquisition of E-Book Titles in an Academic Library” (2012)
- “Give ‘Em What They Want: A One-Year Study of Unmediated Patron-Driven Acquisition of E-Books” (2012)
- “When Patrons Call the Shots: Patron-Driven Acquisition at Brigham Young University” (2012)
- “Patron-Driven Acquisitions and Collection Building Initiatives at the University of Florida” (2011)
- “Shaping a Collection One Electronic Book at a Time: Patron-Driven Acquisitions in Academic Libraries” (2011)
- “Head First into the Patron-Driven Acquisition Pool: A Comparison of Library

Selections Versus Patron Purchases” (2011)

- “Patron-Initiated Collection Development: Progress of a Paradigm Shift” (2010)
- “Reader Choice, Not Vendor Influence, Reshapes Library Collections” (2010)

Rather than despair about these trends, I would like to be proactive as I—and other collection development librarians—prepare for an uncertain future. Therefore, I have identified several threats to our positions—and opportunities that we can grab. These will be the talking points for discussion at the Lively Lunch.

Threats

- PDA (DDA)
- Approval plans
- E-books (low cost, no space concerns)
- Diminishing faculty interest in ordering materials
- Concentration of publishers
- Students want information immediately, online, and in full text

Opportunities

- Establish closer relationships with vendors
- Create or revise a selection profile for approval plans or PDAs
- Work more closely with faculty to select relevant materials
- Weeding and deselection
- Finally get that collection development policy updated

Finally, here are three additional questions for further discussion:

- What does a Collection Development Librarian do?
- What tasks can be effectively carried out by other staff?

- What, ideally, might be the role of a Collection Development Librarian in the new electronic environment?

How the Session Went

The 26 attendees represented a variety of libraries, large and small, academic and public. The discussion that ensued after the presentation focused on three main themes: lack of space for print collections; the use (or nonuse) of e-books; and effective weeding practices. Two librarians lamented the disappearance of the traditional subject bibliographer, especially in the Humanities. There was a strong recommendation for greater faculty involvement in both collection

building and deselection. Librarians need to spend more time cultivating relationships with the faculty and thinking of creative methods for weeding. There was general agreement that it is too early to adequately assess the impact of e-books in academic libraries, though some subjects seemed more appropriate for e-books than others (the sciences and business, primarily). Academic librarians could learn a lot from the experiences of public libraries in how to market e-books to users and how to provide good tech support.

No one at the session was ready to pronounce the death of collection development, but there was a strong sense that significant change is upon us.

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