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The Rise of Patron-Driven Acquisitions: A Literature Review

By Karin J. Fulton

One of the more interesting trends in collection development over the past decade is the growth of patron-driven acquisitions (PDA). The idea has evolved over time from a simple and informal policy of approving the acquisition of titles recommended by patrons to the more recent automated programs that use adapted catalog functions to purchase items on demand. The rise of e-book availability and popularity has brought PDA to the forefront of library literature in the last few years, as e-books are particularly well-suited to the PDA model. With this increased interest, a need has arisen for a thorough review of the literature and developments in PDA. This article will examine the different types of PDA and will explore benefits, challenges, and best practices in implementing a PDA plan.

What is PDA?

Whether referred to as patron-driven acquisition, demand-driven acquisition, on-demand purchasing, or any other number of titles, PDA marks a shift from a just-in-case purchasing model to a just-in-time model (Esposito 2012; Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner 2012). The traditional collection development model has long relied on the expertise of the librarian for selection of materials for the library and has been marked by an emphasis on “the long tail,” or the future use of items purchased for a collection (Walker 2012). Even with an experienced selector, however, collection development has been an “educated guessing game” where users’ needs and librarians’ acquisitions have not always matched up (De Fino and Lo 2011, 327). Dwindling budgetary

resources across the board for all types of libraries have necessitated more creative approaches for acquisition and increased emphasis on meeting the immediate needs of the patron. Anderson (2011) predicts that patron-driven acquisition will be the norm for academic libraries by 2021, stating that funding for higher education is unlikely to return to the levels required to support traditional collection practices. Breitbach and Lambert (2011) and Brinkman Dzwig (2013) agree, declaring just-in-case collecting to be unsustainable for many libraries.

There is already a long history of informal patron-driven acquisition in libraries that maintain and consult patron request logs when making collection development decisions. More recently, libraries have also begun considering additional PDA options. For example, some libraries have begun making acquisitions instead of inter-library loans (ILL). In 2002, Purdue University Libraries experimented with PDA by implementing a program they called Books on Demand. This program evaluated the benefits of purchasing items requested through ILL instead of borrowing them. The Books on Demand experiment was considered a success in terms of both cost-effectiveness and appropriateness of selections (Anderson et al. 2002).

With the advent of e-books, the purchase-on-demand model has become even more automatic. Libraries can now partner with a PDA vendor to offer any number of catalog records for e-books, and the e-books are automatically delivered if handled enough to

trigger a purchase or short-term loan charge. Patrons are usually not even aware that they are purchasing the title for the library because the process is seamless on the user side. The vendor and library can negotiate the terms of what constitutes a purchase. For example, in Stetson University's pilot PDA program, ebrary (their chosen vendor) charged the library if a user spent ten minutes or more with a title, looked at ten or more pages, or printed any pages other than title pages or indexes (Dinkins 2012). At the library of California State University, Fullerton, a short-term loan option was included in their PDA program, with three lower priced short-term loans offered and the fourth use automatically triggering a purchase (Breitbach and Lambert 2011).

Another example of the evolving forms of PDA is the pay-per-view model associated with e-journals. Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner (2012) discuss the user-driven pay-per-view model for journal article purchases at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR). The pay-per-view model gives patrons access to e-journal articles, and the library pays on a per-article basis, rather than investing in entire journals or publisher "Big Deals" containing hundreds of journals. At UNR, however, the librarians found that unmediated purchases used up funds too quickly, and there was a need for a more stringent mediation of purchases by library staff. This, in addition to the lack of customization available from the vendor, rendered the UNR experience with pay-per-view unsuccessful (Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner 2012). In a different trial of pay-per-view at the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point (UWSP), librarians found that the model fit their needs, saving the library at UWSP money on journals they could no longer afford to buy traditionally (King, Nichols, and Hanson 2011).

