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MOVING TO A VIRTUAL APPROVAL PLAN: HOW AN ARL LIBRARY IS LEVERAGING FUNDS AND STREAMLINING WORKFLOW

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INTRODUCTION

The University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries (CU) has been implementing a variety of transformative processes to streamline the acquisition of print materials. One major project focused on re-vamping the library's historic and labor intensive process of receiving weekly shipments of approval books. These were physically processed, reviewed and handled numerous times, rejects were shipped back and final selections were eventually cataloged and labeled. In 2007 the Libraries worked in partnership with Blackwell, its primary monograph vendor, to test a virtual approval pilot. This led to implementing virtual approval on a full scale for 50 funds and 30 selectors/bibliographers in the fall 2008. At the same time CU's Technical Services department worked with Blackwell and OCLC to receive these materials shelf-ready which reduced turnaround time for getting materials to the end user.
This presentation will provide three perspectives on this collaboration including views from collection development, acquisitions and the vendor.   The presentation will focus on the motivating circumstances prompting the change such as budget constraints and the shift to electronic resources and will provide an assessment of the outcomes. This presentation will highlight significant outcomes affecting funding, workflow, selectors, Blackwell and end users.

CONTEXT

In 2005/06 the University of Colorado (CU) Libraries needed to find solutions to meet shrinking materials budgets yet accommodate the exponential growth in electronic resources that began early in the decade. At that time the Libraries faced budget cuts, serials cancellations and a reject rate on monographic approvals of 22%. Reducing reject rates and improving efficiencies were top priorities that fit into several organizational challenges, including the Libraries shift into acquiring electronic content. The Libraries ultimately invited R2 to consult on these questions. Concurrently CU was also re-organizing with new department heads for Acquisitions and Cataloging along with a relatively new head of Collection Development.

The convergence of shrinking budgets, high reject rates, new leadership and R2 consulting was a perfect storm that provided an opportunity for the Libraries to focus on ways to significantly improve the selection to access continuum. Key questions were:

1. How do we realign our processes from selection to access?
   - to improve workflow
   - get materials to end users faster
   - create efficiencies for staff and librarians

2. How do we shift and expand our operations from an orientation based on print to one that efficiently incorporates the complexities of electronic resources?

As a result of the Libraries work with R2 four recommendations emerged as high priorities and led to the development of the virtual approval plan described in this presentation.

- Require Electronic Selection for Titles Handled by Blackwell's
- Reduce Time for Bibliographer Review
- Consider Establishing a Central Fund for Approval
- Implement Prompt Cat, Shelf-Ready, and Electronic Invoicing

SCOPE

For collection development the R2 recommendations were on target for supporting the work of subject specialists.   The print monograph approval process had been in place for more than twenty years. It was a historic, labor intensive process of the past.   The Collection Development unit wanted a way to streamline the approval process for collecting core academic research materials and at the same time free up bibliographers' time for other professional duties. Collection Development also encouraged bibliographers to shift their thinking about individual funds and disciplines into a more collaborative approach. Shrinking budgets also contributed to the desire to save dollars and resources. Instead of holding onto historic, proprietary attitudes about one's area and allocations budgets there needed to be a shift in focus to better serve the interdisciplinary nature of teaching and learning in the 21st century. The shift that needed to take place was, "Should I pay for this from my fund?" to "Does this book belong in the library?"

In order to streamline the approval process the Libraries made the decision to move to both a central fund for approvals from Blackwell and to implement a virtual approval plan by the fall of 2008.   By doing so the Libraries planned to receive books shelf ready, save acquisitions and selectors' time and resources, and improve delivery of materials to the shelves and end users. More detail on the acquisitions and cataloging pieces will be addressed later in the presentation.

PROCESS

Collection Development needed to identify an amount for a central fund. To do this data on approval budgets for the last five years was compiled. Due to many exceptions and other projects such as a cooperative collection pilot for four funds, Collection Development had to massage and normalize the data to obtain a reasonable average amount for approvals for each of the 50 funds.

The data was then shared and discussed with bibliographers over a period of several months, first with representative members of the Collection Development Advisory Committee, then at full bibliographer meetings. Issues and concerns centered around fears of rampant ordering on the part of some bibliographers to the detriment of others, fears that the central fund would lead to shrinking of funds for firm orders, worries that we would miss seeing important titles on everyone else's shelves in the way that bibliographers were used to viewing them on the physical shelves.

