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# Random Ramblings — “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”: When Academic Libraries Say No

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# Random Ramblings — “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”: When Academic Libraries Say No

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I chose the topic for this month’s column after reading the excellent piece by **Barbara Fister**, “Breaking Taboos for All the Right Reasons,” in the April 16, 2014 edition of *Inside Higher Ed.* (<http://www.insidehighered.com/blogs/library-babel-fish/breaking-taboos-all-right-reasons>) She was commenting on a snippet of conversation overheard at a gathering of librarians that “eBooks are a huge headache and students often prefer print.” She then asks: “if students don’t want eBooks, shouldn’t we listen to them? Aren’t we supposed to be student centered?” I contend that academic library users, most often students but also faculty, join the **Rolling Stones** in complaining that you can’t always get what you want. Let me start with examples and also contrast some of these policies with the public library model.

**Multiple Formats.** To start with the case above, most academic libraries buy materials in only one format, either print or eBook, even if some students want the other format. Public libraries buy the same best seller in multiple formats including print, eBook, audio, and video.

**Multiple Copies.** Except perhaps for reserves, academic libraries purchase only one copy of most works, even very popular ones. Sometimes, they do purchase multiple access options for eBooks and will consider interlibrary loan to help desperate users though other libraries often don’t lend popular materials. Public libraries expect multiple users to want the same best sellers and often have rules to buy extra copies based upon the number of requests.

**Textbooks.** Almost all academic libraries voluntarily choose not to meet the most important information need for their students — access to current textbooks. Students would be overjoyed if libraries met this want because they would save hundreds of dollars each semester.

**Lending Policies.** Academic users have divided wants on this issue. If they have successfully checked out the item, they want to keep it as long as they need it. If they want to get their hands on the material, they want liberal recall policies with heavy fines for those that don’t return the desired resource on time, even from an important faculty member.

**Recreational Reading.** Some academic libraries have policies against purchasing recreational reading. Others, especially with no good public library nearby, don’t and try to meet the entertainment needs of their faculty and students. These libraries sometimes solicit gift books and don’t process them fully to keep costs down. Even the libraries with a policy against recreational reading will purchase materials to support the curriculum that may include courses on science fiction, writing for popular publications, and the like. Finally,

some users will consider the **Jane Austen** novels purchased to support the English Department to be the best possible leisure time reads. As a quick aside, my own university purchased a streaming audio service for classical music with a limited number of seats. I felt guilty whenever I used one of these seats for pleasure listening and perhaps kept a student from completing a course assignment. Public libraries consider providing the recreational reading demanded by their patrons to be one of their most important responsibilities.

**Popular Materials.** I’ll go out on a limb here to suggest that undergraduate students might want many more popular non-fiction materials than library selectors buy. Having another resource than the textbook to explain general principles in a comprehensible but different way would be useful to many undergraduates. Then there is always a demand for the *Idiot’s Guides*. Public libraries specialize in buying accessible non-fiction.

**Microformats.** I doubt that anyone in the world actually likes microformats, but they used to be a necessary evil because they provided materials that could not be easily found elsewhere. Today, many academic libraries are giving patrons what they want by buying digital versions of these resources, sometimes at a high cost. Public libraries have always tried their best to avoid microformats.

**Patron-Driven Acquisitions.** While the idea behind patron-driven acquisitions is giving the students and faculty what they want, I don’t believe that this statement is completely accurate, especially for print materials. The undergraduate student whose paper is due tomorrow will use whatever is available and will most likely not find the same richness of resources as in the past. These collections may not also reflect the same balance of divergent viewpoints that collection development experts were expected to provide. The unsophisticated student may not even recognize that the collection is unbalanced. For eBooks, the student must navigate the online catalog including selecting the appropriate subject headings, often not an easy task even for experts, while in the past the same students would find the correct general area in the print stacks and pull down books until they found the required number of resources. Public libraries strive to anticipate user wants so that popular materials are available as quickly as possible after publication.

