

November 2007

# Technical Services Workflows: A Comparison of Two Academic Libraries

Susan Mueller

University of Idaho Library, [smueller@uidaho.edu](mailto:smueller@uidaho.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Mueller, Susan (2007) "Technical Services Workflows: A Comparison of Two Academic Libraries," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 19: Iss. 5, Article 9.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5276>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

# Technical Services Workflows: A Comparison of Two Academic Libraries

by **Susan Mueller** (Head, Technical Services, Associate Professor, University of Idaho Library, Moscow, ID 83844-2350; Phone: 208-885-7955) <smueller@uidaho.edu>



Technical services work is often thought to be routine. Materials are ordered, received, cataloged, labeled and shelved. Although there are some slight variations due to format, it is a given that these activities take place. If one works in only one library, it is easy to assume that every library performs technical services work the same way, but this isn't necessarily true. Having worked in a variety of library settings, of which two were academic libraries of approximately the same size, the author has observed a variety of differences between the two technical services departments. As the head of each department, the author could have implemented the same workflow in each department, but circumstances in each library lent themselves to different workflows. The implementation of different workflows between these two libraries is especially surprising considering that each library uses the same integrated library system (ILS), **Ex Libris' Voyager**. Through experience the author has learned that what may work in one library may not meet the needs of another library. What may seem like ease of use to some in one library may be a difficult and cumbersome routine in another library.

The following two workflows demonstrate the differences and similarities of two libraries that have much in common yet choose to operate differently to perform technical services functions.

Both of the libraries are in state mandated universities that enroll between 11,000-13,000 students, have a comparable faculty size of approximately 800, and a staff size of 1300-1500 people. Both of their materials budgets are \$2 million plus. Both universities were established at about the same time, in the late 1880s-early 1890s and offer doctorate level programs.

The differences between the two include the fact that Library A uses the **Dewey Decimal** classification system, while Library B uses the **Library of Congress** classification system. Library A has a tradition of faculty selection for developing the library collection, while Library B relies solely on librarian selectors for collection development. Technologically, both libraries moved to a new system at about the same time in the late 1990s and early 2000s and both chose **Ex Libris' Voyager**. In addition, both of the libraries' institutions use Banner modules for accounting and student records, both libraries were members of the **WLN** library network until it merged with **OCLC** and finally, both libraries are in the Pacific Northwest.

Based on their similarities, shouldn't these two libraries' technical services units process materials in similar fashion? The answer, not surprisingly, is yes and no. Both libraries acquire materials in a variety of formats. Library

A has a history of a strong library-centered instructional media collection, while Library B has just begun collecting heavily in DVDs and CDs. Both have robust serials collections, collect monographs, and have special collections and archives. Library B has chosen to withdraw older material heavily while Library A does not.

As mentioned earlier, both libraries use the **ILS Voyager**. Both libraries have the basic modules of Acquisitions, Cataloging, and Circulation. In addition, Library A, with the large media collection, also uses the Media Scheduling module which Library B does not utilize. Although they have many of the same modules, each library handles the ILS differently. Library A is part of a small consortium that includes 2 two-year program institutions, a four-year institution, a tribal college, the university's law library, and a hospital library. Library A houses its ILS on site and has two full time employees dedicated to maintaining the system. Library B is also part of a consortium that includes 2 four-year institutions and the university's law library. However, the server is in a separate state 100 miles away and administered by a larger consortium that services over 90 libraries.

The following could also be major factors in how the system is used. Though both institutions are flagship institutions within each of their consortiums, only Library A has that institution as its primary focus and only has the one consortium to manage. The management of the system for Library B is only one of several different consortiums that they manage.

What impact do all of these variables have on the library's technical services operation? Why do the libraries operate differently? There are the usual types of answers, most having to do with people. Who was or wasn't at each library during various critical moments is the usual response when asked about the reason for an existing workflow. Sometimes it has to do with who was the leader, but often it also has to do with who had the knowledge base and how was it used. This isn't always a leadership issue. A leader may have all the good intentions in the world, but with the wrong mix of people to carry out the tasks, it becomes much more difficult to accomplish. Traditions are also an element that is often difficult to overcome.

