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Charles Hillen
Loyola Marymount University, chillen@lmu.edu

Glenn Johnson-Grau
Loyola Marymount University, gjohnson@lmu.edu

Joan Thompson
YBP Library Services, jthompson@ybp.com

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Rebuilding the Plane While Flying: Library/Vendor Strategies for Approval Plan Revision (in a DDA World)

Charles Hillen, Head of Acquisitions and Serials, Loyola Marymount University

Glenn Johnson-Grau, Head of Collection Development, Loyola Marymount University

Joan Thompson, Collection Development Manager, YBP Library Services

Abstract

Library approval plans remain a major means of both codifying a library's collection development program and providing an operational and procedural tool for acquisitions of library materials. This paper summarizes the arduous but ultimately worthwhile and satisfying project that Loyola Marymount University and YBP Library Services undertook in a yearlong approval profile review project. It describes how the library and the approval plan vendor strategized and collaborated to involve over 20 subject liaisons with varying levels of collection development experience and the support infrastructure needed to get liaisons up to speed on their roles in the project. It also explains the communications and collaboration tools we used to document a process with myriad details to track. Both the library and vendor perspectives on how to effectively structure and implement approval plan revisions for print and electronic books are included. Underlying this whole project was the belief that the approval plan (and intentional collection building) still has an important place in libraries.

"Observe moderation" (Hesiod).

For the past 2 years, and very intensely during the 2012–2013 fiscal year, Loyola Marymount University (LMU) and YBP Library Services engaged in a thorough review and restructuring of the LMU approval plan. Our primary goals were to modernize an outdated plan and broaden involvement to include the expertise of our liaisons, but since this occurred simultaneously with our adoption of a demand-driven acquisition (DDA) model, issues related to e-books lurked behind every topic confronted and decision made. This paper will outline LMU's need for approval plan revision and the process this major project followed, with particular emphasis on how LMU worked with YBP to complete the project.

Loyola Marymount University is a mid-sized Master's L institution located on the west side of Los Angeles. One of the 28 Jesuit institutions in the US, LMU has 6,100 undergraduates and about 2,200 graduate students; the affiliated Loyola Law School is located near downtown Los Angeles.

LMU uses the Liaison model of collection development, with almost all our librarians, a total of 22, serving as liaisons to and selectors for one or more academic program. An advantage of this model is that it spreads the load for collection

development over a large group of people with diverse knowledge and expertise. A disadvantage is that, while collection development responsibilities are written into librarian job descriptions, liaison activities are not a primary job responsibility for anyone but the Head of Collection Development. This tension, combined with the fact that librarians frequently do not have much collection development experience from previous positions (or from their graduate programs) and have schedules full from their primary responsibilities, means that maintaining a well-informed and engaged company of liaisons is a continuous challenge.

Early in the tenure of our new dean, she and the Head of Collection Development agreed that the current Collection Development program needed to become more intentional and less dependent on faculty for direction and for selection decisions. The first goal we set was to lead the liaisons through the process of revising and—when needed—creating individual departmental collection development policies to formalize and record the planned direction for the collection at a curricular level. This plan quickly failed, as it demonstrated to us that the expertise of the liaisons was not uniformly advanced enough for the task. Similarly, an attempt to involve liaisons in an initial attempt

to revise our approval profile struggled for the same reason. Attempts to provide information on these tasks to all the liaisons in a large group meeting were notably unsuccessful. It was time for a reset.

Putting Peas in Pods

Our solution came out of discussions between the Head of Acquisitions and Serials and the Head of Collection Development. We agreed that we needed forums that met in small groups on a regular basis for both training, to raise all the liaisons to a uniform level of expertise, and as a place where people could raise and discuss their own concerns about collection development activities. This was the genesis of our Pods: four groups of 4–5 liaisons, each Pod organized around broad subjects, each of which would meet monthly. These Pods have met since spring 2011 on all manner of topics, from basic processes, for example, how to request a series for standing order, to more conceptual topics, such as differing ideas on the right balance between print and electronic in specific disciplines.

