



## Collection Building

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# The votes are in: a process for selecting reference books and managing the reference budget

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to describe the process that is used for selecting reference books and managing the reference budget at one academic library reference unit. While there have been articles written on reference collection development, none have explained the process in detail.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper describes the process used to select reference books via a voting system and how the budget is managed over ordering periods.

**Findings** – Using the system described, librarians can effectively manage a reference budget that fairly distributes resources across different subjects and gives selectors greater control of the resources they purchase.

**Originality/value** – This is a unique book selection and ordering system that has not been described in the literature.

**Keywords** Collection development, Book budget management, Book budgets, Reference book budget, Reference book selection, Reference collection development

**Paper type** Case study

## Literature review

While there have been articles written about reference collection development, none have really explained a process used for the selection of reference materials for the collection. Most articles start with a history of reference collection development (Nichols, 1987; Hattendorf, 1989; Stebelman, 1989). There is also discussion of reference collection development policies and practices (Biggs and Biggs, 1987; Hattendorf, 1989). Then, many segue into the personnel or departments that can make reference collection development decisions. Often, there is mention of approval plans, subject specialists or general reference staff as selectors (Kroll, 1985; Stebelman, 1989; Bordeianu and Carter, 1996; Detmering and Sproles, 2012).

The closest anyone comes to explaining exactly how the selection is made are Detmering and Sproles (2012), who detail a case study of changing reference collection development in their library and mention that all reference librarians suggest titles which go on a spreadsheet and refer to getting periodic budget balance updates from the collection development office. Their reference department then meets to decide on titles based on funds available. There is no mention of how exactly those titles are decided upon, nor how funds are allocated among the subjects, titles or over time.

The process described herein is one way librarians managed the selection and budgeting of resources for an academic reference unit.

## Background

Carnegie Mellon University is a PhD granting institution with 12,676 full-time employees. The university's library system, with slightly over 1 million books, has three separate libraries with four separate reference units. This article relates the experiences of the main library reference unit which concentrates in the humanities (excluding the fine arts) and the social sciences, including business and law. Five librarians, including the head of reference, select materials for these areas. The librarians act as general reference librarians in addition to being subject specialists with liaison responsibilities to one or more academic departments.

Originally, the head of reference, who was also the business librarian, selected the books for the reference collection and managed the reference budget. Subject specialists would submit titles to the head for consideration. There was neither a departmental discussion of individual titles nor a revelation of the budget. Librarians were not necessarily notified if their suggestions were accepted or rejected, though, on occasion, there was an indication that the title would not be purchased. The head of reference maintained the file of suggestions in her office. Librarians often justified their suggestions in one-on-one meetings with the head, citing reasons under which the title should be considered: it was essential for a class, a particular faculty needed it for research, it was a basic subject resource, it was highly recommended from a review source, etc.

With changes in personnel, there was an opportunity to modify the procedure for reference book selection. A new responsibility, coordinator of the reference collection, was added to one of the subject librarians while the search for a

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new head of reference proceeded. This librarian proposed a new procedure in which all would participate.

### Selection procedure

The coordinator of the reference collection suggested that desired reference titles, with their prices, were to be put in a folder that was kept in an accessible area. All librarians were encouraged to peruse the titles in the folder and to add printouts or ads of resources at any time. In sync with a monthly reference meeting, the reference collection coordinator would announce a deadline for submitting titles. She would then make a list of all the titles, in alphabetical order, with prices and any notes for a particular title on a spreadsheet. Notes might include such information as “have earlier edition” or “e-book version requested”. The spreadsheet would then be e-mailed to all librarians in the reference unit about a week before the monthly meeting. The librarians were to review all the titles on the list, deciding which would make good purchases for the collection. Librarians were encouraged to look for reviews of the materials if they were not already included and to consider all titles (not just those in their area). At the monthly reference meeting, the agenda routinely included reference books.

The reference books agenda item was not simply a discussion of the content of each title with the group coming to consensus as to whether or not to purchase. One problem with the previously used method had been that librarians could not simply select a title for their area regardless of how inexpensive it was. With this new method, each librarian was allowed to select or “to star” a title, the cost of which could not exceed \$300, that would be automatically purchased from the reference budget for the reference collection. In addition, librarians would have a chance to cast a vote for ten other titles that they wanted to see added to the collection. At the monthly meeting, librarians announced which were their “starred” or automatic title choices. They also announced which titles they intended to vote for, explaining why the title was necessary and encouraging their colleagues to vote for them.

After each librarian detailed their choices, the reference collection coordinator would announce a deadline for submitting starred choices and votes for other titles, usually within a week. The reference librarians could either submit their votes on a paper printout of the spreadsheet or via online submission. The coordinator requested returning the list of titles online to use the numeral 1 as the vote indicator so that totals could be easily be copied, pasted and tallied on the master sheet. For those using printed sheets, the votes were simply transferred to the online master sheet. Then the coordinator would tally the votes and the starred choices.

The use of the spreadsheet allowed the reference collection coordinator not only to sort the titles in alphabetical order for the initial list of titles but also to total the votes to make sure each librarian voted for the correct number of titles. It also allowed sorting by stars, votes and adding the cost of these. There were columns with each librarian’s initials in which their votes were recorded. First, the stars and votes from all the librarians were added to the coordinator’s master list. Then, this alphabetical list of titles was sorted by starred votes, with the costs tallied. Then, the votes were sorted, and the costs were tallied for the starred items and those with five

votes, followed by starred items and those with five votes and four votes and starred items and those with five votes, four votes and three votes. The reference budget, now available to all via our library management system, was then divided into the number of months in which reference meetings would be held. This would then give a target amount that we would want to spend for the month. Doing monthly apportionments kept us from spending the budget too quickly, making sure we always had money for purchases later in the fiscal year. While vacations, term breaks and other issues may have caused the reference department to miss a monthly meeting or two, the current sum of the reference budget could be re-divided at any point to give a new target spending amount.

