

## THE RELATIONSHIPS OF THE ACQUISITION DEPARTMENT TO THE LIBRARY'S TOTAL PROGRAM

Rolland E. Stevens

Ruth Stephan describes a Japanese tea ceremony in her delightful story, "The Zen Priests and Their Six Persimmons," published in Harper's Magazine, June 1962:

" . . . The tea ceremony had begun.

"Every movement has a spiritual meaning, . . . One movement flowed into another to blend, as the colors of the room blended without one harsh note, in a ritualistic harmony. Kubori-san seemed to be activated by a melody I did not hear."<sup>1</sup>

I suppose that every library administrator, every director of any enterprise, for that matter, would like to see the individual components of his total operation flow together in this manner, activated by an unheard melody. Too often we fall into the error of compartmentalizing; instead of combining, we divide and separate the various duties into traditional departments. Thus, we restrict the freedom of our imagination in developing the most effective pattern of organization and the best use of our staff.

I suggest that a more fruitful approach to administrative planning is the use of an individual function, or group of related functions, as the unit of organization instead of a department with its traditional set of tasks.<sup>2</sup> Several unorthodox and effective uses of library staff have been devised through the use of the function as the unit of planning. Two examples that come immediately to mind are the use of divisional librarians by Frank Lundy in subject cataloging,<sup>3</sup> and the use of a professional core of bibliographers by Ralph Parker for aspects of both acquisition and cataloging.<sup>4</sup>

In this paper I shall refer to "the acquisition staff" or "the acquisition department," to mean that group of librarians and clerks whose duties include (1) the identification and procurement of the books, periodicals, microfilms, and other recorded materials needed in the library, (2) the payment of invoices for these materials, and (3) the maintenance of records necessary for these functions. The effective performance of these functions requires a staff having certain knowledge and skills, and I hope to suggest a number of additional functions

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which might best be performed by this same staff by reason of its special knowledge and skill.

Perhaps the most important qualification of the librarian involved in acquisition work is a thorough knowledge of bibliographies and reference works by which books and the other forms of recorded information can be accurately identified. These range from Publishers' Weekly and the Cumulative Book Index to Novye Knigi and the manuscript catalogs of the Vatican Library, and their use requires some ability in reading a number of modern and classical languages, as well as familiarity with the various methods of arrangement and indexing. A second essential qualification for people in this division of library work is a complete and up-to-date knowledge of the book trade and of sources of gifts and exchanges in the United States and in other countries. Since libraries also collect phonograph recordings, maps, visual materials, microforms, and xerographic reproductions, and increasingly in the near future, magnetic tapes, punched cards, and other forms of computer input, the acquisition staff must also know the sources of such materials. General acquaintance with the costs of current publications and the value of out-of-print books is also important. Knowledge of currency exchange rates in the countries from which books are acquired is necessary in the larger libraries. Further, the acquisition staff, as well as catalogers, must have a good knowledge of the library's rules of entry in order to avoid ordering titles already in the library but cataloged under a different entry than that used in the order request or dealer's catalog. Knowledge of rules of entry is also necessary in making temporary records of books on order and books acquired without prior request, so that such records will be compatible with the public catalog. Some part of the acquisition staff, at least, must have a skill in bookkeeping and in checking discounts and addition on invoices.

These are the special areas of knowledge and skill which we expect in the acquisition staff more than in the library staff as a whole, and upon the basis of this specialization, I suggest that certain necessary functions other than acquiring material can best be assigned to the acquisition staff. These functions fall under four groups: (1) responsibility for building, weeding, and evaluating the library collection, (2) assistance in the technical processes other than acquisition, (3) assistance to the public, and (4) assistance to the library administration.

Of the several functions of libraries, the collecting of recorded materials must be conceded to be the earliest, historically as well as logically. And in spite of the current emphasis upon the public services, many of us consider the building of the collection to be the most important professional duty of the librarian. Yet if libraries exhibit a variety of organizational patterns for the performance of day-to-day book selection, as has been described, how much less standardized

practice there has been for the development and implementation of a detailed, written collection policy! In fact, there seems not to be any general agreement that such a written policy can be meaningful.