Although much of the buzz surrounding PDA is about e-books, print books can utilize patron-driven acquisition as well. At Cornell University Library, for instance, they supplement the e-book PDA offerings with print offerings from

Coutts, the parent company of their e-book PDA partner. They load the MARC records into their catalog and when a patron discovers a print item s/he needs, the record indicates that it can be ordered on an expedited basis. Initial success in this method has pushed the PDA model beyond the trial stage at Cornell (Walker 2012).

Advantages of Using PDA

For libraries, the potential advantages of using a PDA program are numerous. First, libraries can focus on purchasing titles that are most likely to be used. Academic libraries, in particular, are faced with providing a wide array of titles in a vast amount of different subject areas. Many of these titles never circulate, or circulate only rarely. The oft-cited 80/20 rule of Kent's University of Pittsburgh study stated that 80 percent of a library's circulation is driven by 20 percent of its collection (1979). A more recent OCLC research report found that the ratio is even more striking, with 80 percent of the circulation coming from just 6 percent of the collection (OhioLINK Collection Building Task Force 2011). The Kent study also showed that of the items purchased during the study period, 38.5 percent never circulated even once during the first six years on the shelf (1979). In comparison, by being purchased at the time of need, PDA titles are guaranteed to circulate at least once, and case studies demonstrate that the titles acquired through PDA tend to circulate more than those chosen through traditional selection methods (Tyler et al. 2010).

With PDA, users can still choose from a wide variety of titles, but the library is not charged unless the book is actually used (De Fino and Lo 2011). An unexpected cost saver at Stetson University came from the transfer of faculty selected titles to PDA (Dinkins 2012). Stetson had long had a collaborative process of collection development that featured both the library faculty and the teaching faculty. Library faculty had suspected that many of the professors' selections were going unused. By adding the faculty e-books to the PDA program

instead of purchasing them outright, the library would be able to save money if the titles ended up not being used. Similarly, pay-per-view e-journal programs also save money on less frequently used journal titles, since the library only pays a small fee per article instead of purchasing full access to an entire journal (Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner 2012).

In the aforementioned Purdue study, Anderson et al. (2002) noted that the cost of an interlibrary loan transaction averaged \$27.83. Buying titles instead of borrowing them makes sense in many cases, especially when considering future circulations as part of the comparison. Sixty-eight percent of the Books on Demand purchases circulated again after the initial use, and 42 percent circulated more than once. This is in comparison to 36 percent and 6 percent, respectively, of regularly acquired titles at Purdue (Anderson et al. 2002). Similarly, in the pilot PDA program at Stetson University, 59 percent of the purchased titles were used more than once during the study period (Dinkins 2012).

Savings can also be found by having to devote less space to a physical collection (Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner 2012). In the same way that e-books have led to decreased shelf space requirements, a just-in-time purchasing approach can eliminate the need for shelves of titles that might never be used (Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner 2012; Spitzform 2011). Less space used for stacks translates to more space that can be used by patrons for other aims, either traditional or more innovative.

When PDA began to rise in popularity, many were concerned that the collection quality would suffer if the selections were not being made by librarians (Tyler et al. 2010). However, at the Purdue Libraries, analysis of the ten-year period of the Books on Demand program showed that only a very small amount of titles were added to the collection that were inappropriate in scope or audience, and nearly 90 percent of the titles purchased during this

period were from scholarly presses (Anderson et al. 2010). Rather than limiting the collection quality, many see PDA as a way to actually broaden collections. As noted by Breitbach and Lambert (2012), loading so many more records into the catalog for potential use “significantly increases the amount of locally discoverable content” and makes it possible for patrons to access that content when and where they need it (17). The beauty of PDA is that libraries with limited resources are able to increase the size of their catalogs drastically without having to purchase the materials unless or until they are needed.

