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# Patron-Driven Acquisition: An Introduction and Literature Review

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## INTRODUCTION

# Patron-Driven Acquisitions: An Introduction and Literature Review

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Libraries exist for their users, so librarians take user needs into consideration when building collections. In the past, this consideration took many forms. Past use suggested that more books of a similar nature would receive future use. The librarians' knowledge about a particular user community's interest in certain topics drove other choices; a public library collection in a rural area would include books on some topics unlikely to interest urban dwellers, for example. Academic libraries would emphasize subjects taught or researched at the institution. A small liberal arts college's collection would focus on some different subject areas than a polytechnic institution. A museum library might buy few titles outside the field of the fine and decorative arts. Traditionally, librarians relied on book reviews, publisher reputation, and professional intuition to guide them in the selection of books for their patrons. While most librarians seriously considered users' requests for specific titles if they met the library's collection development policies, in general librarians selected the vast majority of titles. To borrow a term from industry, librarians historically built collections on the "just in case" inventory model.

Starting in the late 1970s, the results of several studies showed that users in major academic library collections checked out an astonishingly low percentage of these largely librarian-selected books (Kent 1979). One frequently cited study revealed that 20% of the collection receives 80% of the use (Trueswell 1969). These studies suggested that the traditional model of librarian-selected titles does not serve users, at least not at academic institutions, as well as librarians expected. At the same time, skyrocketing interlibrary loan (ILL) figures from the Association of Research Libraries member libraries also indicated that local collections do not meet needs adequately (Libraries 2009, 9). Certainly some of the ILL traffic is for unusual, obscure,

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or specialized titles needed for advanced research, but a large number of requests are for “ordinary” titles that normal collection development practices did not predict would be needed.

Librarians have long recognized the need to base collection development decisions on analysis (Blake and Schleper 2005; Carrigan 1996; Knievel et al. 2006; Mortimore 2006; Ruppel 2006). Some librarians have tried analyzing filled ILL transactions to select or predict subject areas that should be emphasized in the collection (Aguilar 1986; Byrd et al. 1982; Livingston and Mays 2004; New and Ott 1974; Roberts and Cameron 1984; Wender 1969; Wood and Bower 1969). This approach misses the moment of need, however, and at best results in buying books only after the library has already expended resources borrowing titles one or more times. ILL transactions are expensive. Even if many of a particular library’s supplying partners are part of a mutually cooperative consortium that does not assess per-loan charges among members, there is a cost involved for ILL transactions.

By the early 2000s, more and more libraries explored a new approach that resembled industry’s “just in time” inventory model. When patrons requested books through ILL, libraries began buying the titles if they met certain preestablished criteria generally focused on variables such as price, delivery time, and appropriate content. After initial use by the requesting ILL patrons, the books (and, later, media titles) were added to the regular library collection. Librarians conducting subsequent use studies on these titles discovered surprisingly high circulation figures for these patron-selected titles when compared with similar traditionally acquired titles, even considering that at least some of the subsequent use was probably by the same patrons who placed the initial requests (Anderson et al. 2002; Perdue and Van Fleet 1999). In one study, selectors’ reviews of patron-selected titles agreed that the vast majority of them were appropriate for the collection (Anderson et al. 2002).

From today’s perspective, the ease and effectiveness of what is now commonly called patron-driven acquisitions, or user-initiated collection development, seem so obvious. What better way to build at least a portion of the collection than by letting the users’ directly expressed needs guide the expenditure of scarce collection development funds? Not only are the requesting patrons’ needs satisfied, but also it is highly likely that those books will interest other patrons in the future.

Obvious as the practice seems today, the early implementers encountered snags. For example, Bucknell College’s initial venture in 1990 was only partially successful because some book orders were delayed over difficulties such as being out of print or requiring prepayment (Perdue and Van Fleet 1999). The concept was not fully realizable until the rise of the online booksellers, when library staff could quickly and easily check price and in-stock status with suppliers committed to rapid fulfillment.

