

Books on Demand: Just-in-Time Acquisitions

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by

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Abstract

The Purdue University Libraries Interlibrary Loan unit proposed a pilot project to purchase patrons' loan requests from Amazon.com, lend them to the patrons, and then add the titles to the collection. Staff analyzed previous monograph loans, developed ordering criteria, implemented the proposal as a pilot project for six months, and evaluated the resulting patron comments, statistics, and staff perceptions. As a result of enthusiastic patron comments and a review of the project statistics, the program was extended.

Books on Demand: Just-in-Time Acquisitions

As is true at most academic libraries, many of the loan requests submitted by Purdue University patrons are for recently published books. The most recent Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Interlibrary Loan study pegs the average borrowing unit cost for a research university at \$27.83 per transaction [1]. Purdue ILL staff wondered if it might in many cases be beneficial (and sometimes even more cost-effective), not only for the immediate requestor but also for the library collection as a whole, to establish a practice of purchasing recent imprints rather than borrowing them. Books purchased through such a program would be assured at least one circulation; many books acquired through normal collection development never circulate. [2] However, implementing such a project would only be

reasonable if purchased titles could be obtained in approximately the same turnaround time as loaned materials through traditional ILL channels. The best way to meet this requirement would be to use a discount Internet book supplier that indicated how soon each specific title could be shipped.

To explore this idea, the Access Services librarian wrote a proposal outlining the project's rationale, suggested guidelines, and expected outcomes.

Analysis of Borrowing Activity for Recently Published Monographs

With some programming assistance from the Information Technology Department staff, the ILL staff queried the Clio interlibrary loan management program data. The report criteria were borrowing requests for monographs that were (1) published within the past five years; and (2) received during a recent six-month period (April 1 to September 30, 1999). We were also interested in identifying the patrons' departments and statuses for these requests.

The result of the Clio query was a 67-page report listing alphabetically by title the 796 books that met the

criteria. These 796 books represented 28% of the 2778 total filled monograph requests received via OCLC between April 1, 1999 and September 30, 1999. Appendix 1 shows a sample page from this report.

The report also included a summary sheet showing by academic department how many requests were from undergraduates, graduates, faculty, or staff (Appendix 2).

The Access Services librarian randomly selected five pages (60 titles) from the title list report. She wanted to determine how many of these 60 titles would have been purchased had the project been in place at the time the requests were made. She made the following assumptions about the proposed book purchase project:

- publication date within the past five years
- English language titles only
- standard monographs only (i.e., no conferences, dissertations, audio-visual materials, working papers, technical reports, textbooks)
- works of a scholarly/academic nature (i.e., no novels, "popular" titles, self-help, textbooks)
- prefer paperback over hardcover editions

- maximum cost (excluding shipping): \$50
- expected shipping date within 5 days or less

Amazon.com was selected as the potential supplier partly because of personal experience with this company and partly because the Libraries had already occasionally acquired rush orders through Amazon.

Based on this assumed selection criteria, 18 (30%) of the 60 sample titles would have been ordered through Amazon. The remaining 42 titles would not have been ordered for the following reasons:

- not listed in Amazon (9 titles)
- listed in Amazon, but would take too long to ship (9)
- listed in Amazon, but over \$50 (7: average cost of \$84.20, excluding one title at \$495)
- out of print (5)
- dissertation (3)
- other (conference; older edition required; foreign language titles; popular culture titles; novel) (9)

Had they actually been ordered, the total cost of the 18 sample titles would have been \$468.36, or an average cost of \$26.02 each (excluding shipping charges). The proposal extrapolated anticipated total costs for both six months and a year based on buying 30% of all recently published book loan requests at this average cost.

Of the 18 requests, two were from undergraduate students, 11 were from graduate students, one was from a staff member, and four were from faculty. These findings were not surprising; graduate students place the majority of ILL requests and the sample reflected the same trend.

Only three of the requests came from patrons in departments affiliated with the sciences (one from Physics and two from Pharmacy). The proposed \$50 cap per book excluded most of the generally more expensive technical titles.

Proposal Review

In October 1999 the Libraries Public Services Advisory Committee (PSAC), consisting of the Assistant Director of Public Services and Collections, the public services department heads (which includes the head of Technical

Services), and the head of Access Services, reviewed the proposal. Major discussion issues included:

- Desirability of an ILL book purchase pilot project.

Librarians expressed general interest and support.

- Selection Criteria. The librarians agreed with the

proposed selection criteria, but recommended a maximum cap of \$100 per book so that more

scientific and technical titles could be

purchased. This change increased the anticipated

percent of recently published books that would be

purchased from 30% to 40% (24 titles of the 60 in

the sample) and similarly increased the funding

requirements.

- Processing issues. ILL staff identify the titles and

verify their availability through Amazon.

Acquisitions staff place the actual orders, but

the items are shipped directly to ILL.

