



*Evidence Summary*

**Assessment of Undergraduate-Driven Acquisitions at a Small College Library Shows Both Costs and Benefits**

**A Review of:**

Waller, J. H. (2013). Undergrads as selectors: Assessing patron-driven acquisition at a liberal arts college. *Journal of Interlibrary Loan, Document Delivery & Electronic Reserve*, 23(3), 127-148. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1072303X.2013.851052>

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**Received:** 30 Nov. 2014

**Accepted:** 26 Jan. 2015

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To examine the viability of an undergraduate-focused, patron-driven acquisitions strategy in a small college library and to evaluate the titles acquired through this program for collection appropriateness, patron satisfaction, and cost effectiveness.

**Design** – Case study.

**Setting** – A small, Catholic college in the Eastern United States with 1,850 undergraduate students.

**Subjects** – Acquisitions of 432 print monographs selected by students and 18,624

print monographs selected by librarians and faculty members.

**Methods** – The author compared purchases selected from a pool of undergraduate interlibrary loan requests acquired from 2004 to 2013 to purchases acquired during the same time period through traditional means, including collection development work by librarians and selections by academic departments. The author evaluated titles for use based on circulation figures, for suitability using overlap analysis with the collections of four peer libraries, for patron satisfaction based on turnaround time, and for cost compared to items obtained through interlibrary loan.

**Main Results** – Student selection had some advantages, including moderately increased circulation. Traditionally acquired titles were less likely to circulate initially and only 20.46% of these titles circulated two or more times compared to 24.77% of student-selected titles. Student selections were less likely to be acquired by peer libraries, and 63.66% of student-selected titles were unique, though they had a similar subject distribution to traditionally acquired titles. Compared to interlibrary loan, student-selected purchases had similar turnaround times and in the most recent three-year period had an average turnaround time that was one day faster than interlibrary loan. However, student acquisitions were far costlier than interlibrary loan. Items acquired through this program cost the library \$39.70 on average while borrowing cost \$6.18 on average.

**Conclusion** – The student selection process was found to be moderately successful, and the library will continue the program. Based on the analysis of peer library holdings, the author suggests more librarian intervention in the selection process. Instead of purchasing any requests that meet the criteria for student selection, the author recommends an intermediary selection step of evaluation by librarians. Student selection did not show the dramatic advantages represented in studies conducted in larger academic libraries, and this disparity could potentially be due to a difference in selection quality between the undergraduate students at this college and the graduate and research populations of larger institutions.

### **Commentary**

As diverse libraries adopt patron-driven and demand-driven acquisitions strategies, it is important to evaluate these programs for their suitability to individual libraries and groups. The most significant research on these strategies has been conducted in large research libraries with strong graduate student and postgraduate populations and a variety of demand-driven acquisitions strategies. Undergraduate-focused liberal arts institutions

have different collection development goals, and this study aims to address the long- and short-term advantages and disadvantages of a selection strategy driven by undergraduate interlibrary loan demand.

The short-term circulation advantages are dramatic in existing literature and, though this study revealed more modest gains, convincing evidence still exists that even undergraduate-selected titles have more initial and subsequent circulations than traditionally selected titles. Evaluating on cost per use alone, these items potentially have a more significant benefit since the study limited student-selected purchases to \$75 while faculty- and librarian-selected titles were unlimited. Cost was highlighted as a disadvantage to student-selected purchases because these titles were drawn from and compared to interlibrary loan requests rather than traditionally acquired items.

The study emphasized the importance of quality in selection, which the authors measured by comparing items acquired through student selection to the collections of four peer institutions. Very little overlap occurred between student selections and traditionally acquired titles held in peer libraries, but it's significant that the author did not compare the much larger list of traditionally acquired titles to these libraries. Because traditional selection occurred near the publication date and the library did not receive subsequent interlibrary loan requests from which to draw student selections for these titles, it is possible that many of these titles were already held in the library and student selection represented holes in traditional acquisitions strategies that were missed by all five peer libraries. Assessing incoming interlibrary loan requests for student-selected titles might help clarify this issue.

Student-driven acquisitions policies are difficult to evaluate. They are inexorably bound up with other types of acquisitions and borrowing. The statistical inconsistencies in the results of this study could be due to the close integration of patron-driven acquisitions with

other types of acquisitions in the library. Evaluating the results of these policies is important, but establishing criteria for evaluation is even more important. For a small liberal arts library, balancing budget, patron satisfaction, usability, and collection quality pull acquisitions strategies in many different directions at once. Student-driven strategies might be a part of this balanced acquisitions ecosystem, but the significance of that part depends on the values of the library. This study found clear benefits for circulation and turnaround time, which might mean a collection that is highly useful for contemporary patrons, but cost considerations and value comparisons to other institutions could push smaller libraries to de-emphasize student-selected acquisitions.