

Too Broad and Too Narrow

One Library's Experience with Approval Plans

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In 2019 a public urban academic research library decided to implement a subject-based approval plan to assess its viability to replace single-title book ordering. However, due in part to our library's unique collecting needs, the plan necessitated extensive and continuous reviews and revisions, which ultimately prompted us to discontinue the plan. Our experience was illuminating because, in the end, we felt we needed to experiment with approval plans to be sure that we were doing the right thing for our library and its users in continuing single-title purchasing of monographs.

The Auraria Library serves three institutions, the University of Colorado Denver (CU Denver), Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver), and Community College of Denver (CCD). Although some of their collections' needs overlap—all three have education, psychology, and business programs, for example—they also have unique needs. CU Denver, a doctoral university with very high research activity, has a College of Architecture and Planning; MSU Denver, a large master's granting university, has a Department of Social Work; and CCD, a community college, has a veterinary technology associate of applied science degree. Another complexity in the campus's student makeup is that we serve students at all levels, from community college students to doctoral students. Consequently, collection development at Auraria Library entails balancing the unique needs of many departments, schools, and colleges as well as community college students, undergraduates, graduate students, instructors, faculty, staff, and researchers.

In 2018, staff and faculty at Auraria Library began discussing the viability of approval plans to replace single-title ordering. We define approval plans as an arrangement with a supplier—in this case GOBI Library Solutions (GOBI), an EBSCO product—to automatically provide print and/or electronic books to a library based on a carefully established profile of subject and non-subject parameters. This acquisitions strategy gets its name from the idea that the books are already “approved,” per the predefined parameters.

The acquisitions and collection development staff and faculty at Auraria Library had been using the book vendor GOBI for well over a decade at the time when we decided to try a large-scale approval plan and had had success using smaller approval plans for collecting award-winning adult and children's books. We knew, in theory, how to manage an approval plan. However, we had always relied on single-title book ordering for the vast majority of our print and e-book purchases. This new project, which, if successful, would replace single-title purchasing at our library, would be a significantly larger approval plan than we had managed in the past.

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A number of reasons motivated the consideration of an approval plan, including: (1) our newly hired director had just implemented approval plans to replace single-title book ordering at her last library to great success; and (2) the head of the department that was at the time doing collection development was looking for ways to reduce the amount of time librarians and staff with collection development responsibilities spent on the tedious process of title-by-title selection. This would, in theory, give them more time to concentrate on other responsibilities. After all, if there was staff time to be saved by using approval plans, it was surely worth exploring further.

Library leadership was enthusiastic to transition from single-title book ordering to an approval plan for many reasons outlined by Rondestvedt: saving time, receiving books more quickly, and saving money.¹ Conversely, many of our librarians with collection development responsibilities were hesitant for reasons listed in the same article: inflexibility in orders, irrelevant materials, profile issues, lack of oversight, and the fact that the “library’s collection will look like everyone else’s.”² They were also concerned we would not stay current on new topics and the available books on those topics, which would hinder their ability to support users’ needs. Other concerns raised included: (1) whether turning single-title collecting over to an approval plan might result in a less well-curated collection; (2) whether the staff time saved on the collection development side might simply shift to acquisitions personnel in managing the approval plan; and (3) whether our unique situation as a tri-institutional campus necessitated a collection approach that was in some ways simultaneously broad and narrow, which we were skeptical an approval plan could provide. With these concerns in mind, however, all personnel involved nonetheless felt that it was worth trying an approval plan, given their success at other institutions.

Collection Development at the Library

At Auraria Library, collection development has fluctuated in importance over the past decade in terms of time allocated for the work and perceptions about the importance of the work. Collection development responsibilities have been handled in different departments and divisions, conducted by librarians and staff with or without instruction or reference responsibilities, and done by personnel with and without a master’s degree in library science. In 2015, the library underwent a major reorganization, and collection development was spread between individuals in two departments, Researcher Support Services (RSS) and Education and Outreach Services (EOS). It was this initial reorganization that spurred conversations about implementing our first comprehensive approval plan (although it would not be implemented until 2019), and it would be a subsequent reorganization that would prompt our reconsideration of whether it was the best strategy for our institution.

