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The ABC's of the Fermilab Library Approval Plan

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Introduction

Approval plans have long been a tool to facilitate book supplier and library staff interaction. An approval plan typically involves creating a topical profile of the library's collection, which a publisher or book jobber/supplier then uses as a guide to sending books to the library "on approval" (Pruett 1986, 134). The library staff has a deadline date, typically within 30 days, by which they have to accept or return the books. The 30 days allows sufficient time for both staff and customers to browse the pieces before actually acquiring them. Some jobbers also provide modified approval plans wherein the library is sent notifications of new books in the approval plan profile topics, but not the actual books themselves.

This latter plan is the approach the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory (Fermilab) Library (<http://www-lib.fnal.gov/library/index.html>) has adopted with the Library's main book supplier, **Majors Scientific Books** (<http://www.majors.com/>). This article covers the ABC's of the Fermilab Library's latest approval plan process: (A) Approval plan for (B) Books, reviewed by a (C) Committee. This article is principally an overview of the Fermilab approach, and will not include an exhaustive literature review. Significant literature on approval plans does exist. For a starting point, see Beau David Case's bibliography of approval plan evaluation studies (Case, 1996). The mention of any product names in this article does not constitute an endorsement.

Background

The Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, commonly known as Fermilab (<http://www.fnal.gov>), is a basic research laboratory that operates the Tevatron, a particle accelerator used to better understand subatomic particles as they exist now and as they existed near the birth of the universe. Universities Research Association, Inc. (<http://www.fnal.gov/directorate/ura/ura.html>) manages Fermilab, under contract with the U.S. Department of Energy (<http://www.doe.gov/>). Fermilab was commissioned by the Atomic Energy Commission and was built between Batavia and Warrenville, Illinois during 1967-73.

The Fermilab Library collection is concentrated in high-energy physics, with additional materials in the fields of engineering, computer science, environmental health and safety, and business (see the Library's collection development policy at <http://www-lib.fnal.gov/library/cdpolicy.html>).

For the latter half of the 1990's, the Library's budget has been around \$500,000. A little over half of the budget goes to salaries and benefits. Another 30% or more is spent on journal subscriptions. Scientific and technical titles are notoriously expensive: "the average price per periodical is much higher than in either humanities or social sciences" (Blackwell's, 1999). The remaining funds must cover all other expenses, including supplies, training, maintenance contracts, journal binding, and book purchasing. While a successful case was made in 1998 for ongoing additional funding for book collection development, the Fermilab Library's budget is still very lean. It is very important to spend these limited resources wisely to maintain a collection that suits the needs of Library customers.

In 1995, a Fermilab Library Advisory Committee (LAC) was convened to assist the Library with collection development (<http://www-lib.fnal.gov/library/lac.html>). Members of the LAC represent all the major disciplines at the Laboratory. The Library Administrator chairs this 18-member Committee. Members are appointed annually by the Fermilab Director. In a technical library such as Fermilab's, the library staff are information experts, but the customers are subject experts, and thus it is critically important to involve the customers in collection development. Without the subject expertise of the LAC members, it would be difficult for Library staff to select, within budget constraints, materials that would best suit the needs of the physicists, astrophysicists, engineers and other professionals at the Lab.

In 1996, the Fermilab Library consolidated monographic purchases—with the exception of some association publications—with **Majors Scientific Books**. Majors is a family company, incorporated in New Orleans by Dr. J.A. Majors in 1909 as a medical book supplier. Majors Scientific Books expanded to include four offices: Dallas (now the headquarters), Houston, Atlanta and Los Angeles. In 1964 the Houston Branch expanded into the scientific and technical market, maintaining an inventory of books in business and management, geosciences, electronics, chemistry, physics and other highly specialized fields. Majors provides a detailed list of categories and subcategories from which customers can build a customized approval plan, with materials typically available at a 12% discount. Customers can receive the approval plan books directly, or can receive listings in various formats.

Approval Plan Collection Development Process

Previous Print Process: The Fermilab Library chose the listings approach to approval books, rather than managing the books themselves for 30 days and then being required to ship a substantial portion back to Majors. When the Fermilab Library started with Majors' Approval Plan Program, the listings were available as multi-part forms. The forms listed the title, author, imprint information, price, and sometimes a brief summary of the work. The forms were mailed to the Library each week. The Library's Collection Services Coordinator reviewed the books cited on the forms for possible relevance, and discarded those not of interest. The remainder were organized by topic and sent to appropriate LAC members. The Committee members reviewed the listed books, sometimes with input from colleagues, and noted whether or not they thought the books would be useful for the Fermilab community.

The form review process worked fairly well. The forms could easily be sorted by topical area—the relevant Majors' topical category appeared on each form, plus they could be further categorized based on the title or on the summary, when that was provided. The print forms were easy to send by internal mail to LAC members, and served as a physical reminder to them.

However, a number of LAC members said the forms were troublesome. When they wanted to ask for colleagues' input on these new titles, they would have to take the multi-part forms apart, or retype the information into an e-mail message. Also, the forms were only about 3 by 5 inches, and could easily get misplaced. These members, and eventually the Committee as a whole, asked for an online version of the new books lists, noting the convenience of this format—always available, impossible to lose, allows for copy and paste functions, easier to share. At that time, 1997, not many vendors were providing such services online. The LAC's request was forwarded to Majors. The company informed the Library that such a service was in development.

