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# Inside Pandora's Box: On collection development and acquisitions management ... The Pros and Cons of a University Library Department for Acquisitions

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## Inside Pandora's Box



### The Pros and Cons of a University Library Department for Acquisitions

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#### Introduction

In this time of spiraling prices, changing publishers, and electronic materials, the business of law library acquisitions can become quite a task. The majority of law libraries currently handle much of their own acquisitions processes from ordering to invoices, claiming, and canceling. However, there are still a few of us who are part of a larger "Librarian Department" and who must work closely with a central university acquisitions department in our day-to-day operation. Throughout the following discussion, I will outline some of the advantages and disadvantages of conducting acquisitions within an integrated library system. I intend to provide additional insight into the issue of law library integration, particularly from an acquisitions perspective.

#### The Internal Workflow

The internal workflow within an acquisitions department generally includes ordering, invoicing, claiming, canceling, renewing, reinstating, and accounting. Acquisitions from any departmental library at the University of Illinois requires that all order, cancellation, and reinstatement requests be made through the University Acquisition Department. The major advantage for the law library is that we do not have to commit as much manpower to performing these functions. To make an order or cancel a request, we fill out a bibliographic form and forward it across campus. However, it often takes several weeks for an order to be processed, paid for, and forwarded to the publisher. This delay may partly result from the size of the University of Illinois Library, the largest of any state supported educational institution. However, merging law requests with those of other campus libraries certainly adds extra steps and time to the acquisitions process.

The Law Library Acquisitions Department also forwards invoices to University Acquisitions for payment on materials which do not require pre-payment. In addition, invoices for many of our materials are received directly by University Acquisitions, in essence, bifurcating our invoicing process. This relieves law library staff of invoice workload. However, it also creates other difficulties which arise in conjunction with the current state of library funding and legal publishing.

During the seventies and eighties, law libraries were purchasing legal materials with an emphasis on quantity rather than quality. We were buying updates, duplicates, and new editions without blinking an eye because money was readily available. Today, most law libraries must be more selective. The University of Illinois is no exception. However, many publishers continue to send legal materials without solicitation. In addition to the problems caused by escalating prices, publishers often send new editions or titles based on the erroneous premise that an order was placed previously for a similar title. The original order is often several years old. This results in confusion, delay, and mistakes in an integrated system where some acquisitions personnel are not as familiar with legal materials as acquisitions personnel within the law library. When an invoice, for which there is no order record or matching title, is received directly by university acquisitions, time is lost as they must ask the law library whether we requested the item. When law library acquisitions receives an invoice direct from a publisher, we hold it until the non-prepayment material arrives. Upon receipt of the material, we check to make sure we have the correct item and forward the invoice for payment. In addition to our not understanding why some invoices do or do not get paid, the University Acquisitions Department does not understand why we hold invoices. It's really the nature of the beast without being anyone's fault. Legal publishing differs from other areas of publication. Materials are often supplemented, costly, and published by multiple companies. This results in similar titles which are difficult to distinguish, particularly when abbreviated on invoice statements. Individuals who do not work primarily with legal publications understandably do not comprehend the full extent of this problem and the costly ramifications it carries. This is a disadvantage of an integrated system with which we deal each day.

Titles cause additional difficulties when combined with purchase orders. We have, on several occasions, run across both big and small ticket items which have been canceled due to delinquency. Without anyone's knowledge, these items had not been paid for quite some time. The delinquency did not lie with any systemic sabotage. Instead, many items, particularly electronic materials such as CD-ROMs, include multiple purchase order numbers for a single title or vice versa. This can result in confusion as to what has and has not been ordered or paid.

For the most part, accounting procedures do not cause significant problems. This is highly

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dependent however upon the law library's individual system of fund accounting. If the scope and identification number of each fund is clear, no one had difficulty understanding from which fund money should be taken. With all invoices and cancellations processed outside the law library, our acquisitions staff does not have to work with the fund figures. Instead, the books are done elsewhere and updated records are received periodically.

**External Effects**

An integrated system of acquisitions creates both positive and negative external effects. The first relates to publisher correspondence. Publishers often unwittingly add to the confusion our bifurcated invoicing causes by sending invoices or materials to the wrong department. Many companies assume the law library receives all materials and invoices directly because most law libraries function in that manner. Sending items to the wrong department results in confusion and delays as questions must often be asked to determine if the incoming items were actually requested.

