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Biz of Acq-Teaching Acquisitions

Terri-Leigh Hinkle

University of New Hampshire-Durham

Jack G. Montgomery

University of Missouri

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Teaching Acquisitions

by Terri-Leigh Hinkle <tlhinkle@christa.unh.edu>

Column Editor: **Jack G. Montgomery** (Technical Services and Collection Management Librarian, Law Library, U. of Missouri- Columbia) <MONTGOMERY@law.missouri.edu>

In the fall of 1995 I had the wonderful opportunity of guest lecturing for the **University of Rhode Island Graduate School of Library and Information Studies**. For three weeks I provided a general overview of, and introduction to, Acquisitions as a foundation for the remainder of the LSC 506: Technical Services course. This course also covered Serials, Bibliographic Control, Preservation, Forms of Electronic Bibliographic Publication, National/International Data Networks, Codes and Standards, and the major rule and policy-making bodies that govern the field.

The organization of LSC 506 was reminiscent of the general Technical Services class that I took in library school at the **University of Kentucky** in the early 90's. The two courses were alike in that they both provided students with valuable hands-on experience and exposure to library specialists who were performing the functions that the students were studying. I thought then that this way of teaching was by far more meaningful to the student, so six years later, when given the opportunity to participate in the team-teach approach, I heartily accepted.

I had never taught a class before, but I couldn't help but think about a former creative writing professor I once had who stressed over and over that the best writers were those who "wrote what they knew." So with that in mind, as I made my way up to the front of the class that first October evening, I told myself, "teach them what you know, all seventeen years of acquisitions experience worth." And without a doubt, the experience proved to be a rewarding one for both instructor and student, and one that only cemented my partiality toward this area of librarianship.

The class was comprised of twelve, mostly non-traditional (which is traditional in library school, is it not?) students who brought with them a myriad of experience that enriched class discussion immensely. Given my background, I taught the class from an academic perspective, but tried to stay cognizant of the fact that there were many students who came from a public and school library background. I was also aware that I was probably not teaching future acquisitions librarians (but one can always hope), and that my objective was to give a good, general overview of the subject at hand. I was mindful, however, that these three classes (2 1/2 hrs. each) could possibly be the only exposure a student might have to this area of technical services before that first library job is secured. Therefore, I attempted to cover as much material as time would allow.

Prior to my taking over the class, they were asked to read the chapter devoted to acquisitions in their required text: *Library Technical Services: Operations and Management*, edited by **Irene P. Godden**. It was my goal to cover at least four acquisitions topics in each class. The first night I covered the role of acquisitions in the library, acquisitions methods, the publishing market, and lastly, vendors and suppliers. Acquisitions files and records, budgets and funds, acquisitions basic procedures, functions and activities, and automation of acquisitions were discussed in the

second class. The last night was devoted to acquisitions standards, current trends and issues, cooperative activities, and finished up with electronic publishing and the World Wide Web.

Interspersed throughout the classes I included "field trips," to look at various bibliographic tools (*British Books in Print*, *Les Livres Disponibles*) and *Books in Print* on CD-ROM, etc. We also found time to do some bibliographic searching on OCLC and placed pretend orders in our local acquisitions system. The class really enjoyed this hands-on portion of the course and seemed to thrive on the "Sherlock Holmesian" aspect that is so indicative of acquisitions work.

The three topics that garnered the most lively discussion were vendors and suppliers, library budgets and the World Wide Web. The students were particularly interested in talking about how vendors are selected and the dynamics of the vendor/librarian relationship. The biggest misconception that the class had about vendors was that they thought librarians chose them purely on the discount they offer. I stressed the fact that while acquisitions librarians care greatly about discounts, they probably care more about customer service and fill rates. One could secure an attractive discount with a vendor, but if the item takes ages to get, then the discount becomes practically meaningless.

The subject of budgeting caused wide reaction from the class, especially from those who were already working in libraries. Their exchanges focused mainly on the hardship of dealing with chronic, insufficient budget appropriations, whether from a school, town, state or college/university. So in turn we discussed at great length how vitally important the role of acquisitions is with regard to stretching those waning budgetary dollars and came up with some ideas to battle the problem. For instance, we talked about joining a consortium, renting materials, especially popular fiction, implementing blanket, standing order or approval plans (although these require a continual budgetary commitment) and donation solicitation. I wanted them to understand that sometimes pinching pennies is not always a bleak scenario, and acquisitions librarians can be pretty darn creative when it comes to buying material for their libraries.

At the end of the third class we talked about the World Wide Web and how it has become a useful bibliographic tool for Acquisitions departments. We agreed that while there was indeed misinformation on the Web, it still holds a plethora of information ripe for the picking, such as publisher catalogs and inventory lists, out-of-print dealers, and government information.

Before I said farewell to the class, I left them with the understanding that Acquisitions work is constantly changing, that the way we do things today will probably not be the way we do them a year from now. It is certainly not an area where one can hide his/her head and successfully ward off the demands of technology. Acquisitions librarians are in the thick of it, and from what I can tell, most revel in the challenge of keeping up

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manually enters information into a database that is used to generate the TIPS Plus lists. This same data was being sent to us with MARC variable field coding attached. Unfortunately, since MARC fixed fields were missing the records could not easily be loaded into NOTIS. In addition we were committed to using true MARC records if possible. We did receive true MARC records for the titles actually shipped to us, but too late to be useful for our ordering purposes. Working with the vendor, we developed a way to obtain a large percentage of true MARC records a few weeks after the list is generated for us, but still early enough to be useful for ordering purposes. As expected, this has streamlined our cataloging and ordering process.