In the meantime, Majors introduced the Fermilab Library to the CD-ROM version of their books database. A demonstration CD was provided and Library staff and LAC members tested it. The CD product incorporated the Majors "TacoLine" feature of tables of contents of selected works. LAC members reported that they found this useful; the tables

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of contents provided them with more of an overview of a work so that they could better determine its usefulness for our Laboratory. However, they wanted this information at their desktops.

Fermilab is a multiplatform-computing environment, with desktop machines ranging from Windows/Intel to Macintosh to UNIX X-terminals to NeXT machines to SGI workstations. In this environment it is extremely difficult to network CD-ROM products, which typically are constructed assuming one operating system and local area network. So while the Majors' CD product provided online access from the Library CD workstation, it could not be easily delivered to all LAC members' desktops.

Later in 1997, Majors staff began posting their new books lists on their Web site. The lists were divided into sci-tech (scientific and technical) lists and medicine lists. Each list was further organized by disciplines. These lists were called to the LAC members' attention. While they appreciated the easy Web access, they did not want a "pull" solution in which they had to remember to retrieve the information. By this time, Committee members were firmly fixed in their desire for a "push" solution—new books information that could be sent directly to their desktops.

At about the same time, Majors began experimenting with distributing the new books lists in a comma-delimited spreadsheet format. The files were fairly large, and could not be distributed to all LAC members: there were problems related to the variety of computer platforms used, plus not all members had access to Excel or other spreadsheet applications.

Current Online Process: Early in 1998, Majors standardized on distributing new books lists in Rich Text Format (RTF files, readable by most word processing programs). This format proved to be the breakthrough that has enabled the Fermilab Library to deliver new books lists to LAC members' desktops. For several months after the file was available, the Library continued to receive the new books information both as approval plan multi-part forms and as the RTF file. But the Committee members quickly came to appreciate the elec-

tronic format the Library Administrator created from the file, and the print form service was dropped.

The Library Administrator began converting the RTF file to HTML—a simple conversion in Microsoft Word. The resulting Web page is then posted to the Library's server in the Library Advisory Committee section. As noted earlier, the Web is the best vehicle at Fermilab for serving information to our multiplatform users, as they all have Web browsers. But simply having the file on the Web was not sufficient: there was still the need to "push" this information to the Committee, rather than wait for them to "pull" it off the Web. Accordingly, in place of the multipart form physical mailings, the Library Administrator began sending an e-mail message to Committee members when each week's new books list from Majors was available on the Web. The URL for the newly created Web page is included in the message. That puts the new books list just a click away for most Committee members, or at worst, they have to copy the URL from their mail programs and paste it into their Web browsers.

At first it was unclear whether the Library's regular approval plan discount rate would apply to books ordered from the new weekly lists, which include science and business texts in areas broader than the Library's original approval plan set of topics. After a brief discussion, Majors proved able to offer the approval plan rate for books selected from these lists.

Success

Now Library Advisory Committee members are able to browse the weekly new books Web page, and copy and paste citations into e-mail messages to the Library with recommendations for purchases. Library staff worked with several Committee members to ensure that they provided the Library with all the necessary information from the Majors' list, including Majors' title number and ISBN. This process is now working smoothly.

LAC members are reviewing the new books lists more quickly than they did the printed forms. In addition, Committee members are forwarding more ordering suggestions to the Library than before. Several Committee members have commented that it is now easier to share lists with their colleagues, who contribute additional expertise. They can simply point them to a Web page and ask for feedback.

Another indicator of the success of this electronic collection development process is the circulation statistics. While the Fermilab Library is not tracking approval plan material usage in as detailed a fashion as, for example, is Western Michigan University (Kingsley, 1996), an increase in usage has been recorded. During 1998, the main book collection was reviewed for salience and some older, unused texts that were not part of series or core to the Laboratory were weeded. The size of the book collection thus was reduced by about 14%. However, fiscal year circulation statistics from 1999 compared with 1998 indicate that although in 1999 there were fewer books in the collection than in 1998, they were used about 7% more. There appears to be a direct relationship between this significant increase in usage and the improved book selection process.

Majors' RTF versions of new books lists include immediate ordering capability. Unfortunately the Fermilab Library cannot use this feature, as ordering needs to go through certain internal laboratory processes first. Nevertheless, this technologically-enhanced approval plan acquisitions process has resulted in the selection of greater numbers of books, and more targeted books, to better serve the Fermilab community.

Photo courtesy of Fermilab
Visual Media Services

Sara Tompson Profile

Education: B.A., English, Northern Illinois University; MS, Library and Information Science, University of Illinois, 1987.

Career: Physical sciences librarian since 1987.

Family: One husband (a computer guy, so he's my "secret weapon!") and four fantastic nieces.

Proudest accomplishment: President of the Illinois chapter of the Special Libraries Association, 1999-2000.

Educational highlight and life-changing experience: Being one of the 7 women who wrote the 4th edition of *Special Libraries: A Guide for Management* (Washington, DC: Special Libraries Association, 1987).

My other life: National Organization for Women activism and gardening.

Favorite authors for leisure reading: Marge Piercy and Barbara Kingsolver.

Where I see myself in 5 years: Teaching more regularly (I'm just peering as an adjunct faculty.).

Pet peeve: Librarians who lack initiative.

Single most important piece of advice: "To Be of Use"—see the poem of this title by Marge Piercy.

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