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Glenda Alvin

Tennessee State University, galvin@tnstate.edu

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Collection Management Matters — Friendenemies, Part II: The University Business Services Department

Column Editor: **Glenda Alvin** (Associate Professor, Assistant Director for Collection Management and Administration, Head, Acquisitions and Serials, Brown-Daniel Library, Tennessee State University, 3500 John A. Merritt Blvd., Nashville, TN 37209; Phone: 615-963-5230; Fax: 615-963-1368) <galvin@tnstate.edu>

Recently there was a query on the ACQ-L listserv from an exasperated librarian whose Accounts Payable Department insisted on paying the invoices on the calendar year, instead of the fiscal year, causing ILS fund accounting issues with split payments. This sparked comments from a number of librarians who shared their experiences with that system and those offering helpful advice.

The University's Business Services Department is a vital partner in the library acquisitions process because it is they who process the purchase orders and payments that go to the vendor. Without a good working relationship with Procurement and Accounts Payable, it can be difficult to get books, periodicals, databases and other library resources processed for payment in a timely manner.

For the first half of my career, the Business Services Department was like my neighbor at the end of the block. We would occasionally acknowledge each other's existence, but communication was infrequent. During the second half of my career, I have run into some different experiences.

When I began a new position several years ago, I soon learned that the Purchasing Services Department was like a kingdom unto itself and was impervious to Chairs, Deans and Vice Presidents. My first inkling that there was a problem came when I noticed that our requisitions languished past thirty days and I was asked for payment updates from the vendors. Emails and voicemails to Procurement did not get a response. When I complained to the Library Dean about bringing this issue to the attention of the Vice President over that area, she told me that "it will only make them mad and they won't process our stuff — it will take even longer." Purchasing was also capricious, because they would process the subscription renewal without any problems one year, and the next year refuse to renew the subscriptions to the same vendor for a lesser amount.

The department may have been understaffed, but it was also overwhelmed by the increased demand for electronic resources and the requirement of having licenses and contracts. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the procedure for buying databases. The library got a generous infusion of funds to purchase databases, especially STEM databases in the early to mid-2000s. The licenses and the requisitions went to Procurement as a packet. They would sometimes be allowed to sit on a desk for months and the vendors would grow weary of waiting for payment to the point where they would cut off our service. A "Contracts Officer" was hired, which added

another layer of procedure, but not much improvement in the glacial pace of the approval process. We would have meetings with the Procurement Director to discuss the reasons for the delays, but whatever resolution came out of them was only good for that fiscal year and the next year we would be in the same predicament.

In the meantime the stress on the library staff, especially the librarians managing the database payment processing, was enormous. The Assistant Director of Public Services, passed it on to the Technical Services Software Librarian which brought the problems to my area of supervision. The pressure of dealing with vendors demanding payments, angry faculty who had given assignments that required a database that had been shut off and ignored communication with Procurement, took its toll. We eventually had to split the job between two positions. Lasting relief came when a new president moved the Procurement Director and sent the Contracts Officer to the University Counsel's Office. Streamlined and efficient procedures were created which allowed the database contracts and ejournal licenses to be processed on a timely basis, thus getting payments to the vendors in a reasonable amount of time.

Accounts Payable Departments can be just as impervious to common sense reasoning as Procurement. At my current job, the library's allocation for databases, print and serials, and electronic books was assigned to the capital outlay budget for decades. Two years ago the Associate Vice President for that department directed that those expenditures had to come from the Operational budget which has equipment, office supplies, telephone charges, etc. The administration continued to allocate the funding for electronic resources to the capital outlay budget line. This forced us to process a major budget transfer each year, to place the funds in Operational before we could begin to pay invoices pending since July 1. When he retired recently, we took the opportunity to ask his successor if we could move the funds back to capital outlay. He rejected that request, but did offer to assign the library's electronic resources allocation to Operational, so we would not have to process the yearly budget transfer.

When purchasing and payment processing procedures are developed in Business Services, those offices do not think about the extra work or the wasted time by personnel in the library or other academic departments. However, if the procedures seriously affect workflow and efficiency, it's worth the effort to try to discuss the issue with them, to see if some reasonable accommodation can be made.

Business Services Departments are not always the villains. Sometimes they get caught in the middle of bad management decisions by the library's administrator. At one university I was employed at for a short time, my supervisor managed the serials and warned me

that the Library Dean refused to ask for an increase in funds, so every year they would run out of money in the serials budget and he would take it from the book allocation. Midway through the school year, we processed a purchase order to a vendor and it was sent back because our funds were depleted. Our ledger showed we still had money, so I called the Purchasing Office and was politely informed that the Dean had moved the money,

which effectively closed out our budget for the rest of the year. Rather than tell me himself that he was taking away all of the book money, he let the clerk in the Purchasing Office be the bearer of bad tidings.

A good working relationship with Business Services is required at all times, because problems arise which require cordial contact such as vendors who claim they have not been paid, when the check is at their office and sitting on somebody's desk or it has been processed but not acknowledged, which requires a copy of the check, or when odd charges show up on the university's accounting system that need clarification. The library's Acquisitions Department and Business Services have a common taskmaster — the auditor! It's important that they cooperate on procedures so that neither one of their operations get cited for not performing according to guidelines. 🐻

