Collection Management

User-Driven Acquisitions: Allowing Patron Requests to Drive Collection Development in an Academic Library

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In 2007 Texas A&M University (TAMU) Libraries adopted an approach to monograph collection development that uses an unconventional fund structure and sets aside funds for user requests, called Suggest a Purchase. After initiating this change, the libraries realized that its patrons had become actively engaged in selecting materials for the collection. Data will be presented describing user and librarian levels of satisfaction with the Suggest a Purchase program. Additional data will be presented describing what was requested, what was ordered, how much the materials circulated, who requested materials, and the increase in requests over time.

KEYWORDS user-driven acquisitions, patron-driven acquisitions, acquisitions, technical services, collection development

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1990s, subject specialist librarians at Texas A&M University (TAMU) Libraries have been responsible for making monographic selection decisions (both electronic and print) for the library collection. Although most of these librarians have advanced degrees in their subject area and work closely with their assigned groups, the use of the print collection has gone down over time. This trend is found in most academic libraries across the United States, where it is estimated that many monographs in a typical academic library collection never circulate (Kent 1979). In an attempt to reverse this trend by involving patrons in collection development efforts,

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TAMU Libraries adopted an approach that uses an unconventional fund structure and sets aside funds for items requested by users through its Suggest a Purchase program. In evaluating the program, the libraries discovered that its patrons became actively engaged in selecting materials for the collection (vanDuinkerken et al. 2008, 142–149). Many of the users of the service reported increased use of the library. In this article, the authors present data describing user and librarian levels of satisfaction with the Suggest a Purchase program and additional data outlining what was requested, what was ordered, how much the materials circulated, who requested materials, and the increase in requests over time.

USER-DRIVEN ACQUISITIONS AT TAMU

TAMU has purchased monographs requested through interlibrary loan since the late 1990s and has featured a Suggest a Purchase form on its library Web site for several years. In 2006 the TAMU Libraries decided to expand its user-driven acquisitions program in conjunction with an effort to simplify its acquisitions fund structure. At that time, the TAMU Libraries' acquisitions budget contained 237 monographic fund lines: 31 approval fund lines and 206 firm order fund lines. As there was only one source for the 31 approval fund lines, it made sense to consolidate them. Of the remaining 206 funds, 75 could be eliminated immediately since they were allocated zero dollar amounts and were therefore never used, and nine other fund lines could be eliminated because they were earmarked for summer spending. Six restricted endowment fund lines needed to be retained. The remaining subject-specific fund lines had traditionally been assigned to individual subject librarians (vanDuinkerken et al. 2008). In fiscal year 2007, the collection development management team collapsed the approval funds and the individual subject-specific funds into five unrestricted fund lines that could be used for one-time purchases of monographic materials in print, electronic, or other media formats. These were defined as:

- The approval fund, used to purchase materials supplied through the library's principal approval vendor—whether through the approval plan or a firm order (55% of monographic budget).
- The user-generated fund, used to purchase materials requested by a university student, staff, or faculty member (6% of monographic budget).
- The library-generated fund, used to purchase materials selected by a librarian that total up to $1,000 (5% of monographic budget).
- The library proposal fund, used to purchase materials selected by a user or a librarian that cost more than the threshold price of $1,000 and less than the big ticket threshold of $10,000. Additionally, a proposal to purchase more than 25 related items at one time or over a short period of time requires the use of this fund (4% of monographic budget).

- The big ticket fund, used to fund "one-time cost" materials selected by a user or a librarian that are priced over the threshold of $10,000 (30%) of monographic budget.

The goals of the new fund structure are discussed in detail in the van-Duinkerken et al. (2008) paper and included the following:

- Fund the purchase of all reasonable requests from affiliated users.
- Fill all reasonable requests in a timely manner.
- Increase communication with users during the purchase process.
- Free librarians from the requirement to spend and track individual funds.
- Free librarian time for outreach to users.
- Simplify the accounting system.

