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Dave Gall, "From Acquisitions to Collection Development" (2018). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference*.

<http://dx.doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284317032>

From Acquisitions to Collection Development

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Abstract

Over the last few years, the Collection Development Department at the University of Waterloo Library has been heavily engaged in revamping a number of long-established workflows in an effort to streamline processes to create greater efficiency, collaboration, and access to documents. Hoping to take greater advantage of the accessibility and versatility offered by working with documents in digital format, and reducing the number of avenues for requests to arrive in the department, members of the department looked for ways to employ technologies and software to make the work flow more smoothly. Where these options did not exist, they improvised and created their own. While the evolution of the department continues, the changes implemented thus far have allowed the team to reduce troublesome backlogs in order processing, set and meet consistent service standards, and create a more versatile department capable of responding to the cyclical work peaks throughout the year.

Background

Founded in 1957, the University of Waterloo is a Canadian university located in Waterloo, Ontario, with just over 35,000 full-time students. The library has an annual base budget of \$8.5 million (CDN). Internally, the library has been operating on Ex Libris's Voyager integrated library system (ILS), which it shares with three other local universities as part of the TriUniversity Group of Libraries (TUG) consortium. This ILS has been in place since the late 1990s, and many of the acquisition workflows were originally constructed to serve a print-focused collection. These workflows have evolved over the years to accommodate the growth of electronic resources (e-resources), but this has been done mainly through the application of cumbersome workarounds. The

Acquisitions Department was also structured to best handle the procurement of predominantly print material, but as the format of the library's purchases began to change, it became necessary for the department to undergo modification as well.

Under the previous structure of the Acquisitions Department, the department head was also responsible for managing all subscriptions and continuing resources. Firm monograph ordering was handled independently, and the individual responsible for approval plan monograph processing was part of the Cataloguing Department (see Figure 1). This arrangement was very siloed, even though everyone was ordering resources that were drawing on the same budget.

Figure 1. The organizational structure of the Acquisitions Department.

Figure 2. The organizational structure of the Collection Development Department.

Within the new structure of the Collection Development Department, various functions—including firm and approval ordering, as well as subscription management—are spread across three acquisition associates with a shared job description. This requires the three staff members to be proficient in processing every type of order (see Figure 2). In addition, the Collection Development Department expanded to include roles for licensing and copyright, an e-resource access team, and collection data analysis, so the department is now concerned with many more aspects of adding and managing material in the collection, beyond just the logistics of purchasing resources.

This new structure has been immensely beneficial, as the team is now more agile—able to pivot resources and efforts to various functions in keeping with the ebb and flow of work. This allows the department to maintain service standards, even when the workload

of particular operations becomes unusually heavy throughout the year. Staff have also benefited from greater communication and collaboration, as well as a better understanding of how the team’s work integrates with that of other departments.

Implementing Changes

In order to take the greatest advantage of the department’s new structure, it was important to introduce a number of changes to help facilitate the transformation. To that end, it was integral that the department first mapped troublesome workflows to determine where the most substantial pain points were and devise solutions for alleviating them. This method involved capturing all of the current steps in a process, listing every problem frequently encountered with the workflow, mapping an ideal state that would solve the established problems, generating steps to be taken to implement solutions,

and assigning responsibility for completing these steps in a timely manner. The results allowed us to design new workflows to eliminate waste, such as overprocessing, verifying conditions multiple times, and unnecessary travel. With more clearly defined workflows, the team sought to integrate a number of different software and technology solutions that would help maximize the efficiency of the processes.

A major piece underpinning the new structure was the addition of request tracking software, which allowed us to track and organize work so that orders would no longer run the risk of being lost or buried in individual inboxes. Work can now be triaged to staff members with available capacity and more effectively passed between different units, depending on the stage of a request's resolution. This program has the added benefit of saving an easily accessible history of request and resolution, so that other staff members can review the process and outcome, even if they were not initially involved.

In an effort to standardize the order information coming into the department, we also implemented online forms—the first of which was for rush monograph ordering. These were designed to be dynamic and capable of accommodating different types of requests from different units, while ensuring that all necessary information is included in the request so that Collection Development staff can process the order with a minimum of additional correspondence. The information in these forms is presented in a standardized format and sent as a ticket through the request tracking system, which can then be assigned to a staff member.

A significant improvement to our book ordering process was the implementation of GOBlexport, which is a service provided by our major book vendor, GOBI. Previously, orders were being manually entered, one at a time, with a bibliographic record being searched in the shared catalogue, imported, or created from scratch. The GOBlexport service facilitates bulk order processing, so that hundreds of orders can be processed at once, significantly reducing the amount of time it takes to place each order. This solution has been effective in eliminating troublesome ordering backlogs that previously resulted during times of increased selecting activity by subject librarians.

In order to reduce the amount of variation in the ordering process for both selectors and the Acquisitions team, we also attempted to limit the number of publishers from whom we purchase directly, opting instead to purchase through third-party vendors

wherever possible. This reduced the number of vendors used and consolidated the volume of orders with fewer business partners, allowing the team to maximize the effectiveness of other time-saving processes such as electronic data interchange (EDI) invoice loading. It is worth noting that this was only done in instances where the quality of the collection would not be compromised, and so the department still orders from a number of specialized vendors, which are able to supply materials that are not available from our main vendors.