**Storage Facilities.** Faculty don’t like books to be put in storage, no matter how carefully done and how fast the delivery system works. Whether or not their concerns are reasonable, the academic library is not giving them what they want. Few public libraries have storage collections. They make their resources directly available to their users.

**Weeding the Print Collection.** From the

student perspective, weeding might give them what they want — more study space and an easily browsable collection. Since most faculty seldom work in the library, they consider this step to be even worse than sending the books to storage. Most public libraries weed heavily for the same reason that academic libraries would like to — they have space for only a limited number of items and wish to retain the most popular titles.

**Foreign Language Materials.** I’m the selector for faculty in French, Italian, and Spanish literature areas. The current trends in academic library collection development have penalized severely this group’s teaching and research. They want books in the languages that they teach. Instead, resources have flowed to online databases and PDA from eBook packages. At my institution, the *MLA Bibliography* is about the only important online resource that they might use. This tool includes some full text but almost always in English while a link is the best that they can usually find to materials in the languages of interest to them. The same is true for eBook resources in my local **ebrary** collection with only 254 items of all types in French compared with 113,842 in English.

The examples above should give sufficient proof that academic libraries overlook many of the known collection development wants of their student and faculty users. Instead, the goal of academic libraries is to meet their needs. To me, the guiding principle would be meeting the broadest number of current needs that match institutional goals while serving the maximum number of users. To return to my examples above, buying two books with different content provides greater collection depth than buying two copies or formats with the same content. Purchasing textbooks and recreational reading would take funds away from the more important goal of supporting student and faculty research. The two Italian faculty at my institution would certainly want and use an Italian literature database, but I can’t justify this expense for two faculty in an area without a doctoral program. Overall, I therefore support most of the decisions that I have listed above even when they are counter to our users’ wants.

The decision to focus on needs brings with it a heavy obligation to take great care to assess accurately these needs. As a current faculty member who was an academic librarian for twenty-five years, I’m not completely certain that the two groups understand each other as well as they should. Some decisions to focus on needs may have unintended negative consequences. I support, for example, giving each doctoral student in an area with few library resources a small collection development allocation to purchase key works. The academic

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library should also make the commitment to re-purchase items withdrawn from the collection if these items should turn out to be important in the same way that most academic libraries return storage materials to the active collection after a certain number of uses. In other words, a certain portion of any savings from decisions that go against user wants should be allocated to remedying the cases where the perceived want is a valid need.

To return to the issue of the key difference between public and academic libraries, the public library must meet user wants because users directly or indirectly determine its funding. The public library is following a dangerous strategy if it claims to be meeting user needs by overlooking their wants. The philosophy that the goal of the public library is to increase their users' cultural sophistication by purchasing only the highest "quality" materials is dead. The public library must give its users what they want to keep them coming back as public libraries fight for survival.

Academic libraries don't get their funding directly from their users. Students don't get to vote on the library budget. If they did, I'm sure that many academic libraries would have huge textbook collections. Instead, the administration determines the library budget and most often understands the difference between meeting needs and meeting wants. Administrators realize that many of the decisions above are based upon the principle of an effective use of available funding to best meet institutional goals. The academic library should pay attention to user wants, especially those of the faculty since this group has much more power than students; but higher education administrator will support a good reason to say no, especially one with positive fiscal outcomes.

I have one additional point to make. In an answer to a comment to her column, **Fister** states that "none of us can afford books in both e- and print formats." This claim is literally inaccurate because I can think of no academic library that could not afford occasional or perhaps even systematic duplication between the two formats. I would reformulate this comment to what I'm quite sure she really meant: "purchasing books in both e- and print formats is not a good use of scarce resources." Let's be honest in what we tell users, especially when the "right" decision is to say no.

I'll conclude by returning to my opening conceit: "But if you try sometimes, you just might find you get what you need." Most likely, the majority of academic library users are better off from the decision to focus on collection development needs rather than on collection development wants. 🌻