

This is a preprint version of:

Koufogiannakis, D. (2019). Embracing automating for monograph acquisition. *Against the Grain*, 31(2): 14-15.

<https://www.against-the-grain.com/2019/05/v312-embracing-automation-for-monograph-acquisition/>

Embracing automation for monograph acquisition

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At the beginning of 2014, the University of Alberta Libraries (UAL) began a major shift toward the automation of monograph collection development. UAL was looking to move the focus of liaison librarians toward other growth areas such as research data management, and knew that some aspect of workload had to be reduced in order to accommodate new demands on liaison librarian time. UAL already had some experience with approval plans, but the majority of monograph purchasing at the time was being done by individual subject selectors (liaisons). This shift to shelf-ready approval plans without any supplemental slips or individual selection was a significant one, and the change seemed abrupt to many, but came at a time when such change made sense and current technology enabled us to proceed. My colleague, Trish Chatterley, outlined the process of this change in a 2015 *Against The Grain* article, "Being Earnest with Collections -- Rethinking Monographic Acquisitions in a Large Academic Library" (Chatterley, 2015).

Since that time, UAL has continued down this path, completely changing our approach to collections and forming a new centralized Collection Strategies unit, in which a Head and four librarians work together as a team to make all collections related decisions for UAL, supported by an additional eight non-academic staff. With such a small group covering all collections functions for a major research university, we try to automate as many functions as possible. This means we put a lot of initial thought into the overall process, in the hope that doing so yields long term sustainability and reduces time spent on individual selection or decision making. As such, we consider the whole of the process and how pieces of that process fit together, as well as what aspects can easily be shaped by parameters that allow those functions to just run based upon initial instructions and periodic review.

Considering monographs specifically, this has meant that setting up approval plans and eliminating slip notifications is just one aspect of the overall process. In addition, we review and consider which publishers it makes sense to set up multi-year frontlist ebook purchases with directly; doing so means that we know we have comprehensive coverage, usually on DRM free platforms. We then remove those publishers from the approval plan in order to ensure we are

not duplicating content. We build demand driven acquisition (DDA) into our approval plans so that these elements are interwoven, and make DDA the first order of operations for ebooks. When we work with a DDA plan that does not integrate with our normal approval process, we try to do so at a publisher level and then remove that publisher from the approval process to ensure we are only touching on their content via one process. All our DDA processes are automated once enabled, with no librarian intervention. Similarly, whenever possible, when we purchase ebooks from aggregators such as ProQuest Ebook Central, our instruction is to purchase at the lowest level of access for each book but enable auto-upgrading so that when a book generates a lot of use, the level of access is automatically upgraded in order to meet user needs without any intervention on behalf of the Libraries, making the process seamless for the user. We focus our time on an overarching plan for acquiring monographic materials, and continuing to improve that process by working with the vendors we use so that they can meet our needs, rather than putting time into choosing individual titles. Finally, we have also eliminated all subject based fund codes, and simply use one overarching code for “one-time expenditures” (Koufogiannakis & Pan, 2018), which has greatly streamlined the process of acquisition for monographs.

Why has the University of Alberta Libraries chosen to move in this direction?

Why would a large academic library choose to move from librarian selection to a more automated process? When we first began changing how we approached monograph acquisitions, UAL’s Strategic Leadership Team approved a proposal to streamline and centralize monograph selection and purchasing, in order to enable faster service, smooth workflow processes, and ensure consistency across all subject areas, while aiming to improve responsiveness to user needs and overall sustainability of monograph spending power. The reasons noted in that proposal still hold true today, and are reasons why moving toward automation has been success for us as a large academic research library.

Automation of monograph acquisitions has enabled UAL to be more consistent in providing monograph materials to faculty and students. We are e-preferred and with our large front-list purchases of ebooks, as well as ebooks being the first draw on our approval plans, it means that materials are being made available as soon as they are profiled, which results in more items being available earlier than they were in the past. The same applies to print materials because as new books become available with our provider, they are profiled against our plan and sent to us in a timely manner, whereas in the past this would vary depending upon when a selector was able to attend to their slips and place the order. The process also ensures that we have consistency across all subject areas for how materials are purchased and access made available because we think of the collection as a whole and look at it from that lens rather than only caring about very specific areas.

