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The Virtual Approval Shelf: A Look Towards the Future?

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erative collection development partner institutions for holdings determination. The integrated nature of the modern ILS offers those advantages to the selector.

How Does it Work?

In the Innovative Interfaces ILS, a tool called **WebBridge** is used to build hyperlinks from local records to Web-based content. The **WebBridge** resource management table manages the links for each available resource. Each library enters the technical details of the no-charge and subscription-based resources that they have access to, and indicates which modules are appropriate for the links. When selectors then retrieve a record, information from the **WebBridge** management table is combined with information from the bibliographic description of the record and the relevant links are presented to the user embedded in the bibliographic display. The same method can be used when the selector's search does not produce a positive search result — in that case, the selector's search itself, (e.g., the title or ISBN), is combined with information from the **WebBridge** table and used to build the search. This dynamic link building model is in contrast to a static link storage model where links are stored in the bibliographic description itself. The dynamic links are built when the selector retrieves the title and because the library can regularly update the **WebBridge** management tables, the links always use the most current search syntax for a given resource. Thereby providing "just-in-time" links for each record in the database, or useful links for records not found in the database.

Linking for Library Staff

In offering this tool to the staff modules, the selector receives the bulk of the benefit. Resources appropriate to selectors and acquisitions staff such as inventory links, or links to a book vendor's Web-based order management database like YBP's GOBI or Blackwell's Collection Manager may not be appropriate for patrons in the Web OPAC. But these resources can be quite useful in the selection process. The embedded display of book jacket images are also facilitated by **WebBridge**. Their value to selectors is probably minimal, but there are some intriguing applications in staff modules like Cataloging where identifying a book from a large group of in-process books can be facilitated by the visual clue a book jacket image provides.

Doing collection development work from within the ILS allows the selector to examine the existing collection while at the same time building the future collection. All of the relevant data is there: current holdings, current circulation statistics, patron recommendations, patron search statistics, financial data relevant to current budgets and available funds, vendor data and performance

statistics — all of these things can be useful guides to the selection process. When the possibilities of Web linking are added, the ILS-based collection development process is enhanced significantly.

Challenges

Integrating linking technologies into practical workflows is a challenge for the ILS. Links must be offered in the appropriate displays and ILS functions. For example, the no-hit search is an indication to the selector that the title under consideration is not currently in the local system. From there, the selector may wish to use Web-based resources to explore the nature and availability of the item. Links at that stage of the selector's workflow are quite useful. If the ILS provides a view of new title recommendations made by patrons, then the links at the patron recommendations review stage are quite useful. Ubiquity is the goal in offering Web linking. The ILS should strive to offer links on all of the paths the selector's workflow takes.

Another significant challenge to facilitating collection development is the need for easily accessible selection tools for non-library staff selectors. In many library settings, faculty, faculty proxies, staff and other authorized members of the library community serve as selectors. These selectors may not be fully trained in the ILS interface or authorized for ILS access. The ILS could provide Web-based tools such as browser-based html interfaces to their non-library selectors as a way to facilitate the remote selection process and to offer the same Web-based selection tools that are offered to library staff from within the ILS.

Finally, the variety of Web server technologies provides a challenge to offering linking to a wide variety of sources. Linking tech-

nology frequently relies on a predictable URL structure as a method to create links. **Amazon.com** is an example of a resource that offers predictable URL. Their URL always has the same structure. For example, an ISBN search at **Amazon** always looks exactly the same. It contains the IP address of the server, some specific search commands used by the Web server and the specific ISBN. However, some Web servers don't offer predictable URLs — instead, the full URL syntax is hidden within the Web server's search and display routines. This makes the work of building on-the-fly links more difficult.

It is possible that the **OpenURL** framework could offer relief from that challenge. The **OpenURL** idea offers the potential for predictable URLs for each Web server, and each resource held on the server. Products such as **SFX**, which depend on target resources being "OpenURL-aware," have addressed this challenge for the patron following reference links, but as yet has not been extended to staff-side displays and resources. This is an example of where a technological convention provides clear benefits for efficient information access.