The Purdue study also highlighted an important trend that surfaced through PDA. Evaluation of the titles acquired through the Books on Demand program showed that an unexpected number of titles reflected interdisciplinary subjects. Traditional selection methods were not effective in meeting these needs, since selection librarians tended to purchase titles within specific classification ranges (Anderson et al. 2002; Anderson et al. 2010). The 2010 analysis of the Purdue experiment also showed that liberal arts scholars were the biggest users of the Books on Demand option. Though Purdue has a large concentration (58 percent) of students enrolled in science or technology majors, 45 percent of the total books acquired were in liberal arts areas, as opposed to 13 percent in the science or technology fields (Anderson et al. 2010). This is interesting to note for applications in public libraries’ nonfiction collections, since they would typically feature liberal arts subject matter as well.

Another possible benefit of PDA is that it can result in less professional staff time devoted to collection development and acquisition tasks. An increase in patron-driven acquisition is an opportunity for library selectors to spend more time on other functions. Bracke, Hérubel, and Ward (2010) suggest that PDA opens up the door for collection development librarians to focus on new roles such as developing closer relationships with faculty or working as

academic department liaisons, embedded librarians, or data curators. More time might also be available for scholarly research, grant writing, or serving in roles such as campus committees.

Challenges of Using PDA

Though the advantages of the PDA model are numerous, it is not without potential problems or difficulties. Walters (2012) notes that patron-driven acquisition faces many challenges. Chief among these are that the focus of PDA on the immediate informational needs of current students does not necessarily align with the long-term educational mission of an academic library. PDA creates a system that is very good at meeting the immediate wants or demands of current library users but not at considering the future needs of potential users. Walters (2012) also expresses concern that PDA might lead to too much uniformity across the collections of all research libraries, especially considering the limited number of major vendors offering PDA.

Currently, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to a more widespread adoption of patron-driven acquisition is the complicated licensing involved with the use of e-books. Some materials are easily available, creating a smooth, seamless PDA transaction for a patron, while others might not be available through PDA or in e-book format at all. Choosing a PDA vendor and reviewing and understanding all of the different restrictions and licenses put forth by e-book publishers can be daunting. For example, libraries would like to make sure that patrons are able to access the e-books in perpetuity, but unintentional infractions by users can result in revoked access. PDA e-book vendors can withdraw files from a device (without a user's permission) if rules are not followed explicitly. For example, too many students browsing a title too quickly can trigger a withdrawal of a purchased resource (Walters 2012). Further, Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner (2012) caution that the definition of perpetuity is still uncertain, and suggest that libraries keep good

documentation of their licensing agreements. Shared e-book plans can be even more complicated. Carrico, Shelton, and Ziegler (2013) noted that in a shared e-book plan implemented at the Florida State and University of Florida libraries, Cambridge University Press withdrew some titles from the program after months of participation, deciding that they would no longer sell textbooks via multi-user licenses. Consortial plans can also present difficulties at the outset of a program in identifying currently held titles in order to eliminate duplicate patron-driven purchases. In a pilot at the Ontario Council of University Libraries, the vendor (ebrary) agreed to buy back any duplicates when preventing them became too difficult (Davis et al. 2012).

Libraries must also consider the altered workflows created by PDA and adjust for increased workloads in technical services. Breitbach and Lambert (2011) point out that while MARC records are included with the purchase of the PDA title, they are often not consistent with the records of individual libraries and may need to be cleaned up to increase discoverability. De Fino and Lo (2011) echo this advice, pointing out that while vendors often supply full metadata, "a significant amount of work is necessary to ensure that the records will match and load to the library's ILS" (329). Davis et al. (2012) report that preparation and implementation of a PDA plan can be more time-consuming than expected. At the Ontario libraries profiled in their study, the initial set-up took over ten months. In addition to time staff had to invest in the initial preparation, several of the participating Ontario libraries reported that their cataloging staff had difficulty keeping up with the work created by a rapid pace of acquisitions. Various technical problems, all of which had to be resolved with the vendor, were also reported throughout the pilot.

