Eight May Be Too Many: Getting a Toe-Hold on Cooperative Collection Building

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ABSTRACT. One year ago, John Carroll University instituted a policy of advising faculty selectors when an order submitted for a title already has more than eight circulating copies in OhioLINK. This article describes why the library undertook this, the implementation of the policy, its documentation, its reception, and the results after one full year. This project is an easy first step for any member of a consortium to take toward more collaborative collection development with other consortium members.

KEYWORDS. Cooperative-collection development, overlap (library collections), duplicate materials, consortium, OhioLINK

Most often in our journal literature we read of new or cutting-edge work. Such things attract our attention and make our minds explore the possibilities of applying what we read to our own collections. On occasion, though, it is also useful to reiterate the tenets of a basic project in the hope that this exercise will inspire someone else to start small. This paper relates to a project, small but effective, at John Carroll Uni-

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versity’s Grasselli Library and describes a first foray into developing the print collection with reference to the holdings in the OhioLINK central catalog.

There is a strong history of collaborative efforts in American libraries. Interlibrary lending began in the late nineteenth century, when academics wanted to borrow books from other libraries. This program, along with other efforts at interlibrary cooperation before 1976, is discussed in David C. Weber’s “A century of cooperative programs among academic libraries” (1976). Interlibrary Loan remains a vital service for libraries today and is the most widely used method of collection sharing. In the early 1970s, the Research Libraries Group, originally comprising Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the New York Public Library, collaborated to build comprehensive subject collections, an effort that gave libraries the conspectus approach. In discussing this joint enterprise, Stam (1985) defines the primary tension generated by cooperative programs as that between library interdependence and autonomy.

Consortia gained great ground for cooperative efforts, especially by harnessing technology to deliver to local desktop electronic resources licensed as a group. Electronic resources gave libraries the best of both worlds, a taste of the power of cooperative buying while affording immediate access to the resources. Books bought cooperatively, though, require “a tripartite operation consisting of coordinated multi-library selection, bibliographic access to group holdings, and expedited document delivery” (Haar 2003, 188). The first of these is most often the stumbling block. Questions of whose budget will fund these purchases and whether the items will always be available on demand to the non-custodial libraries can become thorny dilemmas. It is difficult for librarians to refocus our attitudes from desiring libraries that contain everything and are self-sufficient to having a library that will not have certain titles and those that collect in a collaborative manner with other libraries.

Nevertheless, cooperative print collection development is enticing enough that librarians continue to work toward that goal. Burgett, Haar, and Phillips (2004, 36) list the following as reasons to participate in Cooperative Collection Development (CCD):

- CCD offers the best hope of responding to rampant growth in the number and cost of library materials.
- Libraries can only build comprehensive collections collaboratively, not individually.
- CCD can provide fast, reliable service to patrons who need materials not in their local library’s collection.
• CCD leads the way to collaborative preservation, deselection, and storage programs.
• CCD encourages a cooperative ethic that can lead to increased staff efficiency and expertise.

These are certainly worthwhile goals but cooperative development of print collections has moved forward slowly because mind-sets need to evolve before processes can do so.

That librarians are making progress in this area is evident in several notable programs in various stages around the country. Pennsylvania’s Tri-College Consortium (Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore) received a Mellon Foundation grant in 2001 to work on a plan to integrate their library collections into one research collection. Their initial steps involved examining the collection strengths of each college, deselection of one copy of titles held in all three libraries, and conversations with faculty and students to determine usage patterns and attitudes (Seiden 2002). Several years later, the group inaugurated a shared approval plan using YBP’s Gobi interface for two subject areas, and it hopes to build on that success by expanding to other areas (Miller 2006, 64).

Colby, Bates, and Bowdoin in Maine followed suit in 2006 with a two-year grant also from the Mellon Foundation to set up a shared collection development program. They have begun the process of melding three different catalogs, three budgeting approaches, and three library cultures. In the first year, the focus is on developing a joint approval plan with four pilot subjects and with the hope to extend it in the next year to include all disciplines (Bowdoin College 2007).

