

A Role for Faculty in Academic Collection Development

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The philosopher Hegel is sometimes said to have believed that ideas develop dialectically through three stages. In the first stage, an idea called the “thesis” is advanced as true. In the second stage, an opposing idea, called the “antithesis”, is advanced against it. In the third stage, called the “synthesis”, the thesis and the antithesis are combined to form a new idea that contains elements of both. The three ideas that I will discuss of the role of faculty in collection development follow this pattern.

For 28 years I have been represented the philosophy faculty in its dealings with the library. Aside from my academic credentials, my only preparation for this role was a job I held while a graduate student. That job was to compile lists of monographs by and about major western philosophers for eventual purchase by the library. Since that gave me more experience with collection development than any of the other members of the philosophy faculty, my colleagues asked me to take charge of ordering materials in philosophy, to become informed about library policies and issues, and to keep them informed about any prospective changes in policies. So I became what I will call the library representative for philosophy. There have been numerous changes since then. Libraries have become stronger, and, as a result, my duties as library representative have evolved. What I have learned about academic collection development during the three stages of this evolution is my subject today.

Since I am talking from my own experience, it will perhaps be helpful if I begin by describing my university. By American standards, Montana State University is a medium sized quasi-technical university. It is a land grant university. Most American states have a land grant institution. These institutions were established by an act of Congress that granted each state tracts of land for the support of public universities. In order to accept the grant each state had to found a public university, a land grant university, which would teach agriculture, engineering, and military science. Since agricultural and engineering programs are expensive to operate,

most states have only one public institution offering them. Because these programs require technical training, land grant universities tend to be oriented more toward science and technology than other institutions. In recent years most of these universities, like mine, have added programs in business, the humanities, and the social sciences, and some of these programs now have large enrollments. Montana is one of the largest states in geographical area, but one of the smallest in population, so it is one of the smallest land grant institutions. Still, with 500 faculty members, 11,700 students, an annual budget of \$71,000,000, and research grants of \$61,000,000, it qualifies as a medium sized American university.

When I began as a library representative in 1973, there was a growing realization among faculty that older ways of purchasing titles were inadequate. According to the model we then used, the thesis to use Hegel's language, the titles purchased were almost exclusively selected by professors. Each faculty was given a specified library allotment and this was generally divided among individual professors in that faculty or department. Each professor then selected the titles he or she wished. Since serials and journals require annual subscriptions, professors who requested serials agreed to purchase the serial subscription for three years from their allotments. After that the library assumed the responsibility. All titles requested by professors were then ordered without any evaluation on the part of librarians. Librarians did not compare any requests to existing resources, they did not consider the quality of the publisher or the reputation of the author, and they did not try to determine whether it would be used.

This system has some advantages. Professors have expertise in their fields and they are able to order the titles as needed for their teaching and research. But it also has serious disadvantages. Among them is the fact that not all professors are responsible. Examples of this are unfortunately not hard to find. One of my colleagues in political science simply took piles of catalogues to our departmental secretary and told her to place orders. She did, too, even though she had no training in political science. A philosophy professor (who fortunately left just before I arrived) spent his portion of the philosophy allotment buying the New York Edition of the complete works of novelist Henry James. Henry James is an important American writer, so the addition of his collected works to our library was valuable. What was irresponsible was that the

following year this professor spent his library allotment buying a second set of the same edition of Henry James' works. A number of years later the New York edition was replaced by a better one, so in the interests of saving space, the library discarded both sets. A third professor spent his allotment purchasing the collected works of a very minor American writer, Orestes Brownson. To the best of my knowledge this 20 volume set has never been used. It just sits of the shelf taking up space, gathering dust, and needing to be moved every time shelves are rearranged.

