

September 2010

Building Library Collections in the 21st Century- Acquisitions Departments as Whirling Dervishes

Arlene Moore Sievers-Hill
arlenesievers7@hotmail.com

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



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

Recommended Citation

Sievers-Hill, Arlene Moore (2010) "Building Library Collections in the 21st Century-Acquisitions Departments as Whirling Dervishes," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 22: Iss. 4, Article 33.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.5621>

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

Building Library Collections in the 21st Century — Acquisition Departments as Whirling Dervishes

Column Editor: **Arlene Moore Sievers-Hill** <axs23@case.edu> <arlenesievers7@hotmail.com>

The end-of-year buying of books — It is like a sprint and marathon all in one. Of course spending up the materials budget or a last lump sum by the end of the fiscal year has been going on since time immemorial in libraries of all kinds. I wouldn't be surprised if the great library of Alexandria may have experienced such a thing.

Amounts of money funded for the fiscal year frequently disappear back into big coffers if not actually spent by that fateful date of June 30. Materials funding is so penurious in these days of monetary distress for many libraries that no one would want to be caught not spending it all, difficult as that impossible dream of a goal actually is. All of us in acquisitions know how difficult it is to spend money without being a few dollars short or a few dollars over. Books can be a little over the estimated price, or under, some won't come in on time, or more than you wish will. If you are like some fortunate libraries, you have endowed or similar funds that can carry over the fiscal year and can also be used before a new materials budget is actually in place. But rules on this can be difficult and many libraries don't have funds like this.

I once worked in a branch of a large public library, in a time long, long ago, in a faraway galaxy, it seems now, when library funding was robust. This goal of spending the entire book budget and spending the last bit quickly was dealt with in an effective, nontraditional, but quite fun way. In this library I was a reference librarian in charge of selecting all fiction. There was one category — very important — but not handled in the selection of title-by-title method, or even via an approval plan. These were racks of mass-market paperbacks which were so heavily circulated they literally eventually fell to pieces.

I had a great director at this library and she would never allow herself to be accused of not spending all the money as long as she was there. Her philosophy, which I agree with wholeheartedly, is if you don't spend it all it is easy for those who give it out to say you really don't need it all. One year when there were a few hundred dollars left, she arranged for me and a few other fiction librarians from other large branches to have access to the local newsagent depot. You know, the place that supplies all drugstores, newsstands, and airports with magazines, newspapers, and mass-market paperbacks. We were taken there and were given shopping carts and set loose to fill them with paperbacks to as near the amount of the total as we could in a relatively short period

of time. It was like the shopping on Design Star or The Next Food Network Star, where the contestants are running madly through the aisles of a grocery store.

I am of an age when gothic romances and romances in general were the hot items, not true crime and crime fiction, which I think are more common now on those drugstore racks. The artwork on the covers of these Gothic mysteries frequently depicted a young woman in a long dress fleeing across a landscape, which was loomed over by a great house or a castle. The young woman is often looking backward and there is a light in one window. I have read that those with the light in the window always outsold those without the light. There were also bodice-rippers aplenty. Everyone knows what those look like; I think they have always been popular.

The method of selection in this situation where the books were arranged in no particular order was to choose by the cover. And we grabbed several of whatever book we chose — that was how the racks were populated. The criteria I used included those outlined above. Of course when popular authors popped out, **Victoria Holt, Georgette Heyer, and Barbara Cartland** are still in my memory after the passage of time. Those were amongst those I chose. It was a free-for-all, but all the money was spent.

Now the easy way of spending all the money quickly in academic libraries at least, where I find myself now, is to buy big-ticket items. It used to be large-print sets, reference works mainly, which were monographs. Most library vendors and many publishers knew about this end of financial year buying by libraries so sent out, and still do, flyers and email advertising deals on these titles. However databases, attractive as they are, are difficult to buy this way because they require an ongoing commitment for maintenance, a subscription, as well as a first time purchase. With serial budgets not just stretched but broken, one more serial expense is not possible. So those things are sometimes out.

This leaves books, DVDs, and now eBooks. But there are still more books than eBooks, and research faculty, whom we serve where I am, still want books. We had this situation recently where an extra pot of money came available very close to the end of the fiscal year. It was a difficult task to get tens of thousands of dollars spent quickly, to have selectors select them and we to order them, and get them in and received and invoices paid. Strict deadlines for selectors' lists ruled the day. We advised selectors to

choose recent titles from mainstream university and trade publishers.

We in the Acquisitions Department contacted two of our most trusted smaller vendors and explained the situation. They assigned a staff member each to work with us on this, making sure that what was ordered could actually be supplied within that time period. Our vendors supplying these titles kept us advised constantly when new shipments of these were sent out, and they sent out shipments more regularly than usual, a couple of times a week. They also advised us of individual books that could not be sent within the time period. Luckily, we had an overage on order that made up for this. We suspended temporarily our vendor-provided cataloging and processing, which are provided for all books from these vendors. Continuing with the processing in this specific instance would have slowed down receipts for these specific funded titles. The Bibliographic Services Department and their processing will bear the burden of these actions, but it just had to be.

We were still receiving approval books for a couple of subject area profiles, which was a good thing. The rest of the regular approval plan had shut down automatic book shipments when regular funds declined to a small amount. Collection managers had to count on having a little for faculty requests and reserve books until we got out our new materials budget. That is why we had to count on all firm ordering to spend this sudden money.

We did have one specialty vendor who supplies art history books on an approval plan continue shipments. We could choose from items they actually had in stock and tweak the amounts to spend what was needed and get really good books. Our Music Librarian worked one-on-one with his specialized vendors as well to select books they had in stock that we could order. This shooting-fish-in-a-barrel approach for all ordering was crucial to the success of the project.

Well, we made it. We ordered, received, and passed on invoices for the amount needed to be spent. We in the Acquisitions Department felt like cracking open the Champagne after it was all over. There was one staff member — we are a small department of three, including me — who usually takes her vacation to go to her family home in Minneapolis during that time. Fortunately she had changed her timing to leave later, i.e., after all this was over. My staff deserved the greatest amount of the credit. I've got to say our vendors, collection managers, administrators, and myself did really good jobs as well.

I know this kind of thing goes on in many, many libraries — having to spend large sums of money quickly. This is just what happened to us — just one more story in the naked city of acquisitions. This has been one of them. 🍷

