
Approval Plans as a Method of Collection Development

Sallie E. Mann

Over the past four decades, the subject of book selection has occupied a prominent place in the professional literature of librarianship. Few topics have been so consistently under professional scrutiny as the process by which library materials are selected and acquired.

"Herman Fussler, when he was director of libraries at the University of Chicago, voiced this opinion: 'I venture to say that (a) the most important, and (b) one of the most difficult activities in ... a [research] library is the selection of books and other materials.' Harvard librarian Kayes [sic] Metcalf expressed a similar view in 1950: 'The greatest single problem in acquisition for a research library ... is the selection of new books ...' Speaking before an international audience in 1967, J. Periam Danton stated his conviction that book selection 'is the most fundamental, the most challenging and the most indispensable function of a library.' He added that 'aside from the fundamental consideration of budgetary support there are no matters of greater importance for the library—and its patrons.' Another writer, James Skipper, then assistant director of libraries at Princeton, expressed precisely the same opinion in saying 'I can think of no higher responsibility of a library than to build the best possible collections, with the resources available.'"¹

"With the feeling of professional pride and responsibility for book selection running so deep in the ethos of librarianship, it is understandable that academic librarians have viewed with concern selection techniques which tend to shift the responsibility for book selection from the library to other individuals or agencies. Especially have librarians been skeptical of commercial agencies which offer to select or pre-screen books for individual libraries. Traditionally ... academic library collections have been built jointly by librarians and faculty members ... Historically, in many colleges and universities primary responsibility for

book selection has been vested in the academic departments, while in others this function was carried out almost entirely by librarians. Between these two extremes, a broad spectrum of selection practices has developed, delineated by various combinations of shared responsibility. Regardless of where the ultimate decision-making authority for book selection lay, however, the actual selection process almost always involved a separate decision, either by faculty members or librarians, for each title added to the library. Thus academic library collections were the cumulative result of hundreds upon hundreds of individual decisions."²

A pattern of selection has been slowly evolving in which an increasing amount of scholarly library materials are being acquired more or less automatically through a variety of acquisition programs known as *blanket order plans*, *gathering plans*, and *approval plans*. Though these various programs differ somewhat in purpose and scope, they all are designed to supply mass quantities of books without the library staff initiating individual orders. These purchasing plans are essentially an agreement between a library and an agent or publisher in which the library agrees to purchase all of a certain set of publications or to select from books sent and return any unwanted books.

Almost all research libraries active in acquisitions have found it necessary to set up approval plans for books published in the United States, Latin America, Western Europe, and other countries or language areas of particular interest to their curriculum. These plans, which are defined in nature and scope by the needs of each particular institution, have been necessitated by the ever-increasing numbers of contemporary publications that have made it almost impossible for any library to order these multitudes of titles on an individual basis. Since unwanted titles can be returned, these comprehensive plans do not obviate the principles of selection. The library has an opportunity to review what titles are to come and what others are required before the volumes actually arrive.

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Divided Opinion

The published literature shows divided opinion on the question of whether these plans actually improve the overall acquisition programs of the libraries they serve. Proponents of approval plans point out that they are practical, provide for better evaluation of the material in question, deliver books soon after publication, speed up the acquisition process, reduce clerical costs by the convenience of single billing and elimination of single orders, minimize bibliographic checking, and assure broader coverage of current monographs. They also argue that, by providing automatic coverage of certain categories of new publications, approval plans free librarians and teaching faculty to concentrate their selection efforts on the more obscure items and on retrospective collection building.

On the other hand, these plans are not without critics. Opponents maintain that the mass purchasing plans tend to produce canned libraries—all having virtually the same collections—and that most plans fail to supply multiple copies, so additional ordering is required. Critics claim that it is difficult to determine whether particular titles will be received and that evaluation is more

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difficult and time-consuming because books are frequently received before scholarly reviews are available. Some maintain that by participating in these programs, academic librarians may actually be slowly abdicating their responsibility to build strong collections geared to the unique needs of a given academic community. This would be particularly true in cases where the library staff fails to evaluate carefully incoming books or neglects to follow up the approval plan with individual orders for books missed by the dealer's selection network.

Blanket orders are, in effect, a broad based standing order. Examples of blanket orders would be agreements to purchase everything published by a university press or all new books published in a designated subject area from a selected publisher. Normally, a characteristic of a blanket order is that the library must pay for and keep whatever material is sent.

Approval order plans, on the other hand, are books sent by arrangement, or if you will, "on approval." These plans are set up so that unwanted volumes may be returned. They are usually initiated as an attempt to speed up and make more efficient the acquisition of new publications, usually on a rather broad scale. A typical example would be asking a jobber to supply a library with all publications in English, selecting specific subject areas to be covered. Within the framework of broad subject categories, exclusions would be determined; for example, no fiction, no medicine, or no lower-level textbooks. The major difference between blanket and approval plans is the option to select and return books not wanted to the jobber.

