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Rick Anderson
University of Utah

David Magier
Princeton University

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Hyde Park Debate—Resolved: Wherever Possible, Library Collections Should Be Shaped by Patrons, Instead of by Librarians

Rick Anderson, Associate Dean for Scholarly Resources and Collections, University of Utah

David Magier, Associate University Librarian for Collection Development, Princeton University

Opening Poll: 42% agreed with the proposition, 58% disagreed with the proposition

Opening Statements

IN FAVOR: Rick Anderson, Associate Dean for Scholarly Resources and Collections, University of Utah

The resolution before us is that, wherever possible, library collections should be shaped by patrons rather than by librarians.

Not every library is in a position to undertake a patron-driven acquisition program. And, of course, not every book published is available for purchase under a patron-driven acquisition program. There are situations in which, for a variety of reasons, it may not be possible to undertake a patron-driven program. So to be very clear, supporting the present resolution does not mean saying that librarians should never select books for library collections. Wherever politically and structurally possible, however, I believe that it is better for the collection to be shaped by patrons than by librarians, and I therefore speak in favor of the resolution.

In this as with most other issues, we need to distinguish between means and ends— the things we *do* in libraries are the means, and the things we *hope to accomplish* by doing them are the ends. In libraries, where we have done the same things for a very long time and, in many cases, gotten very good at doing them, there is always the risk of getting means and ends confused—of coming to believe, for example, that the purpose of the catalog is to present perfect information about our collections, or that the purpose of interlibrary loan is to share, or that the purpose of the collection is to be comprehensive and balanced and coherent.

There is a wonderful children's book that some of you may have seen, called *A Hole Is to Dig*. It was

written by Ruth Krauss in 1952, and it compiles responses from small children to questions like "What is a hole?" and "What are eyebrows?" The answers are sweet and hilarious and tend to follow a common circular pattern: "A hole is to dig," "a face is so you can make faces," "a castle is to build in the sand," and my favorite, "grass is to have on the ground with dirt under it and clover in it." The phrase "a hole is to dig" comes to my mind frequently when thinking about and discussing collection development. Too often, I think, we succumb to the temptation to believe that a collection is to collect—that it justifies itself by being a collection, and by being good.

So when it comes to collections, what are the means and what are the ends? To put it more simply, *why* do academic libraries have collections? I would argue that the ultimate purpose of the collection is very simple: it is to give students and faculty access to the documents they need in order to do their scholarly work. Its purpose is not to showcase the erudition and wisdom of librarians, nor is it to ensure the library a high ranking among its peers. Nor is its purpose even to represent a coherent and comprehensive monument to human knowledge. The collection may, in fact, do all these things—but its size and coherence, its organization and its comprehensiveness, are all means to an end, not ends in themselves. Scholarship is the end. An academic library collection is better or worse to the exact degree that it makes the scholarly work of its stakeholders possible. This fact makes patron-driven acquisition—which is to say, the building of collections in response to real-world scholarly needs as expressed in the real-world use of books—a fundamentally superior approach to collection-building than an approach by which third parties (librarians) attempt, at great expense and very often erroneously, to guess and

anticipate what books their patrons will need in order to do that work.

I have heard (or can anticipate) a number of different objections to this position, and I will try to answer five of them preemptively.

The first is about relevance over time: an academic library serves more than just the students and faculty who are present at the moment. It also serves those who will come in the future. For this reason, letting its collection be shaped by the immediate needs of today's patrons is short-sighted.

My answer to this objection is to point out the absurdity of trying to anticipate future needs. And if anyone here feels "absurdity" is too strong a word, I invite you to walk the stacks of any large academic library and look at the books that were purchased 20, 30, 40, or more years ago. A few of them remain relevant and useful today. A very large percentage of them do not. A few of them are timeless classics. The great majority of them are not. Some are actually embarrassing. Here's the problem: the further you look into the future, the broader becomes the spectrum of possible scholarly needs, and therefore the greater the likelihood that we will guess incorrectly what our future scholars will actually need. We're kidding ourselves if we think we can guess today which books and other resources scholars of the year 2024 (let alone 2064) are going to need. We can do a pretty good job of guessing what will stand the test of time in terms of *quality*; predicting what will remain *relevant* is a roll of the dice, and an increasingly expensive one.