These are both groundbreaking efforts resulting from painstaking planning and negotiation. Each one required commitments at the highest levels of the institutions even before the planning could take place. These library “make-overs” have broad implications for the parent institutions, especially in terms of financial commitments to the continuing functioning of the common collections. It is not surprising that these top-down efforts involve a small number of institutions.

Many more libraries participate in a second, less formal, level of cooperation that does not require official buy-in from the parent institution. In fact, participation in these projects can be instrumental in building a favorable climate toward cooperation at the institutional level. A few examples of these, all from Ohio, will be presented.

OhioLINK is a consortium of 85 members uniting the academic libraries, and a few public libraries, in Ohio. One important aspect of the OhioLINK collection is the depth and diversity it brings to all its
members. An effort to enhance this quality lies at the heart of the “Not Bought in Ohio” process. Gammon and Zeoli (2003, 77-106) detail their OhioLINK/YBP collaboration in finding a workable way to identify the recent imprints that are not bought in Ohio each year. The Not Bought in Ohio Report, created under the auspices of OhioLINK’s Collection Building Task Force (CBTF), is accessible to all member libraries. The CBTF has also mounted on the OhioLINK website a proposed workflow for libraries wanting to participate in reducing the not-bought lists.

Another effort at ensuring the comprehensive availability of new titles in Ohio, this time from the subject standpoint, is the Not Bought in Ohio–Art and Architecture Books. This project, undertaken by the Art and Architecture Subject Group, identified books not bought in their subject areas through two approval plans, YBP and Worldwide Books. The titles were checked against the OhioLINK catalog in case they had been acquired by other means, then put on a list for members to review (Art and Architecture Not Bought in Ohio Pilot Project n.d.). This kind of subject-oriented collaboration can be very effective in prompting more librarians across the state to engage in the conversation about collaboration.

In a second subject-specific project, SWORCS (the Southwestern Ohio Religious Cooperative) worked to create a shared slip approval-plan profile. Each school agrees to collect in a specific non-Judeo-Christian religion. The members’ goal here is to reduce duplication and broaden the array of OhioLINK’s content on these religions (OhioLINK 2004).

These less formal initiatives have a variable ebb and flow depending on how many libraries participate at any given time coupled with how much time participants can devote to the effort. Sometimes referred to as the “complementary approach,” these efforts occur when individual libraries “attempt to complement each other’s collections and avoid duplicating materials that they consider non-core resources for their clienteles” (Burgett, Haar, and Phillips 2004, 62). It is also defined as “shared collection information, a system in which members use information in a shared database about collection holdings to influence their selection/acquisitions decisions” (Evans and Saponaro 2005, 341). This is the approach John Carroll University’s Grasselli Library took in what could be the library’s first step on the path to collaborative collection development.

John Carroll University is a Masters I institution with an FTE that hovers in the 4,000 range. Grasselli Library joined OhioLINK in 1998 and immediately began to reap the benefits of the vast electronic holdings and the shared catalog. The librarians had, through the years, become
aware of some of the cooperative efforts around the state and occasionally discussed possible participation in one of these. In 2004, when the university was hit by a financial crunch, all budgets were cut. For the following two years the library was funded with no growth. Coupled with these funding issues, the library budget was due for an internal overhaul. Departmental lines had grown for those departments that spent their money and decreased for those that had not, creating imbalances among the departments and a "spend it quickly" attitude. In addition, operational and collections lines had blurred through the years.

With a new director on board in 2005, a new allocations formula for the collections lines was devised for the 2006/2007 academic year that employed such inputs as undergraduate credit hours, graduate credit hours, graduating majors, full-time faculty, and part-time faculty. While spending history will have a role in future years, it will no longer drive the whole allocation process.