Professors like these are, I believe, in the minority, but this system has many more disadvantages than this. For one thing, professors tend to purchase titles in their own areas of special interest. At a school the size of Montana State, one professor is frequently responsible for several areas. As a result, some areas get neglected. Furthermore, the inevitable turnover of professors results in a lack of continuity in the collection over time. When I arrived at Montana State the library had a small, but up-to-date collection on Belgian socialism. After the professor who developed it left, it languished. Then there is the problem of territoriality. Professors typically want to have interdisciplinary titles, but also want the other faculty, whatever that happens to be, to buy them. "They ought to buy that!" was a phrase I heard more than I care to remember. Often no one buys interdisciplinary titles--to the detriment of the collection. Finally, virtually no one takes care of purchasing titles for general education. General education is a primary responsibility for American universities, even the more technical ones. Members of the present generation of professionally trained students are expected to experience several career changes before retirement. This means that they cannot rely on their professional skills alone for their future success. They require versatile skills such as writing and speaking effectively. They also require general knowledge and the ability to add to it by finding and critically assessing information. This is what general education provides. But general education requires library materials. When professors order titles, these materials are often in short supply, much to the annoyance of many students.

As my colleagues and I worked to build an adequate collection, these problems became increasingly obvious. Working separately, we had failed to build a collection that was adequate for our institutional purposes. Some other method of building the collection was required, one

that would draw on the expertise of librarians. Such a method, the antithesis of the first, was provided by a new library director. Her idea was for librarians to order titles and for faculty to approve or reject them. She was confident that with their professional expertise, librarians would select titles more effectively than professors. She persuaded us to adopt her plan by using the slogan, "I'd rather have it in the collection before you have to request it." There are basically two different ways American libraries have tried to do this. The first is to employ librarians as subject experts who work either in the main library or in specialized branch libraries such as physics or architecture. In this system librarians divide the collection into parts, and each librarian orders titles for his or her part. This requires considerable expertise on the part of the library staff and is, consequently, expensive. Higher salaries are required to attract the desired experts. The other way that American libraries have done this is to have the primary responsibility for journals and serials reside with librarians and deal with monographs by contracting with a vendor for an approval plan. Because of the tremendous inflation of serial prices, particularly from 1985 to 1998, ordering new serial titles basically meant canceling titles of a value equal to the value of any new titles to be added. This made for very difficult decisions within a single discipline and library representatives often had a hard time trying to convince their colleagues that cuts were necessary and that if the faculty could not identify the titles to be canceled. The librarians would do it for them. Many faculty members preferred to let the librarians handle these situations. Given the very negative environment of serial cancellations and the time consuming work required to coordinate the evaluations and cancellations of journals on an almost annual basis, librarians were far better suited to manage these decisions. This activity resulted in a loss of research ground and put librarians and faculty at odds. For a long time the blame for the cancellations was directed at librarians, not at the marketplace. With the current move towards electronic journals and the need for license negotiations and technical enabling of access, the responsibility for the journals and other serials has continued to lie primarily with the library.

Approval plans, on the other hand, were initiated for books by a contract with a vendor or vendors as wholesalers to the library market and particularly the academic library market. And approval plan, used primarily for monographs, but sometimes including sample issues of new journals, enables libraries to specify subjects of interest and appropriate levels of content and

presentation. Under such a plan a vendor provides a subject scheme or outline, either based on the classification scheme used by the library or on another outline of disciplines and topics. The library then uses this subject outline to specify subject or whole disciplines of interest for their collection. The library can then also specify a particular level of content and presentation such as general interest, undergraduate, graduate, professional, etc., that is appropriate for materials on each subject given the degree programs of the university. In many approval plans the library can also specify particular publishers to include or exclude based on their reputations for quality and on their importance. Thus publications by IEEE might be very important if one has an electrical engineering program but of no interest at all if the university's focus is on the humanities or social sciences. Approval plans can also be adjusted to accommodate varied levels of funding and can include books shipped automatically for inspection by the library and faculty with the right to reject and return any that do not meet with approval. Plans might also include notification in the forms of lists, bibliographic slips or online databases of other titles that might be of interest but did not fit the core profile. Members of the faculty, primarily library representatives, and librarians then examine the shipment to determine whether the titles should be added to the collection and whether any of the titles on the slips should be sent for inspection. Titles from the slips requested are then included in future shipments. Titles that are approved are added to the collection, titles that are not are returned. Because of its cost efficiency, my university contracted with a vendor for just such an approval plan.