In using the term "collection policy" rather than "selection policy," I have in mind a statement of what subject areas are to be collected, and in what depth, rather than a statement of the principles of selection. The chief arguments against the development of a detailed collection policy (besides the fact that it is a difficult job) are that it can never anticipate all future needs, can never provide for all future decisions, and furthermore is obsolete before it can be mimeographed and distributed. Upon the immensity and difficulty of the task there is general agreement. To the other arguments, however, it may be answered that a detailed memory of past decisions is possessed by those who have been doing book selection and that present selection is based largely upon this memory. In other words, the totality of these past decisions actually constitutes a kind of policy, and the charge that a written policy cannot be appropriate to future needs must apply equally to the memory method of book selection. But the unwritten policy lacks order and consistency until it has been written down, collected, and edited. Furthermore, it is difficult to pass an unwritten policy on to new members of the staff who must participate in selection and even to older members who do not select books but who catalog, weed, and perform other functions which can be done intelligently only with detailed knowledge of the book collection policy.

Once the decision is made to codify the collection policy, certain details have to be settled. Will the document cover the whole spectrum of knowledge, working from one end of a classification scheme to the other, or will it be built up, subject by subject, as the need arises? Will it be only a broad outline, or will it specify in detail the various topics and subtopics, even the authors, to be collected in depth? And who will spend the many hours necessary for the formulation of the policy? On the one hand, a collection policy is so fundamental to the *raison d'être* of the library that it must be the responsibility of the top administrative officer and his governing board. On the other hand, the formulation of a complete, detailed policy is too time-consuming a task for one to expect the librarian and board of trustees or faculty council to spend the many hours necessary for its completion. At best, the board could draft a collection policy only in very broad outline.

I am reminded of a librarian with whom I once discussed the difficulty of writing out a collection policy. His experience lay wholly in public services and in the administration of small college libraries. He agreed upon the importance of a policy, but failed to see any problem. "The policy would simply state," he said, obviously recalling his lecture notes from library school, "that the book collection should support the instructional needs of the college." This, of course, is not the kind of policy statement we are considering. Wheeler and Goldhor

suggest that in the public library the selection policy be written out in detailed form by the library staff and approved by the board.<sup>5</sup> In the college or university, the library council is usually advisory to the librarian, and its approval of the policy is not necessary, but it is still desirable. Indeed, the faculty of the college or university must be called upon for assistance and advice in formulating the detailed policy.

But which members of the library staff are best able to work out the collection policy in detail? A good case can be made for the reference librarian, the circulation librarian, and the branch or departmental librarians, since they see the collection in use and are aware of the daily demands upon it. It is the acquisition librarian, however, whose attention is focused upon the building of the entire collection and the catalog librarian who is concerned with indexing and coordinating the collection for maximum use. These members of the staff are more likely than public service staff to see the collection as a whole and to be aware of the interrelation of its many subject fields and special collections. They are more likely to have a long-range view and less likely to be distracted by the daily crises and temporary problems faced by librarians on the firing line. Furthermore, the acquisition librarian is exceptionally conscious of the subject fields in which there has been active purchasing in the past. He is also an expert on the availability of different types of library material, and the availability of out-of-print books will have a strong effect upon decisions to collect in depth. To take an extreme example, I doubt that any library in the United States will decide to concentrate upon tenth-century Latin manuscripts or Shakespeare manuscripts, since it is almost inconceivable that any will appear on the market. Finally, although acquisition librarians will stoutly deny this, they are well suited to work out the detailed statement, because they have more time to devote to it. Or, to put it more tactfully, they are facing daily decisions so close in nature to those required in formulating a collection policy that they do not need as long a time as other librarians may need to reorient their minds to this project.

The importance of a detailed and carefully formulated policy demands, however, the attention and contribution of several of the best minds on the staff. Although I believe that the committee attack upon library problems is often abused, here certainly is a project requiring team effort. If possible, it would be well to enlist the reference librarian to contribute frontline experience, the acquisition librarian to give advice concerning past collection policy and availability of materials, and the director of libraries to make final decisions and to keep the project moving.