The Auraria Campus is a commuter campus with only one official dormitory, and as such, most students live off-campus. For this reason, the library has found that electronic resources best allow us to serve the majority of our students, as they allow easy access to library materials. For the same reason, all three schools had strong online programs even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2019, most of the e-books accessible through the library were from large package deals, including demand-driven

acquisitions (DDA) and evidence-based acquisitions (EBA) programs, rather than single-title purchases. Despite the fact that only a small percentage of e-books were purchased title-by-title, it still amounted to several thousand books and e-books per year.

Auraria Library had a collections budget of approximately \$3.6 million in fiscal years (FY) 2020 through 2022, with approximately 80 percent spent on subscriptions. In FY20, \$428,500 was allocated for all single-title book purchases, whereas in FY21 and FY22, \$370,000 was allocated. This money is used to purchase individual titles selected by librarians as well as book requests from campus faculty, staff, and students. Although the single-title book budget may appear ample, it must support three schools with a combined full-time student equivalent of approximately 32,000. The money does not go far.

The library uses subject fund codes to designate materials that are purchased to support specific subjects. However, only single-title book funds are split by subject—for example, business has a specific amount of book money allocated to purchase all single-title print and e-books. The amount allocated to a given subject is based on the number of students enrolled by discipline, average cost of books by subject, subject need for new content, and book usage. Although Auraria Library is mainly focused on acquiring single-titles in electronic format, there are some departments and disciplines on our campus that prefer print books, which also factors into determining budget allocations by subject.

In addition to single-title print and e-book purchases, part of the library's e-book offerings are provided through e-book packages and DDA and EBA programs, amounting to between five and seven of such packages and programs at a time. We have participated in two e-book DDA programs and three e-book EBA programs, either alone or through consortial deals; however, our participation has fluctuated depending on usage and funds available in a specific year. Therefore, although our users have access to many more books outside single-title purchases, the single-title book funds are the only funds that can be used to purchase individual print or e-book requests and books from smaller publishers or independent bookstores.

The library does not have official liaison roles, but collection development is predominantly based around subjects. However, the 2015 reorganization prompted further changes in the organizational structure of collection development. After this reorganization, not everyone in the two departments with collection development responsibilities conducted collection development, and it was sometimes difficult to balance collection development needs with other departmental goals and individual workloads. Therefore, it was decided in 2017 that all collection development would be consolidated into one department, RSS, and librarians and staff in RSS would take over the subjects previously in EOS. This process took two years to fully implement.

This transfer of duties to RSS entailed certain staff without a background in librarianship to take on collection development responsibilities while also balancing their work related to other areas, such as geographic information services, special and digital collections, and the institutional repository. This also meant librarians who were already doing collection development took on more subject areas, along with their work related to scholarly communication and research support. At the implementation of

the approval plan in 2019, seven library faculty and staff had collection development responsibilities, with an average of eight subject areas per person, although one RSS librarian was doing collection development for as many as nineteen subject areas at one time. This work included communicating with departments on campus, learning about departmental needs through informal and formal channels, and reviewing and selecting print and electronic resources for purchase or weeding.

After the transfer of collection development to RSS, the department began to discuss potential ways to streamline collection development projects and the selection of materials. One idea was to expand our use of approval plans. At the time, single-title book ordering at Auraria Library was located within the Collection Strategies Department, which encompassed all acquisitions personnel. Purchases were primarily based on requests from campus faculty, staff, and students, as well as reviewing slips generated by GOBI. Slips are weekly GOBI notifications that inform librarians when a book matching specific criteria, such as publisher, subject, content type, and call number, were available to review. These slips were based on the same document GOBI uses to create an approval plan; however, instead of the item being automatically shipped (either physically or electronically) library faculty and staff with collection development responsibilities would review the books (or “slips”) and decide which ones to purchase.