Conclusion

Because of the critical role the ILS plays in the library's work to organize and manage its current collection, it is logical to think of the ILS as useful in the process of building its future collection. The possibilities of linking technologies further enhance the ILS-based selection workflow. Far from making the ILS irrelevant, the enormous variety of Web-based resources now available to selectors, makes a common interface and a facilitated workflow more important than ever — and the ILS is a logical place for that to happen.

The Virtual Approval Shelf: A Look Towards the Future?

by Amy McColl and Amy Morrison (Swarthmore College),
Eric Pumroy (Bryn Mawr College), Norm Medeiros (Haverford College),
and Linda Bills (Tri-College Consortium Office)

Introduction

The libraries of the **Tri-College Consortium** (Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore Colleges) have been involved in a planning grant funded by the **Mellon Foundation** from Summer 2001 through Spring 2002. As stated by the three library directors in the proposal, the main emphasis of the project has been to "conduct a study that should provide the consortium and the wider research community with grounds on which to plan for large and growing collections in a physical environment with little or no on-campus space for growth." A large

portion of the project task force's time has been spent in exploring ways in which collection development in the three libraries can be done more collaboratively and effectively without diminishing the inherent value of either the joint or individual collections. Each of the three colleges has built a strong undergraduate library collection that satisfies the research and teaching needs of both students and faculty; however, there is a high rate of duplication of monograph titles. By minimizing duplication of these titles and streamlining the process by which we select books

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to add to our collections, we propose to effect savings in both shelf space and staff time, while freeing up acquisition funds for other resources. This article will address the issue of book selection only, by illustrating our current approval selection policies and speculating on what the future might hold for consortial approval plan selection.

The Current Situation

The cooperation among the libraries reflects the ongoing academic cooperation among the three campuses that dates back to World War II. For many years now, students at each school have been allowed to take classes freely at the other two, and a number of interdisciplinary academic programs include faculty from all three campuses. The three libraries have shared an online public catalog since 1991, using Innovative Interfaces as the platform. Other **Tri-College** collaborative efforts have included cooperation among the three Language Resource Centers, development of course management software, and cooperative web

development. A **Tri-College** van delivers library materials to all campuses twice daily, including library branches. But while many cooperative arrangements are in place among the three colleges, by far the largest amount of activity takes place between **Haverford** and **Bryn Mawr**. Proximity is an important issue here, as the two schools are located within a mile of each other. Students routinely take classes on both campuses, and many academic programs are explicitly **Bi-College** in nature.

The **Bryn Mawr** and **Haverford** libraries have had a joint book approval plan since 1971, and use the **Academic Book Center (ABC)** as their vendor. The mechanics of the plan have changed over time, but currently the books are shipped by **ABC** to **Haverford**, which holds them for a week to allow bibliographers from both libraries to review them. A small group of bibliographers then meets each week to decide which books go to which library. Many of the decisions simply follow the division of academic responsibilities that the colleges have already agreed to, either formally or tacitly. **Bryn Mawr**, for example, gets most of the books in social work and classics, while **Haverford** normally takes the new

titles in music and religion. In fields where both institutions have active academic interests, the books are either divvied up or, if the books seem important enough, second copies are purchased. Between them, the two libraries spent approximately \$318,000 on approval books in the 2001 academic year, just under half of their total monograph purchases. This is a large enough investment that, between them, these two small liberal arts colleges were able to buy essentially all of the output of the American academic press in the social science and humanities areas of interest to them. Since the libraries have made arrangements with **ABC** to acquire the books pre-processed it is rare for books to be returned. As a result, the bibliographers' review and discussion principally concern only which of the two libraries will house each book. There have been conversations about the amount of staff time that this final decision-making process requires, but the current arrangement has proven to be an effective method for identifying titles to duplicate, monitoring the performance of the approval plan and communicating about changing academic interests on each campus.