When the collecting policy has been set down and approved, the acquisition librarian and his senior staff can do much to implement it. The same reasons for calling upon the acquisition librarian to assist in formulating the policy apply also to his ability to participate in the

selection of materials. Advertisements and announcements of new publications and dealers' catalogs of out-of-print items are received and examined by the acquisition librarian and his staff. Letters from book dealers concerning the sale of especially rare books or of private libraries are also usually addressed to the acquisition librarian. Thus, he and his staff are in a closer relation to the book market than are other librarians and, consequently, can often do most to implement the book collection policy. Decisions upon expensive purchases usually are referred to the director or chief librarian, and selection of medical, technical, and other books outside the acquisition librarian's competence are referred to an appropriate divisional librarian or, in the university library, to an appropriate faculty member. But many decisions within the framework of the collecting policy can and ought to be made by the acquisition librarian, without referral to another staff member or faculty member.

In addition to assisting with the formulation and implementation of a collecting policy, the acquisition librarian and his senior staff can, because of their special knowledge and interests, also aid in weeding the collection. Most research librarians have fervently believed that all recorded material has potential research value and is worth preserving. Although many still profess this belief, there are signs that at least a few research librarians, perhaps made thoughtful by the impending disaster of being overwhelmed by printed and manuscript records, are beginning to exercise some discrimination both as to what is added to and what is removed from their collections. A few years ago, we were shocked to learn that it costs approximately as much to catalog a book as to purchase it. Soon someone will point out, to the further dismay of budget-conscious librarians, that it costs more to weed a book than it formerly cost to add it to the collection. But let us assume that constant, intelligent weeding of the collection is necessary and desirable, not merely to save the cost of building a new wing to the library (a cost study may show that it is cheaper to build an addition than to weed the collection),<sup>6</sup> but to make the collection more responsive to present and future demands, easier to use, and less frustrating to both casual and serious readers.

Too often books are withdrawn because of shabby physical condition, especially when the circulation record indicates infrequent recent use. But a book in perfect condition, although never removed from the shelf since it was cataloged, will not often arouse the killer instinct in the "good housekeeping" type of librarian. Intelligent weeding must be done in conformity with the collecting policy. It makes no sense to withdraw a little-circulated nineteenth-century county history in poor condition while county histories are being collected in depth. The volume should be replaced or repaired. On the other hand, a book in good physical condition should be withdrawn, or preferably never added, when it has no place in the library's collecting policy. Here

again the acquisition librarian can play an important ancillary role. Weeding is too risky a job to entrust to a junior member of the public service staff, guided only by circulation records and the condition of the book. The acquisition librarian, thoroughly conversant with the library's collecting policy and with the state of the book market, and freely consulting appropriate divisional librarians and faculty members, or working with them as a committee, should be able to weed the collection intelligently. The important principle to be followed is that weeding should be done, not book by book, but with the whole collection in mind.

Closely related to acquisition and weeding is collection evaluation. Dr. LeRoy C. Merritt has suggested that collection evaluation is necessary in order to test the adequacy of selection activity in producing a good collection.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, when we give close attention to the meaning of "evaluation," we find that a method of evaluating the collection is by no means obvious. The suggestion is sometimes made that the library collection be evaluated by checking standard bibliographies against the card catalog. However, this implies that the ideal collection for every library would be one including all titles in the bibliographies, and that all libraries perfectly realizing this ideal would have identical collections. But if the same collection, namely, the books listed in The Standard Catalog for Public Libraries or in other standard bibliographies, were the ideal collection for all libraries, regardless of size, purposes, and community composition and interests, then we would be wasting much time in selecting; we could save staff time and obtain attractive discounts by subscribing to a package book purchasing plan, a "Books of the Month Club" for libraries. Of course, I am carrying the suggestion to an absurd and unintended extreme. What is intended is that bibliographies be checked only in those subjects in which the library expects to collect in depth. But my purpose is to show the inadequacy of evaluating the collection by merely checking bibliographies.