The second objection is about the quality and relevance of library collections in the long term: Library patrons may know what seems useful to them today, but they don't know what will stand the test of time.

This objection is based on the assumption that the purpose of an academic library collection is to act as an enduring monument to scholarship. I think that assumption, while not entirely without merit, is problematic. The primary goal of a library is to make possible the scholarly work of its patrons. A book that will stand the test of time but is not

relevant to the needs of today's patrons represents, at the very least, a purchase the appropriateness of which should be questioned, given our manifest inability to anticipate what will be relevant to tomorrow's patrons—and given the fact that libraries have no choice but to forego the purchase of high-quality books every day, given budget and mission limitations.

The third objection is specifically about quality in the here-and-now: library patrons may know what they want, but they don't necessarily know what they need. Academic libraries do not exist to please the customer, but to provide access to the best scholarly resources possible. Patron-driven acquisition is the intellectual equivalent of giving your kids Twinkies for breakfast because that's what they think they want.

To this objection I have two responses. The first is that intellectual Twinkies can easily be (and routinely are) excluded from a PDA profile. When setting up PDA programs, librarians can (and invariably do) set broad parameters for what will be offered while still allowing patrons to shape the collection by their scholarly behavior. So the intellectual Twinkies are a red herring. Second response: we librarians have gotten away for far too long with the arrogant stance that we know better than our patrons what they need in order to do their work. In some cases, we may well know better; in others, we don't. And we can't possibly hope to know better than they do, consistently, across all situations and for all of the thousands of students and faculty we serve.

The fourth objection is about the impact of PDA on overall collection quality: librarian-driven acquisition creates a coherent and intelligently crafted collection, because it is guided by a conscious program and a team of trained bibliographic professionals. Patron-driven acquisition creates a disjointed and incoherent mishmash of resources that are guided by no overarching program, including the curriculum.

In response to this objection, I refer again to the question of the collection's purpose. Does it exist to showcase the skill of the librarians who built it, or to serve the scholarly needs of the students and faculty for whose use it's intended? A collection

may be coherent and intelligently crafted and nevertheless fail to meet the needs of its users. The best way to ensure that it will fully support the scholarship taking place on campus is to provide access to as many relevant and high-quality documents as possible. In an environment of strictly limited resources—which is the environment in which the vast majority of research libraries are operating—the ability to offer a very large number of such documents and then acquire only those that are demonstrated to meet real-world needs is much more likely to result in a relevant and useful collection than a program of prediction and guesswork. Notably, by offering a far greater number of books than could possibly be purchased preemptively, a PDA program also provides far richer opportunities for serendipitous discovery than traditional collection-building programs possibly could.

The fifth objection is not philosophical, but practical: patron-driven acquisition risks letting spending run out of control.

This is one of the most obvious concerns about patron-driven acquisition—if you put the patron in the driver's seat and tell him to drive as fast and as far as he wants, how do you keep the gas tank from emptying out before all needs have been met?

This concern can be dispatched quite quickly: there are many mechanisms available to regulate the rate of spending on PDA, from the cordoning-off of dedicated and limited budget lines to what is called risk-pool management, whereby the number of books offered is decreased as the amount of money available shrinks. The bottom line, though, is simply that putting the patron in the driver's seat does not mean giving him the option of driving as fast as he wants for as long as he wants; mechanisms exist and are easily applied to manage the rate of PDA expenditure.

Those who have been paying attention may have noticed a common thread among the objections to patron-driven acquisition that I have laid out here: they tend to be library-centered, indeed collection-centered, rather than patron-centered. Those who oppose PDA, or who believe that it should have only a marginal place

in our collecting strategies, seem to me very often to be motivated by a fear that their work as professional librarians will be moved to the periphery by a system that uses scholarly behavior (rather than librarian expertise) to shape our collections. This fear is rational and legitimate. It is not, however, a suitable foundation for a collection development strategy. It is not our students' and researchers' job to keep us happily doing the work we like best. It is their job to learn and to produce scholarship, and our job to make that possible. If we are truly professionals, we will do whatever it takes to further the scholarly work of our institutions and patrons.

For all of these reasons, I stand in favor of the resolution before us today.