Some librarians were concerned that users would select materials inappropriate for a research library and deplete available funds. Other concerns related to the time and effort involved in preparing proposals for items or groups of items costing between $1,000 and $10,000. On the positive side, selectors could see that they might have access to more funding than before. Also, they were glad to be relieved of the expectation to spend their allotted funds to meet performance expectations. These and other issues are addressed in the librarian survey results below.

With the new fund structure in place, the library now purchases all items requested by users if the item costs less than $150 and is not already owned. When a user requests an item with the Suggest a Purchase form, the library's e-mail system generates an automated response acknowledging the request and forwards the request to the monograph acquisitions unit. If the item costs more than $150, a subject librarian must approve the purchase. When the order is placed, monograph acquisitions notifies the user, with a blind copy to the appropriate librarian(s) (the subject specialist responsible for the call number range and the library liaison to the user's department). If the user has requested notification of purchase, a public-services unit contacts the user when the item is available for checkout.

Shortly after the policy of automatic purchases was implemented, librarians began promoting it during instruction sessions and in written communications with their constituents. Usage has grown steadily as reported below.

EVALUATION OF THE PROGRAM

Data for this paper were collected in two ways: surveys of users and librarians and an analysis of the user-generated purchase request forms. For the user survey, 900 e-mails were sent to patrons who requested materials

using the Web-based Suggest a Purchase request form and who asked to be notified when the item was available for checkout. The libraries received 186 responses. For the librarian survey, 42 subject specialist librarians and liaisons were contacted and 25 responses were received.

The authors also examined the purchase request forms from fiscal years 2007, 2008, and 2009 (fiscal year is September to August) to analyze what was requested, what was ordered, who requested materials, and the increase in requests over time. Purchase request forms were matched with order and catalog records in the Voyager system in order to analyze circulation. Additionally, requests were tagged with a format code (book, DVD, etc.) and user status (faculty, staff, graduate, or undergraduate).

Results From the User Survey

Users were asked 14 satisfaction-driven questions with two open-ended questions requesting suggestions for improvements and general feedback. Figure 1 shows the user status percentages of the survey participants. Faculty and graduate students were the major responders; they account for 70% of the survey responses.

When asked to rate satisfaction with the Suggest a Purchase service, 97% were satisfied with the overall service; of these, 61% indicated they were very satisfied. The survey showed that 70% of the respondents increased their library usage as a result of the service. When asked to describe their level of library use, 64% said they were frequent to heavy users of the library (more than three times a week). Users were asked whether materials in general were received in the time frame expected; 90% responded positively.

The survey also revealed areas of dissatisfaction, one of which was communication regarding the fulfillment of their request. One user suggested, "... it would be helpful to receive updates along the process (i.e., we have
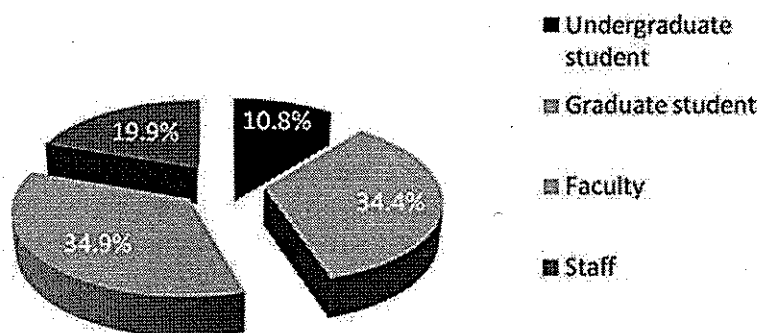

FIGURE 1 User survey response.

approved your request, we are looking for the book, the book has been ordered, the book is en route)." Such notifications would be comparable to the service received from Amazon or other online merchants. There was also frustration with the amount of time it took for materials to arrive in the library. One respondent shared, "Materials took about five to six weeks to arrive, as it was course work–related I was already half way in my semester. I would suggest the course work–related books to arrive at maximum two weeks." Users were asked whether any of their purchase requests had been denied; 17% indicated that they were unsure. Several users commented in the survey that their requests were denied and they did not know why, as no one had communicated this information to them. When users were asked specifically whether they were contacted by the library with questions or concerns related to purchase requests, 36% indicated that they had been contacted. Additionally, when asked whether they had received notification that their items had arrived, 7% said no.