Variations of people, collections and traditions make libraries fun and challenging workplaces, but they also make developing standardized functional workflows very difficult. With these two very different selection environments two very different acquisitions departments developed despite the aforementioned similarities

between the two libraries. Library B developed and maintained itself as solely an acquisitions department. It was not responsible for cataloging, holdings work, or end processing. It only needed to work with selectors and pass the materials on to the next area for processing. This environment continued until a few years ago when the head of the copy cataloging department retired. At that time, the acquisitions and copy cataloging departments merged under one supervisor. After the merger under one supervisor, the departments' activities remained very separate. Only the supervisor did work in both areas.

Currently the activities employed by this library with the acquisitions module of the **Voyager** system are very limited. The employees continue to use a manual system as much as possible.

In contrast, Library A has had a merged department for close to two decades. There is one supervisor over both acquisitions and copy cataloging like in Library B, but the staff members in this library integrated their processes fully, with everyone ordering, receiving, and cataloging. Library A makes extensive use of the acquisitions module of the **Voyager** system.

Library A had a systems librarian as the administrator for the formative years of the ILS development. As a result it was able to concentrate on the various advantages and disadvantages more thoroughly than Library B since Library B was dependent on the outside management of the system. Library A focused on training and problem solving internally, while Library B was only one of the many libraries needing training and problem solving. With the dispersal of focus, it is easy to see that Library B did not feel as invested in the system as did Library A.

So, just because we see a difference in the use of the system and the management of the system does it signify that there is a problem? It does indicate that there may be a problem with the system if Library B can justify its lack of use based on problems with the system itself. The duplication of effort performed by the accounting technician to maintain both a university-wide finance system and a library based accounting system is a problem expressed by many academic institutions. Library B has also identified another problem with the ILS. A bibliographic record attached to an acquisitions record cannot be deleted when it is no longer relevant. Though it is a safeguard to block deletion of records that have account-

*continued on page 38*

*“Technical services work is often thought to be routine.”*

ing information associated with it, there are timeframes within which this would be quite acceptable, yet the system does not allow for this variance. Because Library B removes a large number of items from its collection, the retention of a large number of records in the catalog is more problematic to them than to Library A. Library A chooses to suppress the records from public view and work around the existence of them in the catalog. Library B chose to not use that part of the system that locks the bibliographic record to the acquisitions record. Library A identified both of these problems, but it chose to continue to use the system and find a way to get around the problems within the system itself.

Library B has chosen to take the path of least resistance when managing its workflow in relation to use of the ILS. Conversely, Library A has chosen to use the ILS to its fullest capacity and create work-arounds to allow for it. One reason for the difference in level of use is that Library A had the personnel to work on these alternative workflows while Library B did not. Another incentive for Library A to use the system to full capacity was the desire of library staff and administrators to do so. Perhaps if and when Library B chooses to follow this path it will make the same decision.

Taking all these variations together, the workflow for processing monographs in Library A functions in the following manner:

1. Materials requests come in from a wide variety of individuals. Detailed funds and ledgers allow retrieval of reports associated with the various individuals and accounts. Thorough searching in the ILS, paying extra attention to the status of the bibliographic record (such as withdrawn), eliminates duplicates. However, withdrawn materials records remain in the catalog, suppressed in the public view, but not in the staff view. When withdrawn, the holding record is marked with a withdrawn location code. This assists the staff member when determining whether an item is a duplicate in the library's collection.
2. Acquisitions/Cataloging staff members create orders on the ILS. Order forms or electronic orders generated by the ILS go directly to the vendors. Tracking of funds happens in both the ILS and the university bursar's office. An accounting technician in the library's administrative office reconciles accounting. The library uses EDI for both orders and invoices. Staff members download bibliographic records from OCLC and attach them to acquisitions records.
3. A library staff member receives the materials and records the invoices on the ILS. Some vendors use EDI and the invoices automatically download into the ILS. Student workers do processing

## against the grain people profile

Head, Technical Services, Associate Professor  
University of Idaho Library, Moscow, ID 83844-2350  
<smueller@uidaho.edu>

Susan Mueller, ML, MAOL

**BORN & LIVED:** I was born in Kansas City, Kansas, but my family traveled around the country a bit, before returning to the Kansas City area.