Corresponding with publishers can also create claiming and ordering questions. The law library claims items at regular time intervals. However, if claiming produces no results or many items from one publisher are not received, we often refer the matter to University Acquisitions. They will then claim the item for us. This can sometimes cause confusion for publishers who receive claims from two departments. In addition, with both law and university acquisitions claiming the same items, records may not accurately indicate when and whether a claim was processed. If claiming is not maintained, the order may be dropped and require reinstatement. In addition to claiming problems, vendor representatives, who change often are generally not aware of the procedures we must follow to place an order. We cannot always order new items, accept renewals, etc. over the telephone or by facsimile. This, though not resulting in fatal ordering errors, does result in miscommunications with vendors and impedes efficiency.

Communication is another external effect of working in an integrated library system. Sharing acquisition duties with the University Acquisitions Department provides enhanced relations with other library staff. University-wide acquisitions committees exist which allow departmental libraries a voice in how new procedures will be implemented. Consistent communication with non-law acquisitions personnel allows us to better consider the needs of faculty and students both inside and outside the law school. Another advantage of regular communication with university acquisitions personnel is an enhanced ability to train new employees. Because our procedures overlap, the University Acquisitions Department can and has provided invaluable assistance in answering procedural questions posed by new employees.

As this discussion has indicated, a system of integrated acquisitions requires that we adhere to university-wide procedures for workflow activities. However, our responsibility to follow university procedure does not end with workflow considerations. For example, the university recently canceled all subscriptions maintained with a particular publisher. Although the vendor dropped was not major contributor to the law library's collection, we have experienced difficulty obtaining the

final issues of some periodicals. We will most likely have to shoulder the cost of purchasing those issues even though we have already paid the original vendor. The university is also in the midst of converting to a new client/server integrated OPAC. Policies and procedures will be instituted university-wide concerning the new system. It remains to be seen whether law acquisitions will have to follow all new guidelines. However, many procedures must be upheld to maintain uniformity. Working with the university to develop policies and procedures is beneficial to everyone involved. Personnel from various libraries recognize the needs of others and final decisions emanate from a larger pool of ideas, experience, and knowledge.

**The Future**

Conversion to a client/server OPAC is but a foreshadowing of future electronic developments which will raise new issues for library acquisitions. The Acquisitions Module of our new OPAC will allow departmental units to track orders electronically and customize electronic forms to suit their individual needs. This ability should help law and university acquisitions avoid some past confusion. However, problems will not subside if the two departments do not work together to make sure that all forms complement one another. Being part of an integrated acquisitions department increases the likelihood of cooperation.

Another development lies in the growing ability to order materials online. As with CD-ROM, online database, and e-journal subscriptions, ordering material electronically should not cause problems when the order form, purchase order number, and fund are provided. However, for pre-payment items, the need for security will increase as account and tax identification numbers may have to be disclosed. All libraries must deal with this issue as electronic ordering becomes more common. However, integrated libraries have to approach this question from the standpoint of many more university departments.

Online ordering also presents the problem of law faculty requesting materials online without informing the library. No doubt the bill, but not the product, will show up in acquisitions. However, law libraries within universities that maintain a "Library Department" are separate from their law school. Law faculty who place electronic orders without following library procedures, such as furnishing a purchase order and fund number, must charge materials against law school funds. This will help our acquisitions staff maintain control over purchases.

**Conclusion**

Integrated library systems provide advantages and disadvantages for departmental library acquisitions personnel. Time saved due to a decrease in internal workload is quickly lost through the necessity of increased external communication. Increased communication, however, benefits the departmental unit by pooling the knowledge and experience of various library staff and producing a higher level of cooperation and training within the library department. On a micro-level, an integrated library department often creates confusion and delay for acquisitions personnel. On macro-level, this system enhances uniformity, cooperation, and knowledge. In the long run, the integrated library department enjoys a balance of stability and progress which benefits all library patrons and staff. 🦋

*The greatest library book thief of this century was Stephen Blumberg of Ottumwa, Iowa. Over a 20-year period, he stole some 23,600 books weighing over nineteen tons and valued at \$20 million from libraries in forty-five states, the District of Columbia, and two Canadian provinces. Found guilty of theft, he served five years and eleven months in prison and was fined \$200,000.*

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