AGAINST: David Magier, Associate University Librarian for Collection Development, Princeton University

Point one: I am not against patron selection. PDA can be a cost-effective tool for exposing high-use core materials that librarians would have selected anyway, getting them into collections without the need for selector review. The basic premise of PDA seems almost unassailably logical and "democratic": instead of trying to guess what patrons want, let them choose for themselves and you can't go wrong. Who could argue with that? OK, I concede from the beginning that PDA *is* a useful tool.

A Philips-head screwdriver is also a useful tool: it allows us to efficiently apply maximal torque and rotational pressure to drive a screw into a hard surface with a minimum of force. It is truly a marvelous device, optimal for its task, and we should all be thankful for its invention! How much better the Phillips-head screwdriver is than "traditional" methods of attaching things in the old pre-Philips days!

But should we therefore conclude that the Philips-head screwdriver should be used for all tasks? You could try to use it for cleaning a fish, scraping snow off your windshield, combing your hair or eating your mashed potatoes. But *should* you?

By elevating the role of a special-purpose tool to a broad collection-development *principle*, giving it the *evangelical* force of the word "should," and promoting a dogma that all libraries ought to seek this path to perfection, the proposition leads us down a garden path that would ultimately deprive the entire community of research libraries of the ability to meet their mission and serve their patrons. Notice, critically, that I am not arguing that another useful tool—*librarian-driven* acquisition (LDA)—should be the universal way all collection shaping takes place. We should deploy the right tools for the right tasks. A flexible toolkit gives us maximum scope for meeting our mission. The proposition is false because it presents patron selection as the single best approach for collection-shaping—a false panacea.

Point two: I want to get rid of some myths, false distinctions, caricatures, intentional mis-characterizations and rhetorical straw-men that are raised whenever this topic is discussed. The corollaries of the proposition, which I use to shoot it down, apply equally to the shaping of collections in print and electronic forms, in libraries with large and small budgets. Contrary to the rhetoric my opponent has deployed before, the argument is *not* old-fashioned print-based thinking doggedly resisting the forward-looking visionaries the modern world.

Let's unpack the terms of the proposition in detail:

1. Libraries *should* take those actions that best support their mission of connecting patrons with the content they need.
2. Libraries provide content to patrons in three ways: we *buy* it, we *license* it, and we *borrow* it. The collection is what we purchase or license.
3. *Shaping* a collection means choosing what to collect versus borrow. Librarians engage in a balancing act, deploying limited resources strategically for current and future needs. Librarians look at cost-benefit ratios and trade-offs for their patrons every day:
 - Should we license this content or purchase it?

- Should we get the big-deal package or select title by title?
- Multiyear contracts or a year at a time?
- How many simultaneous users?
- Get it ourselves or buy in the consortium?
- Buy individual articles, subscribe to the journal, or purchase the backfile?
- Maybe don't collect it at all: maybe we could borrow it for our patrons as needed?
- And so on.

In contrast, the life of the patron is simple: "I look at what's available; I pick what I want." The hard questions don't arise for them. Today's proposition is all about *who* should make these hard collection-shaping choices. Should we really take the librarian out of the shaping business altogether?

1. Notice the proposition uses the hedge "*wherever possible*" It is always possible (though not always advisable) to have all choices made by patrons, just as it is possible to eat potatoes with a screwdriver. There already are some libraries following this dictum, eliminating librarians in favor of PDA, and the world has not come to an end . . . yet.

What kinds of collections result from patron selection? What gets in and what gets left out? Let's look at the roles of profit, discovery, availability, and cooperation to see the impact of going to PDA.

1. Profit and patrons

PDA systems are arranged with vendors and aggregators supplying sets of records which libraries expose to patrons in a discovery system, from which patrons select by clicking. These systems are optimized for *mainstream*, *commercial content*, with libraries letting vendors market their wares directly to their patrons. In theory, there's nothing wrong with that: we know lots of mainstream commercial content is

precisely what patrons want anyway, right? So far so good.

But what about all the noncommercial, noncore research content (print, digital and other formats) excluded from the mainstream because it is less profitable? Research needs and commercial viability are not always the same thing! Think of datasets, global government documents, NGO publications, think tank reports, grey literature, maps, digital ephemera, print ephemera—all kinds of *specialized research material*. What if all our libraries simply stopped collecting all these because they were not profitable for commercial PDA?

I hear you thinking, "*If these things really mattered, why wouldn't vendors sell them in PDA? Doesn't demand drive supply?*" The answer is no; the market can ignore these needs because it is harder to make a profit on them. The costs of acquiring this kind of content may be too high, projected constituency too specialized, demand too low, market too small.