This system changed the role of faculty in collection development radically. Professors still occasionally ordered serials, but more often their role was to prioritize existing serials in the face of rapidly increasing serial prices so that the least valuable ones would be discontinued. Rather than ordering books, faculty members now simply examined titles for possible addition to the collection. This system has definite advantages. It is more efficient because each title does not now need to be individually ordered, it requires less faculty time, and it promotes the acquisition of a better collection for the university as a whole. Titles are responsibly selected, the collection is better integrated, and it has more continuity over time. Nevertheless, it soon became apparent that this system too has its problems. The major one is coherence. Monographic titles are current titles and they are sorted by the vendor without consideration for

the existing resources of each institution. To take an example from the humanities, a vendor might classify a book of analysis and criticism about Nobel Prize winning poet Derek Walcott as appropriate for all undergraduate collections. But if one has none of Derek Walcott's works in one's collection, this is not a useful addition. One could, of course, take this as an occasion to purchase some of Walcott's verse. But this required additional resources and purchases outside of the approval plan. As plans are sometimes administered, there are no such resources. This was the case at Montana State. And additional problem is that if important titles that are no longer current titles are not already in one's collection, there is no effective means of ordering them. A further problem was that while the approval plan offers a better collection overall, the vendor's staff responsible for identifying and classifying monographs are generally less knowledgeable about the needs of universities than professors teaching at those universities. But when professors clamor for additional titles, this often falls on deaf ears or at least resource poor ears—to the detriment of the collection. So while this second method of collection development was clearly an improvement over the first, it too had deficiencies, and these became increasingly obvious to both faculty members and librarians.

The obvious solution, one followed by the next library director, was a synthesis of the two previous methods. This method combines ordering by professors with management by librarians. The key to this is to commit fewer resources to the approval plan and more to direct requests from the faculty. This is a far better plan since it allows the pooling of different kinds of expertise to build an even better collection. But it requires a kind of cooperation between faculty and librarians that can be difficult to sustain. The key is for librarians and faculty members to see themselves as players in a joint endeavor. This can be difficult on both sides. Many librarians see themselves either as part of a support staff whose job is to locate resources for students and members of the faculty or as having their own special role which they are free to pursue just as faculty often pursue their—without consideration of the institution as a whole. Many faculty members also see librarians in one of these two ways. These faculty members tend to see themselves as the primary repositories of knowledge. One of my colleagues in history, when asked for his sources for titles he wished to receive on interlibrary loan, would reply that as a historian he is his own source. For this third method to work, librarians and faculty members

have to assume new roles with respect to each other. Librarians have to become more involved in the educational process. This requires them to acquire more expertise themselves and to involve themselves in the same sorts of demands as those to which faculty are subjected—professional service and research. Faculty have to become self-critical. They need to put their own discipline into perspective within the university as a whole. That is, they need to be able to prioritize their requests to librarians and to judge the importance of their needs relative to other pressing needs in the university. This can be a difficult transition for both librarians and faculty members. But it is been aided by the knowledge that it is only by working together that they can build adequate collections for their common purposes.

Let me conclude by returning to my starting point. I have now lived through three different ways in which faculty members are involved in collection development. The first, the thesis, is for them to bear the primary responsibility for ordering materials. The second, the antithesis, is for librarians to bear that responsibility. In this model of collections development, faculty members simply approve or disapprove of decisions made by others. The third, the synthesis, combines the first two. From the perspective of almost thirty years, faculty members at my university have come to see this last model is the best. It draws on the ability of vendors to provide core materials automatically without the labor of identifying and ordering such titles; it draws on the subject expertise of the faculty to supplement these materials with requests for less obvious, sometimes more specialized titles; and it draws on the coordinating and the ability of librarians to prioritize all of the many variables—budget, existing collections, programs, present and future needs of the institution, and quality. Combining these elements in an environment of open dialogue results in good collections for students, faculty, and researchers.