To make the central fund and virtual approval a possibility, both projects were set up as pilots that would then be reviewed and analyzed in 3 months, 6 months and after one year. Collection Development argued that if this proved to be over burdensome and to create more problems than imagined, the Libraries could always go back to some earlier processes.

In fact there were some bumps along the way but after a year and a half of working with both a central fund and virtual approval there has been wide spread acceptance of both concepts. The Libraries have also seen major benefits which will be discussed in the conclusions.

SET-UP AND PROCESS AT BLACKWELL
VIRTUAL APPROVAL PROJECT SETUP

Through 2006 Kim Anderson worked with Yem Fong, Charlene Kellsey, and the University of Colorado bibliographers to reduce the high return rate on their approval program. The Libraries hoped to get the return rate low enough that the program would become a purchase plan and books would arrive at the library shelf-ready. In the course of that profile work the discussions moved to thinking about a "Virtual Approval Plan" in which bibliographers had the ability to de-select titles prior to shipment. Such a plan would allow bibliographers to continue to manage their approval receipts while allowing processed, non-returnable materials to be sent to the library. A pilot project to test the effectiveness of this idea was the first step.

Kim Anderson and the approval staff at Blackwell designed an internal "Virtual Approval Plan" workflow for the pilot project. CU identified several bibliographers who were interested in participating. The subject areas included the hard sciences, engineering, math, business, psychology, and art. All other subjects remained in a traditional approval plan model with bibliographers reviewing weekly book shipments and rejecting those titles they did not want to add to the collection. Acquisitions made the necessary preparations in the acquisitions department to handle this special group and in spring of 2007 the pilot project was initiated.

PROCESS AT THE LIBRARY

For the purposes of the presentation the Classics subject sub profile is used as an example.
1. Each bibliographer receives a weekly electronic notification of titles that matches their particular sub profile. These electronic notifications arrive on Tuesday. Bibliographers have until the end of the day on Friday to act on the notifications. The bibliographer signs on to Collection Manager to review the report. The slide shows a week's report for the Classics sub profile which had seven titles match for book shipment to the library.

2. If the bibliographer decides that they do not want to receive a specific title, they click on the "Notes" link in the title record and enter the word "Cancel."

3. In traditional approval plans, most libraries have a reject shelf so all selectors can review titles that others have rejected. If a selector find a title she believes should be added to the collection, she can choose to keep it. CU felt it was important to create a "Virtual" reject shelf so bibliographers retained the opportunity review and select any rejected titles. So once a bibliographer rejects a title, she adds it to a shared title list/bookshelf for others to review; that is, a "Virtual Reject Shelf." That completes the bibliographer's work for their subject area for that week's approval matches.

4. The bibliographer can navigate to "Shared Bookshelves" to review that week's rejected titles. For example, for the demonstration week there were 87 titles rejected. The review schedule at CU calls for bibliographers to examine the virtual reject shelf on Friday. Waiting until the end of the week ensures that they see all rejected titles.

5. Should a bibliographer decide they want to override the decision to reject a particular title, they simply have to click on the "Note" link and enter the word "Buy".

6. Once the selector has reviewed their weekly book matches and the shared bookshelf of rejected titles, their approval review work for the week is complete.

WORKFLOW EFFICIENCIES

Prior to the R2 consultants visit the Libraries conducted a "before" workflow test in order to document results of any changes made after R2's recommendations. This had to be put together quickly, since the end of the fiscal year was approaching, so a simple methodology was developed. Paper slips were inserted into all books unpacked during one week. Separate slips for approval, firm/gifts and standing orders were used. Each person who touched the book initialed and dated when it left their area. The data was entered into a spreadsheet to calculate the number of days in each area: Acquisitions, Cataloging and Marking.

The test was repeated in 2009 with the same methodology, and in the same month, so that results would be comparable.

WORKFLOW TEST BEFORE AND AFTER VIRTUAL APPROVAL & SHELF-READY

APPROVAL BOOKS RECEIPT TO SHELF	May 2006 362 items		May 2009 364 items	
	Avg. no. of days		Avg. no. of days	
ACQ	22			6
CAT	7	(+ 90 day backlog)		0
MARKING	16			0
TOTAL AVG. DAYS – 76% of materials RECEIPT TO CIRC.	45			6

As can be seen from the table, the number of days from receipt to being sent to circulation was reduced from an average of 45 to only 6 for 76% of the materials. Fourteen days were eliminated by moving from the shelf review process to virtual review, but additional days were eliminated by moving to obtaining MARC records through the Promptcat program and having Blackwell do shelf-ready processing for the books before shipping them.