**FAMILY:** I have been married for 29 years to my husband, **Bill**. We have two children, **Robert** and **Katie**.

**EDUCATION:** I went to **Emporia State University** for my B.A. in Social Sciences and M.L. I recently graduated from **Gonzaga University** with a M.A. in Organizational Leadership.

**FIRST JOB:** Branch Librarian in Mebane, North Carolina.

**PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES:** I have worked in a variety of libraries, from small public to a small academic. I have worked in a law library and a medical library. Currently I am working in a mid-sized academic library.

I have been active developing programs for technical services employees in most of the states I have worked.

**IN MY SPARE TIME I LIKE TO:** Sit down and relax.

**FAVORITE BOOKS:** *PrairieEarth* by **William Least Heat Moon** and *A Light in August* by **William Faulkner**.

**PET PEEVES/WHAT MAKES ME MAD:** Narrow-mindedness.

**PHILOSOPHY:** Be positive but don't be a pushover.

**MOST MEANINGFUL CAREER ACHIEVEMENT:** Hearing that the department I had headed for 12 years received the team achievement award for the entire campus.

**GOAL I HOPE TO ACHIEVE FIVE YEARS FROM NOW:** Implemented our strategic plan successfully and gearing up for the next one.

**HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS:** Well, first off, I don't see the profession as an industry. I do see the profession more deeply embracing our service role. We will be out in the audiences we serve. We will be in the classroom, in the coffee shop, in the dormitories. As an academic librarian in technical services I see that I will not only be creating the information that is used to find stuff, but I will also be using some of the social network tools to let our audience find stuff. The building will still be there, but more of it will be a social place and an office space. It will be a place to make connections. It will be a terminal or hub on the information highway. 🐼

steps that include property stamping and security stripping at this time.

4. As part of the receipt process, a staff member reviews the bibliographic record for cataloging purposes. Only those materials needing original cataloging go to the catalog librarians. Staff members assign call numbers and upgrade the record if necessary. All material has its holding record created at this time, which includes affixing the barcodes.

5. As a last step, student workers generate spine labels using the information in the ILS and affix them.

Library B has a different workflow.

1. A limited number of individuals requests materials. Teaching faculty go through the librarians to place orders. Funds and ledgers reflect the appropriate departmental designation. Staff members use the acquisitions module

in a limited fashion. Thorough searching in the ILS eliminates duplicates, but since the withdrawn records are removed from the catalog at the time of withdrawal any duplicates found are truly that, duplicates.

2. Acquisitions staff members create orders on the ILS. Staff members do not fully process orders in the ILS. Instead they search for the material on the vendor's Websites and enter ordering information on the ILS after ordering directly with the vendor. The library chooses not to use the ILS to encumber funds. Actual fund balances are available only from the accounting technician in the library's administrative office. Acquisitions staff download bibliographic records from OCLC and attached them to the acquisitions record.

*continued on page 40*

3. The receiving function within the ILS is not used. Acquisitions staff members do go into the order record and change the purchase amount to reflect the invoice, as well as make a notation to indicate receipt of an invoice. Received material moves to a separate area for copy cataloging.

4. Copy catalogers review the record in the ILS, search for the record again in OCLC, make minor corrections, and add the holdings data. Catalog librarians receive material that has no call number or has a low level record that needs upgrading. All material needing original cataloging goes to the catalog librarians. The copy catalogers assign the barcode and affix it.

5. Using the information in the ILS, staff members in a separate marking unit generate spine labels and affix them as part of the end processing. Finally, the same staff members handle property stamping and security striping at this time.