Literature Review

Historically, approval plans seem to have originated out of twin concerns: budget constraints and staff time. In 1995, Abel estimated that the staff time required to order each single-title print book to be as high as \$40 per book at the time.³ Budget concerns persist as a motivator to consider approval plans; as Horner notes in her 2017 article on the University of Manitoba Libraries’ study, “budget challenges were . . . a strong motive to review the performance of UML’s approval plan.”⁴

When approval plans began, they were heralded as a technological advancement that would revolutionize the workflow of acquisitions and collection development by some, while at the same time being met with skepticism by others. Quinn calls this the “specter of ‘surrendering to the vendor’.”⁵ However, there was also an appeal to the idea that vendors would help libraries with collection development by pre-selecting books and that “library managers . . . don’t have to invent the wheel.”⁶ As approval plans first came to be widely used, they were regarded as time-savers for librarians, as firm ordering was thought to be a tedious, time-consuming task.

Brantley confirms this view in a 2010 article, stating “automation allows for a reduction in human processing and, in turn, faster workflows and a more efficient organization.”⁷ However, equally consistent throughout the literature is a caveat that books will inevitably slip through the cracks of approval plans and that results might not meet the library’s selecting criteria. For example, Brantley notes that history monographs tend to be interdisciplinary, which may cause them to be missed by approval plans.⁸ Hart acknowledges this too, noting that “usually there are provisions for returning books the library does not want to add to its collection. Those books retained are paid for, processed, and added to the collection.”⁹ Moreover, Pickett, Tabacaru, and Harrell contend that, “consistent

review of approval profiles is ‘necessary to ensure adjustments occur based on user needs and fiscal constraints.’”¹⁰

Most of the recent literature on approval plans focuses on measuring usage of titles selected on approval, and although that is not the primary measure we will discuss in this paper, it is clearly an important factor in the continuing participation of most libraries in approval plans. In a 2017 study, Ke, Gao, and Bronicki compared the usage of print monographs ordered through approval and by title-by-title selection.¹¹ The study authors found that their print monographs ordered on approval had lower circulation than the title-by-title selections.¹² Tabacaru also found that usage of books selected by librarians had higher usage than books on approval and stated, “subject librarians are better predictors of library monographs use than is the approval plan.”¹³ Of title-by-title selection, Ke et al. also write that “[t]his type of manual selection is highly valued because it incorporates liaison librarians’ subject expertise and knowledge, a process considered essential for building a quality and relevant collection.”¹⁴ However, usage also depended on the amount of time items were in the collection and subject, as the study reviewed books purchased from FY 2011 to FY 2017. Books that were in the collection longer had higher percentages of use because users have more time to find and access those books. Additionally, the number of books available to purchase as e-books increased between 2011 and 2017.¹⁵

Tyler et. al. used a slightly different metric to measure success, comparing which type of selection—approval plans, librarians, or patrons—were most heavily cited.¹⁶ For social science materials, they found that “the librarians significantly outperformed both the approval plans and the patrons”; for the sciences “both the librarians and the patrons handily outperformed the approval plans”; and for the humanities “librarians again outperformed the approval plans’ . . . the PDA patrons outperformed both.”¹⁷ This goes to show that even though approval plans may save time and money in some cases, considering circulation statistics and citations, firm order selections routinely outperform approval plans.

Gao, Turner, and Ke also set out to determine whether firm order books had higher usage, and if so, how to modify the approval profile to increase the usage rate of books ordered on approval.¹⁸ These authors looked more granularly at circulation stats in comparison with many other researchers, as they reviewed their profile in small sections, breaking them down by small call number ranges: for example, looking closely at the range BF 636–637. By looking at circulation stats in such detail, the authors found that different subject areas required different approval and firm order needs.¹⁹

As recently as 2021, Attebury found at the University of Idaho that circulation statistics for research books did not justify keeping the books on approval, despite the program having been implemented to save time and money on selection of these materials.²⁰ In fact, University of Idaho librarians eventually elected to keep the profile running as slips only, meaning they would receive email notifications of books that met their approval profile criteria, but the books would not be shipped automatically.²¹ This finding, and those of Tyler et al. and Gao et al., beg the question: are we truly meeting our users’ needs with approval plans?

