Faculty–Library Teamwork in Book Ordering

Robert Neville, James Williams III, and Caroline C. Hunt

Faculty liaisons help to select books and other materials in many libraries, especially those without specialized bibliographers. To get the best results from a faculty liaison system, library staff must take into account the varied nature of academic collections and the uneven pricing of materials, respect departmental cultures and be willing to make adjustments for them, and frequently reassess and fine-tune the system. Using these principles, the College of Charleston has developed a liaison system that permits a range of practices. Two examples, the computer science collection and the English collection, illustrate this range: the former requires the most recent information available and uses relatively little faculty input; the latter seeks to balance primary and secondary materials and benefits from extensive faculty advice. In conclusion, the authors suggest how the institution might further improve its system in the next few years.

Academia liaisons are here to stay. Of the more than fifty recent articles on the subject, not one seriously proposed doing away with faculty assistance (though some writers clearly wished this were possible). A volunteer workforce of faculty, an economic necessity for small and medium-sized academic libraries, can provide much of the expertise that larger, research-oriented institutions would get from specialized subject bibliographers; however, this type of workforce also can be more difficult to manage well than one consisting entirely of librarians. This article addresses the role of faculty in book ordering, the area of collection development in which they most commonly participate.1

Although liaison systems have become increasingly common in the past twenty years, recent articles suggest that few colleges approach this combined workforce systematically. This article argues that an organized plan to make the best use of all participants' time is essential for a successful liaison system. Experience suggests that no single approach works equally well for all collections because academic fields and departmental cultures vary widely. Further, this article suggests that any system, no matter how well organized, needs constant assessment and fine-tuning. In support of these premises, this article describes a model of the continuum of academic disciplines and shows how ordering varies along that continuum. Next, after a selective review

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of literature, the article examines two different examples of successful departmental ordering programs—a collection with maximum library input and one with maximum faculty input. Finally, the article offers an assessment of the program with plans for further improvement.

The Continuum of Academic Disciplines
Academic departments and disciplines may be seen as a continuum, with computer science anchoring one end and the humanities the other. Although all academic disciplines need up-to-date books, the need is most critical in the sciences—particularly in computer science, even at the undergraduate level. The “best” book on a topic in the humanities may be several decades old, but most computer science books published more than five years ago are already obsolete. Retrospective buying and replacement are ongoing challenges for humanities collections, less so for the sciences. Although “classics” exist in every field, those in the humanities remain important far longer than science “classics.”

Finally, trends come and go and so do library liaisons, but academic politics never die.

Thus, the nature of different disciplines mandates different buying strategies; the requirements of a mathematics collection and of a French literature collection differ so much that enforcing the same ordering procedures on both would be counterproductive. Varying monograph costs, for instance, affect ordering: a humanities or social sciences department could divide its money evenly among faculty members if it insisted, but a science collection could not because a single order could exceed one faculty member’s allotment. Finally, trends come and go and so do library liaisons, but academic politics never die. It is often necessary to acknowledge departmental politics, working with a per-person allotment in one department, a rotating liaison position in another, a departmental committee in yet another, and/or an authoritative liaison in a fourth. It is the authors’ belief that library liaisons must acknowledge the cultures of the respective departments in order to work effectively with their faculty counterparts; radically different ordering methods can produce equally good results. Because departmental cultures continually evolve, the authors also recommend assessing the cooperative system regularly to fine-tune it as needed.

Review of Literature
An overview of hundreds of articles on collection development in college and university libraries reveals some clear, but sometimes surprising, trends in attitudes toward faculty involvement. To exemplify those trends, the authors selected twenty-five typical articles since 1981, plus a set of ALA guidelines.

First, there are many fine recent articles that say nothing at all about faculty input. William A. Britten and Judith D. Webster examined circulated titles as a means of collection development; Dan C. Hazen discussed the need to keep collection development policies flexible; and Dennis P. Carrigan measured the “health” of collection development policies by examining the “overselection” (selecting materials that never circulate) of materials collected.