Since a library exists to meet the needs of its own community, a more appropriate method of evaluation would seem to be one based upon ability to meet those needs. One index of this ability is the number of unanswered reference questions; in evaluating the collection, of course, we are interested only in the reference questions which go unanswered because of failure of the book collection. We must somehow eliminate human failure as a cause. Another and more direct indication of ability of the collection to meet community needs is the number of titles borrowed on interlibrary loan. Another index of this ability is circulation statistics: both room and home use. We begin to run into a difficulty: since we have provided ourselves with no model, we do not know how much circulation there ought to be in our community. Evaluation is a complex, philosophical question, and interesting as it is, we cannot pursue it at greater length here, because

it has already become evident that the acquisition staff cannot play a significant role in evaluating the collection in terms of its usefulness to the community. Whoever does perform this function, the information so obtained must be fed back into the collecting policy.

Many libraries carry insurance on building and contents against fire and other damage. In such libraries, appraisal of the collection for insurance is clearly the work of the acquisition staff, with its special knowledge of book costs. After the initial appraisal has been made, it must be periodically revised to conform to changing market conditions.

The second group of functions in which the acquisition staff may assist the library's total program includes technical processing other than acquisition of materials: namely, cataloging, recording of serials, and binding. The particular function which first comes to mind is the establishment, for each book or periodical ordered, of a catalog entry conforming to American Library Association rules of entry. Since a correct entry has to be assigned when the title is cataloged, the same entry may as well be assigned when the order is prepared and then used throughout subsequent processing. Establishment of the correct entry before the title is ordered, making it compatible with the official catalog record of books already in the library, helps to ensure that a second copy is not ordered unwittingly under another entry. This procedure also aids in the ordering of Library of Congress or other catalog cards by author and eliminates entry establishment in the cataloging process. For these reasons, it is usually recommended that the correct entry be established before a title is ordered, even though it requires that bibliographers with professional library training be employed in the acquisition process. Establishing the entry requires a thorough knowledge of the American Library Association rules of entry, verification of the publication in authoritative bibliographies, and checking the entry in the cataloging authority files.

There are, however, certain disadvantages to this commonly practiced procedure. First, much of the time spent in establishing the correct entry may be lost when large numbers of books ordered are never subsequently received. Out-of-print books ordered from dealers' catalogs may be already sold, and the longer the delay in ordering caused by first having to establish and verify the entry, the greater is the risk of losing books ordered from antiquarian catalogs. Also there are always certain books announced for publication which never appear, at least not under the announced title. On a long list of desiderata there are often some titles which no amount of searching will uncover. The time spent by bibliographers in establishing catalog entries for these books is wasted.

Besides the loss of professional effort in establishing the entry for such books, a second disadvantage is that the use of the library entry on an order form may even confuse and obstruct the book dealer

from supplying the desired book. Let us distinguish between the catalog entry and the entry which will indicate clearly to the book agent what book is wanted. These are not always identical. Any dealer knows that a book by Samuel Clemens is the book which he handles under Mark Twain. And most jobbers or antiquarian dealers must know that libraries commonly order a book written by two or three authors under the first name on the title page. But some of our corporate entries must present problems to dealers, especially in foreign countries, where the use of the corporate entry is not firmly established. And until dealers became inured to the idiosyncracies of American libraries, the following entries on orders must have appeared ridiculous: Lytton, Edward George Earle Lytton Bulwer-Lytton, baron, for Bulwer-Lytton; Bible. O. T. Psalms. English. Paraphrases, for the Bay Psalm Book; Catholic Church. Councils, for Mansi, Sacrorum Counciliorum Nova Collectio

The third disadvantage in establishing the full entry before ordering is that it is more difficult and less accurate to do so at this time than to do it with the book in hand. Furthermore, by the time the book is received, it is more likely to be listed in the National Union Catalog than it was when the order was placed several weeks earlier. And, consequently, there is a fourth disadvantage: most catalogers will wish, and with justification, to recheck the entry assigned by the bibliographer at the time of ordering. Thus, much of the justification for establishing a catalog entry early in the ordering process has vanished. I do not say all of the justification. Bibliographic verification of each item to be ordered and conformance of the entry to standard library usage may prevent costly and unnecessary duplication of books already in the collection, even if the cataloger will repeat much of the work with the book in hand.