The aforementioned studies were all based on print book usage, which does not capture the full picture of approval purchasing or usage, as GOBI and other book vendors also offer e-preferred approval plans, which provide an e-book rather than a print book when one is available. Horner finds that it can prove quite difficult to compare the usage of print books with that of e-books, resulting in a kind of apples-and-oranges comparison that yielded questionable results. It is important, as Horner notes, to exercise “caution in drawing conclusions about the higher number of uses/transactions/sessions of e-books in comparison with print usage.”²² This is something that rang true in our experience with approval plans, as we struggled to capture meaningful usage while receiving both print and e-books on approval.

In addition to concerns of usage and relevance to the collection, many have raised concerns over approval plans being ineffective for acquiring books that fall outside of the historically white supremacist structures of academia. As Monroe-Gulick and Morris note in their 2023 article, the ways in which librarians “collect and acquire information results in bias and unbalanced collections.”²³ The literature presented ample evidence that approval plans are not a good tool for capturing small, independent publishers that would help alleviate the centering of colonialist perspectives in the collection.²⁴ Many found small publishers were not adequately captured on approval, rendering approval plans less effective in these efforts. Pickett, Tabacaru, and Harrell mention that in ARL’s 1997 study on approval plans, they found “minimal coverage of small presses and inadequate profiling.”²⁵ Brantley identifies one hurdle to capturing small publishers on approval: that GOBI and other book vendors “require contractual terms that booksellers are unwilling or unable to meet.”²⁶

In the 2022 article “The State of the Approval Plan in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Mihailovic details the results of a survey of academic librarians on the shift in their monograph acquisitions strategy: specifically, the change in their approval plans to accommodate distance learning necessitated by the pandemic.²⁷ Mihailovic found that some libraries stopped their approval plans, some reduced them, and a small minority made no change to their plan. Among those who stopped their approval plan (ten out of forty-one respondents), at least one respondent cited dissatisfaction with, and low circulation of, the print approval books as the reason for stopping their plan.²⁸ Interestingly, another respondent decided to discontinue their plan *because* of the staff time it takes—the very thing that approval plans were meant to alleviate.²⁹

Studies that reported more benefits than drawbacks in approval plans saw those benefits in e-preferred plans, rather than traditional print plans. Pickett, Tabacaru, and Harrell found benefits when they switched from print approval to an e-preferred plan: “weekly print approval shipments declined, mitigating ongoing space limitations; duplication was minimized, and oversight of e-books by subject selectors and collections personnel has improved.”³⁰ Additionally, one respondent to Mihailovic’s survey whose library had an e-preferred approval plan indicated, “Covid hasn’t affected our approval plan, but rather underlined its importance.”³¹

Overall, the authors’ takeaway from the available literature on approval plans is that they require review, assessment, and maintenance. Although they can save time in some circumstances, approval plans do not eliminate the need for oversight by librarians for single-title collecting. What goes largely

unmentioned in much of the literature is the amount of staff time invested in selecting title-by-title and the impact on the quality of the collection if this process is removed. It seems that even in the best-case scenario, review is required or at least recommended as a best practice. Such a review of course requires staff time, and further study would be necessary to determine whether the time saved by eliminating single-title ordering is undone by the time taken to review and correct the results of the plans.

Implementation of Approval Plans at the Library

In 2019, RSS approached the Collection Strategies Department about implementing a comprehensive approval plan and agreed to an introductory meeting with GOBI to discuss a pilot. The licensing and acquisitions manager at Auraria Library oversaw big-picture GOBI activities and therefore took the lead on liaising between GOBI representatives and collection development personnel. Additionally, since our collecting priorities had long been focused on electronic resources, we communicated this to GOBI at the very start to keep in mind when designing our approval plan.

After discussing possibilities with both GOBI and internal stakeholders, we elected to start by moving just one area, business, to approval. In this section, we will refer to books in either format as “books”; however, due to our status as a commuter campus, it should be understood that Auraria Library generally prefers e-books in single-title purchasing. The rationale for moving business first was that the RSS department head had recently been asked to oversee the business collection among many other responsibilities and would not have much time to devote to title-by-title selection. Due to the transition of collection development responsibilities after the reorganization, as well as some upcoming retirements, we would apply similar rationale in selecting future areas to transition.