Second, numerous articles mention faculty in passing but assume that librarians maintain control of purchasing decisions. Patricia Buck Domínguez and Luke Swindler, as well as Paul Metz, looked at cooperation among libraries with both faculty and librarian input. Although the former article pointed out some disagreements in setting up the cooperative program, both articles seemed to suggest that librarians are in control. Sue O. Medina also examined cooperation among libraries. Again, library faculty seemed to control selection (within the limits of a consectus required by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education). “Collection Development in an Interdisciplinary
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Context," by Myoung Chung Wilson and Hendrik Edelman, noted that materials selected for one discipline may be used by researchers in others but did not describe the involvement of faculty.5

Third, crested in the 1980s and abating in the 1990s, there was a debate about whether faculty should take an active role in collection development. Answers fall into three categories: "no," "yes," and "yes but". Naysayers used words such as *abdicate* to describe sharing book selection with faculty. Quoting with evident approval an earlier view ("The reason why we can’t place decision-making powers with the faculty is that they have a purely parochial viewpoint"), Mary Biggs’s 1981 article “Sources of Tension and Conflict between Librarians and Faculty” echoed that opinion: “...it is true that a capable library administrator, advised by able subordinates, is in a better position to assess the broad needs of the academic community than any single faculty member could be.”6 However, actual attempts to measure the quality of faculty selection versus library selection have produced mixed results. In their article “Effective Collection Developers: Librarians or Faculty?” David L. Vidor and Elizabeth Futas reported that they could not determine with certainty whether librarians ordered better than faculty (in terms of circulation figures),7 but added wistfully, “although in certain areas they appeared to make better choices of material” [emphasis added].8

Most articles saying yes to faculty involvement were rather general. Donald E. Riggs’s editorial, “Working with Faculty,” urged faculty and librarians to work more closely together.9 He believed that faculty—librarian collaboration goes beyond book selection and pointed out many areas of collaboration such as "selecting paper and electronic resources, designing library instructional programs for students, writing research grants, team-teaching,” and more.10 Ordering was the focus of a few “yes” articles. Charlene S. Hurt, Laura O. Rein, Maureen S. Connors, John C. Walsh, and Anna C. Wu viewed faculty involvement in book selection as essential.11 At George Mason University, a faculty task force, using course reading lists, worked with librarians to ensure the relevance of orders to the curriculum. In a similar example from a single academic department, Eveline L. Yang’s “Psychology Collection Review: A Cooperative Project between Librarians and Departmental Faculty Members” detailed a comprehensive collection review begun in 1987.12 Yang stressed that “increased coordination needs to be instituted for selection, assessment and weeding of collections.” One professional did not question this need. In “Let’s Make Sure We Are Not Part of the Problem: A Librarian’s Lament,”13 Ed Buis began with the assumption that in smaller, understaffed libraries, “collection development is one of the many responsibilities of faculty.”14 Similarly, the Rutgers Universities Task Force on Liaison Relationships has as a major heading of “Effective Liaison Relationships in an Academic Library” the rubric “Integrate the faculty into all stages of the collection development process.”15 Two articles encouraged librarians to make ordering less mystifying in order to boost faculty participation. Mary Sellen’s “Book Selection in the College Library: The Faculty Perspective” usefully summarized earlier articles, and Robert J. Dukes’s “Faculty/Library Relations in Acquisitions and Collection Development: The Faculty Perspective” sketched the plight of a typical faculty member.16

In the “yes but” category, some pictured an ideal world in which faculty would participate on a carefully controlled basis. Indeed, this seems to be the party line of the ALA, whose Reference and Adult Services Division’s “Guidelines for Liaison Work” advise using the expertise of faculty members and keeping them informed, but not relinquishing any power over purchasing decisions: “An advisory role for faculty may result in the most effective means of collection building” [authors’ emphasis].17 Less restrained language characterized Helen L. Gater’s “The Price of Partnership,”
The College of Charleston uses a combination of an approval plan with faculty book ordering by faculty–library liaison teams. The total budget for monographs is divided into approval plans (40%) and departmental firm-order budgets (60%). The approval plan, which provides a consistent safeguard for core collecting and distributes orders evenly throughout the year, takes the form of both book-in-hand selections, which are reviewed at two-week intervals by faculty, and approval slips from Blackwell North America (BNA). In addition, Choice cards and, where appropriate, catalogs and reviews are circulated to departmental faculty liaisons.