Swarthmore College began an approval plan on its own in early 1997, also contracting with **ABC** as its approval plan vendor, but it is a separate plan from the **Haverford/Bryn Mawr** plan. **Swarthmore** is situated

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near the other two colleges (about eleven very congested miles away), but not close enough to make weekly meetings of bibliographers a realistic possibility for **Swarthmore** librarians as travel time would be considerable. In addition, since **Haverford** and **Bryn Mawr** have had a joint plan for thirty years, **Swarthmore** felt more comfortable piloting its own approval plan, to see what effects it would have on the collection.

Duplication

The verdict is in: approximately 80% of the titles received through **Swarthmore's** approval plan from 1999 through 2001 were duplicated in the **Haverford/Bryn Mawr** plan. Since borrowing privileges are extended to patrons on the other campuses and books can generally be delivered within 24 hours, the needs of students and faculty at **Swarthmore** can be met without this high rate of duplication. Spending the acquisitions budget in this way means that there is less money available to invest in other resources.

One likely way for the **Tri-Colleges** to reduce the duplication of approval plan titles would be to form a **Tri-College** rather than a **Bi-College** plan. With a merged approval plan and selection discussions extending to three campuses rather than two, decisions about duplication could be deliberate rather than accidental. However, the question remains: how can we best accomplish this in a time-efficient way which will be agreeable to staffs on all three campuses, and defensible to faculty members?

As part of the Mellon-funded project, we invited **Rick Lugg**, former President of **Yankee Book Peddler** and now a consultant with **R2 Consulting Services**, to speak to a gathering of our bibliographers about the idea of implementing a **Tri-College** approval plan. The logistical difficulties were considered significant, and surfaced as one of the primary obstacles to a successful program. **Swarthmore** bibliographers were not willing to spend the time to travel to **Haverford** each week to review books. As a result, new models were explored. One idea was **Tri-College** circulation of **ABC** information slips for books coming on approval, but all agreed that the information provided on these slips was insufficient to make sound acquisition decisions. Moreover, the time needed to circulate the slips among all bibliographers would be excessive.

However, most of the bibliographers present were interested in the idea of reviewing forthcoming titles virtually by using one of the emerging tools discussed elsewhere in this issue of *Against the Grain*, which would incorporate the use of extended metadata to provide fuller information and even sample chapters of forthcoming titles. If we could somehow have a "virtual approval shelf"

which would have a space for notes, commentary, and discussion among the bibliographers at all three campuses, the **Tri-College** plan might become a reality.

Selection

How would this work? Without having seen a true mockup, but with the knowledge of the **Amazon** and **Barnes & Noble** tools available, the bibliographers began to discuss some of the elements they would like to see for titles on their virtual approval shelf. Bibliographies, sample chapters of books, tables of contents, information about the author and previous publications, previous editions, and other formats of the same content (cloth, paperback, eBook) were all mentioned as desirable elements which could be provided by the publisher. Local consortium information was also desirable, including circulation data for other titles by the same author and a list of other titles held by the **Tri-Colleges** in that particular subject area. All wanted to have a place for notes by bibliographers, and some sort of logical place to record decisions made by the bibliographers.

Once this marvel became a reality, how would the actual selection process work? We would first need to develop approval profiles that "matched." Currently, the **Bi-College** plan is set up as a 2-part plan, one profile for science titles and one for non-science titles. The larger non-science plan is very complex, with multiple LC classifications, non-subject parameters, and publisher criteria selected. **Swarthmore** has very recently divided up its approval plan into subject profiles, so that class numbers are grouped together with a total of 28 separate profiles, one in each of 14 subject areas for hardbacks and 14 for paperbacks. Either by beginning with small subject areas and then expanding, or by tackling the entire range of subjects at once, the profiles of the **Bi-College** and **Swarthmore** plans would have to be merged with criteria selected by groups of bibliographers from all three campuses. This would be an enormous undertaking, but it would be necessary if we choose to implement a **Tri-College** plan.