The teaching faculty at John Carroll is heavily invested in the library. Most selection of material is done by faculty members, a privilege the majority take very seriously. During the years of lean budgets, the faculty provided strong advocacy for the library budget with the administration. In short, faculty members regard the library as part of their responsibility, watch their collections lines carefully from year to year, and are accustomed to buying as they see fit. By the spring term in 2006, with the budget lines lower than they had been in years, the librarians were anxious for any measure that would stretch collections funds while helping faculty to continue to build strong collections. Grasselli Library already enjoyed the speedy delivery of OhioLINK materials, ordered seamlessly through the central catalog, two of the three elements necessary for successful cooperative collecting. The most straightforward independent project at hand was to try to reduce duplication in the central catalog.

Rob Kairis, library director of Kent State University's Stark campus, ran a statistical analysis on a control group of recent publications in 2002 to determine the amount of duplication in the OhioLINK central catalog, using the ratio of copies available to copies purchased as an indicator of the amount of duplication (Kairis 2003). The next step, establishing a workable formula for librarians to apply at the time of purchase, remains in development. In a 2005 memo, OhioLINK's CBTF recommended as a temporary standard "a range of three to eight circulating copies as the number of copies per title in OhioLINK." The CBTF noted that the optimal number of copies should ultimately be set within each discipline, using the level of the material, the level of the programs, and local needs.
In light of the pressing need to stretch budget dollars, the members of the Acquisitions Unit of Grasselli Library made the decision to implement some copy limits as a collection management tool and to do some local consciousness-raising about duplication of titles across the state. Trying to present as liberal a policy as possible, Grasselli Library used the larger number from the CBTF memo, eight, as the limit for circulating copies in the central catalog beyond which the Acquisitions staff would question an order. Routine exceptions include reference works or other non-circulating works, items destined for reserve, and titles needed for course development or support. To put the policy in place, acquisitions staff adapted steps in the purchasing processes. Faculty selectors receive electronic slips from YBP. They can request that the book be brought to campus for review, and, after seeing it, either recommend it for purchase or reject it. For items ordered for approval review, Acquisitions student assistants begin by checking the number of copies in OhioLINK at the time of the initial order. If there are already eight circulating copies in OhioLINK, that information is conveyed to the faculty member. The faculty member then, and throughout the process, can override the limit if there is a need for the book to be physically in our library. Once the approval books arrive at the library for review, the titles are searched again. This time a slip is inserted into each book, reading, for titles with less than eight copies, “To help you in making a decision we are providing the following information: at this time there are ___ copies of this title in OhioLINK,” or, for titles with more than eight copies, “To help you in making a decision we are providing the following information: at this time there are eight or more copies of this title in OhioLINK. If you wish to purchase this, please speak with your library liaison or use the OhioLINK 8+ exemption form in the approval area.” To expedite the process, faculty were informed that, in lieu of the form, they could use “8+” on the back of the YBP approval slip as a reason for rejecting the book.

For firm orders, the title is searched just before the order is placed. If there are already eight copies in OhioLINK, the faculty member is informed by e-mail. The faculty member can either reply to the e-mail to exempt the title or fill out the OhioLINK 8+ Exemption form on the website. While 8+ advisories were sent to faculty for both approval and firm orders, the focus was on the approval process in part because the literature, as well as experience, suggests that approval plans result in greater duplication of titles (Knightly 1975, 301). In addition, the ap-
proval process is more easily tracked and librarians and Acquisitions staff have more personal interaction with faculty members when they come into the library to review the books and are able to answer questions readily.

It is important to note that the only completely new step in the procedure for Acquisitions staff was the second search on approval titles. The new process was simply an enhancement of the library's regular preorder searching to encompass the OhioLINK catalog, the addition of that one new step and some minor measures to track how the program was working.

The official statement for the program reads in part,

Grasselli Library will not place orders for any title of which there are already eight or more circulating copies in the Central Catalog. These orders will be returned to departments. Selectors who determine that such duplication is necessary and appropriate can fill out the accompanying "Exception to OhioLINK Copy Limit" form, and return it to the liaison librarian assigned to their department.