First, the licensing and acquisitions manager met with the GOBI representative and the former business liaison to map the library’s needs to the approval plan. This involved reviewing the list of call numbers for business and any related subjects and determining whether we would like to have books automatically added to the library’s collection based on the library’s collecting interest in each subject or Library of Congress (LC) call number. We carefully analyzed our campus needs for each area. For example, our business programs do not have a large focus on water transportation (HE380.8-1000) and we excluded that area from the approval plan.

After we completed this process for business, we began to track the business purchases on approval to ensure (1) that books received were appropriate for the library’s collection, and (2) that the budget for a specific discipline was not exceeded based on their annual allocation for single-title book orders. After the business approval profile was up and running, the licensing and acquisitions manager began to work with RSS to identify the next areas to transfer to the approval plan. We began to track upcoming areas using a table similar to that shown in table 1. We also began to run monthly reports to help us determine if and when subjects were over or under spent, review the types of books received, and see if there were issues with fund codes. In late summer 2020, the collection development program lead librarian began working closely with GOBI on the approval plan. In the summer 2021, they reviewed the GOBI profile line-by-line to correct mistakes in the fund allocations.

Table 1. Approval transition timeline.

Time	Action
Fall 2019	Business and hospitality transition to approval, modern languages partial transition to approval
Winter 2019	Economics, political science, and public administration transition to approval
Spring 2020	Law, criminal justice, and public health transition to approval; turned off print approval, review slips for print purchases
Summer 2020	History, theater, and international affairs transition to approval
Winter 2021	Human performance and sports and anthropology transition to approval; unsuccessful transition of ethnic studies to approval
Spring 2021	Quick review of full approval plan, pause in adding new subjects
Summer 2021	Combine approval plan and slip profiles
Summer 2021–Spring 2022	Extensive tracking and review of approval purchases
Summer 2022	Approval plan turned off except children's literature award winners

As a result of the campus closure necessitated by the pandemic, print book shipments were halted in April 2020. Although print shipments started again in 2021, the library determined that print books should not be automatically shipped. Auraria librarians had noticed that some titles were published as e-books months after the print book was published, and with e-books preferred over print on our campus, we wanted the option of selecting the e-book option instead at a later date. Therefore, print approval was shut off permanently in late spring 2021, and subsequently, subject areas on the approval plan would need to have slips reviewed for print book purchases.

In the end, thirteen subjects were fully placed on the e-preferred approval plan between summer 2019 and summer 2021: business, hospitality, economics, political science, public administration, law, criminal justice, public health, history, theatre, international affairs, human performance and sports, and anthropology. Our GOBI account was set up to automatically select a 1-user e-book where available, with priority given to EBSCOhost and then Ebook Central (ProQuest). If an e-book was not available through EBSCOhost or Ebook Central, and it matched our approval plan, then the e-book would be purchased through another available vendor. This priority was put in place because of automatic upgrade programs we had with these aggregators, which would upgrade a title from 1-user to 3-user, or from 3-user to Unlimited, if the existing simultaneous usage cap was exceeded. Ethnic studies was scheduled to be added to the plan; however, after much time spent trying to determine the best way to select materials via GOBI's approval plan, we could not narrow it down enough to be successful without excluding topics or overspending extensively. For similar reasons, modern languages had specific authors placed on approval, but it received very few purchases on the plan. We elected not to add any new subject areas to approval between summer 2021 and summer 2022 in order to assess and review the program, at which point we decided to suspend the plan.

When evaluating the success of our approval plan, we made the choice not to look at usage as many other studies have done, primarily because of the difficulties in accurately capturing e-book usage for comparison purposes. As a commuter campus with the majority of our budget dedicated to electronic

resources, we naturally prioritized e-books from the beginning and later turned off print books altogether. Gathering e-book usage would have entailed gathering data from multiple publishers that may or may not have been comparable, as not all vendors use the same usage metrics and could not properly be compared to print usage. Of course, we might have figured out a way to measure usage if we had been on the fence regarding whether approval was working for us. However, for the reasons described below, we felt that we had enough information even before evaluating usage to know the approval plan for single-title books was not meeting our library's needs.