With this target spending amount in mind, the reference coordinator would look at the sum totals of the stars plus five votes, the stars plus five and four votes, the stars plus five and four and three votes and decide which came closest to the target amount. These were then the titles that would be ordered for the department.

The goal was to get as much consensus as possible on the items to be purchased. Titles with votes of two or less were discounted. These were titles that could not generate enough interest to win the support of most in the department and thus were not considered for purchase. All titles not chosen, however, remained on the list for next month to be included along with any new suggestions. Librarians, of course, were free to star old or new titles. If a librarian had two titles she considered essential, she really only had to wait another month to be able to star the second title, assuming it had not garnered enough votes to win purchase on the first go-round. Titles were limited to \$300, so that a starred vote costing several hundreds or even thousands of dollars did not consume the entire reference budget for the month or even the year. We had originally started this process with starring two and voting for 13 but found that so many starred choices could easily take too large a portion of the budget, leaving little for any votes. We also found that it was easier to get consensus with 10 votes rather than 13, so we decided to go with that number. At the end of the fiscal year, or at the beginning of the new one, the titles left in the order box were reviewed. This was the time some titles would be discarded or left in to be considered during the next fiscal year.

### Pros

This procedure had many benefits. Now all could participate in the selection of reference titles. Most importantly, librarians could select titles crucial to their subjects and faculty without needing to beg or to plead their case. Previously, an inexpensive item might not be approved by the department head. Now there was the freedom to obtain that resource with a simple star vote. Of course, more expensive items still needed the consensus (votes) of the group, which was done by discussing the value of the title to the university community. Most understood that there would be times when the group’s votes would be necessary for a title they wanted, so most were willing to be supportive when they could.

Because the titles were discussed among all the librarians, all could get a broader understanding of materials outside their areas of expertise. One could hear the rationale for proposing a particular title, that is, how it would help researchers and students in a particular field. This allowed

individuals to become familiar not only with the books we were buying but also what was being taught and researched in the different departments.

Another benefit of this process was that it was totally adaptable to the available budget. The total reference budget could be divided as often as we chose to meet or not meet for reference book discussions. At the start of the fiscal year, we started out dividing the total budget by 12, planning to have a meeting each month of the year to discuss reference books, but, if a meeting was missed, then the new budget sum (subtracting for those titles already purchased) was divided by the remaining months in the fiscal year. As we got to the end of the fiscal year, if we had a smaller sum than usual, we might just do the starred titles, no voting. Likewise, librarians could be restricted to voting for eight, rather than ten titles, or any other number that seemed rational. The system was totally fluid, able to adapt to any fiscal situation.

### Cons

There are caveats to this star and voting system, however. Some librarians had not made their starred choices by meeting time and, therefore, were not able to share their choice with the group. While some did send e-mail with their choice soon after the meeting, some did not. This meant others voted for items that were to be starred later, wasting a vote on an item that would be purchased automatically. Sometimes there were not enough items on the list that some librarians thought worthy of a vote. We had a librarian who refused to use ten votes one month; she just voted for fewer books.

The department head, too, could be considered to have an influence on voting. Some may have been more willing to vote for something the head wanted rather than going against an authority figure. The department head could also use her authority to influence votes. Favoritism could also enter into who votes for what, something we fortunately did not experience. Likewise, reference librarians can indulge personal interests or favored subjects with their starred choices. It is difficult to watch a less-experienced librarian purchase a reference book with little or no relevance to the academic community that the more experienced librarians knew had little chance of being used. On the other hand, it certainly opens the reference collection to diversity!

Another difficulty with the system is that reference works in some fields are inherently more expensive than in others. Our business librarian was frustrated with the \$300 limit per starred item because few of the resources she needed fell under that amount. We never worked out a satisfactory answer to that issue, but colleagues were sympathetic when it came to casting votes and, thus, voted for many expensive business items. Quite honestly, if all had starred books that cost \$300, we never would have had money for any other votes. We were fortunate that many starred books were fairly inexpensive.

Finally, it must be noted that this procedure is time consuming. Someone must be willing to create the spreadsheet with the titles and costs. Time needs to be set

aside at a regularly scheduled meeting to discuss the titles. Then someone needs to establish a timeframe for voting, collect and mark the votes and tally them. In the middle of a busy semester, it is easy to forget to schedule the deadline for submitting titles in coordination with a reference meeting.

### Conclusion

This process allowed our reference collection to become more diverse in the humanities and social sciences than it had been. The reference collection coordinator keeps the spreadsheets; so if we wanted to, we could easily see what has been purchased over the years, and, because it is in a spreadsheet, we could sort it any way we wanted. This process has allowed the subject librarians to be more responsive to the needs of their constituents, as well as to new programs and new interests. We continue to use this method for e-resources because we tend to buy less print these days. It really works for any format. One issue that we still need to deal with, however, is the decrease in dependence on reference works. Many of our users refer to resources freely available on the internet rather than use library purchased materials. Quite honestly, we are not sure how to deal with that yet. Regardless of how many titles we have to consider, however, we still continue to vote. While we may adjust number of stars, votes, budget, the cost for a starred item, etc., the system is one that works for us. Perhaps it will work for you.

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