To manage the firm-order budget, each academic department appoints a faculty liaison to oversee the selection process and to encourage (or hector) peers to place orders. Concurrently, the library appoints its own liaison to work with each academic department. The two liaisons divide the work of ordering in whatever way works best for them. As the departmental examples show, the library liaison’s job may vary from doing most of the work to simply receiving and processing faculty selections. Apart from setting the schedule for firm orders, the library does not dictate the mechanics of faculty book buying. Should a department divide the available money equally among its members? Should the faculty liaison be the sole arbiter of what is pur-
chased? Should a selection committee do the ordering? Any of these methods can yield satisfactory outcomes if the library and faculty liaisons are working together.

Working with Targeted Faculty Efforts: The Computer Science Collection
The computer science department shows the greatest need for library participation and the smallest degree of daily participation by faculty; thus, the library liaison’s share of the work is proportionally higher for this collection than for most others. By nature, the computer science collection differs from those of most other departments. It supports the department’s curriculum just as it does other collections (though circulation figures suggest that many computer science majors rely on their textbooks as reference manuals and are less likely than other students to rely on the library’s collection). The collection also serves as a reference for non-computer science students, faculty, and staff. For both audiences, the computer science collection must deliver information on a range of topics. This is especially important because with the limited curriculum and staffing of the department, many areas of computer science and many programming languages cannot be taught regularly. Moreover, the rapidly changing nature of the field itself accelerates patrons’ needs for the most current material. College staff members frequently check out books on topics such as creating Web pages, using Windows 95, and using Microsoft Office Professional; books such as Unix for Dummies and Advanced VRML Programming, appealing to quite different readers, are popular.

Another sharp contrast between the computer science collection and some others is that there is little need for retrospective efforts to fill gaps. In some cases, material is out of date by the time books on the topic arrive. For example, as the library started to receive books on HTML 3.0, HTML 3.2 became the standard, followed rapidly by HTML 4.0. Similarly, some said that Java would be the last word for Web pages. However, within months, Javascript (an entirely separate language) emerged, while Java applets that could perform almost any function desired on a Web page became freely available over the Internet.

Clearly, a collection such as computer science must rely more on approvals and the library liaison than most—even when faculty members are not overextended (as is often the case in this discipline). On the other hand, the expertise of the computer science faculty is vital to the health of the collection. Librarians have tried to increase efficiency by focusing faculty participation in a few key areas: (1) helping with the parameters of the approval plan and evaluating approval plan books, (2) ordering from preprinted lists supplied by the library, and (3) reviewing all books selected for weeding.

The approval plan continues to be a valuable source for acquiring computer science titles. A profile set up by the library (with input from departmental faculty) provides a selection of books on the latest computer innovations, operating systems, or other computer topics. Over a two-week period, faculty may mark these “keep” or “send back,” adding comments if they wish. Not only do members of the computer science faculty review materials as they come in, but faculty from other disciplines also can “approve” computer science books that may contain useful information for the general public. The approval system ensures the speedy acquisition of time-sensitive materials and complements individual ordering in this rapidly changing field.

Given the constraints already suggested, timely book ordering can present a problem for a department whose members are overextended. To speed up this process, lists from Books in Print are printed by subject (within computer science) and mailed to the department along with the usual Choice cards and other routine ordering information. In return, a thick stack of orders usually comes back in late February—a time line that expo-
nentially increases the last-minute workload of the paraprofessional who must handle orders. Still, these orders represent a cross section of material needed to support the research of the students and faculty; selection may not always be as timely as one would like, but quality is high and coverage broad.

