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Book Selection: An Approach for Small and Medium-Sized Libraries

Book selection is an essential element of librarianship, and all librarians should participate. Approval plans provide one means of participation by all the staff, particularly in the small and medium-sized library. The article is a description of the process of current and retrospective book selection in a medium-sized library. This process is a cooperative undertaking of classroom faculty and librarians. The problems raised and solved by library participation are discussed.

WITH THE GROWING acceptance of approval plans, libraries will have to try a different approach to their book selection policies. The receipt of books on a regular basis forces the small and medium-sized library to reconsider some time-honored practices, such as allocation of funds to departments and selection by classroom faculty.

I start with the premise that an approval plan is a desirable means of acquiring books. There are those who would take issue with this, but I think the problem is in the mechanics of particular plans, not the principle.¹ An approval plan enables a library to acquire a large part of current book production for inspection, a very useful first step in book selection.

The question of who selects the books and how much money is allocated to a department often raises problems of power and status and causes conflict between departments and the library and departments. Formulas for allocation of funds to departments are based on a variety of factors, but the overriding factor should be the need that the col-

lege or university has for a particular book in order to satisfy curriculum requirements. The number of students and the number of faculty are minor considerations. If a university offers a degree in biology, the books that are necessary are necessary whether there is one student or forty. Fortunately at my own institution we do not allocate the book budget by department. We do keep a record of expenditures by subject, partly as an insurance policy against the time when a department may feel it is being done out of its fair share of the book budget. For obvious reasons, when money is tight, this problem worsens.

The question of who selects is a touchy problem when the faculty member feels that any delegation of book selection to a librarian involves a loss of status and/or admission that he is not competent to select material in his field. The only way to resolve this problem is to have librarians who are competent and can work with departments. One can ask each department to appoint one member of its faculty as a "library representative" to serve as departmental liaison with the library. Each librarian is assigned a section of the Library of Congress classification as his responsibil-

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ity for book selection and weeding. It is necessary for a librarian to cover several departments, since there are not as many librarians as departments. This has obvious drawbacks since a library usually cannot provide specialists in every field, and in some cases there is no one interested in a particular subject. Science specialists are difficult to come by. Those people assigned a field in which they have no expertise must depend on good communication with the departments concerned.

In the area of current book selection our library receives books weekly on approval. These are placed on shelves in the acquisitions department by rough LC classification (supplied by the vendor) and every two weeks library representatives are sent notices of the display and asked to come to the library to make selections during a five-day period. Selections are made by signature on the multiple-order form placed in each book. The books are left on the shelves one more day so that the librarians may make additional selections and also see what books have been chosen. This provides an additional guide to departmental interests.

This system works, and its ideal of two-way communication between library and departments is good, but it does not function as smoothly as it sounds. There are two principal reasons for this. First, not all library representatives take their responsibilities seriously. Some departments appoint the junior member of the department as library representative. This can mean the representative changes each year and continuity and sometimes ability is lost. On the other hand, in some cases the young faculty member is well acquainted with the literature of his field and indeed is even more current than senior members. In some cases the department head doesn't trust book selection to anyone else and tries to do it all himself, with the result that it may not get done, the

chairman's duties being what they are. Some departments encourage all members to make selections. This, we feel, is good because one man may not be interested in or know the literature outside his own narrow field.

The other reason that the selection procedure does not always measure up to the ideal is that, sad to say, some librarians are not concerned. My feeling is that book selection touches the essence of librarianship and all librarians should be involved in it. There is an understandable tendency for some to place other duties first and book selection last, especially when there is much to be done. Also many academic librarians have never been involved in book selection, since it has usually been a faculty prerogative or limited to bibliographers or acquisitions librarians.

The question of retrospective purchases is somewhat more difficult because the range of possibilities is much greater, and there are not nearly enough funds to buy everything wanted. At the moment our approach has not been systematized to the point necessary for a thorough review of every classification. We have used *Books for College Libraries* as a basic minimum guide, and each librarian has ordered the books thought necessary to our collection. Beyond this we accept requests from the faculty and distribute them to the staff for review. This is necessary, of course, if the librarian is to know what is being requested and what is being purchased in his area of responsibility.

"Deselection," or weeding of the collection, is often difficult. The faculty may not see the need to discard books that are not used or are superseded. We consider weeding important if we are to have a vital, useful, and used collection. Since we are not a research library we should not attempt to keep forever everything we have acquired. We will leave that to Harvard. We have to guard against building for the faculty alone.

The students come first. However, we have had some success in weeding. We have asked library representatives to examine the books in their subject area and recommend ones for discard. In some cases the librarians have made preliminary selections for discard and asked the representative to make recommendations from these. This is more effective because the initiative is in the library and psychologically, the faculty member feels relieved of the responsibility of discarding a book.

When we receive a large number of gifts, we arrange them by subject and ask the library representatives to select those for retention. For the small number of day-to-day gifts, the order librarian asks the librarian concerned to decide what to keep. The librarian may in turn consult with the library representative. Since no expenditure is involved, and the titles will appear in the monthly accessions list, the main reason for consulting the library representative

is to keep him informed.

This method perhaps approaches the point whereby the reference function, the book selection function, and the cataloging function are combined, with one person doing all three.² We have not attempted to go this far. I think the combination of functions is not always desirable, although I believe that all librarians should at some time in their careers have the experience of cataloging.

Involving all librarians in book selection has two worthwhile side effects. It broadens a person's view of the library, and it provides a means of contact with the faculty. This latter effect may be important where faculty status is still an issue. It may seem as if the library representatives are doing a great deal of work and making most of the decisions, but it is a case of a shift of decision-making from one group to a sharing by two groups for the ultimate benefit of the library.

REFERENCES

1. For a contrary view see Roscoe Rouse, "Automation Stops Here: A Case for Man-Made Book Collections," *CRL* 31: 147-54 (May 1970).
2. See Frank A. Lundy, Kathryn R. Renfro, and Esther M. Shubert, "The Dual Assignment: Cataloging and Reference: A Four-Year Review of Cataloging in the Divisional Plan," *Library Resources & Technical Services* 3:167-88 (Summer 1959).