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UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

User-Driven Collections: Barriers to Implementation

Steven R. Harris

Statement of Problem:

Responsiveness to library user needs is part of our stated strategic plan for the University Libraries. User-centered or user-driven collections also figure explicitly or implicitly into our *UL Strategic Framework 2015*. See:

- “Vision Statement” – By offering extensive and user-centered electronic services
- “Planning Principles” – Provide services and resources that are student centered
- “Program and Service Area Principles – Materials & Collections” – Continually provide, improve, and adapt the materials and collections offered by the UL to meet the requirements and demands of our customers

In recent years, the UL has adopted additional and more overt processes for employing user-driven collection decisions, including purchase-on-demand through ILL and purchase-on-request for faculty requests. There are, however, a number of barriers to implementing user-driven collection development on a more extensive basis. These include:

- Resistance to a user-driven philosophy of collections on the part of both library staff and the campus community
- Lack of a comprehensive infrastructure to solicit and respond to user requests
- Lack of integration or coordination between different aspects of a user-driven strategy

This report is an attempt to examine and analyze these barriers. Although some solutions are offered, this is not a “project” in the sense of having specific outcomes, team members, and responsibilities. It may be necessary, however, to develop projects to address these issues, if we decide as an organization to go in this direction. This document is also *not* a policy statement. A more formal policy or philosophy statement might grow from this. This report is an honest assessment of differing approaches to collections. It is not intended as a criticism of any particular individuals.

I use the phrase “user-driven collections” throughout this document to describe an environment where choices about what the collection includes are pushed as much as possible out to the user, with little or no mediation by library staff. Obviously, some staff intervention is necessary in most collection processes. A user-driven model would suggest that users can get whatever they need, but also that the UL would not expend effort on acquiring what they do not need. I do not envision a world where the library staff plays no role in collection development. On the contrary, they would be *more* responsible for identifying gaps or deficiencies and working to correct them.

I use “user-driven” and “on-demand” in this document in similar ways. “Patron-driven” is also a phrase one sees in the literature. I assume “patron” and “user” to be equivalent terms. I occasionally use “patron” but prefer “user.”

Acceptance of User-Driven Philosophy:

The philosophy of user-driven collections is completely different than that which libraries have historically employed. This difference is typically described in the literature as “just in time” versus “just in case” collection development. In a time when it was slow and laborious to have library materials delivered, it made sense to have as much material stored on site, just in case someone wanted it, rather than having to wait for it to arrive after ordering. “Just in time” was never soon enough. Libraries of all sizes (and their users) have lived by the just-in-case philosophy for many years. It is understandable that both library staff and users will feel alienated by a change in collection philosophy. This is the greatest barrier to implementing a user-drive collection model.

Users

One might think that if a library user were told, “The library will acquire anything you want,” they would be happy, but that is often not the case. Faculty, in particular, often have the expectation that the library will already be well-stocked in their subject area. They may feel a sense of approval for their discipline to know that the library has already made a great investment in it. Libraries like those at UNM might not fare well in a comparison with “the library where I got my Ph.D.” Professors who think the library should already be well-stocked, sometimes feel as though a user-driven model means it is their responsibility to “select” material for the library. “I have to request the stuff I think we should already have.” Or “I have to keep up on everything to make sure the library doesn’t miss something.”

Response: The library cannot possibly afford to develop a collection of great depth in every possible subject area. We will develop a core collection to serve identified curricular and research strengths. Beyond that, we will respond to any need as it arises, as quickly as possible. We do not expect faculty to develop collections; user-driven collections will develop at the point of need.

In a physical book collection, undergraduates still may not be well-served by a user-driven collection model. Waiting 5 days to a week for materials to arrive may hinder their academic success. An extensive approval plan and targeted selection, however, should create a core collection that will serve their needs. More advance undergraduates and graduate students should be expected to make use of on-demand services. We should teach them to do so. There is greater potential for developing e-book collections that can respond immediately to student needs. (See Expansion below.)

We cannot expect that our user population will immediately understand and accept a change in collection philosophy. It might take months (perhaps years) of speaking with them about it and demonstrating that it works to their benefit, before they will accept it. Ambassadors will need to deliver this message frequently and convincingly to make it stick. Personnel throughout the UL (including Dean’s Cabinet) will need to carry the message to all parts of UNM: President and Provost, Faculty Senate, department chairs, etc.

Library Staff

Librarians and staff who do selection of materials have a great deal invested in the idea of building the largest possible collection on site. It goes to the heart of our professionalism to say that we understand our users' needs and have the skills and knowledge to develop resources that meet those needs, but even those with the highest sense of service to patrons find it difficult to accept that letting user need drive selection is a good idea. A collection developed over years of selection and evaluation seems to stand as a monument to the librarian. Those who have the largest collection budgets may feel like they are the most valued employees. Suggesting that a different approach is in order will sound like a criticism of their skills and perhaps of their entire career.

