Patron Driven Acquisitions: Best Practices for University Libraries

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Historically academic libraries have acquired books in a certain manner. The traditional acquisition method has been bibliographers or subject librarians becoming specialists in certain areas and selecting books for those subject areas. This model is often known as the “just-in-case” model of collection development (Hodges, 2010). The selecting librarians choose books that they believe will fit the collection and the needs of the users.

In the last few decades libraries have been trying out different ways of acquiring books. A patron driven acquisition program is a great way to let the patrons voice what they need and want. Also, it has been shown that books purchased under a patron driven acquisition program circulate much better. While these programs are not standard and still somewhat controversial they are one of the best ways to deal with diminishing budgets. With a purchase on demand program patrons have more of a voice and are assured to get the materials they need even with thinning budgets.

There are three main types of patron driven acquisitions in the current literature. They are; print acquisitions not using interlibrary loan, print acquisitions using interlibrary loan and e-book acquisitions.

The first type is acquiring print materials with patron input not using interlibrary loan as a selection tool. The University of Denver’s Penrose Library implemented one such plan. This library had received books on approval from the Blackwell book vendor for years. With the recent merging of Blackwell and YBP Penrose library took the opportunity change their approval plan.

The library will still receive some books on automatic delivery, but the slip approval plan evolved to make it a demand driven acquisition model. Instead of the librarians purchasing
books from the approval slips the MARC information for the books is loaded into the library catalog. Once the MARC information is loaded into the catalog the users will have the option to suggest the book for purchase (Levine-Clark, 2010).

There are several pros to this type of plan. First, the library has already set up parameters for the books they receive approval slips (now MARC information) for so they know that the patron selected books will fit the collection. Second, the users get to suggest books that they believe would enrich the collection. This type of patron driven acquisition plan solves the potential problem of user selected books being inappropriate for the library’s collection.

The downside to this plan is that library patrons cannot select any book they want. The book they suggest has to be one from the parameters the library set up. Although, this type of patron driven acquisition plan gives the users the ability to suggest a book for purchase it does not give the users the freedom of selecting any book that a patron driven acquisition model using interlibrary loan does.

Another library that chose to manage the patron driven acquisition program without interlibrary loan involvement was the Texas A&M University library. The library created a “suggest a purchase form” for patrons to fill out. When submitted an automatic email gets generated and sent to the patron acknowledging their request. The requests go to the acquisitions department for purchase consideration. The library automatically purchases all books requested by patrons under $150 (Reynolds, 2010).

Texas A&M libraries surveyed their patrons and librarians to assess the purchase by request program. For the user survey 900 emails were sent to all the patrons that had requested materials via the online form and had asked to be notified when the material was available for
checkout. They received 186 completed surveys. Overall, patrons were very pleased with the service, 97% were indicated that they were satisfied. However, there were a few concerns. One user expressed that they would like to receive updates along the process and another stated that the turnaround time was too long (Reynolds, 2010).

The librarians were asked to respond to an 11 question survey. The overwhelming concerns from the librarians were that the patrons would not select materials that were a worthwhile contribution to the collection or that they would select too many textbooks. In a follow up survey only some of the librarians indicated that their fears had been realized, most responded favorably (Reynolds, 2010).

Many university libraries have chosen to manage their patron driven acquisitions plan through interlibrary loan. There are several different ways of setting up this model and the specific vary from library to library depending on their needs and how the currently manage interlibrary loan.

The most in-depth plan is called the “Getting It System Toolkit” or GIST (Pitcher, 2010). This system was developed by librarians at the State University of New York (SUNY) College at Geneseo Milne Library. This library noticed that ILL was heavily used and they realized that this meant there was an unmet demand for materials in their collection. They set out to solve this problem with the GIST (Pitcher, 2010).

The foundation of the Getting it System Toolkit is the ILLiad software by Atlas Systems that the Milne library already used. ILLiad is very customizable and they were able to adapt this software to meet their needs. They made several key changes. They were able to embed information from external vendors into the ILLiad request screen. They added a question about
format type, as well as a link to Amazon.com, information from their library catalog, and a tool to assess whether the requested materials was available free online.