To cope with acquisitions problems, academic libraries have implemented blanket orders and approval plans. Traditionally, book selection in academic libraries has operated under the strong influence of the teaching faculty. Pressures to acquire even greater quantities of materials in a time when there is an increasing number of titles from which to select have produced a trend away from faculty selection and title-by-title ordering of books. Consequently, a larger role in selection of materials is being given to librarians as a result of heavier reliance upon blanket orders and approval plans for book acquisition. Some libraries have developed a corps of bibliographers, each with one or more subject areas for which they are responsible. They initiate book orders and are responsible for the depth and maintenance of the collection in their respective areas.

Approval plans are becoming more the rule than exception for selection in large academic libraries. Summarizing a report on approval plans of forty-four academic libraries, Norman Dudley reiterated the need for careful review of approval materials received. He indicated "that if materials are not reviewed with thought, discrimination, and some measure of professional expertise, if close contact fails to be maintained with bibliographic sources, and if new orders are not generated, then it is likely that the library will lose its flexibility and fail to meet its responsibility to respond to changes in the academic environment."³

Raney's Study

Leon Raney conducted a study of the effects of a domestic approval plan on book selection in a given academic library. His study simulates the application of a commercial approval program to a medium-sized academic library for the purpose

of determining how closely approval plan selections relate to the existing pattern of book selection in that library. The investigation was designed primarily to answer the question: Is it possible to program the selection mechanism of one of the leading domestic approval plans in such a way that it will automatically supply within certain categories a high percentage of the titles that would have been acquired by a given library through conventional acquisition methods, and at the same time screen out a high percentage of titles that would not have been selected through conventional methods? The study addresses the question of general adaptability of such a program to the existing pattern of book selection in a medium-sized library.

In Raney's study, he states that "it would seem reasonable to conclude that the adoption of an approval plan would not per se result in better book selection or an improved acquisition program at the participating library, although the potential for both would seem to be present in the program simulated in the study. If an approval plan were entered into after a thorough review of strengths and weaknesses of the library collection, if in the process an effort were made to correct deficiencies of the present selection mechanism, if librarians and faculty members worked jointly in developing the library profile, if flexibility of the dealer's profiling technique were fully exploited, if titles pre-selected by the approval system were reviewed with the same discrimina-

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tion that is applied to other library acquisitions, and if libraries and/or faculty members continue to select appropriate titles which are not covered by the approval system, then the approval program could serve as a focal point for overall improvement in the selection and acquisition effort."⁴

Approval plans are an established method for the acquisition of books and have been made a part of many academic libraries' acquisitions programs. An approval plan can be a collection development tool that begins in the acquisitions department. The acquisitions role is emphasized in two results of the study done by Kathleen McCullough, Edwin Posey, and Doyle Pickett:

"that 3/4 of the librarians responding said their plans were initiated because they were believed to be an efficient acquisitions tool and that acquisitions department personnel were involved in initiating the plans nearly 60% of the time as contrasted with collection-development personnel, less than 20% of the time. Because of the ultimate function of an approval plan, the collection development role should be strengthened both in practice and in subsequent research and discussion in the literature."⁵

Acquisitions is the point at which an approval plan procedure starts; collection development is the point at which it ends. It is possible, given staff and time, to organize the special procedures needed for an approval plan into a reasonably efficient routine, at least for those procedures that are under the control of the acquisitions department. If the approval plan ultimately serves collection development well, the additional effort needed to administer it is justified.

"The professional staff must become practiced at approval plan apologetics and exegetics and at mediation among the various interested parties: teaching faculty, selection librarians, vendors and processing staff."⁶ An understanding of approval plans is important to any acquisitions librarian, whether or not he works in depth with such plans. To understand these procedures is to understand some of the important techniques of acquisitions. The financial crunch of the present, which promises to extend into the future, will no doubt mean that the days of the grandly sweeping acquisitions of all appropriate titles in given areas may be over. On the other hand, the continuation of approval plans with carefully constructed profiles, limited and and closely defined, can serve as a viable method of collection development if they are constantly monitored to assure that the profile reflects the needs of the institution and if selection is done systematically and conscientiously with the user in mind.

References

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2. Raney, 3.
3. G. Edward Evans and Claudia White Argyres, "Approval Plans and Collection Development in Academic Libraries," *Library Resources and Technical Services* 18 (Winter 1974): 41.
4. Raney, 243.
5. Kathleen McCullough, Edwin D. Posey, and Doyle C. Pickett, *Approval Plans and Academic Libraries* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1977), 124.
6. McCullough, et al., 131.