Overview of Purchases

Because of empty positions and extended leaves, Auraria Library waited until January 2024 to do an extensive review of our collections acquired on approval. The collection development program lead librarian pulled a list from Sierra, the library's Integrated Library System (ILS), using vendor codes. When books were purchased on approval, two vendor codes were used—one for e-books and one for print books—and these were combined with a subject code for each subject. Therefore, we were able to analyze the number of books and costs associated with those books for each subject and material type. We then analyzed the books purchased by subject, paid date, cost, and format. From fall 2019 to summer 2022, the library purchased 2,383 books on approval, which included 356 print books and 2,027 electronic books. The total cost was \$231,820.24.

Unsurprisingly, as business was the first subject area placed on approval and was allocated the most money of all subjects on the approval plan, at 624 titles it had the most purchases. History, with its broad subject areas, large allotment of money, and preference for monographs over journals, acquired 459 books on approval. However, only 15 percent of history books received from the approval plan were in print format. This was problematic for us because despite prioritizing e-resources in general, there are exceptions, and we knew that our history faculty in particular prefer print books over e-books. Since our approval plan was e-preferred for all subject areas, this did not meet the needs of history faculty.

Economics was not allocated a lot of money, and we were shocked by the number of books purchased (399). We realized, however, that there were errors in the approval plan, and many business books were being shipped using the economics fund code. Hence, the number of true economics books was much lower. Other surprises were that books related to the subjects English language and literature and social work were purchased using fund codes specific to those subject areas, yet these subjects and fund codes were never added to the approval plan.

Business (28 percent), economics (19 percent), and history (14 percent) spent the most amount of money. History books are typically cheaper than business books, so we received more books for the amount of money spent. Business book prices averaged \$102, economics \$112, and history \$72. (See tables 2 and 3.)

The year in which we received the most books was 2021, with a sharp decrease in 2022. This is expected because as a result of overspending, we had to turn off most subjects on the approval plan at the end of 2021 or beginning of 2022. (See table 4.)

Looking closer at the economics spending, between FY 2020 and 2022, economics was allocated \$21,280.45 for single-title print and e-book purchases, including books purchased by librarians reviewing slips and selecting items for purchase and requests from faculty, staff, and students. Yet, \$44,587.44 was spent on economics books during that same time frame. Meanwhile, business was allocated just over \$100,000 and only spent \$64,207.45. We addressed the issues in the approval plan that led to charging business books to the economics fund; however, economics was still consistently overspent. Additionally, because the single-title book fund allocations by subject had not been reviewed and redistributed in at least six years, we reviewed these allocations at the end of FY 2020 to ensure subject areas with more book needs, such as history, were allocated more funds.

There were also irregularities in the number of books shipped on approval per subject area.

At the start of the approval plan, business books were few and far between. We had to continuously review and edit the business call number ranges in the approval profile for any books to be sent. On the other hand, history was only fully on approval for two years and was allocated \$44,377.80 for all single-title book purchases during that time, and \$33,047.48 was spent from the approval plan. Although it was not overspent, history faculty submit many book requests, and with those requests coming out of the same pot of funds, little funds remained for faculty requests. Therefore, we grew concerned that we would not be able to purchase requested books that we knew would receive immediate use. We were never fully able to correct or even explain these

Table 2. Total amount spent and number of books received on approval by subject.

Subject	Amount Spent	Books Shipped
Business	\$64,207.45	624
History	\$33,047.48	459
Economics	\$44,587.44	399
Criminal justice	\$18,627.38	195
Political science	\$16,624.18	179
Public health	\$9,966.45	99
Anthropology	\$8,758.33	86
Hospitality	\$9,950.20	83
International studies	\$8,207.94	79
Theatre	\$5,862.91	54
Human performance and sport	\$3,388.67	36
Law	\$2,438.85	35
Public administration	\$3,819.62	29
Ethnic studies	\$1,484.99	18
Modern languages	\$483.20	4
English language and literature	\$245.20	3
Social Work	\$119.95	1
TOTAL	\$231,820.24	2,383

Table 3. Total e-books and print books purchased.