Other useful data were also gleaned from the user survey, such as how often patrons used the service and the purpose of the request. Based on the survey results, 79% of the respondents used the Suggest a Purchase service more than once, including 5% who used it more than 25 times. Users were asked to indicate the format of material requested; 87% indicated print while 38% indicated video or DVD. Users were also asked to identify the purposes related to their requests for materials; research not related to a course was the most frequent response at 61%, with recreation the second most frequent response at 29.9% (Figure 2). From the data collected through the Suggest a Purchase forms, librarians determined that the major users of the Suggest a Purchase service are faculty members and graduate students. The user survey revealed that the majority of requests were for research purposes, rather than for course work. Overall, users are very satisfied with the service, and most used it more than once. Users identified communication as their only area of dissatisfaction; they would like more information about the progress of each request.

Results From the Librarian Survey

In 2007, when the new user-driven acquisition policy was presented to subject specialists, several advantages were highlighted: 237 funds were consolidated into five funds (not counting restricted gift funds) so less subject specialist effort and time was needed to code and track funds; additional time for subject specialists to evaluate the collection; more meaningful information on collection and funding trends; increased opportunities for communicating with users about collection needs; as well as visible demonstration that the TAMU Libraries trusted its users to choose information resources wisely. Subject specialist reactions to the fund structure change were mixed. Some
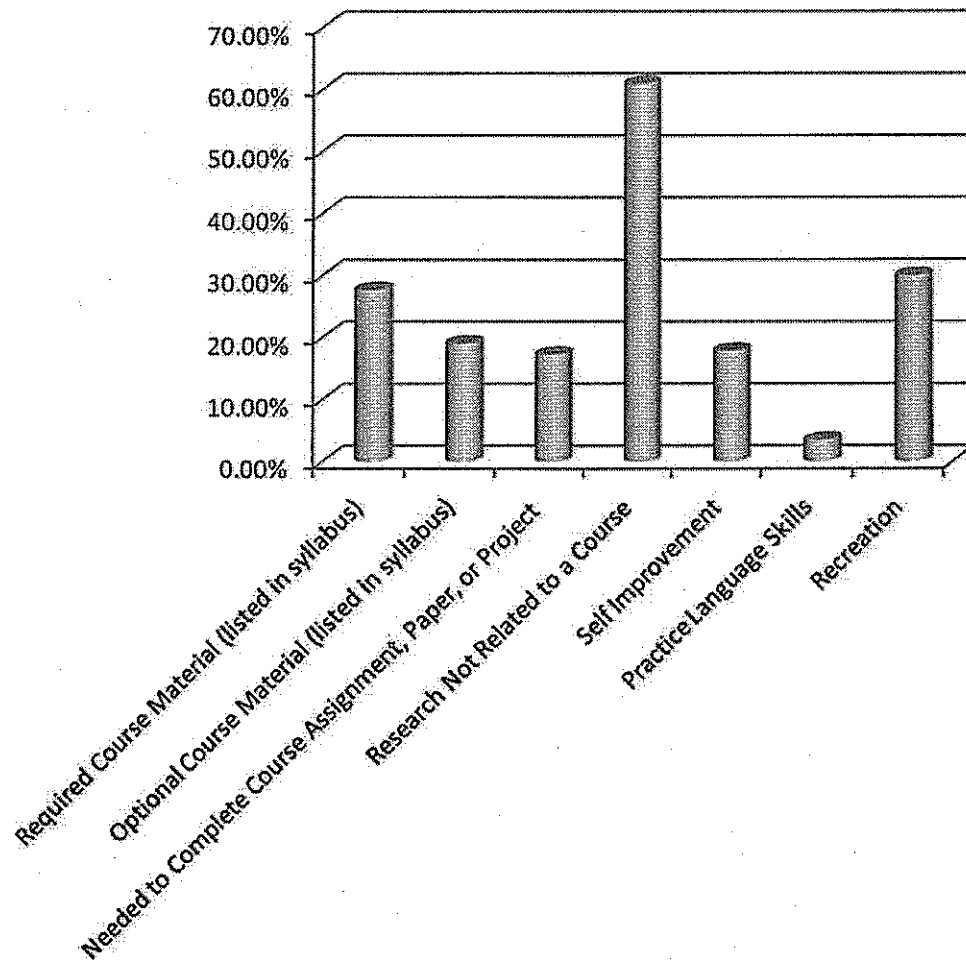
FIGURE 2 Purpose of user requests.