Response: I do not suggest that the methods followed up to this point were wrong or that the librarians did a bad job of developing collections, but we now have many new tools and methods at our disposal which can be employed to respond immediately to user needs. A sense of responsibility about using our budgets requires that we think seriously about spending money in a "just in case" way. We need to be open to new methods that might serve user needs more effectively and efficiently.

Selectors may also feel defensive about switching to a user-driven model because they feel they have already been operating in that way. They have formed relationships with faculty and students. They know what those user groups want. They order anything users ask for.

Response: It has never been possible to predict, with 100% accuracy, what library patrons will use in the collection. Circulation statistics suggest that as much as 50% of the collection in many areas never gets used at all. An honest assessment of our collection methods would show that, because predicting use was so difficult, we had to develop larger collections to increase the probability that we would have on hand what was actually needed by users. Shifting some of the emphasis from selection to immediate user need may decrease the size of collections in some areas but it will increase the utility. One circulation is (at least) more than zero. As mentioned before, this approach may require that faculty themselves think differently about their requests. We don't want them to send requests because they think we *ought* to have the item, but rather because they (or their students) *need* the material. Librarians should similarly shift away from selecting what *might* get use to what *will* get used. (There is a great possibility of falling into the same old habits here, but we should be much more ruthless about exterminating *might* than we have been in the past.)

Selectors may also object to a user-driven model because the resulting collection will be out of balance, oddly shaped, and skewed to the fashions of now but unsuited to the needs of the future.

Response: Collecting for the future is the same argument as building the largest possible collection: just in case someone needs it. Since predicting current use is so difficult, there is no reason to suggest that we will be any better at predicting future use. If we always respond immediately to current community needs, however, the collection will always be achieving its primary goal, even in the future. Balance is an abstract goal that seems to serve no particular user need. The desire for balance may spring from the professional

impulse to be fair and unbiased. One of the main tasks of librarians in a user-driven model would be to address gaps or under-represented ideas, especially in areas of the undergraduate curriculum where a range of views would be useful. There is no reason to believe that all possible research methodologies and philosophies should always be represented *with great depth* in the collection, since they are not represented across campus or in the laboratories. The collection will follow where the faculty goes.

A related response might be that the users just want the “wrong” things. We shouldn’t let them have “bad” information.

Response: Trust the user. At any rate, user-driven collections do not preclude library instruction and information literacy training. It is still our responsibility to educate patrons about making good information choices. A user-driven collection allows them the greatest number of options.

Another objection to user-driven collections would be that, because they are skewed and perhaps smaller, they no longer adequately represent the cultural record. “If all libraries adopt this model, something will be lost.” This is similar to the “collecting for the future” argument, but has an added sense of wanting the library to be an archive of the best that is thought and recorded by humanity.

Response: Because no library can possibly contain all of the cultural record we must depend on the collective of libraries to preserve human knowledge. No single library can be responsible for all subject matter. We need to cooperate and collaborate to create the universal archive. It is not clear that selection will achieve any greater diversity than user-driven collecting. Each library will have a different mix of library selection and user-driven content to contribute to the whole.

Librarians and staff will have a continuing role in a user-driven collection model:

- Educate users about how they can request materials
- Monitor what is acquired via user channels
- Fill gaps where they develop
- Select materials for areas of strength

Infrastructure:

Another problem that currently stands in the way of implementing a user-driven collections model at UNM is that we have no good infrastructure to solicit and manage user requests.

Current user-driven mechanisms:

- Purchase on demand: a procedure through ILL where requested materials that meet certain criteria are simply purchased and added to the collection rather than borrowed from another library.
- Purchase on request: a name for a procedure we already had where faculty request materials through their Ambassador, who then submits the orders to CAS.
- Recommend a book to purchase: is a web request form that actually populates a list in Millennium Acquisitions Module.

The systems and procedures for processing interlibrary loan requests through ILLiad are well developed. As a result, the purchase-on-demand procedure we use through ILL works quite well. Although, when some users hear it described, they express surprise and say they do not want us to purchase materials they submit through ILL. I view this process as an operational tactic and doubt whether library users even need to know about it. Do we inform them, for example, of the method we plan to use when acquiring other material?

Our purchase-on-request model is not widely understood or accepted and therefore is cause for some confusion. We do want Ambassadors to be more proactive in soliciting user requests and to carry the message that we will order anything users want. As with purchase on demand, perhaps the users don't really need to be burdened with procedures and names. I would suggest that we stop using the term purchase-on-request, stop describing it as a specific program, and instead simply promote a message that "We'll get what you want." A marketing message or catch-phrase for that idea should be developed. A major task of Ambassadors should be to carry that message.

The "Recommend a Book" form on our website is 3 clicks in from the elibrary main page. Few library patrons ever find it. They often use FastInfo or other email links on the site to submit requests instead. The resulting Millennium list does not work well with CAS ordering procedures (requiring too many levels of approval and export).

Integration:

The integration that needs to happen for user-driven acquisitions is primarily in the understanding of library staff. We need to present a clear, coherent, and enthusiastic message to our users. Simplicity and seamlessness should be the order of the day for library users. All they need to know is the message that we will get anything they want...quickly!