Material Type	Books Purchased	Cost
E-books	2,027	\$208,804.91
Print books	356	\$23,015.33
TOTAL	2,383	\$231,820.24

Table 4. Number of books sent on approval by year.

Year	Books Shipped
2019	81
2020	969
2021	1,176
2022	157
TOTAL	2,383

types of discrepancies, and trying to do so began taking more and more time from staff and faculty in both Collection Strategies and RSS.

Lessons Learned

After consistently working to implement and refine the approval plan for three years, we reviewed the time and money spent on the venture and determined that it had not been successful for Auraria Library. Due to the limited funds and diversity of programs on campus, it was difficult, even impossible, to limit an approval plan to meet campus learning, teaching, and research needs without overspending. On the flip side, when we tried to narrow the collection areas to reflect what we believed we needed, the plan ended up so constrained that no books could get through.

Even after spending days closely reviewing the approval plan for issues, and GOBI subsequently correcting these issues, we would still receive books not relevant to campus and quickly go over the budgets of multiple subjects early in the fiscal year. We had to consistently review the budget for subjects on approval to determine when (not if) the plan would need to be turned off so that a subject did not overspend in one fiscal year. And once the plan was turned off, there was little money left for requests that came from campus users for that subject. We were still reviewing books, just after the money was spent and not before, and we experienced none of the anticipated time savings. Additionally, like Gao, Turner, and Ke found when looking at usage for materials on psychological disorder topics, we know that campus users are more interested in the application of rather than the research on many topics, particularly when related to psychology, social work, and education. Approval profiles make it difficult to de-prioritize research titles, hence single-title ordering is needed to ensure materials with direct applications are acquired.³²

We also encountered issues with receiving e-books that were well over our set price limit. Our original price cap for an individual e-book was \$280; however, we had to lower it to \$249 to decrease the number of expensive, and frequently irrelevant, e-books that were being sent. This issue turned into an even bigger one for our firm order acquisitions specialist, who is the staff member responsible for placing print and e-book orders. GOBI's method of reimbursing us for the books that came in over our price limit should have been simple: they would apply the amount as a credit against our next invoice. However, the problem we ran into many times was that the books that came in totaled more than the invoices we were receiving. For instance, our average invoice was only around \$600 to \$700, but on more than one occasion we received an \$800 book, making it very difficult to be reimbursed under GOBI's system. Meanwhile, the firm order acquisitions specialist was still ordering single-title books as normal to support the programs not yet transitioned to approval while we worked to troubleshoot the plan, further negating any staff time we were saving.

In addition to receiving multiple titles that were over our price cap, we also received a number of titles that were completely irrelevant to campus studies, despite our careful selection of subject parameters. For example, in just one month we were sent three different books about train transportation in England. We also had concerns about how the approval plan only enabled us to purchase materials

from large publishers, rather than being able to support smaller, independent publishers as we try to do wherever possible. It is standard practice in collection development at the library to actively research and purchase resources from smaller publishers, and we have ceased purchasing from vendors, publishers, and bookstores in the past that did not meet our standards. As a library dedicated to diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility, we felt that the inability to purchase from small and independent publishers through the approval plan did not adequately support our mission.

Finally, in terms of library faculty and staff with collection development responsibilities, if a subject was on approval, it was easy to forget to review the few slips that came through, and we were not as aware of what was being published or purchased in a subject for the library. It is difficult to promote a collection when you do not know what is in it. And with the decrease in publications during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were worried the overspending on single-title books on approval would be even higher after normal publishing timelines resumed.

Benefits

The major benefit we found was familiarizing ourselves with the approval plan document itself with the assistance of our GOBI collection development manager. We appreciate our GOBI representative's expertise and developed a closer relationship with them, and as such we have a better understanding of GOBI's capabilities. Additionally, the approval plan document that controlled our slips had historically been reviewed in bits and pieces rather than as whole, and while reviewing the plan for issues, the collection development program lead librarian sat down and reviewed the thousands of rows one at a time. This led us to realize that the plan should be reviewed on a more regular schedule to reflect any changes in campus offerings.

