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Approval Plans for College Libraries: Strategies for Smaller Collections

by R. Charles Wittenberg (Blackwell North America)

For nearly every large library it is a given that the approval plan is an essential tool for lowering the cost of acquisitions and for enabling collection managers to keep abreast of current publications. Approval plans are in place almost universally in ARL libraries and in most of those of the next rank in size.

Studies have demonstrated that the cost savings achieved simply by receiving books without incurring the expense of creating an order are, at a minimum, several dollars per volume. Additional cost benefits occur as libraries take advantage of vendor-generated files which serve as order/receive/pay records and as sources of fund information which can be directly absorbed by the integrated library system. As the number of libraries seeking to lower costs by "outsourcing" the provision of technical services increases, vendor-delivered catalog records and book-processing services are most often sought for those books which are acquired on approval rather than for purchases for which libraries are creating or deriving records as orders are created. The approval plan has become the focal point of the service synergies which library book vendors can offer to ease the means crisis felt nearly universally by customers.

Big libraries have also come to take for granted the benefits of first-possible-availability of new publications for their patrons, protection against the acquisitions headaches that come with short print runs, and the "automatic" appearance of key-to-the-collection items that may have escaped their attention.

It is a matter of interest – and concern – that the cost and coverage benefits of approval plans have been realized by very few college libraries. In recent years the number of research libraries whose collecting is truly independent of the university's current curriculum has certainly not grown. I suspect, in fact, that budget constraints have led more and more large libraries to look to curricular relevance and collection use in shaping their acquisitions policies – including the profiling of their approval plans. When we look at the college and undergraduate-driven small university library, however, we are looking at a relationship of curriculum to collection which is of an entirely different order.

The library with a book budget of (for the sake of a working definition of "small") \$50,000–\$200,000 has historically operated in a firm-order-only environment shaped by the demands of teaching and by the immediate non-teaching concerns of the faculty. In many college libraries the funds available for current book buying have, historically, been allocated entirely to the teaching departments with the exception of dollars appropriated for the reference collection. I know of only a few places at the opposite end of the continuum where libraries' funds are truly managed by the library in light of an independent mandate to build a consistent and shapely collection. Many colleges are in the middle ground where allocated and controlled funds have found a balance. It could be said that the good news about college libraries is that their patrons are interested and involved in their collecting activities; the bad news is that collection development bends to the needs of the moment. It is relatively rare in these circumstances that college librarians have even broached the idea of approvals to their faculties and administration ... until recently.

The pressures of rising book prices and increasing (necessary) commitments to the purchase of serials and non-print materials have drawn college librarians' attention to strategies for saving costs and expanding purchasing power. More important, perhaps, is that college library directors and collection managers are intensely serious about their professional role in their academic community and that they are anxious to have control of their collections; to build them in ways that rise above the demands of the moment. It is the rare college library that doesn't suffer from dramatically varying levels of attention to the library from teaching departments and from dramatically varying perspectives on the part of faculty about the right way to use allocated resources. Approval plans are an attractive tool for controlling and ensuring balance in collecting, and a steadily increasing number of libraries that would historically have felt that they were "too small for approval plans" have begun to explore their potential.

An examination of the possibilities for growing approval plans in college libraries needs to begin with consideration of the politics of the situation. College librarians who have followed the path of experimenting with approvals will be the best guides for their colleagues who are now moving in that direction, but there are some general observations that can be made.

In most cases it is a given that non-library faculty will be involved in the decision to make a considerable change in collecting practice. These "outsiders" need to be presented with both the direct benefits to them – early delivery of new titles, the opportunity to review and reject – and with the cost benefits for the library which are shared with the community as expanded purchasing power. It is my experience that the bookseller can be a useful partner to the library in presenting to teaching faculty the issue of library savings which result from "process" enhancements and from bookseller efficiencies which frequently result in added discount on approval purchases.

A cogent picture of how the larger library community uses approvals, of how they are used in other specific college situations, is a perspective that the traveling bookseller can bring to the table. These encounters with non-library faculty are also a valuable learning experience for vendors.

The selling of the approval concept outside of the library is no simple matter and it is probably unrealistic to expect that all constituencies will be convinced. It is common, for instance, for the faculty to accept the idea of automatic delivery of new titles but to balk at the opportunity/responsibility of reviewing approval shipments. The essential dynamic in this situation is the relationship between teaching faculty and their library contacts and the successful implementation of an approval "experiment" can serve to confirm the librarian's key role as a partner in collection building. Experience with a well-made small

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"In recent years the number of research libraries whose collecting is truly independent of the university's current curriculum has certainly not grown."

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plan should lead to faculty trust in the process and to their willingness to step back from constant scrutiny of the new arrivals — except to look for that special book reviewed in Sunday's *New York Times*.