Process

With these preliminary steps successfully completed, here is how our virtual tool using elements from our Innovative Interfaces **OPAC**, the publishers, and **ABC** would be employed. A workflow would likely begin with the announcement of forthcoming book titles in a specific subject area. **ABC** would send the publisher information to our **Tri-College** virtual approval shelf, including all of the desired elements listed above. Since the desired information may not all be available at the point the book is announced, we may want **ABC** to post information as it becomes available, or to hold off on all information until a certain minimum level is met. Currently, although we may occasionally make preliminary decisions based on pre-publication announcements, it is clear that

the final decision point is when the book arrives. In a virtual world, we would want some alert when either a complete suite of decision data is available, or when it is clear that no further data will be available without the book in hand.

The virtual approval shelf would then combine information from the vendor/publisher with our own local **OPAC** information, creating a tool which would present all desired information in one place. Work would be needed on the format of this data to devise a presentation system that moves logically from the broadest "make or break" elements of a buying decision to the finer points needed for difficult decisions. Since we will be facing two decisions — whether to buy and where to shelve — we may want a two-stage information and decision structure.

At the same time, a file of order records for these titles would be sent to the **Tri-Colleges** by **ABC** and loaded into our Innovative system with notes that state to patrons that the titles are "under consideration." Another possibility might be a link in our web-based **OPAC** which would provide patrons a way to get from the "under consideration" title to the virtual book shelf. Patrons would then have the ability to see either a selected subset or full set of the data and add their comments.

The bibliographers would then have a system in place that allows them a certain amount of time to review the titles in the batch (probably still sent weekly). They would add their comments to the note fields on whether they want to purchase the title or not. In the decision component, the system could evaluate the votes on each title, automatically process orders for the unanimous decisions and produce a discussion list of inconclusive votes. Bibliographers might complete the decision process through email or chat. Once completed, a virtual order form would be filled out with the total number of copies desired, which **ABC** would process. The pre-processed books would then be sent to the libraries when they become available. The virtual bookshelf would improve on the current process significantly for delivery and payment functions. Currently books in the **Bi-College** plan must all be delivered and billed to one library, **OCLC Promptcat** records sent to a single account, and complete shelf-ready processing is not possible. With the virtual shelf, **ABC** would know at shipping which library gets the book. Shipping, billing, **Promptcat** records, **OCLC** holdings, and shelf-preparation could all be done accordingly, significantly reducing the drain on processing staff created by the present **Bryn Mawr/Haverford** plan.

As a result of these changes, we would tailor our choices to match our strengths, duplicating core titles and eliminating duplication where possible. All three libraries would gain valuable shelf space, and would be

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The Decline of the Poultry Selector: Thoughts on the Virtual Approval Plan

by **Stephen Pugh** (Senior Vice President, International Division, YBP Library Services/Lindsay & Howes)

What is a virtual approval plan? For the purposes of this article I have been asked to speculate just a bit. It is not a review mechanism for eBooks, but a way to evaluate printed material prior to purchase by means of linked metadata. As such, it would replace the two integral allocation components of the traditional approval plan — electronic/paper notification slips and books shipped automatically. Essentially it would turn every approval plan into a notification slips plan. Technically very cool, highly evolved, and dazzlingly rich in relevant content to be sure — slips on steroids. What are the implications and realities for library review and selection? It is highly probable that it would accelerate the already robust trend toward profile-based selection and the attendant waning of title-by-title selection of books by professional librarians. If true, monographs acquisition would increasingly resemble the packaged structures already common with e-books and journals — with the package represented by the profile.