This information is available to the users and the staff members and is intended to help the patrons and the staff assess whether to buy or borrow the requested material. Patrons have the ability through the ILLiad request form to specify that they would like the book purchased instead of borrowed, giving the patrons a high level of collection development involvement. This toolkit also serves as a platform to streamline the exchange of materials from the ILL department to the Acquisitions department (Pitcher, 2010).

The developers of GIST are recently looking to new directions. They have expanded the toolkit to also manage gifts and deselection of materials (Pitcher, 2010). The librarians that developed the GIST have also created a support website. It is a valuable tool for any library looking to implement this system (http://www.gistlibrary.org/).

Other libraries have integrated patron driven acquisitions with interlibrary loan without using the Getting it System Toolkit. The Purdue University Libraries implemented a patron driven acquisitions program over a decade ago. On the tenth anniversary in 2009 they assessed the program. This library began the program by analyzing interlibrary loan requests for English-language scholarly books submitted by users. After the first ten years they had added nearly 10,000 items through patron suggests acquisitions (Anderson, 2010).

While this program allows users to request any book there are several guidelines the interlibrary loan staff looks at before sending the request on to be purchased. The books have to be in English, nonfiction, scholarly, published within the last five years, maximum cost of $150, and able to be shipped within one week from the bookseller. This library did not use
Amazon.com as a vendor as many other libraries with patron driven acquisitions programs did (Anderson, 2010).

The Purdue University Libraries placed a paper survey in each book they checked out to patrons after the purchase. They compiled the answers to the statistics from two spring semesters. This was a simple survey that just asked two questions, did the book arrive in a timely manner and was the book useful? The responses were mostly positive, out of 571 responses 564 said that the book arrived in a timely manner and 542 said that the book was useful (Anderson, 2010).

In 2008 Oregon State University Libraries implemented a purchase on demand task force. This task force was charged with researching options for implementing a purchase on demand program via interlibrary loan. This task force was also asked to identify criteria to assess the program’s success. This program called, “Buy Request,” was implemented on a trial basis from mid-February 2009 to mid-February 2010. The task force recommended that the program be limited to faculty and graduate students only, to keep costs down (Hussong-Chrisitan, 2010).

Participants in the program were asked several questions to assess the effectiveness of the program. One of the key questions asked was how likely the patron was to check out the book again. The majority of the patrons indicated that they would check out the material again. Most of the participants also responded that they would recommend the title or add it to a reading list. The survey also provided space for patrons to give free feedback. They discovered that the most important aspect of the program for patrons was turnaround time. Most patrons rated the program favorably in that area (Hussong-Chrisitan, 2010).
One of the main issues when implementing a purchase on demand program is making sure the collection remains balanced. A patron who was disgruntled pointed out that they did not believe the program was a good idea. This patron believed that by allowing users to develop the collection would produce gaping holes in the collection (Hussong-Chrisitan, 2010). This problem can and has been addressed in most patron driven acquisition systems. Limiting the type of material, price, year published, and language, to name a few, can direct the patrons requests to keep the materials appropriate for the library collection.

With the fairly recent surge in available e-books more libraries are implementing a purchase on demand model for e-books. The University of Nevada, Reno implemented one such program in the spring of 2011. UNR has an agreement with the e-book seller EBook Library (EBL). This library set certain parameters for the books they wanted their patrons to have access to. The books had to be from the most current three years, under $150, and in English or Spanish only. There is no limit on the type of book; they have included items such as trail guidebooks and the popular “For Dummies” series (A. Beisler, personal communication, August 6, 2012).

Patrons can access any book in the EBL library that has been loaded into the library catalog and trigger a short term loan or a purchase without even knowing it. After five short term loans the e-book is purchased. Each short term loan costs roughly 10% of the purchase price, in turn saving the library thousands of dollars on books that may only be used once or twice (A. Beisler, personal communication, August 6, 2012).