Another fairly substantial concern for libraries that are trying to implement a PDA program is the practical matter of working within

budgeting cycles and managing the availability of funds throughout the year. As one author asks, “how does the library responsibly budget for selection decisions being made unknowingly and on the fly by an unidentified subset of our 40,000+ potential users?” (Fisher et al. 2012, 490-91). If all of the acquisition funds are depleted in the first part of a library’s billing year, books requested in the second half of the year might never be purchased or might be delayed until the following year. As more libraries turn to patron-driven acquisitions, this could mean that scores of books published in the second half of the year are not able to be purchased, not just at one institution, but across the board (Walters 2012). Walters (2012) suggests that adopting monthly billing allocations alleviates some concerns, but that approach has challenges too, as catalog records must be suppressed and reactivated each time funds are depleted or replenished. This both increases the library staff’s workload and creates possible patron frustration and confusion as available resources seem to appear and disappear throughout the course of their ongoing research.

Another possible disadvantage to PDA is that it challenges the typical academic press model. Esposito, Walker, and Ehling (2012) label PDA a “disruptive practice” (59) and argue that widespread adoption of PDA by academic libraries could lead to a breakdown in the academic publishing industry. Academic libraries are typically the primary customers of university presses, and without university presses a large number of books might never be published. As noted by Esposito, Walker, and Ehling (2013), “this is the most dreaded possible outcome of PDA, where what begins as an administrative efficiency ends up determining a large amount of cultural output” (s21). Walker (2012) also wonders what effects this will have on the academic requirements of publishing for tenure and advancement.

Finally, authors Sens and Fonseca (2013) point out that additional scrutiny should be given to

the motives of vendors and publishers with regards to the PDA model. Too much vendor influence over the online catalog can potentially result in a discovery process that favors backlisted titles that publishers especially need to sell, rather than titles that are best for the patrons’ needs. They caution that the lack of skepticism in the existing body of literature on PDA is alarming, stating that “academic librarians have taken at face value findings in the literature authored by writers who represent publishers, vendors, and other entities in the ebook trade” (362).

Adapting PDA to Your Library

When implementing a PDA program, each library will need to take into consideration how to tailor its PDA plan to best meet its individual needs. Some libraries will remain content to use an informal patron suggestion method or a substitution of acquisitions for ILL requests, while others find their needs are best met by partnering with a PDA vendor. Setting up a PDA program is somewhat similar to creating approval plans. Care must be taken to ensure the correct PDA vendor is chosen and useful parameters are set up at the beginning to tailor the plan to best meet the needs of the library it is serving. Libraries can choose which titles they want to include in their catalog according to many criteria, including subject areas, publishers, price point, publication dates, etc. Breitbach and Lambert (2011) offer practical tips for setting up a PDA profile with a vendor. At California State University, Fullerton’s Pollack Library, Breitbach worked with Ebook Library to build a profile that best met their needs and their goal of building their e-book collection. They excluded subjects already covered by consortial subscriptions, subject areas in majors not available at their campus, and publishers that offered popular titles instead of scholarly works. Finally, decisions were made about what parameters triggered a purchase or a short term loan, what price limits were set per title, and whether languages other than English could be included for purchase.

If control over the collection is of utmost concern to a library, the PDA plan can also be aligned with existing approval plan criteria to “pre-select” the titles available in the PDA collection. Brinkman Dzwig (2013) explains that at the TU Delft Library in the Netherlands, they use a hybrid print/e-book PDA plan with vendors Blackwell Book Services and Ebook Library. The vendors work together to meet the TU Delft Library’s needs. Blackwell checks with Ebook Library to see which books on the approval plan are available as e-books. If they are available electronically, their records are added to the catalog as PDA options. If they are not, they are sent as print books in accordance with their approval plan.

Many factors must be taken into account when considering the implementation of an e-book PDA plan. The structure of a library or library system can be especially important. Carrico, Shelton, and Ziegler (2013) stress that library systems with multiple locations often face different rules for shared e-book plans. Publishers may refuse to participate in shared e-book plans or may place restrictions on simultaneous use from multiple facilities. It is important that libraries are aware of these rules and restrictions in order to choose the most appropriate vendor or plan.