During our time running the approval plan, RSS saw two retirements and one impending retirement whose positions we would not be able to fill immediately due to a hiring freeze from the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, another benefit we found to an approval plan was that we were able to bridge the gap in collection development duties caused by these retirements and let those subject areas run on approval while we re-staffed. After each of these librarians announced their retirement, we were able to quickly shift around which subjects would go onto approval next to accommodate the absence of a dedicated subject specialist.

As we had several new collection development librarians start after we discontinued the plan, we were able to make them familiar with the approval plan document from the beginning so that they could understand and recommend changes to the plan as needed. In fact, the authors feel we have gained some level of expertise in the reading and revising of the approval plan document that controls our slips, which we did not have before. Ultimately, there is now a much higher level of ownership over our slips approval plan among collection development librarians, resulting in even more conscientious selection than before.

Our acquisitions and book ordering workflows also saw some benefits from our experience with the approval plan. Our firm order acquisitions specialist reported less time spent per day checking GOBI for new orders. Additionally, having the subject of business 100 percent on approval was beneficial to this staff member's workflow, mainly because business books can be difficult to find through third-party vendors when they are not available through GOBI. An indirect benefit to the acquisitions workflow that came from the approval plan was that we finally implemented an API to facilitate communication between GOBI and our ILS. The API has continued to be used well after we stopped the plan and has proven to be an improvement in the ordering workflow overall.

A final benefit that did save time was keeping the children's literature award winners on approval. It took the librarian with education collection development responsibilities hours each spring to research and select the awards; as Tabacaru also found, their high usage in children's literature warranted allowing more children's literature to be sent on approval.³³

Further Changes at the Library

In summer 2022, the library went through another reorganization and the former RSS department was split into two, with collection development moving under the newly named department Collection Development and Strategies (CDS) department. Although there were still a couple of individuals with collection development responsibilities not in CDS, over the following year, with new hires replacing retirements that had not been filled during the COVID pandemic, those responsibilities eventually fully transferred to CDS. This reorganization combined the collection development and acquisitions employees into one department, which spurred our desire to re-evaluate some of the projects the two groups had worked on together, including the approval plan.

After three years spent experimenting with a comprehensive approval plan, we returned to reviewing GOBI slips by subject and resumed our previous workflow of single-title ordering. As mentioned above, usage of the approval books was not a decisive factor in whether we would continue it, owing to several issues that clearly indicated the approval plan was not working for our library. However, looking at book usage of approval plan versus firm orders could be a potential area of future study. The persistent issue of overspending was the most important factor; however, a close second was the fact that managing issues with the approval plan was taking as much if not more time than single-title ordering had been. Our inability to purchase titles specifically requested by our community as a result of the plan being overspent was another important factor. In the end, we felt that all the constant monitoring of and tinkering with the plan was resulting in much more time spent on the approval plan than would have been spent doing our traditional single-title purchasing.

We maintained a handful of our EBA and DDA e-book programs, although budget cuts in FY 2024 and FY 2025 forced us to scale back on these models. We also elected not to explore any new e-book packages or programs, as we wanted to ensure we had funds to purchase book requests and support independent publishers and bookstores. Although our experience with the approval plan was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, it seems clear to us that—as a library focused on electronic

resources and with few funds to dedicate to a well-curated collection—the issues the library experienced with the plan would not have been lessened if we happened to undertake it at a different time. In fact, it may have been worsened if we had had print included in our approval plan because we would have been purchasing more books with the same amount of funding.

We do think that approval plans could save time for a library with a larger collections budget and only serving one institution, as balancing the needs of one institution is simpler than balancing the needs of three. Overall, there do seem to be benefits for staff workflow to be found in approval plans if a library has collecting needs that can be well-defined by LC subject areas and non-subject parameters, and if there are real and pressing issues with a single-title ordering workflow. In our case, however, a careful and considered single-title book-ordering approach has proven to be the best thing for the library's book and e-book collection.

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