Acquisitions staff add the titles to the OPAC

showing the "on order" status so that other

library staff will not inadvertently order the

same titles. Upon receipt, ILL staff stamp each

book with a property stamp, but otherwise process items as usual for patron use. After use, ILL forwards books to Cataloging.

- Determining Books' Destination Library. ILL staff designate the books' ultimate library destination based on the patrons' departmental affiliation. Titles acquired for undergraduates go to the Undergraduate Library. When ILL staff forward a book to Cataloging, it contains a colored paper flag labeled "ILL Amazon Project." The flag also alerts the receiving library that these books came from the ILL book purchase project.
- Tracking. The OPAC technical services module and the ILL Clio software capture the basic data. Staff generate customized reports later.
- Length of the Pilot Project. One semester/six months.
- Funding. For the pilot project, the Associate Dean allocated \$15,000 in non-recurring funds.
- Project Evaluation Criteria. Suggestions included:
 - tracking subsequent times the books circulate, compared with similar books acquired at the same time through traditional channels

- analyzing the books purchased and determining if the bibliographers would have been likely to select them or if the approval plans included them
- soliciting patron feedback about whether the books acquired through the ILL books purchase project are useful additions to the collection and whether the titles arrived in a timely manner
- analyzing the breakdown by patrons' departments and statuses

Pilot Project Implementation: January - June 2000

The pilot project began in January 2000. ILL staff modified the established process for handling monograph loans by separating out those requests for monographs published in English within the past five years. These titles were checked against the OPAC and, if not held locally, searched in Amazon.com's book website. If the title met the project criteria and the Amazon record indicated that the title was available for shipping within a week, ILL staff printed the first page of the Amazon record.

After indicating on each sheet the campus library to receive the book after its first patron use, ILL staff took these Amazon printouts to Acquisitions by noon each day.

Acquisitions staff ordered each batch of Amazon books each afternoon. ILL staff added a record for each book in Clio, using the "ALA Form" option. The destination campus library was noted in Clio's edition field to make subsequent tracking easier. We established the lender code AZZ for Amazon project orders.

As arranged, Amazon shipped the books directly to the ILL office. Staff stamped the Libraries' property stamp in the front of each book, and then processed them as they would any other ILL loans. The only other difference was the inclusion of a paper flag in the book briefly explaining the project's goals and asking patrons to complete a short questionnaire (see Appendix 3). Books were assigned the normal two-week ILL loan period, were eligible for renewal, and were treated as usual if they became overdue. ILL staff also added each book's cost information, including shipping, to the Clio records.

Upon the books' return, ILL records were cleared, the patron paper flag removed, and a different paper flag slipped between the pages to alert both Technical Services

staff and the staff at the destination library that the book was acquired as part of the ILL Amazon project. The books were then forwarded to Technical Services for processing as new books.

Although handling the Amazon project books required some small additional effort by both ILL and Technical Services, staff hoped that the overall benefits of quickly acquiring recently published books for patron use as well as for ultimate addition to the collection would outweigh the extra time spent processing these orders.

Pilot Project Evaluation

Evaluation criteria were of four types:

- (1) patron feedback about the pilot project;
- (2) staff perception of the value of the project and the amount of effort it entailed;
- (3) analysis of the data gathered during the course of the project; and
- (4) administrators' perceptions.

Based on the returned questionnaire bookmarks, patrons were overwhelmingly positive in their assessment. Of the 248 books received by May 22, 2000, 142 completed bookmarks (57%) were returned (although of those 248 received books, some recently acquired ones would still have been in use by patrons on May 22, so they would not yet have had an opportunity to return a bookmark). Although the bookmark questionnaire was anonymous, it is the staff's perception that in cases where a single patron received several Amazon books, he or she generally only filled out one bookmark for the entire batch, rather than one for each book.

Of the 142 bookmarks returned, 141 respondents indicated that the book arrived in time to meet their needs. The bookmark also asked "In your opinion, what is the usefulness of this book as a permanent addition to the Libraries' collection?" Patrons selected the following choices:

Very useful:	112 (79%)
Moderately useful:	22 (15%)
Marginally useful or no answer:	7 (6%)

The bookmark questionnaire also solicited patron comments. Some of them wrote mini book reviews, but most understood the intent of the comment section and indicated their delight with this new method of rapidly obtaining the material they needed. Several commented that they felt less rushed knowing that within a few weeks of its return to ILL, the book would be available for them to check out for the normal, longer loan period. See Appendix 4 for selected patron comments.

Staff in Interlibrary Loan and Technical Services unanimously agreed that the project was valuable despite the additional processing time required in both units. Based on anecdotal evidence, campus librarians agreed that most of the books acquired through the project fell within their collection development profiles.