But can we not isolate the several cost factors in this process, in order to determine whether to establish the library entry before placing the order or to wait until the book has been received? We must consider a given number of requested titles, at least several thousand; these should include both out-of-print and currently published books, both domestic and foreign publications, in approximately the proportions normally acquired by the library. On the one hand, we must total the cost of bibliographic verification, searching, and ordering of this sample group. We should also note the number of unintended duplicates received in spite of careful bibliographic verification and add the cost of these unwanted books, either their net cost if they are kept, or the cost of returning them to the dealer and of adjusting the invoice. To this cost we should compare the total cost of handling another group of requested titles, similar in quantity and type. In this group we shall verify author and title, before ordering, only where warranted by excessive price or difficult entry, searching other titles under the entry as given. After books have been received,



the order entry will be examined and changed, if necessary, to conform to cataloging practice. The cost of establishing the entry at this point must be added to the cost of ordering. Again the cost of unwanted duplicates, which probably will be higher with this group, has to be added. But the cost of establishing a standard entry, after books arrive, should be lower; first, because the number of books received is somewhat fewer than the number of books ordered; second, because the task is easier, especially with a Library of Congress card number in the book. To oversimplify the case, the question of relative efficiency of these two methods will depend upon whether the added cost of bibliographic verification of all titles before ordering is substantially higher or lower than the cost of the larger number of duplicates received when some titles are ordered without bibliographic verification.

These are two extreme methods. Experience will suggest modifications to either method. At the Ohio State University Libraries (where we have not made a cost analysis), we separate order cards upon receipt in the Acquisition Department into those which need and those which do not need bibliographic verification before ordering. We verify any book costing \$15 or more and those with corporate entries and difficult personal names. Of necessity, we verify any order request lacking publisher's name, although we do not insist upon knowing the exact price. Many entries are corrected or, more often, completed with a search of the dictionary catalog. But we verify in bibliographies only about one-half of the titles ordered. Other large university libraries usually (and in spite of textbook advice) follow some policy of nonverification of inexpensive publications. A medium-sized public library, on the other hand, ordering predominantly current American and English imprints, may well find it worthwhile to verify entry and all other information before placing the order.

Since the arguments in the preceding paragraph may seem heretical in some library circles, I should like to be correctly understood. I am not arguing against bibliographic verification and entry establishment for all titles before ordering. I am arguing against the continuance of these procedures in all libraries solely for the reasons that we were taught these as correct procedures in library school, or that we followed these procedures in other libraries in which we have worked, or that these procedures have always been followed in our present library. I am urging the continuing examination of our procedures in the light of circumstances in our individual situations. The proportion of a library's attempted acquisitions which are out-of-print and elusive publications will affect its procedure in preparing orders. Large university and public libraries order many titles which may subsequently not be received; small college and public libraries order predominantly current domestic publications which are easily available.

If most acquisitions are in-print publications and therefore almost certain to reach the library, there is least to lose and most to gain in doing as much of the catalog preparation as possible before placing the order. Such preparation includes not only the establishment of a catalog entry, but also the ordering of Library of Congress or other catalog cards. Again the advantage is obvious: with a set of unit cards on hand when the book arrives, cataloging is both easier and faster. But if the library orders many out-of-print books, publications of small societies, privately published items, foreign imprints, and other materials which may never be received, catalog cards cannot safely be ordered in advance. Although it would seem fairly simple to distinguish between books for which cards may safely be ordered in advance and those for which it would involve a risk, large libraries usually wait until books are received to order cards or to match books with Library of Congress proof slips. Medium-sized public libraries often order cards when they order books, although Wheeler and Goldhor point out that it may be easier and faster to catalog all books upon arrival, without waiting for printed cards.<sup>8</sup>

A third way in which the acquisition department may aid in the further processing of purchased books is to participate in one of the commercial or cooperative central cataloging and processing plans. These centers receive the books ordered by a member library directly from the publisher or jobber, catalog and classify, and return books to the library marked and pocketed, with book cards and sets of catalog cards. Although participant libraries are invited to accept a standard form of cataloging, they may specify certain variations at extra cost. The chief advantage of the plan is the economy effected by having a central staff of catalogers and clerks serve a number of libraries, many of which add too few books to justify employment of one full-time cataloger. Hence most of the participating libraries are small public and school libraries. Mary Lee Bundy found that only eight per cent of the 628 public libraries served by 28 cooperative centers have total incomes of \$100,000 or over.<sup>9</sup> Although this service is seldom used in the medium-sized and large libraries with which we are here concerned, increasing shortage of catalogers in the future may well spread this practice among larger libraries.

