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Op-Ed--Approval Plans

Barry Fast

Academic Book Center

Rick Heldrich

College of Charleston

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Op-Ed — Opinions and Editorials

Hey y'all! I am talking to YOU and YOU and YOU. Express your opinion right here. — KS

Approval Plans: A Response by Barry Fast

Writing in the September issue of *Against the Grain* (vol 8, No. 4, p. 25) John Perry Smith castigates approval plans (as well as booksellers, librarians and publishers) in his article entitled, "A Voice of Disapproval." I think he is serious, so I respond in kind.

Some of his allegations are true. His recognition of the need for businesses to make a profit is profound. His recognition of the role of libraries to "cherish and nurture" a collection, though a bit overblown, is valid. Calling publishers "intellectual vampires," though colorful, may apply to a few (one of whom took a long dive off a short boat), but most publishers are just as nice as you or I. By implication, a close reading of his article may lead some to believe that librarians who utilize approval plans are "lazy" and booksellers who promote them are "cynically" exploiting this character defect. Most librarians I know wish they had time to be lazy, and my bookseller colleagues are cynical mainly about politics or getting older.

Terming approval plans an "insurmountable conflict of interest," Smith tries to prove this assertion by demonstrating his ignorance. He believes that collection managers

have "hours" to spend pouring over publisher catalogs, reading reviews, and meeting with faculty to "craft the best possible collection from a limited budget." The last time I checked, most libraries' collection development librarians were working the reference desk during the hours they used to have to peruse catalogs and read reviews, while at the same time begging faculty to tear themselves away from outside consulting or grant writing so they can grab a few minutes to talk about their unexpended or overspent book budget.

Smith weeps for the "small and uncooperative publisher," though "vampires" they may be, as they "skulk through professional meetings" and "troll the night of authorial despair" looking for "product," their "important" books excluded from approval plans. Instead of trashing approval vendors for not dealing with these folks, why not make reasonable suggestions that will enable vendors to handle them, suggestions like allowing returns. If publishers don't allow returns, a hard-nosed capitalist like Mr. Smith ought to recognize that we customers have a right to choose not to include them

on approvals. If our aim is to "lock up the lion's share of the monographic budget," why in the world would we want to limit the publishers we handle. The more publishers we handle, the more we "lock up." Publishers who prevent us from working with them on approvals by denying returns (remember Mr. Smith, an approval plan means the ability to return unwanted books) can have their books included in approval plans in a heartbeat by simply allowing returns.

We do not, indeed cannot, "gravitate to those publishing programs that present the highest discounts, the lowest cost of shipping, the easiest returns policies, and the most generous credit terms". This, according to Mr. Smith, is how approval plans "corrupt" booksellers. We remain uncorrupted because our customers quite reasonably expect us to handle virtually all publishers on a combination of approval plans

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and firm orders. Those of us who offer approval plans agree ahead of time with our customers which publishers will be covered, and then we guarantee coverage, whether or not the publisher is sweet and kind, or nasty and difficult. Mr. Smith's nirvana of approval publishers does not exist. I can name names, but won't in a family magazine such as this. Our customers tell us who to cover, and they check. Nothing keeps a company uncorrupted more effectively than customers who can't be fooled.

Mr. Smith laments the loss of librarians as "gatekeepers" of the collection. Making their way into your collection through the "trapdoor of your approval plan" are books that are "too trivial ... too shallow .. too stupid ... too boring .. too evil." Too evil?? From your approval plan??

In fact, approval plans empower librarians as gatekeepers. Being able to actually look at a book, read the table of contents, the jacket cover description, the introduction, or just flipping through pages, librarians can make a most informed decision. Instead of wasting hours wading through different publishers' catalogs looking for the books in the subjects they manage, collection development librarians have their books right on a shelf for easy access. Keep or reject decisions are made with full, unfiltered knowledge, unhyped by those "vampires" publicity.

Does Mr. Smith really believe approval plans "inject a serum of banality into major research collections"? Does he really think that librarians who use approval plans "establish the notion that book selection is really just a commodity"? How can he predict that the use of approval plans will contribute to an environment where "unconventional and revolutionary voices are trivialized and driven out of the mainstream"? (By definition, they never have been in the mainstream.)

Approval plans, in fact, are supposed to deliver to the library the books the library

would buy anyway through the more costly firm order process. The approval plan will deliver as banal or revolutionary a core collection as the library managers desire. They alone reject what they don't want. They alone look at vendor selections and decide if they meet library collection standards. Experienced librarians know quite soon whether a plan is missing the types of books they want. Approval plans do not operate in a vacuum, like some robotic commodity selection gizmo. They are managed by the vendors and within the libraries, and vendors compete quite vigorously on the quality of selections. That's why returns matter, why they are analyzed, and why profiles are fine tuned.

