
Balancing the Books

Valerie W. Lovett

Between 1982 and 1985, Wake County Public Libraries became one of the premier public library systems in the United States. It redirected its book selection policy and used a rapidly growing book budget to create unparalleled circulation growth among American public libraries in the past three-and-a-half years. Its creative approaches to the challenges offered by growth can be examined by others wishing to create a pro-active library system whether or not a rapid growth dynamic exists.

Growth does not guarantee the progress one anticipates. The initial years of book budget expansion at Wake County are an example of this situation. From FY 1979 through FY 1981, the book budget increased 60 per cent, but book circulation only increased 13.5 per cent. During this time a six-month cataloging backlog existed, book selection lagged months behind bookstore availability of titles, long waiting lists queued for best sellers, and the entire process choked on paperwork. Clearly, the library system did not use the opportunity provided by budget growth to give better service to the community. It merely continued to do what it had previously done.

Before the Wake County system could progress, it had to recognize that growth creates new situations that must be dealt with through alternative approaches to library operations. New approaches must be relevant to the goals and objectives of the library system; otherwise the management process will make changes that are no more relevant than maintaining the status quo.

Rapid increases in Wake County's book budget highlighted two areas in which change had to occur in order to capitalize upon that growth. First, the technical services department could not continue its current practices in the same manner and handle the increased book purchases. The option of increased staff was not available. Second, the book selection philosophy and its concomitant procedures had to be reexamined because the available new funds were not

producing proportional increases in circulation.

Both areas were addressed during FY 1982. The new library director, Tom Moore, set a performance objective for technical services that books were to leave that department fully processed within five days of receipt. This objective recognized the public service need of having materials promptly available to the public.

This objective forced the technical services staff to examine every aspect of the acquisitions and cataloging process. During the analysis, all procedures were flowcharted and questioned from this perspective: "Does this procedure directly benefit public service? Is it a procedure that has lost its meaning over the years? Is it being done for internal reasons that are not cost beneficial? Is it being done because it is a standard technical service procedure but not necessarily relevant to public libraries in general or this library specifically? If we stop doing this, or do it another way, who will notice and will the difference directly improve public service?"

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Some of the major changes implemented by staff were: (1) using the available accounting subsystem of the on-line ordering system to do all accounting, thereby eliminating all paper files; (2) eliminating individual branch book budgets and instructing branches to buy what they needed; (3) converting the shelflist to a title file and combining all on-order/in-process files with it, thereby simplifying searching procedures for the order section, cataloging, reserves, and ILL; and (4) removing the accessioning process from the book flow by ceasing to add accession numbers to holdings information.

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Changes made in Wake's technical services department showed positive results. In 1982 the department processed 53,474 books. In 1985 it will process 104,000 books with fewer staff.

These are not traditional solutions to technical services production problems; however, given the stated objective, technical services found innovative ways to reach the objective without diluting the quality of its product. Indeed, technical services operations must contribute to the timely availability of materials, not impede them.

The same statement can be made about the book selection and acquisitions process of a library system. Unlike its approach to the operations problems of the technical services department, library administration initially addressed the existing problems in book selection and acquisitions from a philosophical basis. From the analysis of book budget growth vs. circulation growth, from the data collected during a system-wide inventory, from the reserve lists for popular materials, and from the comments by library users, it was evident that the library system was not purchasing materials in a way that satisfied patron demand.

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With this information in hand, the administrative staff had extensive discussions about the direction book selection should take. An examination of the Baltimore County Public Library's approach to book selection favorably impressed the administrative staff. Thus, the administration moved from the philosophy of the traditional balanced collection to a philosophy of demand buying, i.e., providing current patrons the materials they want and need in sufficient quantity so that they are reasonably certain of finding that material when they come into the libraries. Therefore, the collection is balanced based on user needs rather than on arbitrary standards of collection composition.

Putting that emphasis into practice required restructuring the entire selection and order process. Selection was centralized into a book selection committee, meeting weekly and composed of administrative staff and branch heads. Batch ordering for all branches was reintroduced, thereby improving upon the efficiencies achieved in the order section the previous year. Pre-publication

purchasing from ads was accelerated. Everything necessary was done to insure that Wake had enough copies of a book in its branches by the time that a bookstore was displaying the same book.

A decision to purchase a title is based upon the question of the quantity that is needed in the system. It is as important to purchase 4 copies of Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Poems* as 297 copies of Joe McGinniss's *Fatal Vision*.

The selection process has been an evolutionary one. One cannot implement demand buying without making mistakes. Procedures have changed over the past three years as the entire staff has become more experienced in the process, and we expect change to continue. What has not altered is the philosophy behind the selection—that public libraries exist to provide the public with the materials that they want to read and that public use is the yardstick by which a library system measures and evaluates its performance.

Examining Public Response

Public response to the redirection of the selection philosophy can be examined. From FY 1982 to FY 1985 the book budget of the library system grew 112 per cent (from \$406,980 to \$861,700). Projected circulation growth through the same period is 113 per cent (from 1,080,993 to 2,300,000). This is a measurably better performance in materials selection than the 60 per cent book budget growth vs. 13.5 per cent circulation growth in the preceding three fiscal years. The proportionality of the two growth rates is a valid indication that Wake County is on the proper course. However, it appears that the system has reached the crossover point for these figures. In the future, circulation growth should be greater than book budget growth as a cumulative result of better book selection and collection management.

Rapid growth in a book budget is not a prerequisite condition to demand buying. Any library can examine public response to its purchasing by looking at its circulation figures in a variety of ways—circulations per capita, population growth vs. circulations growth, potential circulation projection vs. real circulation, and so forth. If the examination does not show an active and increasing response to book purchases in the use of the collection, that library should not be satisfied with its performance. It should re-examine its philosophy of buying, remembering that it is accountable ultimately to its paying customers, the taxpayers, for effective use of their tax dollars.