We need a single and prominent page on our website that will enable any type of request the user might have. The page might redirect them to ILLiad, a book request form, or some other option (see Expansion below). We should discontinue linking to the Millennium request form and create our own. A request option should be prominent on all our lists of Ambassadors or subject specialists (whether or not such requests are actually mediated by the Ambassador).

Discovery is an important element of user-driven acquisitions. We could expand the discovery possibilities beyond what we already own or license to a wide variety of material the users themselves could select from. How we integrate that metadata into our existing discovery platforms will have a great impact on the success of a user-driven model.

Expansion:

There are many tools we do not currently use that might become vehicles for user-driven collection development.

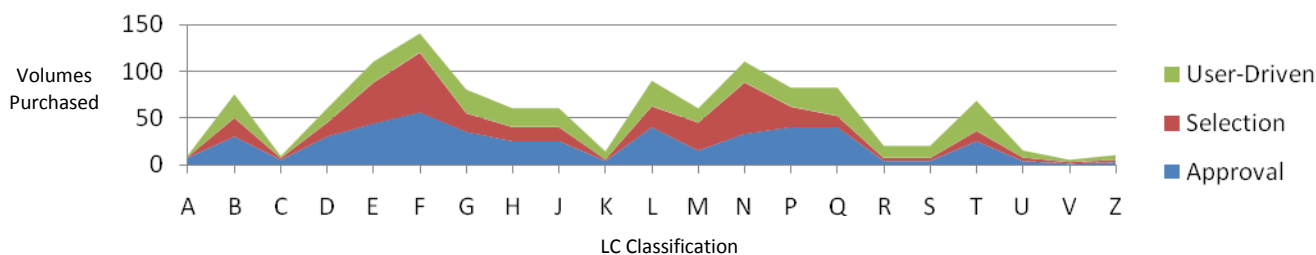
- Espresso Book Machine. Print-on-demand material from this machine could either be paid for by the user and given to them, or simply added to the library collection after the patron is finished with it. The catalog of titles from On Demand Books can be searched on the web, although some libraries are harvesting the metadata into their next gen discovery layer.
- E-book readers. Both Kindles and iPads could become platforms on which we offer to “get them what they want.” We could leave the devices open to allow purchases by the users at the point they are being used, but that might prove to be a problem for UNM Accounts Payable. Otherwise, a request mechanism will have to be developed: request an item and it will be added to the device before you come to pick it up.
- E-book collections. Many e-book vendors are now offering user-driven acquisition models. Most of these involve providing access to an extensive collection. The library then purchases and owns anything that is opened and used more the X number of times. EBL is probably the most prominent of these vendors, but Elsevier, NetLibrary and others offer similar programs.
- Approval books. Some vendors and libraries are cautiously developing programs in which MARC records for materials available in the vendor’s warehouse are loaded to the OPAC. Users will see a note that says this material is available in X number of days upon request. Items that are requested are rush-ordered and delivered to the user. Full processing typically happens after the user returns the item (much like our purchase on demand program).
- Journal articles. Most of this document describes purchase of monographic materials, but we could employ similar methods to acquire journals articles on a “by the drink” basis. Many publishers offer such programs. Some are completely unmediated. Others require librarian approval for each transaction. These can be difficult to predict and budget for, but they do expand access to information for library users.

Conclusions:

User-driven collection development can be a path for the UL to become more responsive to user needs. If we adopt it in the spirit of service, it has great potential for success. We should see it as a way to consistently communicate a positive message to users: whatever

you want, we'll get it. Anything in the world is part of our collection under the user-driven model. If, on the other hand, we look at it as some new-fangled replacement for the good old ways, it is doomed to failure.

We will be in a transitional stage for some time. Because we currently lack the infrastructure and the philosophical acceptance of a user-driven model, it is unlikely that it can fully replace library selection immediately. Even in the long run, I believe that we will continue to have a mix of acquisition by approval plan, librarian selection, and user selection as seen in the table below. (The values described are illustrative and not meant to accurately reflect our current or future collection emphasis.) The table shows that in each subject area we might have a different mix of selection methods.



In general, I believe we should design our approval profiles to address the needs of the undergraduate curriculum, building a core or foundation collection that serves very broad interests. Librarian selection should be focused on graduate curriculum needs, research interests of faculty, filling gaps, and building on identified collection strengths. On-demand mechanisms would fill in all other user needs. Over time, the user-driven element, the green band, should increase in size as we develop better ways of capturing and responding to user input.

Users now have many other options for accessing and retrieving information besides the library. We should recognize that as a threat to our existence. We can continue developing collections of material that we think they ought to use, but we may be surprised to see that they choose not to. On the other hand, we can work to place as many information options in front of our users as possible and let them select what best serves their needs. In the long run, I think the second alternative is a more cost-effective way to develop collections. We should not be surprised if university administrators agree with that assessment and choose to fund only initiatives with a demonstrated user demand.