There probably is some basic sameness to core collections at peer universities. Librarians should strive to make available to their patrons the books that would commonly be found in a large, medium or small academic library. That's service. Approval plans insure that those books are available on or around their publication day. They are an efficient method of obtaining those commonly held books quickly. Core collections that resemble each other are not banal; they reflect academic institutions that resemble each other. If biology is taught comprehensively at 200 American universities, those 200 library biology collections ought to have many of the same books.

Approval plans are evaluated in terms of collection policies by analyzing circulation records (see **Marcie Kingsley's** article in the same *ATG* issue v.8 #4, p.1), by statistical analyses among peer libraries, by feedback from library users, and by the experience of librarians who feel a profound professional interest in building a fine collection. By using approval plans for core collections, librarians can use the rest of their limited time to find the monographs that will make their collections unique and responsive to their teaching programs, the research needs of faculty and students, their traditions, and their cooperative resource-sharing responsibilities with other libraries.

Perhaps Mr. Smith's most egregiously

false accusation is that somehow approval plans contribute to the stifling of unconventional and provocative views. He describes an "uninformed self interest" of (approval plan) booksellers, publishers and publishing faculty, as if there is some "invisible" type of conspiracy. Or perhaps he means that the approval plan process, in combination with approval participating publishers, creates an environment that is hostile to unpopular and/or revolutionary ideas. But what evidence is there for this? Has scholarly publishing become more banal, less provocative? Maybe, but it seems to me that our whole society has. If there is any evidence that scholarly publishing is more plain vanilla, more conventional, it seems reasonable that this reflects the state of scholarship instead of a bookseller/publisher cabal.

We approval vendors sell what's published. Libraries buy what's published. Publishers like diverse and provocative books; it brings attention and revenue. The real enemy of revolutionary or provocative ideas are reviewers, whose actions in ignoring these books or reviewing them unfavorably scare publishers into not considering this material for publication. Approval plans remove the reviewer as arbiter (or the non-reviewer), placing the buying decisions directly into the hands of professional collection managers. They too have their prejudices and blank spots, but still I'd rather see thousands of librarians making buying decisions with the books in their hands, with their ethical underpinnings of the free and open dissemination of all sorts of ideas.

Approval plans free librarians to make better collection management decisions. They enable publishers to publish more diversely because they know the intended audience will actually see their books. Approval plan booksellers, disciplined by an intellectual and professional group of customers, have to deliver quality. Arguments such as Mr. Smith's distort the intent and the results of approval plans. Sophistry went out with Aristotle, or at least it should have.

"I Have A Nightmare. That One Day ..."

by **F.J. Heldrich** (Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry, College of Charleston) <heldrichr@cofc.edu>

Margaret had worked diligently all through high school in order to gain admissions to illustrious Grant & Foster University. Grant & Foster was listed on the October pages of the North American News Monitor Service as one of the top ten comprehensive Universities. Margaret did have high grades from high school, ranked 8th out of her class of 357, and had what she had hoped where outstanding recommendations from her service work with both "Feed the Hungry" and "Save the Parks". Margaret's international ranking in the 93rd percentile, based on her Score of Cognitive Assessment Marks (SCAM) results, did not hurt either. Still, Grant & Foster was highly competitive and she had not been certain that she would be

accepted when the semester opened. But here she was, eager and ready to begin what her parents referred to as her "college education." Margaret scoffed at her parents expression, but not openly. After all, they had agreed to foot the bill for her work over the next three years. Both of her parents had gone to Emory University, but Margaret had wanted something different. She had picked Grant & Foster. And why not. After all, the Monitor Service listed Emory University as the only traditional institution ranked as highly as Grant & Foster. But even if she had wanted to go to Emory, Margaret knew that she'd never have been able to afford it. One semester's tuition at Emory cost more than the three-year program at Grant & Fos-

ter. And that did not even include room & board. Her parents knew how expensive it was to live in Atlanta, even as a student. Margaret felt sure that her parents were pleased with her decision.

Margaret opened her campus map and tried to orient herself. It was an intimidating campus. But the map, at least, gave her the confidence to explore what would be her home for the next three years. In a few days, she would not have to refer to the map to find her way around the campus, but now she looked at all the building icons and was overwhelmed by the size of the campus. She counted over 150 academic buildings clustered in pods. Each pod focused on a differ-

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ent learning strategy. There was an Auditory pod, a Visual pod, a Kinetic pod, a Writing pod, and the newest pod of all, which was unique to Grant & Foster, called simply the Reflective pod. Margaret had heard about the Reflective pod, but she doubted that she'd ever have occasion to enter it. The Monitor report had described it as a "bland collection of facts and figures which only the truly gifted intellect would find captivating, and then, only for a very short while." Grant & Foster described the Reflective pod as a unique opportunity for patient discovery and personal growth. Margaret thought that it sounded more like a way to keep you enrolled in Grant & Foster for an extra year. There were a couple of non-academic buildings on the map. Margaret quickly noticed the social center, the fitness center, the health center, and the advising center, the inter-campus communication center, and the special events center.