PROMPTCAT/SHELF-READY

 Records from OCLC are received for all but a very few books, and labels for an average of 90% (meaning there was a call number in the record). Currently, 76.3% are bypassing the Cataloging department and going straight to circulation, because they have LC or PCC records. Acquisitions staff are currently being trained to also work on member copy so that more will be able to bypass Cataloging, freeing them to work on our backlogs of hidden collections (i.e. not in

the online catalog at all). For 0809 we found that 88% of Promptcat records were LC, only 12% were not. An additional 3% are bypassing Marking, meaning they had to go to Cataloging for some reason, but already had call number labels which did not need to be changed.

VIRTUAL APPROVAL BOOKS - PROMPTCAT/SHELF-READY
2008-09

Records supplied	12,911
No record avail.	41
Labels	11,608
No labels	1,303
% no labels	10.1%

Setup of the Promptcat profiles was a little complex, because CU needs to have branch locations printed on the spine labels. This problem was solved by having a different Blackwell code for each branch, so each code could have a different Promptcat profile.

SAVINGS ON RETURNED BOOKS AND CREDITS

Although the Libraries cannot quantify exact amounts, CU is saving money on shipping boxes of books back (shipping is paid in the mailroom, and there are no separate figures for Blackwell). For approvals, books are invoiced to the deposit account when shipped, so the vendor has to then supply credits for the rejects. So both the invoice and the credit had to be posted in the Innovative acquisitions module. With virtual approval, books rejected online are not invoiced at all, and therefore no credits need to be posted.

Due to the initial experiment with pre-publication approval selection, the Libraries did still receive some books into the fall of 2008, and credits are often sent by the vendor a month or two after the return, so the credits did not decline as quickly as expected but the dollar amount for 2008-09 was half that of 2007-08.

So far, for July-Sept. 09, CU received 4,563 books and returned 16, mostly damaged, or inadvertent duplicates.

CONCLUSION

According to fund account reports, the Libraries spent close to the same amount on the approval plan in 08/09 than had been spent in 07/08 and received a similar no. of titles, so the initial worries about overspending did not materialize.
 Bibliographers have gotten used to the routine of checking their lists every week, and since they are available on the web at any time, from any location, there is less of a problem checking when they are away from campus. With the previous shelf process, they would have to designate a substitute to check their shipments when they were away.

Although there were initial complaints about not enough information upon which to base a decision in the virtual approval plan, Blackwell is supplying an increasing amount of metadata from the publishers for new titles. This includes table of contents, jacket blurbs or summaries. This information makes it easier to make a decision on the relevance of a title for the collection, and though it may not be quite as good as looking at the actual book, many find that the time efficiencies of doing the selection online compensates for the occasionally difficult decision. From the Technical Services point of view, the gain in workflow efficiency is spectacular. From an average of 45 days to only 6 days from unpacking to circulation provides much better service to our users in gaining access to new materials. The move to downloading records in a batch has streamlined the receiving process and allowed us to re-designate one FTE staff member to other duties. The shelf-ready processing has also cut a large number of books from the labeling and stamping process in the Marking department, allowing their staff and students to be assigned to other projects, such as book repair and a reclassification project.

The single fund for approvals has made receipt of the materials easier, but the Libraries have lost some of the statistical and reporting capability we had, because items are no longer assigned to individual fund codes in Innovative's The Innovative acquisitions module. Fund code was an easy way to create lists of materials purchased for a specific subject area. In addition new books lists now have to be created using call number ranges, which can be complex for some fields. The Libraries also has to rely on Blackwell reports to determine spending in each profile area, but Blackwell bases their reports on date invoiced, while the Libraries use date received in the acquisitions module so data for each fiscal year does not match exactly. Overall, in spite of some drawbacks, the virtual approval plan and central fund implemented at the University of Colorado, Boulder has to be considered a success in meeting the goals set at the outset: to improve workflow, to get materials to end users faster, and to create efficiencies for staff and librarians.