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April 1990

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Education for Acquisitions: A History

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Once an essential part of the library school curriculum, acquisitions in the present day rarely, if ever, is taught on a regular basis. Acquisitions is seen not simply as a specialization of a relatively few librarians, but as a fundamental part of the work of librarians in many settings. A review of early formal training in acquisitions and the textbooks pertaining to the subject, and an analysis of the literature provide an historical perspective on education for acquisitions, and suggest elements that may provide basic and adequate training in acquisitions useful to all librarians.

Acquisitions, the process by which libraries order, claim, and receive material, was once an essential part of the library school curriculum. In the early days of library science education, until the 1 930s, training for acquisitions work was a fundamental part of any librarian's education and included detailed work in order processes, book and serial purchasing, discussions on the interworkings of the publishing industry, handling of gifts and exchanges, and accessioning, as well as some of the fundamentals of what we today ~call collection development.

Today, acquisitions rarely, if ever, finds itself the topic of concentrated learning in library schools. For those librarians choosing work outside the specialization of acquisitions, this deficiency appears to have little effect. It can be argued, however, that all librarians can benefit from knowledge of how a library procures materials, and how the economics of the publishing and bookselling industries affect our collections and our collecting. In addition, there are the many librarians who are themselves involved in acquisitions work, be it in smaller libraries in which one librarian may serve several functions or in larger libraries where size justifies a separate acquisitions department. Hewitt recently noted, "Acquisitions is a professional specialization learned almost entirely on the job. . . . Almost all librarians must deal with acquisitions as users of a service critical to their own functions, yet few are prepared to interact with acquisitions in an informed way."[1] Librarians handling acquisitions frequently find themselves reinventing the wheel from day to day, learning through serendipity and by mistake how to procure the materials their libraries need efficiently and economically. Among acquisitions librarians and their colleagues in the books and periodicals vending field, this lack of formal education is a vexing situation.

An historical review of formal education for acquisitions is useful in discovering the content of the lost training, and in discerning which of its elements might be resuscitated. The literature on education for professional acquisitions work is sparse. No single book, article, or chapter in a book covers the history of

acquisitions education, and interest in the topic has been sporadic. To gain an historical perspective on the topic, it is useful to review courses on acquisitions that have been taught in selected library science schools. A review of acquisitions textbooks used in the past century of library education in the United States is equally helpful. Viewed in tandem with the few writings on the topic, one gains insight into how this aspect of librarianship has been treated.

LIBRARY SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Certain library education programs have set the tone for most of the other programs in the United States. This seminal group of schools includes Columbia College, established in 1886 (soon relocated to the New York State Department of Education in Albany), Pratt Institute (established in 1890), Drexel Institute (organized in 1892), Armour Institute (established in 1893 and soon relocated to the University of Illinois), the University of Chicago (which opened with Carnegie support in 1925 and offered the field's first doctoral program), and Columbia University (which absorbed the school in Albany and the program at New York Public Library). The initial establishment of these schools covers almost forty years, from the founding of Dewey's school at Columbia in 1886 to the establishment of the University of Chicago Graduate Library School in 1925. A review of these programs provides an intimate look at the development of acquisitions education in American library schools.

The oldest program, the Columbia College School of Library Economy (later the New York State School of Library Science and still later merged with the School of Library Service at Columbia University), also presented the first structured educational approach to acquisitions work. Unlike traditional programs of lecture and practice work, in which material such as cataloging was presented, acquisitions work was treated in 1886 with "other methods of instruction." These variant teaching methods, when applied to acquisitions (or "order work" as it was then called) involved "visits under guidance to representative houses, where can be learned to the best advantage so much as a librarian needs to know about publishing, book-selling, book-auctions, [and] second-hand bookstores."[2] In addition, "object teaching" was employed, including "buying, with warnings and suggestions on how to get the most for the money Ilwith] various tables to show net cost to the library of books at the usual price per franc, marc [sic], shilling, etc., after adding commissions, fee, freight, insurance, duties, brokerage, etc."[3] Finally, order work was also treated as part of a traditional lecture course on administration. That course addressed the basic order system, systems for indexing order files, creation of ordering forms, and receipt- and invoice-checking." Education in the technical aspects of librarianship, including acquisitions training, was thorough and complete. In 1902, for example, the course outline describes the curriculum for the course entitled "Accession Department. Lecture and Practice" as "Acquisition of books, serials, pamphlets, ephemera; order slips and sheets, order and receipt indexes, serials checklist; price discounts, duty free importation; auctions, old book lists; duplicates, exchanges (domestic and foreign), gifts; reception . . . [and]

checking bills."[5] By 1917, the course work was revised extensively and included a course on the more administrative aspects of acquisitions and cataloging. Study on this topic was condensed into one course covering "the book from the publisher through the departments of the library to the reader . . . [including] . . . book selection and book buying; American publishers, the book order department, its staff, [and] checking of invoices and order files."[6]