subject specialists were concerned that users, rather than subject specialists, would be directing collection development and that the users would spend the entire monographic budget before subject specialists had sufficient time to identify needed materials. Subject specialists were also concerned that users would request inappropriate materials without subject specialist input.

Forty-two subject specialist librarians and liaisons were asked to complete an 11-question survey to gauge the perceived effectiveness and satisfaction with policy and procedural changes. A Likert scale was designed to allow librarians to rate their level of satisfaction related to this service. All questions included opportunities for free-form feedback. Twenty-five librarians (60%) responded to this request. Over half (52%) of the respondents were initially concerned that users would select inappropriate materials for a research library (i.e., selecting non-scholarly items). Another initial
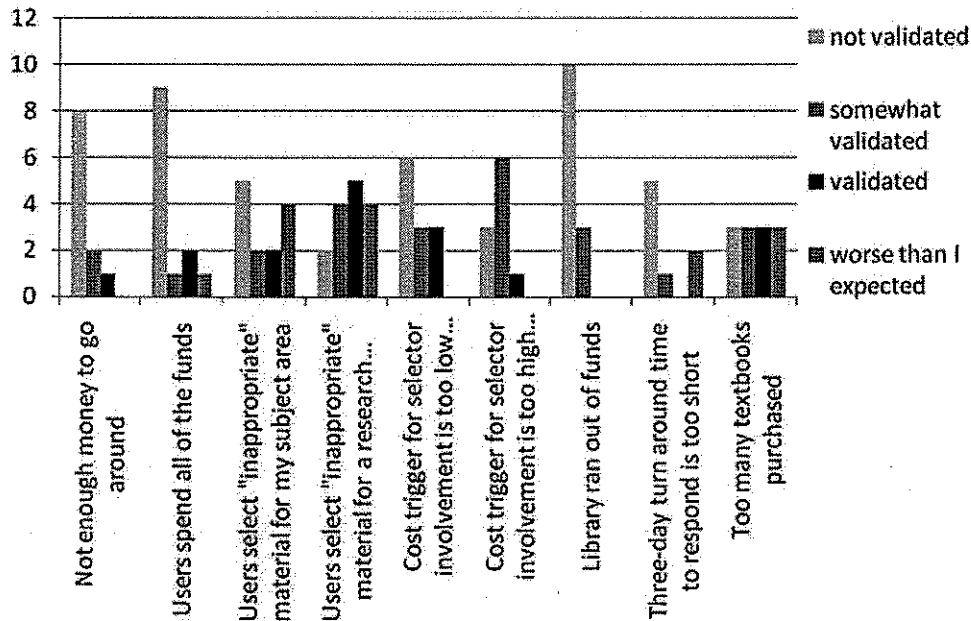
FIGURE 3 Librarians' initial concerns.

concern noted by 47% of the respondents was that a large number of textbooks would be purchased. Librarians were asked whether their initial concerns were validated after implementation of this policy. Forty-five percent of the librarians said that their concern that users would spend all the money was not validated, while 35% had not been concerned with this possibility at all. Even though users spent less than the budget earmarked for their requests, 20% of the librarians indicated that this concern was somewhat validated and one even indicated that it was worse than expected (Figure 3).

When asked to comment on user requests aligning with current collection development policy, 62.5% of the librarians agreed that most requests had aligned; 37.5% stated that few of the requests were aligned. Eighty-eight percent said that they have not needed to adjust their collection development policies in response to users' needs. One of those who did make changes as a result of information gleaned from user requests stated, "In my CD [policy] I made sure to look at videos, as this is one of the most requested formats." Overall satisfaction with the Suggest a Purchase service was fairly high. Eighty percent of the librarians were satisfied or very satisfied with the policy to purchase items under $150, the process in place to make these ·purchases, as well as the communications about these requests with their users.

