

## An Acquired Taste

By Donna Heady

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Over the past decade, academic libraries have undergone sweeping changes in the way they are developed and organized to function as information providers for disparate users. Through use of modern technologies, card-based catalogs and print indexes have metamorphosed into online and/or web-based reference and text retrievers. There has been an increasing reliance on resource sharing to provide for patrons who have research needs that are beyond the library's ability to acquire, spawning an emphasis on providing information "just in time" in place of the more traditional emphasis on building a "just in case" collection. Databases and indexes are moving steadily toward the online format, and electronic, full-text journals continue to become more prevalent.

In the face of the many changes that have occurred, the need to acquire information in the form of the scholarly monograph has remained a constant for libraries that are attempting to provide for the research requirements of their academic patrons. Although it would be impossible for any library to provide within its own collection every item to which a patron might require access, the library must still be a source of the basic needs of its user community. In developing a collection to meet these needs, the University Libraries at Western Michigan University employs both an approval plan for monographic acquisitions and a liaison program to foster communication between the academic departments and the Libraries.

### A KEY APPROVAL PLAN

The majority of the monographic titles purchased by the University Libraries comes as the result of an approval plan that is designed to insure that the basic materials needed to support old and new academic programs at WMU are automatically added to the collection. The current administrator of the University's approval plan is Blackwell North America, re-

nowned for its representation of academic and scholarly publishers. Blackwell has been in use for some eighteen months and was put into place only after the creation of a "current" profile that represents the Libraries' collection parameters. Those collection parameters are built on existing and planned curricula as well as research strengths. In many instances, representatives from academic units reviewed classification categories and selected the categories that would automatically generate purchase without the need for an order to be placed. Although attention to books received is still necessary to make sure that the titles supplied actually fall within our criteria, such a plan does allow a more efficient means to select essential monographs. This, in turn, frees up personnel to pursue other professional assignments and seek out items not automatically processed by Blackwell. Moreover, the approval plan provides monographs in a timely fashion since individually reviewing material, selecting, preparing orders, placing orders, and waiting for the receipt of the titles take much more time to complete—especially if the selector waits for reviews to be published.

The most prominent feature of the approval profile is the subject category, but factors such as publisher, price, language, and country of origin also enter in the determination of whether or not the University Libraries will receive a particular book. Monographs that fall within the established parameters are shipped automatically; titles that are determined, upon receipt, to be unsuitable are returned to

the vendor. During the 1997-98 fiscal year, the University Libraries received 9,831 books through automatic shipment.

Books that are automatically shipped are, however, only part of the approval plan service. For titles that are outside the predetermined parameters of the profile, such as those that fit targeted subject categories, but are over an acceptable price, and those that are in subject categories that are more peripheral to the University's curricular emphases, the vendor supplies notification slips. These slips are distributed to the library liaisons—library faculty with specific subject assignments—who then determine if that title is still appropriate for the collection. Another 5,973 books were received during the 1997-98 fiscal year through use of the notification slips provided as part of the approval plan. When taken together, the books received automatically and those received due to the notification slips comprise approximately 58% of the monographic titles purchased by the University Libraries in the last fiscal year.

### LIAISONS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The second component of collection development at WMU is the liaison librarians. Liaison librarians, working in conjunction with teaching faculty from the academic departments/programs, are responsible for keeping abreast of curricular changes and faculty research interests. As a result, individualized selection of materials for programs and faculty

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ACQUISITIONS AT WORK: Elizabeth Thies, Judi Canaan, Paul Heintz, Terri Stowers, Robin Williams, Betty Glen (left to right)



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research is accomplished and orders placed. Furthermore, liaison librarians can work with the faculty to provide library instruction targeted to a particular course or curriculum. Along with monitoring faculty requests, librarians search reviews, bibliographies, and publishers' catalogs to identify sources otherwise missed. This also gives the liaison a basis by which to monitor the reliability of the approval plan, i.e., does the plan produce from Blackwell the monographs that the University expects—or must they be individually ordered?

### **AND, BEHIND THE SCENES ...**

Another cohort of individuals is also essential to the acquisitions process at Western Michigan University. The business of acquiring books, as well as video, slides, and other media added as a one-time purchase, is performed for WMU by the Monographic Acquisitions Department located on the lower level of Waldo Library. Formerly a combined unit that handled all materials acquisitions, Serial Resources and Monographic Acquisitions were established as separate departments within the last year and a library faculty member was recruited to oversee monographic resources. This reorganization reflects the need to deal with growing complexities resulting from recent developments in electronic media as well as the many new graduate programs and the current University priority to achieve Research II status.