The method of training librarians for order work evolved at Columbia with little documented substantive change for several years. Course titles were altered, as in 193 1—32, when "Library Records and Methods" was offered, including "the various steps in ordering," but the content remained the same. In the late 1 940s, however, the approach to acquisitions/ order work and to other practical aspects of library science came under close scrutiny. In the 194 *5—46* annual report of the School, Dean Carl White perceived the need to separate library practice from library theory. Acquisitions work was seen as falling into the former category, as part of standard library procedures. White envisaged a "learning process as close as possible to what the athletic coach would call 'game conditions.' The introduction to the profession would be concrete, and. . . immediately applicable."[8] As a consequence of this re-thinking of the practical aspects of library science, including acquisitions/order work, Columbia's approach to acquisitions training changed. In the following academic year a special program entitled "Workshop on the Acquisition of Resources in Research Libraries" was offered. It focused on the development of acquisitions programs and methods of obtaining material throughout the world.[9] In the same year Columbia began to teach a required course in technical services. This course included an overview of "methods of acquisitions" designed not primarily to develop skills and techniques, but "to promote a critical understanding of practices and alternative methods."[0] Since that time, Columbia has offered a similar kind of course in technical services. At various times it offered courses in advanced technical service problems and in book publishing. The latter course might be perceived as a significant contribution to the education of librarians for acquisitions work, in that it addressed not only the business aspects of publishing, but also the relationship between librarian and publisher.

The Pratt Institute School of Library Training was founded one year after the New York State School of Library Economy. It offered "order department work" as part of its first-year course. Examinations from the period prior to the turn of the century required students to "give routine of order department from making out of order slip to reception of book," and asked "How may foreign books be obtained by a library, and what method would you advise as most economical of time and money?"'[2] Examinations in these classes also called for knowledge of selection practices. Students were asked to recall where to look "for material for a complete list of the publications of the Cornwall Royal Institution, 1818—date."'[3] Like its sister institutions, Pratt realigned instruction on book-buying in 1915, removing it from the technical area of instruction and placing the topic within a course on administration. "'In the mid- 1940s, taking a different tack from other library schools of the period, Pratt began teaching library department practices within the study of types of libraries. Acquisitions work for public libraries, therefore, was found in a series of courses concerning public libraries.

By 1959, this, too, changed, and acquisitions was taught in a course on technical services administration. This method of handling acquisitions has continued at Pratt since that time.

Drexel Institute's School of Library Science was founded in 1892. It had a more independent approach to the teaching of acquisitions work. Drexel maintained a course devoted to order work and accessioning until the 1926—27 academic year.'[5] At that time, instruction in order work became part of a class in the administration and history of libraries. In what may have been an experimental change in 1931, Drexel offered a course entitled "Order Work and Trade Bibliography," providing a study of "the uses of the principal trade and national bibliographies in connection with order work."'[6] By 1934—35, "library methods" was taught as part of one course, and included instruction in acquisitions, accessioning, and other library routines.'[7] This course was separate from courses on administration. In 1950, acquisitions work was covered as one of the administrative aspects of managing a college or university library,'[8] and by 1954, all references to acquisitions had been dropped from the course catalogs.[9] When Drexel added its program in information science in the mid-1960s, the School began to offer a course entitled "Acquiring and Organizing Science Materials," covering the selecting, ordering, and organization of published scientific information.[20] This specialized approach to acquisitions was later dropped, and acquisitions as a topic was not treated in any course.