One of the goals of the program was to increase communication. As for communications between librarians and the acquisitions unit, 84% were

satisfied or very satisfied. The only concern noted was that the subject specialist was not notified unless the request was over $150. This comment demonstrates a breakdown in communications as all related subject specialists and departmental liaisons are supposed to be notified of every user request regardless of cost. The new model requires direct communication between subject specialists and users for items over $150, for multiple requests, or for questions regarding the request. Thirty-three percent of the subject specialists contacted users because the cost of the item was too high, and 25% contacted users because they had requested an item already owned by the libraries. Several of the librarians made contact with the users to discuss format availability or edition desired. One librarian commented, "I contacted a few requestors because they were faculty and [I] wanted to offer my services. I contacted another to let him know why I turned down his request and offered alternatives." A majority of the librarians polled (71%) stated that the Suggest a Purchase service improved their knowledge of their users' areas of study and research. Eighty-seven percent agreed that the service has been well-received by their user groups. One librarian recommended that there be a "Suggest another item" option at the bottom of the page so that users could submit more than one item without having to reenter their personal information, a comment echoed in the user survey.

Analysis of User-Generated Purchase Request Forms

The TAMU Libraries received a total of 13,121 Suggest a Purchase requests. Of these requests, a total of 9,825 (75%) items were added to the collection: 8,665 from the user-generated fund and 1,160 from the approval fund. Staff did not order 2,767 items, either because they were already owned (1,981 or 15% of the titles) or because they were not yet published (786 or 6% of the titles). An additional 388 (3%) requests were for journal subscriptions, which are reviewed once a year through a previously created procedure. The remaining 141 (1%) requests were forwarded to the Medical Science Library for review and purchase. The procedure calls for users to be notified to let them know whether their requests were ordered; for materials requested that were already owned by the library, the individual was told how to find them.

The number of requests submitted through the Suggest a Purchase request form increased over time. During the 2007 fiscal year (September 2006 through August 31, 2007), there were 2,495 requests. In the 2008 fiscal year, the number of requests increased by 2% to 2,544, followed by a 43% increase in 2009 to 3,626 requests.

Based on the figures retrieved from the purchase request forms, the breakdown by user status was 44% from faculty, 27% from graduate students, 19% from undergraduates, and 9% from staff affiliated with the university (Figure 4).
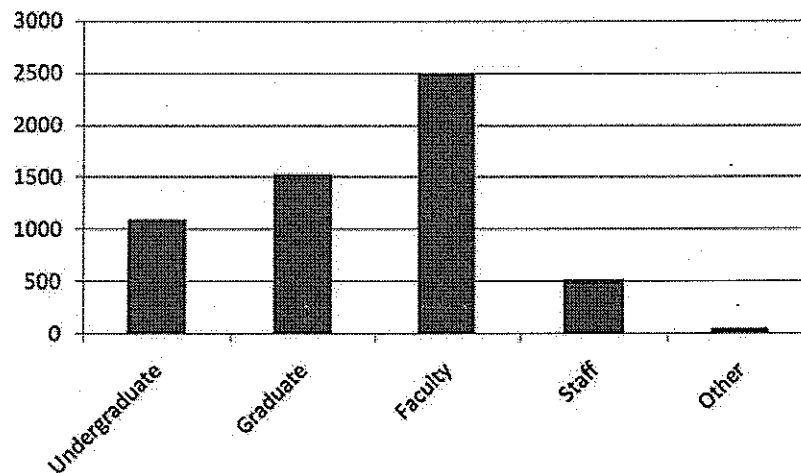
FIGURE 4 User requests by category of requestor.

The Suggest a Purchase form included a field requesting department affiliation. Although it was not always filled with a meaningful designation, the researchers were able to identify participation by 134 different departments. The largest percentage of requests came from the Arts and Humanities departments followed by requests from Social Sciences and Engineering. The large volume of requests from Arts and Humanities is not surprising in that TAMU is historically a land grant institution originally grounded in the sciences. The collections in Humanities and Social Sciences are less developed.