The new direction has smoothed or in some cases completely removed steps in the acquisition workflow. We now simply have one budget for monographs, and no longer need worry about specific funds for either the selection or payment of materials. The Collection Strategies librarians devote time to ensuring that the overall plan runs smoothly, taking an assessment

approach to make any changes required, based on materials received or noted gaps in new areas. Payment tied to our financial systems has also been automated with our primary supplier so that paper invoices are no longer necessary. We have regular check-in meetings with the primary supplier in order to raise specific issues, learn what is new on their end, and propose any changes required from our perspective.

We have built in mechanisms to be responsive to user needs, always aiming to meet those needs before they are expressed, but knowing that not all needs can be anticipated. The one area where we continue to place firm orders is from user requests; our acquisition assistants place orders for all requested materials that we do not already hold in the collection. All requests go into a database which can then be evaluated by the Collection Strategies librarians in order to look for patterns or trends in areas not being well served via our approval plans, new emerging areas, or items where approval coverage is not likely but where we want to be comprehensive (such as with small Indigenous publishers in Canada). We then look for ways to more proactively obtain those types of materials in the future.

What does automation not account for?

In addition to the individual requests noted above, some areas have not fallen neatly into place with our overall plan for automation of monograph acquisitions. While most of our non-English language materials vendors have been willing and able to go down this same path with us, one area in which we faced difficulty was in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (CJK) materials. This is primarily because our CJK librarian retired a number of years ago and was not replaced, nor do we have the internal language capacity with existing staff to account for the language loss. This led to a period of several years where our collection in CJK areas of study was not as robust or proactively being built, as we would normally like, instead relying heavily on faculty requests. As a result, we had to think differently about how to approach this problem, and earlier this year made an agreement with the University of Toronto to draw upon the skills of their Chinese Studies Librarian. He is working with us to do a needs assessment and tailor approval plans in keeping with our overall way of doing things. This is an area requiring much more attention but one where we will be able to achieve the same level of service and proactive automation of acquisition.

Other areas where automation is more difficult include unique and local materials that may be outside the confines of normal publication or not on a book supplier's radar. For UAL, one major area falling into this category are publications by Indigenous authors, where we are trying to make our collection more complete. Hence, greater attention by the Collection Strategies librarians goes into this effort to ensure content is added, working together with liaison librarians. Pairing with public service offerings, such as UAL's [Don't Judge a Book by its Cover](#) event, yields collection building benefits as well since we acquire materials to enhance the collection for this purpose, adding materials that were overlooked in the past. Overall diversity checks are an important part of the work of Collection Strategies, since reliance on approval plans can miss more marginalized voices that we do want to add to our collections, and this is

work we must consciously pay attention to in order to ensure diversity of materials. Finally, emerging areas of research and teaching need to be noted and explored in order to ensure that collection needs are being met. For example, at the University of Alberta we have newly emerging [signature areas](#) which the Collection Strategies librarians need to investigate, discuss further with liaisons, and determine adjustments or additions to plans in order to meet those cross-disciplinary needs.

Is it worth it?

In conclusion, UAL's move towards automation for acquisitions has been a successful one. While this change was not without controversy, it has been implemented without lingering concerns about the quality or quantity of materials being acquired. The overall plan for how we approach acquisitions is functioning well and ensures that a holistic view of our collection is taken. It is important to remember areas that are less mainstream and build those into the overall plan. The overall end result of automation allows us to focus on areas that require more time and attention because they are new or special in some way. The basic function of library acquisitions is at a point where technology allows us to think about the process in new ways and make positive changes. Automation of core functions can be normalized for all large academic libraries, enabling more targeted time for the myriad of other services we need to implement.

References

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