Weeding takes on more than usual importance in computer science. Unlike literature or history where older is sometimes better, the computer science collection must remain up to date, with the exception of materials (such as books on theory) needed for accreditation and research purposes; these materials, not surprisingly, seem to circulate less often. Thus, computer science differs from most other collections where material is more research oriented and historical. This emphasis on the new means that as materials age, they are no longer needed—an important criterion in a library overgrowing its physical facilities. To create space for the new orders, the library has begun a massive weeding project eliminating all books published before 1985 or not circulated since 1994, except for those required for accreditation. Drastic weeding of this kind, although appropriate for computer science, would not work in most other areas. Here, the expertise of the faculty is vital; each season, potential titles for weeding are presented to the departmental liaison, who removes from the list any books needed for research or accreditation.

Several other departments, principally in the sciences, share with computer science the need for the most current information. In an undergraduate institution with few or no graduate programs, a correctly profiled approval plan can help supplement much of the undergraduate information needs in the sciences. As in computer science, mathematics and laboratory science majors rely heavily on their texts and make only modest demands for monographs (compared to students in other disciplines). Thus, much of the department’s library budget can be used to fill gaps and acquire materials specific to faculty interests. Aggressive weeding also occurs in these areas, though less so than in computer science. Disciplines that fall between the computer science end of the spectrum and the humanities end include business, education, and social sciences. Here, too, the approval plan ensures the timely purchase of books on emerging topics.

Working with Maximum Faculty Participation: The English Collection

The Department of English and Communication has one of the oldest collections in the library, and a high percentage of its faculty has always been willing and able to help with acquisitions. For this collection, the library liaison’s work is proportionally less than for most others. The English collection suffers from several intractable problems, the most difficult of which is maintaining a solid offering of primary texts in the face of fluctuating funds and erratic supply. It may be impossible to order whole sets of authors whose works run to many volumes; one volume or two per year may be the limit. If part of the edition comes out in a period of library budget retrenchment, such as the early 1970s or the early 1980s, volumes for those years may not get purchased. Locating and completing multivolume editions with missing parts can be a challenge, especially if some volumes go out of print before the gap is discovered. Second, with changes in the canon, whole categories of “new” authors appear in print. A conspicuous example would be women writers of the Renaissance; if the library-faculty team orders these writers all at once, it may underorder elsewhere. If, on the other hand, the library orders women writers seriatim over a period of two to three years, some will go out of print before the end of the ordering cycle. Third, curricular innovations require massive infusions of books in subjects that were missing before. For several years, the team had to order large numbers of communication books to accommodate a new major (which now has its own separate budget); on a smaller
scale, the library has recently added books in African literature and Irish literature to support new courses in these areas.

Given these challenges, the common methods of faculty ordering (first come, first served; per-person budget allotments; liaison and/or selection from Choice cards and other preprinted forms) will merely perpetuate the lack of balance in the collection, particularly in primary texts. For more than five years, the department has used a comprehensive strategy to strengthen its weak points while maintaining stronger areas. Vital to this effort are (1) a departmental library committee, and (2) synchronization with new programs and courses. The library liaison was heavily involved in setting up the initial strategy, which was then implemented by the faculty liaison and the departmental committee.

A new graduate program leading to the MA in English caused the department to reevaluate its library holdings. During academic years 1991–1992 and 1992–1993, the department’s library committee met regularly and hammered out a plan for improving the departmental collection. In the first year, actual ordering went on much as before (first come, first served), though the new liaison succeeded in holding back orders from some prolific purchasers. By the end of that year, the committee had agreed to reduce individual impulse ordering of single titles to approximately half of the total library budget for the department. Within that half of the budget, amounts were allocated according to the part played by a particular field within the curriculum, the perceived importance of the field, and the relative strength of the existing collection. Faculty members received specific dollar allotments and were asked to group requests into “must have,” “should have,” and “wish list.”