It was clear to us that the Pods could provide the structure through which we would address revising the approval plan. We ended up using the Pods as the training and group discussion forum for the individual work necessary for profile revision. Since Pods met monthly throughout the process, we set Pods agendas to prepare for upcoming profile work. We played up the incentives for liaisons to spend time now in profile review to save time later in approval slip review. We also spent time on approval plan basics that would make the process easier, such as our examination of the relationship between the classification system and the approval plan, which was clear for catalogers but less so for other librarians.

The Need for Approval Plan Review

LMU's approval plan was created in the mid-1990s and had not been thoroughly and systematically reviewed nor modified since that time. It was well past time for a complete review. Over the course of the project, significant flaws with the old plan came into focus: for example, major areas within classification ranges, particularly in the sciences,

were excluded for no discernible reason, and innumerable areas were set to receive slips rather than books, even in areas of curricular focus and collection strength.

Early in the planning, we had to take a step back to consider the approval plan in light of our move into title-level selection of e-books both as firm orders by librarians and as part of our emerging DDA plan. Where did e-books fit into our collection? Why invest the time in revising our approval profile if we were going to let patrons select materials? Was an approval plan an anachronism in a DDA world?

There were three main interrelated considerations in our internal discussion of the role of e-books for our library. Nardini (2011) raises the issue of the contingent, transitory nature of e-book publishing models as a cautionary factor for providing long-term access under an exclusively DDA acquisitions model. A second issue for us was the still emerging understanding of the proper role of librarian selection in building strong collections; research by Tyler et al. (2012) indicates that while patron selected titles are the most heavily used, librarian selections are more heavily used than approval plan provided titles. Finally, our sense from our own institution is that format still matters quite a lot to our patrons and that we are still quite a ways from an e-preferred consensus for monographs. In short, consideration of these issues made us realize that we are still in the early days of the transition and led us to reaffirm both the role of intentional collection development for our library and our belief that gradualist plan for the transition on e-books was the right path for us.

An approval plan is more than just an operational and procedural document; it is the codification of an institution's philosophy. The approval plan review process led LMU to restate that we believe in intentional collection building, with a mixture of print and e-books that we anticipate will gradually shift to primarily electronic in many subject areas, and that we will give an increasing role to direct patron selection, but for the foreseeable future that will be supplemented and balanced by librarian and faculty orders. Our approval plan(s) will be customized to meet LMU needs, and our print and electronic plans will be coordinated to cover curricular needs with minimal duplication.

Once we had decided on our philosophy, we set specific goals for the approval plan revision process. An overriding outcome that we wanted to achieve with the approval revision was a reduction in slips that needed to be reviewed. The crush of slips, particularly for some funds, was a significant burden both for librarians and for those in academic departments to whom they were passed. This led to massive backlogs and either unspent funds or seasonal floods of orders overwhelming Acquisitions and Cataloging. We believed that the investment of time on the front end to revise the approval plan would reduce the constant work of slip review. We anticipated that this would be accomplished through a combination of increased approval shipments and decreased slip notifications in nongermane areas. We were receiving roughly 30% of our print book purchase on approval and 70% on firm orders. To reduce liaison (and faculty) time spent reviewing slips, accelerate receipt of desired material, and reduce process labor on Acquisition staff, we hoped to flip that ratio.

Another goal was to provide a framework for moving the needle from print purchasing to e-books for both firm orders and DDA. We know that we will be adjusting this ratio for years to come, and we wanted to feel confident that it will be within broad parameters that we had through systematic approval plan review, rather than entirely ad hoc. On a related note, we have also begun a pilot project for going e-preferred through the approval plan for certain academic disciplines. This, too, is needed to be within the framework of the revised approval plan.

In consultation with our YBP representative, we outlined a plan for a full revision of the approval plan. The scope of the work needing to be done was daunting, as we had to match the desired granularity of our decision making with the dual challenges of educating each liaison on the process and the time constraints of each meeting.

The YBP Perspective

From the YBP perspective, the project grew over time. At the beginning, we knew that it would be a more in-depth profile review than most libraries normally undertake. Owing to the length of time

since the plan was originally created, we did not know the extent to which we would end up breaking down the existing document and creating a new structure nor if we would be using various types of approval plans in response to content and format needs. Once the project began, the scope expanded to include additional needs discovered during the review process.