Other efforts to modify the ordering processes included attempts to eliminate unpredictable standing orders by having the individual issues come through GOBI as notifications for selectors. Budgeting for standing orders has always been difficult, and some selectors had encountered substantial problems in the past with unexpected standing orders consuming much of a small monograph budget. This change provided more control for selectors over expenditure timing and collection content, and prevented major surprises, since there were fewer open orders that could arrive unexpectedly without some form of mediation.

The addition of a licensing & copyright librarian and developer to our department provided an opportunity to create a homegrown electronic resource management system to aid in the tracking, organizing, and storing of license information, as this was not a function for which we used our current ILS. The system developed in the Collection Development Department combines information on purchase, license terms, and resource in one spot, and also feeds into the link resolver so that some of the information is visible to patrons. Staff are now able to quickly and easily determine such things as usage rights or license term, without needing to consult the original license.

A number of changes were also made to the invoicing section of the department, which is overseen by one staff member. Efforts were made to review and refine EDI invoice profiles in order to reduce the amount of manual cleanup necessary with invoice files. Where applicable, the department also requested that vendors invoice in U.S. dollars, rather than a converted Canadian dollar amount, which allows for the identification of true subscription price increases. The University of Waterloo Library spends the majority of its budget on resources purchased from U.S. vendors, so price increases of the resources can be misleading when foreign exchange rates are factored in, making budgeting more difficult.

By far, the biggest change made in invoicing was to shift our operations to digital-based invoices, rather than print. Previously, records management had required paper copies of all invoices to be kept as the copy of record, and as the years went on more vendors/publishers began sending electronic copies, which meant printing a lot of invoices and retaining drawers of paper. After consulting with records retention experts on campus to determine the appropriate requirements, digital invoices are now housed on the department's SharePoint site, where they are easily accessible by the whole team and are backed up by the university's campus Information Systems & Technology team. In addition to the physical space savings, this initiative has resulted in greater accessibility and discoverability, allowing staff to view invoice details without having to find the physical document.

In terms of budget management, a number of changes were made that contributed to more fiscally responsible approaches in budgeting. Using rather complex spreadsheets and formulas, at the beginning of each fiscal year we have instituted a process that lets us identify payment anomalies from the previous fiscal year, such as multiple payments for subscriptions or invoices that were not received, and account for them in our annual budget request. In addition, a percentage of the monograph budget is now held aside as a contingency fund to hedge against major swings in the currency, increasing the resiliency of the library. This contingency fund is returned to the monograph budget during the final

quarter of the fiscal year if it appears as though it will not be needed to alleviate budgetary pressures caused by currency fluctuation.

We also added processes that help ensure a more accurate close to our fiscal year. We now regularly run not-yet-invoiced reports to identify invoices for which we have budgeted, but that have not arrived. We make it a priority to acquire these invoices from the vendors, as having these missing invoices paid allows for more accurate budgeting in the next year. We also started undertaking line by line comparisons with the campus Finance Department's records, so that we can identify the discrepancies between what our department has accounted for, and what the campus has in their records. This results in greater consistency when reporting deficits and carry-forwards.

Outcomes and Next Steps

Taken together, the overall impact of these changes has been remarkably beneficial. Most importantly, the department has experienced a substantial reduction in troublesome backlogs of ordering and invoicing. Thanks in large part to our ability to process orders more quickly, we now have more even ordering conducted throughout the year. Prior to enacting the changes to our workflows, we were experiencing inconsistent order volumes, making it difficult to process severe spikes; however, ordering patterns for the current fiscal year have been relatively even so far (see Figure 3). Another major benefit of the

Figure 3. Order processing patterns in the last five years.

department's transformation is that we have a more versatile team capable of responding to the cyclical work peaks throughout the year. This has enabled us to set and meet consistent service standards, so that request tickets are addressed within 24–48 hours of submission, and selections are processed within 1–2 weeks for order. Lastly, our budget is also more accurate on a day-to-day basis, as orders are reflected in the system more quickly and payments are made more frequently, so that selectors can be more confident in their fund balances.

While many of these changes have greatly contributed to increased efficiency within the department, there is still work to be done. We are currently in the process of shifting subscription end dates to a calendar year cycle, as this will help with maximizing the effectiveness of bulk ordering and renewing, and will reduce the number of invoices that need to be actively sought before fiscal year-end. The department would also benefit from an investigation of other methods of collection development.

Currently, the library is ordering the vast majority of its monographs through a system of review and selection, which requires manual intervention that can be time consuming. Other collection development models, such as demand- or patron-driven acquisition (DDA, PDA) or evidence-based acquisition (EBA) could prove effective for limiting the amount of labor involved in making and processing selections. These opportunities should be investigated for their applicability to our library. Lastly, the library will be migrating to a new library services platform (LSP) later in the new year, so it will be important to determine what further efficiencies can be gleaned from the new system's features.

The past few years have seen the Collection Development Department put in place a number of initiatives designed to streamline workflows, take advantage of a digital environment, provide greater transparency, and utilize data in a way that ultimately enables it to be more fiscally responsible stewards of the collection budget.