The vendor lists are very reliable in general, but problems and errors do occur. Brodart selectors occasionally include reprints that should be excluded under our profile. Sometimes the price of a book legitimately exceeds our limit, and sometimes the Dewey classification assigned by Brodart is other than we would expect. In one

instance we received both the hardcover and paperback versions of a title when only the paperback version should have been sent. Our preliminary findings indicate vendor errors during startup represented less than one percent of the allocation for the plan. Considering the complexity of the process and the number of titles involved, we consider these problems to be minor. Problem resolution by the vendor has been outstanding, and our corrective costs have been minimal.

We have determined that the number of "first pick" books provided at the time the lists are sent to us is closer to 20% than to the 30-40% we had anticipated. Selectors now spend their very limited funds with a great majority of the books being unseen. Even with reviews included on the lists this was an adjustment many made unwillingly, since under the former approval plans selectors were able to examine most of the books listed.

We continue to evaluate our profile. We found that by including the "Prepub Alert" section of *Library Journal* in our profile we were not seeing full reviews for these titles. By limiting titles from this section most of the same titles began to appear on later lists, with reviews included. For one list we received a large number of books in Spanish, based on an annotated bibliography in *Library Journal*. We collect in 53 languages and were glad to have the materials, but this was an expenditure we had not anticipated. Since our selectors know a title will be re-

ceived automatically if it is reviewed in one or more of our sources, we are reluctant to define the profile too narrowly. Yet there is growing demand for adding *Booklist* as a fourth review source, and fiscal limitations may force us to make hard decisions to modify the profile further.

Impact

Titles reviewed in our three sources tend to carry large publisher discount rates. A preliminary study indicates the aggregate discount of titles received under the review-driven plan is almost double that of our approval plan. The review-driven plan provides many of the titles requested by library users, we're shelving books faster, we're getting more titles, and overall we're paying less per book. In fact, some managers now consider their lease book plans to be unnecessary. Canceling these superfluous contracts could mitigate the added costs of the review-driven purchase plan.

Under our previous approval plans we received a substantial number of technical, esoteric and research materials that maintained the quality of our collection. We supplemented approval purchases with firm orders for more popular materials.

Our review-driven purchase plan reverses the types of materials received. We now automatically receive a large number of popular titles, and supplement those with firm orders and notification slip orders for research materials. We are monitoring these supplemental orders to insure that appropriate technical, esoteric and research materials continue to enter the collection.

Under the approval plans most of our librarians were involved in the review and selection of titles for addition to the collection. The review-driven plan makes first copy selection automatic, and consolidates added copy ordering tasks to a limited number of staff. While this is very expedient from an acquisition perspective, it limits the ability of most of our librarians to develop and maintain selection skills.

The book reviews included with bibliographic citations have caused our biweekly order lists to become quite large, inconveniencing selectors and testing the capacity of our printing department.

We are attempting to evaluate circulation patterns for review-driven purchases. Studies have shown that 80% of circulation demands can be met by 20% of the titles in a collection.¹ We anticipate that titles purchased automatically based on published reviews will account for a substantially larger percentage of new title circulation. This would lend support to the validity of this plan.

Conclusion

The structure of the review-driven auto-

matic shipment plan has allowed us to streamline acquisition of adult titles, redirect staff efforts, provide timely online order status information, and offer prompt delivery of materials to our patrons. Considerable evaluation remains to be done and modifications are already in sight, but if we are able to properly maintain the quality of our research collection and can spend within our projections, the review-driven automatic shipment plan will have proven to be a very advantageous change for the library.

End Notes

¹ William A. Britten. "A use statistic for collection management: the 80/20 rule revisited." *Library Acquisitions: Practice & Theory* 14(1990): 183-189. cf. Richard L. Trueswell. "Some behavioral patterns of library users: the 80/20 rule," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 43 (January 1969), 458-461.

NB: As Acquisitions Specialist at Detroit Public Library, **Robert Chapman** monitors daily operation of the review-driven purchase plan. He is a member of the team of librarians and administrators that developed the plan. Comments may be directed to <rchapma@cms.cc.wayne.edu>.

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and staying current. I also felt the class needed to know the makeup of most Acquisitions Departments has changed, and that it is now common practice to join forces with Serials, Cataloging and Collection Development Departments in an effort to better streamline procedures, enhance productivity and utilize expertise more efficiently. No longer do technical services departments exist as separate islands, but more as partners working for the common good.

While I concede that I could have covered a lot more in the classes and perhaps covered some topics more thoroughly, I do think that the students got a pretty good idea of what the world of Acquisitions is all about. And even if it was in a very small way, I take pride in the fact that I had the chance to contribute to the education of our future librarians.

NB: **Terri-Leigh Hinkle** is Acquisitions Librarian and acting Serials Librarian at The University of New Hampshire-Durham. She holds an MSLS from The University of Kentucky, and is currently working on an MA in English Literature at The University of New Hampshire.