The University of Illinois School of Library Science (founded at the Armour Institute in Chicago in 1893 and transferred to the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign in 1897) had a course devoted to work in the order department as part of the first-year work. As with other library schools, this course included work with accessioning and the shelf list. A typical description from the 1910—1911 *Circular of Information* describes the order work course as such:

> 16. ORDER, ACCESSION AND SHELF WORK. The subjects treated in this course are indicated by the following: the order department records and routine, book-buying, publishers and discounts, copyright, serials and continuations, gifts, exchanges, duplicates, the accession book and its substitutes, the shelf list and its uses, and the care of pamphlets, clippings, maps, etc.[2]
>
> Lecture notes preserved from this period indicate that the course not only taught routine tasks such as the correct method of opening books and cutting leaves, but also provided detailed discussions on obtaining books at auctions and through second-hand dealers, and the legal aspects of handling duplicates. A class examination from 1895 asked "Should a small
> library buy books in large lots at long intervals, or in small lots at shorter intervals? Give reasons."[22]

Until the 1 970s, it was more or less standard operating procedure at the University of Illinois library school to offer a course concerned with order work. In 1928—29, in addition to the regular course on order work, a course entitled "Book-buying for the Large Library" was added for second-year students.[23] It continued to be taught until

the mid-l930s, but later was dropped. In 1942, a course on publishers was added for graduate students only, presenting information on the evolution of book publishing and book trade practices in relation to the library. Three years later, courses on order work were dropped, and any specific reference to acquisitions did not reappear until 1960. At that time, a course on technical services was introduced[25] and has been offered off and on at the school since that time.

The University of Chicago Graduate Library School was established in 1925 to provide graduate work only; admission presumed that the student already possessed the entry-level professional degree of the period, a fifth-year bachelor of arts degree. The Graduate Library School approached education for acquisitions as it approached many other aspects of traditional library education, by eschewing any discussion or teaching of the topic. The GLS *Announcements* for 1929—30 state: ". . . the School does not duplicate the usual first-year curriculum of other graduate library schools. *Hence pesons desiring systematic courses belonging to this first-year curriculum are advised to attend some other library school"* [their emphasis]. All instruction related to technical processes was handled through individual research, and topics were closely controlled. Suggested topics included studies in typographical history.[27] Five years later the school began to offer a course entitled "The Administration of Technical Operations." This course included instruction on the ". . . routines for the incorporation of acquired books into the collections of a library, beginning with their purchase. Typical procedures will be analyzed with respect to cost and efficiency, and the effect of the order of operations."[28] In the summer of the 1939—40 academic year, the GLS relaxed its restrictive approach to acquisitions education even further, and introduced a course entitled "Order Work and Records." Described as "a discussion of the methods used in acquisition departments for the locating of materials to be purchased, their acquisition and incorporation into the collection . . . [including] accounting," this summer course was offered during the regular term in the following year. In 1943—44, the GLS returned to instruction on the administration of technical operations.[29] This format for addressing acquisitions and other aspects of technical services continues to the present day.

Viewed together, education in acquisitions among these schools has a homogeneous history. With the exception of the University of Chicago, as noted above, all the schools provided some instruction in order work at the first-year level. The curriculum changed during the 1920s, with less emphasis on the practical aspects of library management. Acquisitions, as well as courses in accessioning, indexing, and binding, were amalgamated into one course on library or technical administration. The University of Illinois maintained its order course for the longest period. At approximately the same time, both Illinois and Chicago moved from opposite ends of the acquisitions education spectrum and began teaching acquisitions as part of courses on technical services. Courses on publishing, which are an integral part of acquisitions education, were taught in most schools only sporadically. Among these prominent schools, no courses devoted solely to acquisitions are presently taught.

TEXTBOOKS

The development of textbooks and training tools for order work paralleled the rise and fall of interest in acquisitions within library education programs. Since much of the early acquisitions education was done by demonstration and visits to publishing houses, there were no textbooks per se. Dewey's *Library Notes* was the first example of a unified approach to teaching any library science topic, and the first issues of this circular included basic discussions of accessioning and book-buying: Curricula for early classes were developed year by year within each school, and were exchanged among instructors at such meetings as the ALA Annual Conference of 1885 at Lake George and the Milwaukee Conference of l886.~' In 1908, the Committee on Library Training met and approved the publication of the *A. L.A. Manual of Library Economy,* which was issued chapter by chapter from 1911 through 1929.32 This text included a chapter entitled "Order and Accession Department," by F. F. Hopper,[33] and was later revised in 1930 by Carl Cannon.[34] Cannon's text became one of the few important textbooks addressing acquisitions work, and included training in importation of books, copyright, serial subscriptions, accessioning, gifts and exchanges, second-hand buying, and the design of order slips.