This is a fairly common model for a purchase on demand b-book model in libraries. The University of Arizona Libraries has a very similar agreement with EBook Library. They have set different parameters to meet the needs of their patrons (Jones, 2011).
With so many options for patron driven acquisitions how is a library to know what is the best approach or if it is even a good idea. Many libraries are implementing at least pilot projects, but do the statistics really support spending the time and staffing needed to implement such a program?

Several libraries that have implemented patron driven acquisitions have statistics that lean in favor of the projects. At the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) the librarians conducted an in depth survey of their purchase on demand program to assess its effectiveness. The program had been in operation for five and a half years and more than 68,000 books had been purchased in that time period. This library broke down the costs of the program, buying versus borrowing. They also looked at the circulation statistics (Tyler, 2011).

UNL found that the cost of purchasing books varied throughout the LC subclasses, but when looking at the overall big picture they found that the purchase on demand books tended to be slightly more expensive. However, the authors of the study argue that, “money saved on books with lower prices is money wasted if those books do not get used” (Tyler, 2011, pg.66).

According to this study at UNL the purchase on demand books do get used, and they get used a great deal. When this library reviewed their circulation data they found that a large number of books that had cost the library less money to purchase had been sitting uncirculated for quite a long time. Some people argue that the purchase on demand books have an advantage in circulation statistics because of the almost guaranteed first checkout. UNL tried to fix this problem by taking the first circulation out of the number for the purchase on demand books. They discovered that even with one circulation removed the purchase on demand titles had less idle books (Tyler, 2011).
Purdue University Libraries and The library at the University of Wisconsin-Madison also analyzed their circulation statistics for purchase on demand books. Both libraries found that the purchase on demand books circulate at a higher rate than book acquired through traditional acquisition methods. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison they found that at the end of the first 24 months of the program items purchased circulation an average of 3.5 times. They also discovered that 73 percent of the items had circulated at least twice (Allen, 2003).

Patron driven acquisitions with e-books, as mentioned previously, can save a library a significant amount of money. Instead of buying a book for one use a library can pay a small amount of money for a patron to access the e-book with a short term loan. With EBook Library program at the University of Nevada, Reno students can print around 50 pages, or download the book for one or seven days, or simply view the book online. All these actions count as one short term loan (A. Beisler, personal communication, August 6, 2012).

The data shows that it is a good idea for libraries to integrate some type of patron driven acquisitions. The question is which method is the best. Well, it depends on the library, but according to the literature all methods have positives and negatives. The answer to this question also depends on the available budget at the library and the available staff to carry out the program. The budget and type of books purchased can be carefully controlled with every type of purchase on demand model.

A good place to start when getting into patron driven acquisitions is an agreement with an e-book vendor. In a society like ours that thrives on instant gratification libraries can fill this desire by participating in an e-book purchase on demand program. Patrons get access to books online immediately. This option will likely take the least amount to staff time. It will, of course
still take staff time, but probably only a couple librarians need to be involved. If the institution has a collection development librarian this person would be a good place to start. The majority of the staff time would be devoted to developing the criteria for the records to be loaded into the catalog and actually loading the records.

Incorporating a patron driven acquisitions program not integrated with interlibrary loan would be the next step up in staff time required, and integrating patron driven acquisitions with interlibrary loan would be the most work intensive program to get started and to maintain. However, intergrading with interlibrary loan is very simple for users. Patrons do not have to adapt to filling out any additional form; they just use the ILLiad request form they are already familiar with.

The decision to develop and integrate a patron driven acquisition program will be different for each library as each institution is different. There are three clear options and much documentation on each to guide librarians through the process. Patron driven acquisitions is a great program for libraries to institute. With tight budgets and low staffing levels it can be difficult to meet users’ needs as well as every librarian wants to. Patron driven acquisitions is a way to pinpoint user needs and deliver exactly what they want. Every library should consider some type of patron driven acquisition program. Money will be better spent because the materials will be well used.
References