The committee agreed to use the remainder of the budget to remediate gaps in the collection, concentrating on upcoming graduate courses and perceived weak areas. The committee used the graduate schedule partly because none of the department’s collection areas was strong enough to support graduate work and partly because the regular rotation of courses would provide a built-in structure for ordering over a number of years. Having determined its strategy, the committee sent a series of memoranda to department faculty, first explaining how book ordering worked, then outlining the challenges facing a department with an uneven collection and a new graduate program, and finally asking for support for the new ordering system. The department voted unanimously in favor of the system, and this support has proved essential to the continued growth and improvement of the English collection.

Eventually, the cycle of graduate courses began to repeat, and the allotments for these shrank. Meanwhile, a system had been devised for reviewing the core collection on a rotating basis. The problem here was, primarily, the uneven quality of faculty input. The library and faculty liaisons were both concerned that fields with zealous faculty would be better served than equally important fields with less library-oriented professors. To make ordering as easy as possible, the team devised a new tactic. A professor teaching in a certain field would be asked simply to list the authors he or she considered most important for undergraduates to read. The library liaison, using Books in Print (more recently BIPDATA), would then print out every known in-print book by each author, followed by a second printout listing every known in-print critical book or biography about the same author. The library liaison then indicated with a checkmark those books already in the library’s possession. The next semester, different professors were selected and the process repeated.

This simple method has paid enormous dividends. Rather than having to think of all the significant texts and critical works in his or her field, the professor has a menu from which to select. After the first semester, the library-faculty team decided simply to order all missing volumes from multivolume sets, leaving professors free to concentrate on choices
requiring more specialized knowledge. In the case of standard biographies or bibliographies (many of which the library had once had but discovered were lost or presumed stolen), the team also decided to order as they became available.

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Using this system, the library has augmented its collection of Romantics, nineteenth-century American authors, modern poets, and novelists of various periods. Faculty have been extremely cooperative and appreciate having the preliminary work done for them. In return, they have assisted with some time-consuming library projects. For example, the 1997 American Literature Conspectus, which measured the library’s American literature collection against a core collection, received expert attention from two professors of American literature and a graduate student. Further, after noting that the conspectus stopped at 1985 and included only author listings, the three conspectus workers continued the project up to the present and began compiling a separate list of general works.

Assessment, Adjustment, New Ideas: Some Conclusions

The parallel examples of English at one end of the spectrum and computer science at the other illustrate why the library has found it worthwhile to accommodate differences in discipline and departmental culture. From the library’s point of view, the faculty liaison system works well. Even successful models can usually be improved, though, and at the end of the fall semester 1998, the authors decided to poll faculty liaisons to determine their perceptions. This survey revealed several interesting points. Three-quarters of the faculty were appointed by their department chairs; others were elected by their department, or volunteered. Most work without a departmental library committee (over 80%) and make final decisions on all orders. Typically, the faculty liaison receives order requests from the department and acts as gatekeeper to ensure balance. More than half said they rarely (less than once a month) consult with their counterparts in the library because either they understand the process and do not need assistance or they procrastinate until just before the deadline. When asked how the current purchasing plan works for their department, 42 percent reported that it works “very well” and 27 percent answered that “it works quite well but could be improved”; 23 percent said that “the quality and timeliness of book order in our department vary a great deal”; and the rest responded that “the system does not work well for us because the department methods need revision.” Most interestingly, no one considered the system to be poorly designed by the library. On a less reassuring note, several respondents seemed not to understand the approval plan adequately, and a disturbing number felt they had been selected as liaisons because no one else wanted the job.