Table 1 illustrates the various formats of the 9,825 items purchased as the result of user-driven acquisitions. The data show that the most common format requested was print, followed by DVDs. The data indicate that the majority of the DVD requests came from faculty members.

The researchers found quite interesting results in the circulation statistics for the 8,665 titles purchased from the user-generated fund. Nearly 78% of

TABLE 1 User Requests by Format

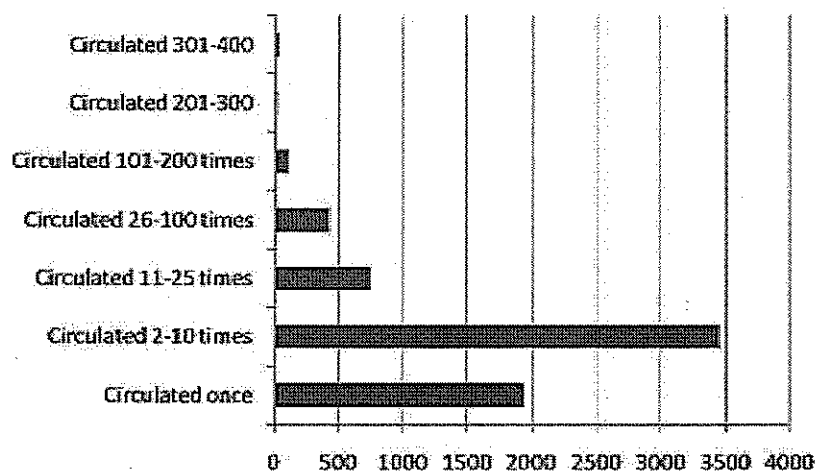| Format	Number of Titles	Percentage of Total
Print	6,213	63.24%
DVD	3,210	32.67%
Audio CD	165	1.68%
Music CD	140	1.43%
Electronic Book	70	0.71%
VHS	13	0.13%
CD-Roms	13	0.13%
Microtext	1	0.01%
Total	9,825	100%

FIGURE 5 Circulation of total number of requested titles.

the titles circulated during the three-year period. Nearly 40% of the total titles circulated more than once. One title circulated 430 times, a title on course reserve (Figure 5).

CONCLUSION

To summarize, there were 13,121 Suggest a Purchase requests during the three-year period covered by the study. Of the 8,665 user-generated fund requests, 78% circulated during the three years. Most of the requests came from faculty and graduate students who needed the materials for research rather than course work. Users requested primarily print followed by DVDs. Based on the user survey, 97% were satisfied with the overall service. Many users expressed delight that the library offers this service and hope it continues. When asked to describe satisfaction with aspects of the service users identified satisfaction that the correct item was purchased (99%) and that it was delivered to the correct location (95%). One area identified for improvement was communication between the library and users regarding the process from original request to item delivery and every step in between.

According to the librarian survey, initial concerns were focused on the appropriateness of the material requested and the potential for users to spend a disproportionate share of the funds. When asked whether these concerns were validated three years after implementation, a majority of the librarians who responded to the question about a possible shortage of funds said no. Some librarians (20%) continue to be concerned about the appropriateness of the material requested by users. This concern might be alleviated by the comment of a user who said, "I feel obliged to keep up with the latest in

my field, even outside of my immediate research area—for my teaching, and because curiosity of students begins with curiosity of teachers."

The results show that this model of user-driven acquisitions is valued by users at all levels of the university community. As stated in an enthusiastic comment on the survey:

> This is a fantastic system/policy and, in my opinion, a major selling point of TAMU to prospective faculty and students (especially graduate students). In recruitment efforts I have actively called attention to your ability and willingness to continue developing the collection according to patrons' needs even in tight budgetary times; this really sets TAMU apart from many peer institutions. I applaud the library for being so responsive to faculty and student needs: without such responsiveness, our research and teaching, both central to the work we do here, would encounter many more obstacles than it does.

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