One area discussed from the beginning was the goal of covering both print and DDA. The library and YBP had discussed LMU's desire to align the print profile with a parallel profile to provide DDA content coverage. It was refreshing to start a profile review not with the goal of drastically reducing it or shutting down a print plan to be replaced by DDA. Instead, the goal was to comprehensively make decisions about what should be collected regardless of format.

The role of the YBP Collection Development Manager includes responsibility for working with libraries to create, manage, and keep approval profiles current. This normally entails a 1–2 day on-site meeting for the creation phase and then occasional meetings and e-mail exchanges for regular maintenance. We do not normally spend time on site on a regular basis with the library since most of our time is usually focused on documenting decisions that have already been made, or at least considered, prior to meeting with YBP. The project with LMU was an excellent opportunity to be present while intensive collection development work was being carried out.

In the end, our process resulted in deconstructing the existing profile and constructing several profiles in its place. This year-long undertaking allowed the library to make full use of the profiling capabilities of YBP, as well as find a few limitations, and create a customized set of profiles that mirror the collection development and access objectives of the library.

The process was informed by YBP's profiling process, in addition to the library's objectives. While we did not start out to systematically review every level of profile decision making, we found that it was necessary and beneficial to address each one. Some of this happened

organically as part of the subject review process when we looked at the effects certain publisher list rules and series instructions have when combined with subject instructions. However, we found the need to review the series instructions separately as well as the publisher lists for portions of the new plans. The process also served as a crash course for the library on YBP's profiling capabilities and vocabulary.

YBP profiles are normally based on four areas of rules: series instructions, publisher list, and subject and nonsubject parameters. There is interplay among most of these rules, and there are various options for employing them with the exception of series instructions. The result is that each set of rules could be arranged in multiple permutations. The role of the YBP collection development manager is to guide the library through the decision-making process so that not every option need be examined. But when a library has very specific needs and interests, it can be rewarding to explore some of the less obvious choices.

For the actual profile review process, we made use of the YBP database, GOBI, to view new title slips sent and titles shipped, reviewed the actual titles and the number of titles by subclass. We also reviewed detailed bibliographic information for individual titles to better understand the output and how it was currently being mapped to LMU areas of study and research. Each LMU liaison, working with the Head of Collection Development, participated in the labor-intensive process of determining what changes were needed in the profile instructions. The primary role of the YBP representative was to explain how the profile rules were applied in individual situations and what options existed for altering rules to bring about different outcomes.

While this is a much more intensive process than most libraries chose to employ, it worked well for LMU, and the outcomes are informative for libraries in general. First, the library found it useful to consider the e-book policy and print policy simultaneously. While academic output of e-books is somewhere above 40% of print and growing, there are still titles for which there is only a print option. The library needs to have a

policy in place for collecting preferences for electronic and print. As well, the library must decide between the multiple e-book options for the forty percent-plus that are available in both print and electronic. And when DDA is part of the equation, it must be remembered that not every e-book title is available for DDA, so only a subset of the subset of print titles is available in electronic format. Once the library has decided on the appropriate relationship between DDA and purchased titles, there are more considerations for DDA. All of these can be incorporated into a comprehensive collection development policy, and LMU's example shows the value of doing so: comprehensive coverage of subjects of interest and deduplication of titles among print and electronic.

The review resulted in a profile structure that includes several subject- or function-specific plans: a main books profile, a supplementary profile used during the profiling process to capture critical titles across essential subject areas, a reference plan, a museum plan, a novel plan, and a DDA plan. All of these plans are automatically deduplicated but must be manually coordinated, meaning that when rules are changed for one plan, the other plans need to be reviewed and possibly revised.