Notwithstanding some supportive faculty members, a few others were alarmed at this intrusion into their purchasing decisions. Initially feelings ran high and a couple of letters of protest came to the library director. The library was seen as interfering with the rights of the faculty. For the library's part, emphasis was placed on the last part of the statement, affirming that the library intended to honor faculty decisions that the addition was necessary and appropriate, and that in those cases the library would willingly override the copy limit. The focus became to present the advisories as impartial aids to purchasing decisions in a reduced budget.

The reaction over faculty "rights" was more easily countered than the discomfort caused by more substantive objections. The worry that either the bigger schools with more money or the institutions with book plans rather than review plans would always get the books first, that the new system rewards the speedy purchase over the thoughtful purchase, and that it would potentially result in the deterioration of a browsing collection where students can find "classics in the field" are legitimate concerns that Grasselli library and the OhioLINK community can only continue to reexamine over time. The original intent was to bring the 8+ program live at the start of spring semester 2006, but implementation was delayed until the summer of 2006 in order to respond to faculty concerns more effectively.
A look at the approval process numbers from the start of June through the end of May shows that, out of a total of 2,120 titles brought into the library for review in the course of a year, 28% were returned. Thirty percent of those returned, or 181 titles, were rejected by faculty members due to having more than eight copies in OhioLINK. Of the titles purchased, overrides of the limit accounted for 7.8%.

One full year into the project, all faculty selectors were identified and an informal e-mail survey was sent to the half who ordered most heavily (59 surveys). There was a 37% response rate, a total of 22 responses. The survey comprised these questions: “What was your initial response to the 8+ advisories?” “Has your opinion changed at all?” “Has having this [the number of copies] information influenced you in making decisions about purchases?” and “Do you find OhioLINK useful for your own research? Do you have an expectation that your students should use OhioLINK materials in your assignments?”

In response to the first question, 36% reported having positive initial responses while 41% reported negative responses. Some adjectives used to describe the negative responses were “felt limited,” “program is restrictive,” and “annoyed.” The remainder were either indifferent or did not answer the question. One faculty member in the latter group remarked that it is interesting to know what other libraries are buying. Of those who reported positive responses, all remained positive after one year, one recommending that we change the limit to 4. Of those with initial negative responses, two (22%) continue one year later to dislike the 8+ advisories. The remaining 78% now view them in a positive light. Comments from these faculty noted that they were indeed able to get the titles they refrained from buying (due to the advisories) from OhioLINK in a timely manner. The ease and speed of the OhioLINK loans converted them to the program. Eight of the twenty-one answered that the advisories influenced their thinking in making purchases. Only two dissented, and the rest did not respond to the question.

The final pair of questions focusing on faculty versus student reliance on OhioLINK was prompted by a nagging suspicion by the librarians that there is a double standard regarding OhioLINK on the part of the faculty: they welcome it for their own research but do not think of it as a necessity for their students. That the responses to the first half of the question are the stuff OhioLINK testimonials are made of came as no surprise. “Great service, best in the country, splendid, invaluable” were descriptors used, with “essential” appearing numerous times. The second part of the question, regarding faculty expectation of student use, garnered much more diverse answers, but on the whole more positive
than was expected. Seven respondents did not answer this question, three
gave a flat negative and one responded "I will now!" The remaining ten
ranged from positive to emphatically positive about the importance of
OhioLINK sources for students.

Data were analyzed to draw some conclusions and to assess the
value of the program. At the most basic level, funds not spent on the
181 returned books were used to purchase other materials. By finding
the average price of the books returned on the program for three months
and subtracting the library's discount rate, an estimated $6,000 was saved
by rejecting on the grounds of eight or more copies. While this repre-
sents just over 3.5% of the funds available for departmental purchases,
it is enough to be significant on a first outing. That money remained in
the departmental lines to be used on other materials. On this basis, the
program could be considered successful in that the original goals were
to make tight budget dollars stretch farther and to reduce, insofar as pos-
sible, duplication of holdings in the central catalog.