Serials workflows are not as disparate. Both libraries use the acquisitions module fully. Both libraries use the same serials vendor, EBSCO

and place the majority of the orders through this vendor. As mentioned earlier, Library A has embraced the technology more fully, which is evidenced in their invoicing methods. They place orders on the ILS, receive issues on the ILS and process claims on the ILS. The library receives invoices using EDI. Library B places orders on the ILS and receives issues on the ILS. The serials/periodicals technician continues to claim issues manually, as it does invoicing. However, Library B is investigating the use of EDI with serials.

The choices made by each library cannot be judged right or wrong, good or bad. Each library, though faced with many of the same situations as the other, chose a different path that suited the needs of the library at the time. The use of technology introduced in the form of an ILS influenced the choices made. As more and more technological advances are made, there is a thought that this might engender greater uniformity. However, as demonstrated by these two institutions, it is just as likely that there may be more diversity of implementation rather than less.

Library A has committed itself to using the system more fully. This can be a burden as well as a benefit. It puts a greater onus on the library staff to use the system in the most complete way possible. This may put them into a position of using a process that is cumbersome in the long run, but may be

difficult to extract oneself from in the future. This is especially noticeable in the use of the many funds and ledgers used by Library A to track every transaction and item in the library. On the flip side, Library A is allowing as much work as possible to be done in a way that frees personnel to do other things. Staff within Library A are proud to use the system to its fullest extent, but recognize that they are making adjustments to do so.

Library B believes it is being more efficient when they don't employ work-arounds. They view their workflow as being more flexible, because they are not locked into the system as thoroughly as Library A. At the same time, Library B acknowledges that it doesn't have as much data available electronically to use for reports and tracking transactions.

There is discussion at each library to change the level of use of the acquisitions module. Library B wants to use more of the capabilities of the system as soon as it is upgraded to allow for the detachment of records within the system. Library A's discussion centers around foregoing some of the features, such as the detailed ledgers, because the work-arounds are too cumbersome. At some time in the future there may be a point in which both libraries are using the system in a very similar way. 🐛

---

## Catalog Information and User Expectations in an Amazoogle World: Too Much? Too Little?

by **Martin L. Knott** (Head of Quality Control & Database Management, University Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI) <amuro@umich.edu>

and **Doreen R. Bradley** (Health Sciences Librarian, University of Michigan) <dbradley@umich.edu>

and **Deborah S. DeGeorge** (Print Cataloging Unit Cataloger, University of Michigan) <dsd@umich.edu>

and **Jim Ottaviani** (Coordinator of Deep Blue, University of Michigan) <hellpop@umich.edu>

---

### Background

In the spring of 2005, the **University of Michigan Library** began a comprehensive, multi-phase assessment of its selection, acquisition, and cataloging workflow with the objective of making operations in these areas more cohesive and efficient. The initiative was just one part of an ongoing, user-focused, programmatic review of all of the library's operations and services. This review was initiated in part because the library had recently migrated to a new integrated library system. Another major motivation to undertake this effort, though never explicitly stated in the charges to the review working groups, was the then relatively new partnership with **Google** to digitize the entire **University Library** collection. It was clear to everyone that an initia-

tive of such a scale would affect all aspects of the library. For Technical Services units, this meant a potentially massive growth in their already sizable workflow. New strategies for processing the existing print and digital resources would be necessary in order to have the resources to handle this addition to the workflow.

Prior to the review getting underway, a question that came up repeatedly during discussions about the process was, "Do we know what information users want in the library catalog?" Anecdotally, we knew that users were expecting OPACs to behave like their favorite search engines and **Amazon.com** but we did not know what they were expecting in terms of bibliographic information. With this in mind, the Library's administrators charged a work-

ing group to gather feedback from users of the library's OPAC on the extent of the bibliographic and classification information provided in the catalog; review current literature on user search behaviors; and make recommendations based on our findings. The obvious implication made by acknowledging a need to investigate this aspect of the workflow is that detailed cataloging requires more time which translates to slower, most costly cataloging throughput. Our findings were meant to contribute to a cost-benefit analysis of the amount of effort necessary to catalog new collection materials in relation to the benefit the cataloging provides to the library's users.