Librarians began reporting the buy versus borrow programs at their individual libraries (selected examples: Ward 2002; Clendenning 2001; Brug

and MacWaters 2004; Foss 2007). While these libraries' purchase criteria considered the same variables, those variables often had very different values. For example, some libraries circulated the book to the ILL patron before cataloging it; others rush-cataloged the incoming books. Some libraries' pilot programs began with very modest funding; others were sufficiently funded to buy all the books that met the criteria. Maximum cost per book varied. Some libraries also bought books from the used book market or from international booksellers; others did not. Some libraries reviewed all new ILL loan requests for possible purchase; others only examined titles that had failed in the first borrowing attempt through traditional ILL channels. One beauty of the model is that each library can set the parameters that suit it best.

By 2003, *Library Journal* published an article about "purchase on demand" (Hulsey 2003), and in 2004 a librarian at the University of Hong Kong offered an international perspective (Chan 2004). The literature also began to acknowledge the necessary partnerships between library units or functions that formerly had had little interaction: ILL with acquisitions and/or with collection development (Ward et al. 2003). By today, most people reviewing the literature will be convinced that the patron-driven acquisitions model has proved itself on a number of levels, including cost-effective collection development; user satisfaction; high subsequent circulation; and flexibility in meeting local constraints for price, content, and processing. It is no longer a revolutionary concept, but one that is accepted as routine in many sizes and types of libraries.

Patron-driven acquisition is also a concept that easily and naturally moves beyond the print and media arenas into electronic books. It is now just about as easy to order an individual e-book title from a book jobber's list as it is to choose a print title from an online bookseller's site. By adding the e-book to the catalog and sending the patron an e-mail with the link, the library fulfills the request in a matter of hours instead of days, with every expectation that the patron-selected e-book will receive more future use by other patrons than some librarian-selected ones. On this front, the vendors are so convinced of the model's success that several of them have developed patron-driven acquisition versions of their lists. The library loads the records, possibly preselected or refined in some way by the librarians, into its online public access catalog. There, patrons find e-book records that look the same as any other e-book records. After a certain number of browses or after a certain amount of time viewing each book, the library pays for the title and adds it permanently to the collection. Librarians were initially cautious of adding this service, concerned that the ease of selecting an e-book would lead to runaway expenses. Recent research by Jason Price and John McDonald, however, indicates that these fears may be exaggerated (Price and McDonald 2009). During this time of transition between print and electronic (however long it lasts), many libraries may chose to maintain patron-driven

acquisition programs in both formats to satisfy patrons who have compelling needs to consult either version.

The editors are three of the six authors who wrote “Buy, Don’t Borrow: Bibliographers’ Analysis of Academic Library Collection Development Through Interlibrary Loan Requests” for *Collection Management* (Anderson et al. 2002). Realizing that the program had nearly reached its tenth anniversary, the six authors met in 2009 to discuss conducting the same analysis on 10 years of data that had been conducted on the initial two years of data. Would the results be similar? Would a program that had appeared promising after its first two years still be fulfilling its promise? Would some earlier hints at unexpected results, such as high subsequent circulation and strong evidence of interdisciplinary use, show development over a decade? While discussing the scope of the new article, however, it quickly became clear that far more analysis could be done with a decade of data than had been possible after only two years. For example, all the patron-driven acquisition titles could be compared with all the normally acquired books over 10 years to examine circulation patterns. Then a colleague in one of the Purdue University science libraries expressed an interest in analyzing the science and technology books. Several of us wanted to ponder the effect of this shift toward patron-driven acquisitions and its effect on collection development librarians’ roles. With four article ideas already in the works, the editors were pleased when Faye Chadwell, *Collection Management* editor, accepted their proposal for a special issue about patron-driven acquisitions.

In fall 2009, the editors sent a call for papers to over a 100 library Listservs around the world. They received 30 paper proposals. The editors selected papers that fell into three major categories: those that best represented practice in the traditional print-based patron-driven acquisition programs based on ILL requests; those describing the experiences of early implementers of e-book patron-driven acquisition programs; and those from librarians with truly innovative concepts for involving patrons in the collection development process. Despite the wide distribution of the call for papers, no proposals came from public libraries or from special libraries. The few proposals from international libraries were not among those finally selected. Although the resulting articles mainly report patron-driven acquisitions activities at large American academic libraries, the editors hope that many of the ideas and practices will be in some way adaptable to other sizes, types, and locations of libraries.

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