Once more with assistance from the Information Technology Department, the Access Services Librarian reviewed summary data from the pilot project. Customized queries into the Clio database yielded the information that the 242 requests received by May 22 had cost \$9,600, for an average price of \$39.67 per book, including shipping charges. The average turnaround time was 8 days; the

average turnaround time for all loans during this same time period was 7.8 days.

The average number of requests per patron was 1.6 books, allaying concerns that a few patrons would account for the majority of the purchases. In fact, of the 151 unique patrons who received books purchased through Amazon, 108 (72%) of them only got one book. Twenty-two (15%) patrons received two books each. At the other end of the spectrum, one patron received ten books, another received eight, and a third received five. But even combined, these three patrons received only 15% of the books.

The breakdown by patron status was as follows:

Faculty	33 (22%)
Staff	11 (7%)
Graduate Students	98 (65%)
Undergraduate Students	9 (6%)

The patrons' disciplines for the majority of the books were in humanities and social sciences. The disciplines with the highest number books acquired were English (42 books); history (39); foreign languages and literatures (19); and political science (18).

Even with the \$100 maximum price per book, staff were not able to acquire many scientific and technical books. Although staff did not specifically track reasons why certain books were not acquired through Amazon, the staff believe that a combination of factors explain this phenomenon. First, researchers in scientific and technical fields request loans much less frequently than do their colleagues in the humanities and social sciences. Second, many of the titles that they do request on loan are very specialized (e.g., conference proceedings, technical reports); these types of titles not only did not match the selection criteria, but also Amazon tends not to list these titles or, if it does, cannot supply them within a week.

In general, the staff's impression is that it was far more likely to reject ordering a book of any subject through Amazon because of the projected delivery time being over a week than because of a price over the maximum.

There were very few unanticipated snags during the pilot project. Staff learned to check Clio periodically to identify those few titles that Amazon did not ship as soon as anticipated; a few orders had to be cancelled and ordered through traditional ILL channels, but no more than the normal low percentage of orders that slip through the cracks

during routine operations. Patrons did not lose any of these books or let them run seriously overdue.

One unexpected development was the necessity of leaving newly received books propped open for ten minutes after applying the property stamp so that the ink would dry. Another was realizing that many campus libraries liked to receive dust jackets with their new hardcovers for new book displays. ILL decided not to circulate the Amazon books with the dust jackets for fear of wear and tear. Staff stored the dust jackets in a box and made a note to match them up with the books when they were returned.

Staff also decided that it was wise to assign a title's ultimate destination library with a little more thought than simply assigning by requestors' department (e.g., a book on artificial life ordered by a physics professor was designated for the Life Sciences Library rather than the Physics Library). ILL ordered one novel by mistake, but the patron's comment was that it was an important literary work. Another book on the All-American Girls' Baseball League turned out to be a juvenile title.

The Assistant Director for Public Services and Collections, who had provided the funding for the pilot project, remarked on the high number of university press

publications in the title list. She hopes that some of the information gleaned from the titles' subject areas and publishers can be used to fine-tune the Purdue University Libraries' collection development approval plans.

Circulation Comparisons

One way to measure of the project's effectiveness is to determine how often these books circulate in comparison with similar books purchased at the same time through normal procedures. To determine this factor, staff queried the Library Management System (Endeavor's Voyager) to compare books acquired from January through May 22, 2000 for Purdue's largest library, which serves the humanities and social sciences, with those acquired through the Amazon project during that same time period. Since the majority of the Amazon books were eventually cataloged for this library, staff felt that this comparison would yield meaningful results.

Of the Amazon books, 48 (28.7%) of the 167 books that had been cataloged between January 1 and May 22 had circulated, whereas 76 (18%) of the 420 books purchased with regular funds and cataloged between January 1 and May 22 had

circulated. This circulation measure suggests that books purchased through the Amazon project circulate at a higher rate than those acquired through normal channels (including user requests), and correlates with the findings of another similar project reported in the literature [3]. However, it is too early to draw definitive conclusions. This library's books circulate for 16 weeks, so most of these books had a chance of only one circulation during this period. Many of these books might also have been borrowed by the original requestor. Tracking these same books six or twelve or more months in the future should yield a better indication of the relative circulation frequency of these two groups of books, and whether patrons other than the original requestor are borrowing them.

Conclusion

Patron response has been overwhelmingly positive. There are preliminary indications that books acquired this way are subsequently used more frequently than similar books purchased through routine collection development. Library staff are pleased to accept recent titles identified by their patrons as works needed for research and study. The

process provides a way of quickly responding to patrons' requests for research and scholarly material, rather than the more traditional model of analyzing ILL transactions months after they are completed. The project also demonstrated a successful partnership between the Interlibrary Loan unit in Access Services with the campus libraries and with Technical Services, both reporting to Public Services.

Funds have been provided to continue the ILL Amazon Project through December 2000. Staff are delighted to be able to continue this service to patrons.

References

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