The implementation of an approval review and rejection process also brings to the fore the issue of building a "general" collection which includes appropriate materials to anticipate future needs (solid general works in Southeast Asian history in a college library where there is no current course being offered) and to satisfy student demand which may not be immediately evident to faculty. (We're all aware that the collection viewed from the Chemistry chair's office and the collection viewed from the reference desk are very different beasts.) Deliberating about the use of approval plans can be an interesting exercise simply because it raises the issues of shared responsibility and the general collection. For libraries operating in situations where funds have always been allocated to teaching faculty, the approval plan can also be a useful tool to shift the control of library resources.

It is clear that approval plans need not be all or nothing propositions — select bits and pieces of approvals — including the delivery of new titles announcement slips — may be the most appropriate strategy for the college library. It is not realistic to envision a college plan as a university arrangement except — somehow — smaller. There are features of approval plans which are especially appropriate to the smaller library environment and as vendor and library experience grows I expect that a variety of models will evolve.

A college library plan can begin with one or several departments who have bought the concept. The best case result of this strategy is the "Tom Sawyer effect" — the evident satisfaction of the first participants with early and easy access to new titles will draw others into the approval fold. A highly satisfactory college plan can be grown gradually as departments can be convinced to play the game. Confidence is imparted to the start-up faculty by offering them involvement in the creation of the approval profile. They should particularly be approached as the experts in

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identifying core publishers for their discipline. Given the huge universe of scholarly publishing and the limited means of the college library, it is inevitable that a publisher-based profiling strategy will be adopted. The adding and deleting of publishers from the core to be covered is also a way to trim/expand the profile to meet the resources available that is understandable and intellectually credible. (The acquisitions librarian

can contribute to this process by identifying for the faculty the publishers who appear most frequently in the department's firm orders.) It is obvious that this core of publishers will be different for every department; it is difficult to build a plan in Education without Jossey Bass, or in History without Princeton University Press.

The issue of "undergraduate" versus "research level" materials is not one to be resolved simply and universally, and certainly not one to be resolved by the bookseller. College programs will differ dramatically in their intellectual ambition and bibliographic requirements. Teaching faculty and librarians together can identify a huge range of discriminations within a vendor profiling system that will add up to a satisfying implicit definition of what constitutes an "undergraduate book." The college library may not ordinarily collect proceedings, but if there is a department which requires them as part of a commitment to approvals that decision can be implemented for just one discipline or one publisher or one segment of a subject profile. The geographic scope of a teaching department's interests is another dimension to be made specific to curricular demands and local interest.

Serious investment in the initial profile and the clear expectation that adjustments will need to be made until the review shelf contains the right quantity and character of materials are the keys to success in building a small approval plan. The college environment is a first class test of the flexibility inherent in any approval system.

I expect that more and more college and small university libraries will choose to experiment with approvals to realize the cost and service benefits which are taken for granted by the largest academic libraries. As experience with the startup process is shared by librarians and their approval vendors, the sophistication and serviceability of the "college plan" should grow apace.

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Study evaluated two vendors at California State University, Los Angeles. BNA sent slips and B&T sent books in 14 science subjects. Data collected and compared on timeliness of notification and delivery, subject profiling, discounts, and coverage. Although seemingly equal, findings illustrate strengths and weaknesses of the vendors. Other libraries using the vendors were also interviewed. Author concludes that plans must be regularly evaluated in order to prevent misleading assumptions, and suggests that bidding process results with greater discounts.

Warzala, M. "Acquisition of Monographic Series: Approval Plan Versus Standing Order." *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory* 15:3 (1991): 313-327. Author performed six title keyword searches in B&T database for irregular monographic series over ten years: (1) "science" for domestic, commercial publishers; (2) "Latin America" for U.K. publishers; (3) political science, history, and social issues for domestic think tanks; (4) "adulthood" and "aging" for domestic medical/professional publishers; (5) "solid-state" and "physics" for European scientific, technical, and medical (STM) publishers; and (6) "molecular biology" for domestic STM's. Data presented for all cases for frequency of titles, and average and total prices by year in three tables: generically, by LC class, and by intended readership

level. Cases 1 and 4 were diverse in L.C. class and readership and thus recommended for approval; cases 5 and 6 were limited in each and thus recommended for standing order.

Footnotes

¹The Vendor Study Group. "Vendor Evaluation: A Selected Annotated Bibliography, 1955-1987." *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory* 12:1 (1988): 17-28.

²Case, B.D. "Seeking Your Approval: Your Approval Plan Vendor Evaluation." *Against the Grain* 7:4 (1995): 30.

³Godden, I.P., K.W. Fachan, and P.A. Smith. *Collection Development and Acquisitions, 1970-80: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography*. Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1982; Kohl, D.F. *Acquisitions, Collection Development, and Collection Use: A Handbook for Library Management*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO Information Services, 1985; Library Administration and Management Association, American Library Association. *Statistical Applications in Library Technical Services: An Annotated Bibliography*, edited by S.A. Burkholder. Chicago: Library Administration and Management Association, American Library Association, 1987; Rossi, G. J. "Library Approval Plans: A Selected, Annotated Bibliography." *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory* 11:1 (1987): 3-34.