Metadata and preservation should also be considered when implementing an e-book PDA plan. De Fino and Lo (2011) suggest that negotiating the highest quality of metadata from vendors is important. For instance, some vendors are willing to add local notes to the records that a library purchases, thus eliminating that step for the library. They also suggest continually monitoring the record quality and communicating any problems to the vendor. Libraries implementing a PDA program that utilizes e-books will need to research and consider archiving options for those e-book titles that come with perpetual access, just in case a vendor goes out of business (De Fino and Lo 2011). Because e-book contracts are not standard, each vendor’s offerings must be

reviewed carefully. Fisher, Kurt, and Gardner (2012) echo this advice, stating that libraries must be sure to understand the terms of the contracts they are entering with regards to perpetual access and long-term preservation, ensuring that the terms align with the needs of the university or parent institution.

As advice for best practices, the bibliographers involved in Purdue’s Books on Demand program stressed that collection development should not be left completely up to PDA. While they were pleased with the results thus far, they indicated that sole reliance on PDA could result in “misshapen” collections over time (Anderson et al. 2010, 139). Fischer et al. (2012) caution against relying solely on patron-driven acquisitions in their account of a PDA pilot program at the University of Iowa Libraries. Their selectors found that the limited availability of suitable academic titles in some PDA programs meant that additional selection methods had to be implemented in order to offer a balanced collection.

De Fino and Lo (2011) suggest that libraries that want to start a PDA program should start on a small scale, like the pilot program they initiated at Rutgers University Libraries. They began by working with only the math and computer science collections, with the thought that they could address any challenges that surfaced before expanding the model to include the rest of the collection. If fears about runaway costs are a concern, libraries can follow the example of Stetson University, where their pilot program utilized a deposit account with a very small initial deposit (Dinkins 2012). Libraries can tailor the amounts available for PDA to their specific budgets or to whatever amount they are comfortable with putting in the patrons’ hands.

Finally, learning from peer institutions is always a good way to begin a new process such as implementing a PDA plan. Interviewing librarians at other libraries who have been through the process of setting up a PDA plan can highlight challenges and successes and is helpful

for any library that is considering the move to PDA (De Fino and Lo 2011).

Who is Using PDA?

The bulk of available literature regarding PDA suggests that academic libraries make up the vast majority of adopters of PDA. However, many of the insights from this literature can be adapted for those in public libraries who are considering using PDA in the future. While public libraries have been slower than academic libraries in implementing PDA programs, current headlines suggest that public library systems are beginning to experiment with programs of their own. A press release from October 15, 2013, details a new PDA pilot program launching at the Chicago Public Library. The pilot program was made possible by a \$300,000 grant from the Illinois State Library and features a partnership with Ingram as the PDA vendor (Ingram Content Group, Inc. 2013). In contrast, at the Georgia Public Library Service, collection development contact Peggy Chambliss (pers. comm. 2013) reports that no formal PDA vendor partnerships are in place yet. However, more informal measures do currently exist for purchase suggestions. For Georgia libraries that utilize the Georgia Download Destination, a prompt to suggest a purchase is given to patrons who are unable to find what they are looking for on their library's Overdrive portals. Chambliss also pointed out that many individual library systems, such as the Cobb County Public Library System, have a

form on their website where patrons can suggest titles for purchase. The dearth of available literature concerning public libraries using PDA indicates an area that is ripe for further exploration.

Conclusion

The amount of research that examines patron-driven acquisitions indicates a high level of interest in this growing library trend. No matter where on the spectrum a library falls when it comes to adopting PDA, it is obvious that patron-driven acquisitions will continue to increase in the near future. Because today's financial realities dictate that all types of libraries make the most of every dollar they have to spend, the PDA model is an attractive choice for librarians who want to realize cost savings, waste less on unused books, enjoy more space, and develop a collection that truly meets the needs of its users. If a library's collection development staff carefully considers the challenges of implementing PDA and acts accordingly to ensure that their collection remains balanced, their budgetary cycles are accounted for, and the altered workflows that PDA can create are managed, PDA can prove to be an excellent tool in successful collection development.

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