In the same year, 1930, Francis Drury produced *Order Work for Libraries,* published by the American Library Association under the guidance of its editorial committee and the University of Chicago's Curriculum Study Committee. Drury's text, like other texts of the period, was extremely detailed, and set out to teach the student "to learn fundamental routines for acquiring purchases and gifts; to develop judgement in the various phases of order work. . . to know how to count books at the accession desk. . . to understand the necessary processes in the mechanical preparation of books . . . [and] . . . to distinguish the essentials in statistics and reports."[36]

The Cannon and Drury works were key texts in acquisitions training for many years. Later training material for acquisitions was relegated to one chapter within a larger topic. In 1937, Columbia University published its syllabus on "Principles of Library Organization and Administration," a detailed course outline that devoted one session to acquisitions.[37] Acquisitions was the object of only two chapters in Tauber's *Technical Services in Libraries* text, published in 1954,38 and less than one page in his 1959 syllabus, *Outline for the Course in Current Problems in Technical Services in Libraries.*[39] More substantial essays on acquisitions work were published as a result of an institute conducted by the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library Science in 1962 **•40** Almost half of the chapters in *Selection and Acquisitions Procedures in Medium-Sized and Large Libraries* dealt with some aspect of acquisitions work, and portrayed the general educational move away from a prescriptive approach to the topic.

Fifty years after the first texts appeared, the 1969 American Library Association Pre-Conference on Accjuisitions prompted the publication of *Melcher on Acquisition* in 1971. Melcher, who presented acquisitions from his experience at the R. R. Bowker Company, offered his personal advice as well as objective experiences to make the acquisitions process more meaningful to the librarian and the library science student. Stephen Ford's *The Acquisition of Library Materials* was published in 1973 by the American Library Association, and was a direct result of a recommendation by the Ad Hoc Committee of the Acquisitions Section of the Resources and Technical

Services Division of ALA to produce a current text and reference book on acquisitions ~42 In many respects, it updates the Drury textbook in both scope and content. Given the diminished interest in acquisltions as an independent course in library schools, it is not surprising that more continuous attention to updating of acquisitions textbooks has not occurred.

PROFESSIONAL CONCERN

When courses in acquisitions, or order work, stopped, it was not as if their passing went unnoticed. In 1938, the *ALA Bulletin* reported the minutes of the Acquisitions Departments of Research Libraries Round Table discussion. One of the first items on the agenda was a discussion of whether there was adequate preparation for acquisitions librarians in library schools. A practicing acquisitions librarian present at this meeting expressed the opinion that library schools had failed to provide adequate courses in acquisitions work." A library school instructor noted that "the curriculum [in acquisitions was] already too full." A medical librarian suggested that librarians needed more symposia.[43] No resolution was suggested. At the same ALA conference, Thomas Fleming delivered a paper entitled "Some Unsolved Problems in Acquisitions." He noted, among other things, the profession's failure "to define adequately the function of university acquisition work, and to differentiate clearly the duties which properly belong to an acquisition department." In addition, he stated, "there is a definite need for education of trained personnel. The present courses offered in library schools need revision.""

The topic was raised again thirty years later, in a 1966 *Library Journal* opinion piece on acquisitions, subtitled "The Missing Link in the Library School Curriculum?"[45] Drawing on the opinions of his colleagues, as well as his own experiences in academic librarianship, Royce Butler (an acquisitions librarian himself) made note of the scattered nature of acquisitions education among several specialized classes—book selection, library organization, or technical service courses—and stated that a course on acquisitions "is not only needed, but long overdue. It should be required of all library school students, and the initial required course should be supported by advanced and/or specialized courses."[46] The author expressed his concern about the source of acquisitions education for most acquisitions librarians, noting that "right now, it is in the technical services departments of libraries, rather than in the library schools, that experiments in acquisitions are being made. . . . I would like to see the library schools doing more on the level of education and scholarship."[47]