The surveys revealed three needs: better selection of liaisons by departments, more relevant training, and better recognition of liaisons. The faculty liaison who is chosen because either no one else will do the job, he or she is the most junior member of the department, or the position rotates every year or two is at a terrible disadvantage. (Many new PhDs are in fact very competent in library work, but being chosen simply because one is junior conveys a negative message and leads to the liaison’s replacement as soon as a more junior person arrives.) Library staff members plan to meet with department chairs to address this issue. Second, in accordance with the continuum model, the library staff plans to conduct not one annual orientation but five, one for each School (Sciences and Mathematics, Humanities and Social Sciences, Education, Arts, and Business). To remedy the problem that faculty liaisons feel unappreciated, some formal means of recognition will be devised. Suggestions to date in-
clude letters of commendation, a reception for liaisons, or certificates of appreciation. This recognition will be developed in cooperation with department chairs.

Finally, the library hopes to improve faculty understanding of, and participation in, the various categories of collection development. As Felix T. Chu points out in his difficult, but enlightening, article, “Library–Faculty Relations in Collection Development,” lateral relationships pose special problems when the participants do not belong to the same vertical hierarchy. It is time to assess the entire system of lateral communications, not just rely on faculty to process firm orders, make bimonthly trips to the approval books, and write annual memoranda about serials. The authors believe that the faculty liaisons do an excellent job in practice but need a better conceptual framework in which all constituencies (students, faculty, library staff) and all collection development techniques (firm orders, slips, approval books, serial acquisition/cancellation, and weeding) will fit logically into place. Strengthening faculty input as the library increases its use of electronic resources will be a particular priority.

Conclusions
An effective faculty–library liaison system requires considerable planning and constant adjustment; in most cases, an approval plan is an essential backup. Sometimes individual library liaisons may have to accept an unusually active role in ordering (as in the computer science example) or a largely supervisory one (as in the English example). Faculty liaisons, too, face challenges—lack of understanding from peers, difficult financial and political choices, and the problems of working in a field where most lack technical training. However, despite these issues, the authors believe that a liaison system can provide better coverage and higher quality than any other means available to small and medium-sized college libraries.

Notes
1. To minimize confusion, the authors refer to nonlibrary faculty as “faculty” or “professors” and to credentialed library staff as “librarians,” although in many institutions, including theirs, librarians hold faculty rank. The authors would like to thank David Cohen, Dean of Libraries, and Katina Strauch, head of the Collection Development, who reviewed this article at several stages and pointed out this and other possible ambiguities.
7. David L. Vidor and Elizabeth Futas, “Effective Collection Developers: Librarians or Faculty?” LRTS 32, no. 2 (1988): 127–36. These researchers also cite four earlier studies, one on each side and two inconclusive.
8. Ibid., 135.
10. Ibid. The authors regret that the scope of this article does not permit exploring these other areas of faculty involvement, some of which are flourishing at their own institution. (Riggs also discusses faculty as motivators of library use, through both their own research and assignments.)
Other articles examined the negative side of the same issue; a lament that teaching faculty do not require the use of library resources in their course is Robert K. Baker, “Working with Our Teaching Faculty,” *College & Research Libraries* 56 (1995): 377–79.


13. Ibid., 44.


15. Ibid., 21.


17. Ibid., 303.


20. Ibid., 201.


27. The authors agree with Amy E. Arnold, who demonstrated the improvement in faculty participation at Auburn University, Montgomery. See Amy E. Arnold, “Approval Slips and Faculty Participation in Book Selection at a Small University Library,” *Collection Management* 18, nos. 1–2 (1993): 89–102.

28. The authors are grateful to Professors Christopher Starr, chair of the computer science department, and Walter Pharr, departmental liaison, for help with this section of the article. The authors appreciate the willingness of this overextended department to experiment with different approaches to book ordering.

29. Professor Nan Morrison, chair of the English department, reviewed the English section.

30. The authors wish to thank Professors Larry A. Carlson and Scott Peeples for their work on the American literature consensus, and Eddie Macy, graduate student in English, who ably assisted them.