Margaret had taken a battery of tests to evaluate her learning skills. She was free to utilize any of the pods, but her tests had revealed what she already knew to be true about herself — she was going to spend a lot of time in the Visual and Kinetic pods. Grant & Foster profiling had recommended she spend about 50% of her time in each of these pods, and she figured that is what she would do. And so Margaret called up her courage, looked up from her map and selected the Chemistry Building in the Visual pod. She clicked on the CHEM icon and entered her ID code, which had been posted to her account yesterday. After Grant & Foster had deposited her three-year tuition check. The screen flashed once, and darkened. The theme song from the "Warrior Ant" played as the image on her screen slowly coalesced and the words "Welcome, Margaret, to

Chemistry I" appeared on the chalk board in the center of her screen. Margaret took a deep breath and got ready to watch as her "college education" began.

There you have it. The nightmare that I have been living with for about a year now. Ever since reading the article by **Eli M. Noam** on pages 247—249 in *Science*, Vol. 270, October 13, 1995 called "Electronics and the Dim Future of the University."

Tenured college professors, even when tenure is being redefined, are supposed to be secured from the fear of the evaporating job. We take less money in exchange for that sense of security. With increasing years in service, the ability to change careers (say from chemistry teacher to industrial chemist) seem to diminish. But why should this dream and the article that inspires it be of concern to the book lovers and protectors who read *Against the Grain*? Well, perhaps you did not notice, but Grant & Foster University had no library. No books, no journals, no buildings either for that matter. This might seem all dream without even a hint of reality, but I encourage you read Noam's article before you discount the notion entirely.

The library has been the focal point of academic communities for over two thousand years. But longevity is no guarantor of survival. Ask T. Rex if you have any doubts. If books become museum pieces and journals become LP's or 8-Track tapes of the year 2034, then my nightmare might become yours. But the advent of electronic information technologies is not the sum of my fears. Coupled with this, we are in the throes of a synergistic development in the study of learning. Psychologists, who have made great strides in the development of behavioral, learning and personality studies, have developed an understanding of human learning that is being exploited by talented, charismatic capitalists, disguised as motivational speakers. These people, and their mar-

keters, know how to effectively communicate with a large audience by using a dynamic mix of kinetic, verbal, visual and literary means. And they are making millions.

Noam imagines universities with Broadway-like appeal and investment. How about Disney, AT&T or Paramount U? Similarly, universities could become the province of moguls like **Bill Gates**, with learning materials developed by the motivational crowd and psychologists. Chemists and librarians would be needed, but as technical consultants, not educators.

But I must be wrong in my fears. I have a history of being wrong about many things and this has been a constant source of delight. After all, civilization did not disappear in a mushroom cloud of Armageddon, thanks be to President Reagan. My colleagues, who have read the same article, are not afraid. And obviously the Board of Trustees of universities who are planning to build new libraries (even when they are fearful of building new laboratories and classrooms) have not read or do not believe the Noam article. But then, neither of these entities heard the spokesman from the **National Science Foundation, Directorate for Science Education**, tell a diverse national faculty gathered at the **6th National Conference on Undergraduate Research** that the Noam article was a must read.

The redemption for the university model, as we now conceive it, might well rest in the non-academic development of the student body. Noam cites one-on-one mentoring and humanistic attributes of the current university model as its saving grace. But we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that personal development is best when provided on college campuses or in fraternities and sororities. If we adopt a national requirement for a year or more of public service after high school (armed forces or otherwise), then much of the social maturation and development of the 18-20 year old set will occur off campus, opening the door for educational vehicles such as Grant & Foster. Perhaps the only hope of survival of the campus-based institution is the exceptionally expensive, individualized instruction that comes from faculty-student mentoring in tutorials, special projects and research. But how can this be made cost effective? After the three year experience at Grant & Foster?

As the library's importance as a storehouse of knowledge declines and as adequate alternatives for personal development are manifested outside the confines of the campus seclusion, then we (educators and librarians) become increasingly at risk. There is already strong evidence that students can access more information from their personal computers than any library can afford to provide. Political climates can change and required public service could become a nationality reality in America as it already is in many other countries. Interactive electronic media seems ever closer to satisfying the need for personal attention. There would seem to be sufficient cause for you to share my nightmare. Are you afraid?

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