Selector satisfaction, which corresponds to user satisfaction, was high
at the end of the year—80% viewing the program positively is a sizable
increase over the 37% who originally had a positive attitude. It must
be noted that among those who did not answer the question or were
indifferent are some faculty members who never got an 8+ advisory and
remained largely or wholly unaware of them. For instance, faculty mem-
bers in the modern languages department rarely order titles that are
widely held in the state and also rarely order books for approval review.

Since the same selectors, using the same guidelines, were able to spend
the money saved from the 8+ advisories to buy other items in their dis-
ciplines within their ranges of interest, it is clear that the library stayed
within its selection profile while developing a less homogeneous collec-
tion overall. A minor triumph is that allowing rejections on this basis did
not raise the approval return rate higher than it was previously.

There were some surprise gains, moreover, in the intangible benefits
of the program. One unexpected outcome is that faculty members are
now more thorough in searching potential orders before submitting them.
In the past, when faculty members submitted a firm order request to the
Acquisitions Unit, they rarely had checked for duplication in local hold-
ings, much less in OhioLINK. Several months into the project, the ac-
quisitions staff began to find that the number of requests for material
already owned was dropping significantly. Some faculty apologized for
submitting an order for an in-house duplicate and even mentioned
searching in OhioLINK before submitting orders. It became evident
that this heightened awareness of what is in OhioLINK spilled over into
Grasselli’s catalog. Whatever the reason, the time once spent in checking for duplicates in Grasselli’s catalog and informing faculty members of the call number and status of the item has translated into the time now spent on OhioLINK checking.

As this example shows, the faculty became much more discriminating about what they were buying across the board. While rejecting materials based on how many circulating copies are in OhioLINK, they could then spend the funds on another title within their area of interest, which broadens the collection. Faculty began to give as a reason for rejection that there were already enough in OhioLINK even when that number was far less than eight, indicating a progression on the part of faculty members to seeing OhioLINK not just as an extension of our collection but as a component of it. The librarians had hoped to raise the copy duplication issue at the institutional level, an absolute necessity for any school with heavy involvement of the teaching faculty in book selection, and that hope has been realized.

As for the immediate future, acquisitions staff will continue to modify the 8+ advisories this year to make it as seamless as possible for faculty. They may in addition examine lowering the limit for the notices sent before bringing books into the library for review to lessen the percentage sent back. Projects like the Not Bought in Ohio look attractive and more accessible to John Carroll now. In fact, the greatest benefit resulting from this effort is the new-found confidence that further cooperation lies in the future.

While the pilot was in process, other collections managers in Ohio schools were also putting limits on purchasing even if somewhat less formally. A survey about such limitations, their methods and their successes or lack of success would prove interesting. Youngstown State University, for instance, has an unwritten policy of sending orders back to selectors if there are more than eight circulating copies in OhioLINK. Discussions about related issues, best practices, or directions for the future at a broader level will be useful and welcome to librarians around the state and may help to reduce duplication in more institutions. Recognizing that faculty selectors feel forced to make decisions before seeing informed opinions on the works, since reviews in disciplines usually lag behind those in the library field, librarians across OhioLINK should discuss that and other implications for faculty. For librarians, the guidelines for assessing a collection must be rewritten. The consortial level collection must be part of that assessment, possibly the principal part. How we will assess what each library contributes is an open question. Emphasis will
shift from the number of core titles in the collection to the number of unique titles that a library brings to a consortium.

The value of this small project is that it can be a starting point for every library that is part of a consortium. The project is independent, requires no negotiations with other institutions, and can be run with minimal changes to existing workflow. Furthermore, it puts an institution in the quiet phase, one might say, of cooperative-collection development, preparing the ground for the next step. It has helped the librarians at Grasselli Library to engage more actively in conversations about collection issues and assessment. Rob Kairis remarked, “Once consortium members recognize the advantage of redirecting funds from duplication to diversity and develop working strategies to accomplish that task, then cooperative collection development at the consortium level can become a practical reality” (Kairis 2003, 325). The 8+ advisories have helped John Carroll become better prepared for that new reality.

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