Results

Comparing the results so far to fiscal years 2011 and 2012, we have found that we have received fewer books on approval than in either of these years. From June 1–September 30, 2011, the library was invoiced by YBP for 2,618 titles. In 2012, for the same months, we received 3,368 titles, and in 2013 the number was only 2,235. There are several factors to keep in mind as we begin to fully analyze the impact of our profile changes. For example, at the end of both the 2010 and 2011 fiscal years, the library had to place our approval accounts on hold due to budget concerns in other areas. YBP continued to allocate materials to our approval plans, and when the new fiscal year began, we received backlogged titles as well as current allocations.

Another main factor to consider centers on the areas of our profile that were restricted rather

than opened. For example, we noted that the library was receiving a large number of Routledge titles every month that were very expensive; creating a publisher override allowed us to review these titles individually, but decreased the number of titles shipped on the approval plan. In addition, we made some other publisher-, geographic-, and subject-based restrictions and moved all YBP-assigned format types of Reference and Museum Publication to slip-only review. Therefore, even though we opened the profile in many areas, our number of titles received would be counterbalanced by restrictions. It should be noted that 50 small changes to increase receipts could be undone by one significant change that restricts the plan, and vice versa. It will take several months for us to fully know the impact of our changes.

Although one of our overarching goals was to redistribute our approval-to-firm order ratio and definitely see more books coming on approval than by firm order, the profile review process was strikingly revealing of long-standing undesirable parameters or it revealed new opportunities to contemporize our receipts based on new programs or other curricular developments. We had no choice but to soften our emphasis on the approval-to-firm-order ratio and make all needed improvements.

Next Steps

With a keen desire to avoid a “feast or famine” approach to maintaining the profile in the future, we will be seeking to incorporate reviews of subject areas into the subject librarians’ performance goals on staggered intervals. This approach will ensure that a small, manageable number of subjects are reviewed every year. Rather than having the YBP representative travel to campus, we may be able to employ the use of online conferencing, video chat, or remote desktop technologies to have dynamic and productive meetings.

As we proceed with future edits to the profile, we must be concerned with establishing a routine method for assessing the impact of the changes and ensuring quality control. Not all changes are worthy of assessment, such as

deciding to exclude aerospace engineering titles at a liberal arts college. However, changes that will cause an increase in the number of notification slips and fewer books to be received automatically or changes that restrict or relax the profile based on title pricing, publisher, content orientation (e.g., reference, textbook) need to be monitored in order to determine whether or not there are unintended consequences.

Additionally, we created an assessment tool that asked the subject liaisons to self-identify their skills, abilities, and knowledge of all of the concepts and tasks that underpin selection, evaluation, and collection management. The assessment’s questions were created from the Pod meeting agendas in order to ensure that the topics covered were formerly discussed and reviewed with everyone. The questions also form a critical baseline of expertise that the library’s Dean expects of each subject liaison. The results of the assessment were relatively scattershot, making definitive conclusions difficult. Given that, we are considering an additional assessment of demonstrated skill, knowledge, and ability, the results of which should permit us to make confident decisions about how to further develop the liaison program.

Lastly, in order to ensure consistency across the subject content in the library catalog, we asked YBP to use the revised print approval profile to generate a revised, correlative e-book DDA profile. Once the document was prepared, we asked them to reprofile the entire complement of DDA-eligible titles that ebrary has available. Within a few weeks, we were able to completely delete our current DDA pool and load a much more contemporary group of titles in which we had much better confidence. Since the last time we profiled our DDA pool, ebrary has developed a way to deduplicate DDA-eligible titles from its Academic Complete product. This made the library’s new pool much more reasonable in size. YBP was also able to manually remove monographic serials—an iterative restriction that will require ongoing quality control. Also, we hoped that we could receive only the latest edition of a given title, but that qualification is

not feasible at this time. In the future, we will consider having YBP manage our non-ebrary e-book collections, such as those from Wiley or EBSCO, in order to easily deduplicate our DDA pool from those title groups.

Conclusion

An effective approval plan is necessarily a living document that reflects the changing publishing

marketplace and the needs of a dynamic academic institution. Layered on that is an ever shifting landscape related to e-books. So our approval plan is not “done.” However, by investing substantial time and energy in our revision process, we have renewed our confidence that it meets our current needs and provides us the flexibility to make future adjustments as needed. That will do.

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