Responsibility to accomplish all of the acquisition procedures implied in the past few paragraphs rests with a librarian, 3 full-time staff members, and 5 student assistants. Each locally generated order must have verified bibliographic information, avoid unwanted duplication, be monitored for receipt, and have payment generated. Although these steps seem, at first glance, somewhat straightforward, each order request must wend its way along a challenging path before it ultimately reaches the library patron. Checking the online catalog, *WestCat*, is only the first of many checks to avoid duplication of materials or the acquisition of the wrong title. When records are imported into the catalog from some external bibliographic utility, they often contain information not included in the original order requests. Acquisitions staff must have the knowledge to interpret the records, and discuss them accurately with the Cata-

logging and Serial Resources Departments, as well as with the publishers, vendors, and even the person who placed the order. The process of selecting a vendor includes weighing the best price or discount against factors such as which vendor supplies titles most quickly or is able to fill a larger percentage of the requests. Once received, each book has to be verified against online records to assure that the right title was received; authorization for payment is sent to the Business Office, and online records are updated since the catalog does indicate when items are on order or are being cataloged. Each item is also "charged" against the monies that are budgeted for respective departments, and, as the year progresses, overall budgets are closely monitored to determine if funds are available for special purchases.

The approval plan reduces both the demands on faculty selection of material, and the number of orders that must be processed through the Monographic Acquisitions Department. However, the boon to acquisitions staff is limited since all of the procedural steps noted above also apply to all orders generated by approval notification forms, and most of the steps apply to books received automatically. Order requests placed by teaching faculty and library faculty must be monitored for possible inclusion in the approval plan, requiring the staff to maintain a working knowledge of the plan and any modifications so that they can guide orders through the correct channels.

### **THE RIGHT BOOK...THE RIGHT TIME**

The entire ordering process is performed against a backdrop of a rapidly changing technological environment. The staff of the University Libraries struggles to stay current with updates to vendor databases and verification tools. Most recently, the University Libraries' migration to a totally new and Web-based online system has meant a total revamping of procedures to handle basic monographic acquisitions—the core of the Libraries' collections. All of this is handled while the day to day tasks never change, and individual demands are inevitable—a last minute order for a class reserve, a special request for a graduate research project, an immediate replacement for a lost book, a much-needed but out-of-print title for professor at a critical stage in her research. Selection, ordering, receipt, then on to cataloging and the shelf—all done with the hope that "the right book" gets into the hands of "the right person at the right time."

## *The Book Man*

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"A.V., I hate to interrupt your work, but Melvil's question is the type only you can process."

Arnold Vobble tried to conceal his irritation at being interrupted. He did not like to be bothered while he was squinting through his optical scanner just when a new collection of mini-miniature-ultrami-crofiche had arrived.

"I see you've taken the day off to go fishing, A.V.," Mrs. Jones said in a tone of calculated levity.

"I'll try to help you if I can, Mrs. Jones, but I don't understand how archives can help you with an intellectual freedom issue."

"Melvil has a client who says he wants to look at a book and I thought you might just have one stored away somewhere down here."

"Come again?"

"Dewey wants a book."

"Please shut the door and don't talk so loud. Excuse me, Mrs. Jones, but this is very serious, indeed, and we ought to keep it as confidential as possible. Now will you tell me exactly what you want, Dewey? Say what you have to say slowly and clearly—right here into the multimedia recorder."

Melvil cleared his throat and said, "A very old man upstairs at the reference desk asked me if we had a book he could look at. He said that's why he came to the—the—library."

"He said library, too, did he?" chortled Vobble, his historical imagination now aroused.

"Yes, any book, he said, just as long as he could see it. He said he didn't want to touch it—just see it."

"Well, well, you know this sort of request ought to be videotaped and digitally recorded for the sake of posterity. It would make an interesting presentation at the next meeting of the Archival Information Access Association. You realize, of course, that we don't have any books in archives anymore?"

"Does that mean you can't help the old gentleman?" Melvil asked.

"No, but he will have to settle for a telefacsimile reproduction. We do have one or two books preserved in that form to illustrate the early days of bibliographic technology. He has to sign a waiver, of course, promising not to reproduce the reproduction."

"Alright, I'll see if that will do," Melvil

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