One year later, a *Drexel Library Quarterly* "Curriculum" column addressed the education of librarians for acquisitions and cataloging. The eight-page article devoted one page to acquisitions, citing Butler,[48] and noting "the most obvious point to be made concerning education for acquisitions is the lack of it. . . . The basic assumption has been that acquisitions is almost exclusively clerical, experience being much more useful than theoretical classroom teaching." The topic has grown so extensively, the author suggested, that the "area deserves at least one separate elective course. . . [which]. . . can be integrated with book selection and cataloging to which it is closely related."[4] Any more detailed suggestions about where potential acquisitions librarians should learn

their work were not offered. Twenty years later, the same column reviewed the curriculum of book selection. ~ authors, Bendix and Pennypacker, reviewed course-work objectives in book selection as developed by the Association of American Library Schools in 1963 **.~'** Knowledge of the book trade was one stated objective, an understanding of which clearly is useful to the acquisitions librarian. A checklist of twenty-three major topics covered in a materials selection course included two, gifts and order work, falling within this paper's definitions of acquisitions. Of the twenty-seven library schools returning usable surveys, all offered a materials selection course. Twenty-five (92.6 percent) discussed the handling of gifts, and twelve (44.4 percent) discussed order work. Only five schools emphasized order work, meaning that less than 20 percent of library schools devoted one portion of one course to acquisitions work, at least as it related to materials selection. **52**

The only other contemporary discussion about acquisitions education in the literature appeared in 1978. "Are Library Schools Educating Acquisitions Librarians?: A Discussions ~ provided a forum for four librarians to discuss various aspects of acquisitions education. In the first article, Wilham Myrick presented a semi-serious review of his own experiences and remembrances of acquisitions training in library school. Myrick took an unscientific sample of his technical service colleagues in academic libraries, asking them to recall what they remembered of acquisitions courses in library school, and soliciting opinions about what might be taught. In addition, he polled five library science educators, seeking their responses about what, if anything, was taught about acquisitions in their schools. While not providing scientific data, the two groups' responses did provide Myrick with a list of topics for a library school curriculum, as well as the almost unanimous feeling that acquisitions was not covered to any useful extent in the library school curriculum.[54]

In the second article, Williamson presented a scientific survey of acquisitions training in accredited library schools in North America. In a population of twenty-seven schools, she identified sixty-five specific courses containing some aspect of acquisitions work. She concluded from her survey that the majority of library schools recognize acquisitions as a component of their graduate education, but do not give it any significant standing within the curriculum.[55]

The final articles were more informal. Heitshu stated that, if asked, a majority of acquisitions librarians would claim their acquisitions education came on the job, as a result of work with vendors and colleagues. She made note of the University of Michigan intern program, which provides an opportunity for library science students to work in the technical services area of the university library, as well as the coursework available there in collection building. Other continuing education opportunities were noted, such as interaction with American Library Association committees and discussion groups. Serebnick spelled out the kinds of acquisitions topics library schools should consider teaching. She suggested that only by evaluating the work of present and future acquisitions librarians can one decide how well library schools are training students for this position.

CONCLUSION

A review of the history of education for acquisitions work demonstrates a paucity of data about how well acquisitions librarians are educated, and the more fundamental question of how they are educated at all. The progenitor of American library education, Melvil Dewey, noted in 1883 that "As all of literary life is based on books and reading, it is certainly a wise investment to make of the little time needed to acquire so much information on these topics [i.e., book buying] as is practically useful to an educated reader, though he may not attempt to follow out details valuable only to the printer, binder, or publisher.' Yet, Williamson contends that library schools are paying, at most, a nodding acquaintance with the topic, and informal discussion with acquisitions librarians would seem to bear this out.[59] It would be a specious argument, indeed, to suggest that the library school curriculum return to the past and provide the detailed and intricate training in acquisitions work that once existed. There are useful components in the earlier teaching methods, however, which could be used to enhance formal education for acquisitions.

Of primary importance would seem to be instruction in the publishing and book and serial vending businesses. Publishing is, after all, the "bread and butter" of librarianship, and its output, in book, nonprint, and electronic form, is the basis upon which we catalog and provide reference services and seek to build adequate collections. A fundamental understanding of the economics of publishing, including pricing policies and marketing techniques, is valuable to all librarians, regardless of specialization. Of secondary importance, but still with universal application, are generalized discussions of the business aspects of acquisitions, including accounting techniques, purchasing ethics, and evaluation of the various methods of material procurement, such as approval plans. Libraries are too varied, and the routines of acquisitions too clerical in nature, to emphasize any of the early instruction on order forms or receipt procedures, or any of the myriad detail work that composes the acquisition routine. What is important is to focus on the professional aspects of acquisitions work, and the recognition of acquisitions as an essential component in good library administration.

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