Would original research really be possible in a community of libraries that simply gave up the long tail of lower use, specialized, noncommercial content?

Until a few weeks ago, Ebola was a distant obscurity. Now it's "Whoa! Where the heck did that come from?" If Liberian public health documents—in English mind you—are available to academia at all, it is only because they were collected by research libraries shaping their collections—before the outbreak hit the headlines. Trust me: these materials will not make their way into your commercial PDA: they are not commercially viable. Vendors thrive on selling as many copies as possible of the same thing: their profit lies in duplicate sales at the high-use end of the spectrum, ignoring the long tail.

Just a few weeks ago, no one had heard of ISIS. Turns out it's a well-equipped army of 30,000 fighters controlling vast areas of Syria and Iraq. "Whoa! Where the heck did that come from?" Content to answer that question exists, but it's in Arabic, a "squiggly language," highly specialized, not commercially viable, not in the "mainstream"

and certainly not coming to you under PDA. If we all adopted the proposition "wherever possible," this kind of material would be absent, not discoverable, let alone accessible. By the time someone had figured out what's needed on ebola or ISIS, libraries would be unable to acquire such material—it would no longer be available.

The same is true with new trends in academia that require us to strategically shape collections: so many fields now adopting *quantitative* methodologies; student research assignments requiring new types of microdata, financial and social/demographic statistics, maps and GIS data, etc.; new cross-disciplinary *global* concerns such as energy and environment entrepreneurship in applied science, climate change and human rights, *internationalization* across the campus; traditional language-and-literature departments with new emphases on cultural studies, film, popular culture, mass social movements, and so on.

Patron selection alone simply will not get us there.

2. Discovery and availability

Patrons can only request what they can discover. The largest source of discovery is the aggregate of library catalogs. But here's the catch-22: if libraries only collect what patrons select, the long-tail just won't make it in. They can't discover it, can't request it, and libraries won't acquire it. And then, too often, it's simply too late: it's no longer available. A tremendous portion of current use of our collections consists of materials no longer in print, no longer found on the web, and available—if at all—only by borrowing from a library that had the foresight to collect it back when it was available. *Collection shaping means being proactive on behalf of your patrons.*

3. Cooperation in the community of libraries

Abdicating responsibility for shaping collections nullifies the cost-efficiency of collection sharing. All over the country, library consortia are pushing the envelope for more efficient collection sharing with print and electronic delivery, optimized shared repositories, integrated shared discovery and request systems, negotiated consortial deals and new kinds of licenses for shared electronic

content, and so on. Collaboration has enabled us to pursue *coordinated* collection development, leverage our resources as a community, enrich the collective collection, reduce unnecessary duplication, and redeploy resources strategically.

But all this coordination disappears if shaping is done exclusively by patrons.

Patrons do not wear this collection development thinking cap.

Relying only on PDA would result in massively duplicated vanilla collections, accumulated with no intelligent design other than greatest profits for vendors, and no provision for patrons actual needs.

I know many of you are thinking, "Oh, they can do that at Princeton, but how could we afford it?" This logic is false. The tighter the money, the more strategic, careful and collaborative you have to be in deploying it. Your patrons can't do that for you on their own. Giving up on the hard task of making priorities and choices means giving in to the panicked psychology of scarcity: it's the tunnel vision that leads to long-term surrendering of the ability to support research in higher education. I say, work with your partner libraries *and* your patrons.

Remember: patron-driven librarians can shape collections, patrons on their own cannot.

RESPONSE STATEMENTS

Rick Anderson

My worthy opponent has, I believe, successfully refuted the proposition that patron-driven acquisition is the best way to build a collection. That, however, is not the resolution that we are debating here today. To argue in favor of this resolution is not to say that PDA is the best way to build a great collection. It's to say that the greatness of the collection is not the point—the point is to support scholarship.

What David has not done, in my view, is demonstrate that librarian-driven collection building is the best way to accomplish that task.

In fact, if connecting students and faculty with what they need in order to do their scholarly work is the task, then librarian-driven acquisition is a demonstrably poor tool for it, since it invariably means guesswork and prediction about which resources will actually meet scholarly needs—which is a bit like using a screwdriver to eat mashed potatoes: it involves a huge amount of wasted energy, not to mention wasted money.