Still another service which the acquisition staff may perform to assist in cataloging is the maintenance of the complete and official record of serial holdings. In those libraries in which currently received journals and other serial publications are ordered, recorded, claimed, and distributed by a division of the acquisition staff, it seems an unnecessary duplication of effort to have the cataloger annually change the record of holdings in the public catalog and shelf list. At the Ohio State University Libraries and a number of other university libraries, a single, central record of serial holdings is maintained; cards in the dictionary catalog and shelf list refer to this central

record for all serial holdings. While the catalog department is responsible for descriptive and subject cataloging, assignment of entry, change of entry, classification, and designation of copy numbers, the maintenance of the record of holdings is the responsibility of the acquisition department.

The acquisition department may also serve to eliminate further processing of books in the library by having unbound volumes prebound before they are shipped by the dealer. This technique is particularly effective with paperbacks published in this country and with unbound European publications. Prebinding may also be the substitution for the publisher's binding of a strong library binding in anticipation of heavy circulation. When an agreement for prebinding is drawn up with a dealer, certain kinds of publications should be excepted: rush orders, small pamphlets, and individual replacement numbers of journals. Binding specifications must be given to the dealers from whom such books are bought, and close adherence to these specifications must be demanded. There is probably some saving in cost by having binding done abroad, before books are shipped, but care must be taken that what appears to be an economy is not actually a poor quality job. Perhaps the principal advantage, not essential in some libraries, is the relief of an overburdened binding program, and the use of book funds, rather than insufficient binding funds, to pay for some of the binding.

A third general class of functions which may be assigned to the acquisition staff is that in which assistance is given directly to the library's public. Without meaning to invade the field claimed by the reference staff, the acquisition librarian or a professional member of his staff, having special knowledge of trade and national bibliographies, may often or even regularly be called upon to aid readers in the identification of bibliographic items or in the intricacies of serial publications. But subject bibliography and lists of books by and about a given author are more appropriately handled by reference librarians or by subject specialists on the staff. As in prebinding, the assignment of certain types of reference questions to the acquisition staff may be considered as an expedient to relieve an over-worked reference staff. However, opinions on the value of old books, identification of foreign and domestic publishers and dealers, of sources of elusive publications, and of outlets for the sale of books, should always be referred to the acquisition department.

Another service to the readers that is best assigned to the acquisition staff is the sponsorship of private book collections. Contests among students are sometimes held in the college library to encourage student reading, pride in books, and interest in collecting. Dollar limits are usually included in the contest rules in order to give a fair chance to students of different economic means.<sup>10</sup> Such contests or displays, with encouragement and technical advice offered by the

acquisition staff, might be held in public libraries, as well as in colleges and universities.

The fourth kind of assistance that might be assigned to the acquisition department is that in support of the overall operation of the library; specifically, in maintaining fiscal accounts. Since the department keeps a ledger of expenditures for books and periodicals, has staff trained for bookkeeping, and has equipment suitable for the purpose, it seems feasible to employ this same skill and equipment to keep accounts for supplies, equipment, and other budgeted expenditures. A centralized bookkeeping service is most appropriate to the smallest libraries we are considering, where specialized staff and equipment cannot easily be duplicated. Larger libraries can better afford to have two centers for bookkeeping: one in the acquisition department and the other in the director's office.

Now that we have considered, and I hope in some manner justified, twelve functions in which the acquisition staff may be involved because of its specialized training and experience, it is tempting to ask whether we do not need to double this staff: one half to care for regular acquisition work, the other half to perform these added functions. The first responsibility of the department is to acquire and receive library materials swiftly and accurately. Any of these auxiliary duties should be added only to a department already performing well its basic task. Several of the functions mentioned above properly belong elsewhere in the library but may be partially assigned to the acquisition department to relieve an overburdened budget or staff elsewhere. The fun of directing a library or other enterprise, to those to whom it is fun, must be partly in the challenge of rearranging and deploying resources to meet changing needs with the maximum effectiveness. It is in this sense that I have suggested certain relationships of the acquisition department to the library's total program.

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