Several years ago, near the climax of a long and sweltering four-day approval profiling session at a large land grant university, I found myself oddly looking forward to the final meeting on the schedule — the Poultry Selector. My curiosity had been aroused by this looming appointment. Surely this was an individual whose scope of inquiry was so narrow as to permit him to examine every monograph published in his field with lov-

ing care and in minute detail. At his leisure, he could linger critically over every footnote, research the scholarly output of the authors, read every review, lose himself in the indexing, and luxuriously digest the material like a fine five-course meal. Finally, after determining where the threads of each book properly lie in the intricate warp and weft of the university's Poultry Science interest, he could accept or reject it. What would such a selector possibly need with a carefully crafted and precise approval profile? Either he wants the 20-30 titles published annually in Poultry Science or he doesn't. He certainly doesn't require notification slips — paper or electronic. He might, however, benefit from a virtual approval plan if it provided an acceptable analog to his "paper & ink" selection regimen. In turn, his Library might benefit marginally by saving the time and money it costs to return rejected material. This assumes, of course, that vendors would ban returns for those libraries that are not already "shelf-ready" in a virtual environment.

Sadly perhaps, the Poultry Selector simultaneously represents the best candidate for a virtual approval plan and a lonely sentinel of a dying breed. Subject bibliography (conscious, measured and informed collection building) in such sole specialties is seen less and less outside of the very largest research

libraries. In many international universities it is more or less absent entirely as the faculty is responsible for choosing material and the library simply buys as much of it as it can afford — often on a "first in, first ordered" basis, sometimes in multiple copies. Academics possess enviable expertise (including a perfectly reasonable, but overriding, interest in their own research specialties), but few are concerned with strategically building a library collection in support of wider goals.

The reality is that many selectors now have little, or in any case not enough, time for reviewing approval material. Some report they are able to devote as little as 5% of their time in collection building activities. Despite this, they are responsible for enormous areas of scholarly discourse and are burdened with impossibly broad titles such as Humanities Bibliographer, Science Liaison or Social Sciences Selector. Many complain that their administrators do not value review as it is not easily measured, benchmarked or otherwise statistically defined except in the most useless of ways — raw title numbers. If done properly, professional evaluation demands judgment, discernment, expertise and a host of other intangible qualities. Ideally it is a painstaking title-by-title enterprise whose benefits are measured in decades not quarters. As a professional pursuit it has a great deal of intellectual appeal to many librarians, but on a day-to-day basis it is often pushed aside in favor of other priorities or, as pointed out above, is absent or disappearing.

Would a virtual approval plan help these selectors? It is doubtful that more than a small minority of dedicated and persistent librarians could find the time to use it on a regular basis. I have yet to meet anyone who claims to enjoy reading online. Yet the virtual approval plan could effectively double the number of titles that require computer-assisted review for a library with a mature approval plan (50% or more profiled titles shipped automatically). A large approval profile may yield 1000 titles per week. Even if an ILS vendor could quickly synthesize all the relevant metadata for each new title into a convenient package, imagine competently and comfortably reviewing 250 of these titles in only 5% of your time. Should your mind reel at this unhappy prospect, you might consider using the virtual approval plan to simply supplement "normal" selection for particularly difficult titles (leaving open the ques-

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granted the opportunity to gain more collection depth as a result of the decline of duplication. The process of reviewing all the virtual books would also alert the librarians about the collection strengths of the other libraries, and this would build a community sense of the Consortium collection as a whole.

We know we would save time in processing, but in the end, would bibliographers save time by using the virtual shelf? This remains to be seen. It could well be that the time needed to read large amounts of data for each book and make decisions would be even more time-consuming than the weekly meetings

currently taking place for the **Bi-College** plan. It would be an adjustment for librarians to view content online rather than physically, and the impact of this cannot easily be measured. It is also possible that in the initial phases of implementation the time spent on decision-making could be considerable, but as we got to know each others' collections and developed specific subject strengths, we could strive to perfect our **Tri-College** approval plan profile to such an extent that only books in a few subject areas would need to be reviewed in detail. It is very hard to predict what impact a virtual approval shelf would have until we have had a chance to test it, but we are intrigued by the possibilities that such a tool could present to us.