David's points about profit and patrons are not incorrect, but neither are they particularly relevant to the resolution we are addressing today. He's right to point out that there are (and surely always be) documents that patrons need in order to do their scholarly work, but that are not available for acquisition on a PDA basis. If the resolution under debate were "No one except patrons should ever shape library collections," or "Libraries should only collect materials that are available on a PDA basis," then his point would constitute a powerful refutation of it. But neither of those is the resolution under debate. Clearly, if we need documents that can't be acquired through PDA, then we need to get them in some other way. The fact that PDA will not always be possible is explicitly accounted for in the resolution.

Last point: David seems to have confused the idea of patron-driven acquisition with patron selection. The two concepts are very different. PDA doesn't call on patrons to make selections. It provides what patrons experience as a larger collection than what librarians could possibly provide based on speculative purchasing, and then simply invites the patrons to do their work. The patrons don't make selections; they do their work, and the work they do then generates selections. David is right that books in the "long tail" of relevance may not make it into the collection by this mechanism. Some will, and some won't—but this is true no matter how we buy books.

Let me close by pointing out a fundamental point on which David and I very much agree: "The tighter the money, the more strategic, careful, and collaborative you have to be in deploying it." This is why libraries like mine—a library whose entire operating budget is barely larger than Princeton's annual expenditure on collections—have been

relatively enthusiastic about embracing PDA. Buying, housing, and caring for books that our patrons don't need may be a great way to build a wonderful collection—but it's no strategy at all for allocating strictly limited resources in support of the scholarly work on our campuses.

David Magier

1. Without identifying a single good thing about PDA, Rick devotes himself instead to a new low of dismissive stereotyping and character assassination, a completely fictionalized librarian straw man to shoot down. He trivializes and slanders the work of librarians, calling us childish ("*a collection is to collect*"), vain and self-centered ("*monuments to our own wisdom*"), absurd and delusional (tilting towards "*comprehensive*" collections for the *distant future*), and wasteful and self-interested (*valuing our own jobs over the interests of patrons*). This cartoon character villain doesn't actually exist: no library would tolerate it. So let's dispose of these distractions and hot air and look at the real world. We librarians *are* patron-driven: engaged closely with faculty and students every day. We engage in collection-shaping with and on behalf of our patrons, because failing to do so produces negative impacts right here and now, not 40 years in the future!
2. Because of potential bad outcomes from PDA, even Rick is forced to hedge his bets. Pay attention to these rhetorical hedges: they reveal something fundamental about the argument he would rather you didn't notice. For example, where he says mysteriously "We have ways of slowing down expenditure," he's really talking about slowing down the patrons through *quantitative squeezing*: decreasing the number of books offered as the money runs out. Well, who selects which records to suppress and which books to hide from patrons so they can't trigger purchases? Even under PDA, it's

the *librarians* who make these choices, just as they chose the profiles of records to expose in the first place. But this is precisely collection shaping: what to include and exclude. Knowing that *bad things can happen* when PDA runs wild, Rick hedges by covertly acknowledging that librarian collection-shaping is necessary after all!

3. Did you notice the biggest hedge, where Rick is forced to argue my side of the debate? Some places maybe can't go with PDA due to "political" reasons . . . Well, what are these mysterious political reasons? Again, it's not that these libraries *couldn't* do PDA, it's just *not politically advisable* because bad things can happen that get the library into trouble! *If you over-deploy the screwdriver, someone gets screwed!* Faculty know this and they exert political pressure to prevent it. So Rick tries to reduce the proposal to a logical zero: "Collections should be shaped by PDA, *except where they shouldn't.*"
4. Finally, Rick ignores the largest fallacy of PDA: it deprives libraries of their primary tool for leveraging limited budgets: coordination. All of us exist in an interdependent ecosystem of cooperation, a whole greater than the sum of its parts, making accessible the long tail of lesser used content without which research is impossible. Even we at Princeton have to borrow lots of what we don't have. Coordination requires strategic shaping by librarians. Otherwise, we'd all have the same 2500 monographs.

CLOSING POLL RESULTS: 50.2% agreed with the proposition, 49.7 % disagreed with the proposition.

Remember: You don't have to collect everything your patrons need. But you do need to have other libraries out there ready to lend what you can't collect. The PDA proposal would make such coordination impossible.