
“Ask at Reference” for backlogged books

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How to avoid user frustration as arrearages grow.

Cataloging arrearages or backlogs have been discussed in the library literature from the 1940s to the present. Considering the continuing relevance of the subject, this report on a program at Trinity University to make the backlog accessible through the public catalog may be of interest.

Background

In the *Memoranda on Library Cooperation*, published by the Library of Congress in 1941, Herbert A. Keller listed accumulated arrearages of uncataloged books and pamphlets as a problem. He noted that, according to one calculation, 20% of the holdings of research institutions were uncataloged.¹ A 1951 meeting of the ALA Division of Cataloging and Classification discussed cataloging arrearages at UCLA, Yale, the University of Pennsylvania, Brooklyn Public, Columbia, and the Library of Congress.² Lucile M. Morsch from the Library of Congress observed: “We must find some way to live within our means, in other words, to catalog each year all the current acquisitions, or otherwise organize them for service in such a way that the materials will never be considered a cataloging arrearage.”³ At the same program, Maurice

Tauber summarized the solutions to arrearage problems and discussed “the growing concern of librarians generally with the need to adapt, tailor, and modify traditional methods of organizing materials when these methods are too complex to permit the reasonably prompt assimilation of materials acquired into their collections.”⁴

In 1968 George Piternick sent a questionnaire on cataloging arrearages to a sample of Association of Research Libraries members, and in 1985 Grace Agnew, Christina Landram, and Jane Richards administered another questionnaire. Piternick concluded in his 1968 study that “some type of permanent cataloging below ‘LC standard’ for monographs had little appeal for the great majority of libraries now operating with arrearages.”⁵ By 1985 Agnew, Landram, and Richards found widespread concerns about arrearages.⁶ They identified two major strategies for coping with them: placing the backlog in a public area while providing mini-

the Library of Congress,” *Journal of Cataloging and Classification* 7 (Fall 1951):103.

⁴Maurice F. Tauber, “Summary of Solutions to Arrearage Problem,” *Journal of Cataloging and Classification* 7 (Fall 1951):107.

⁵George Piternick, “University Library Arrearages,” *Library Resources & Technical Services* 13 (Winter 1969):104.

⁶Grace Agnew, Christina Landram, and Jane Richards, “Monograph Arrearages in Research Libraries,” *Library Resources & Technical Services* 29 (October/December 1985):352–53.

¹Herbert A. Keller, *Memoranda on Library Cooperation* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1941), 21.

²*Journal of Cataloging and Classification* 7 (Fall 1951):89–109.

³Lucile M. Morsch, “Cataloging Arrearages in

mal cataloging and allowing the items to circulate; or keeping the arrearage in storage and providing full cataloging for materials as time and funding allow.

Over the years various solutions have been developed by libraries trying to deal with arrearages or backlogs. For smaller libraries, temporary backlogs often develop while librarians wait for Library of Congress cataloging or when there are temporary increases in acquisitions. Nelsie Rothschild of Guilford College wrote in 1977 about a method for processing the backlog by temporarily cataloging all books which arrive before the Library of Congress card sets.⁷ In 1984 Ellen Neville and Antonia Snee found that monographs do lose their usefulness with age and suggested that "to expedite the availability of materials to patrons in the face of backlogs, staff shortages, and economic constraints, less than full level cataloging should be given serious consideration."⁸ In 1986 Donald Share of Rice University discussed management of backlogs and how a "reorganization effectively eliminated our cataloging backlog, since there was more time for experienced catalogers to work on member-copy or original cataloging."⁹

Many libraries today have resigned themselves to some kind of backlog. In seeking to make the materials in the backlog available to library users, some have looked for methods that do not take a great deal of time. Most recently, the use of minimal level cataloging has been discussed as a means to provide access to backlogs. Karen Horny outlines the issues and reactions to this method in a 1986 article.¹⁰

The situation at Trinity

Trinity University's library has been involved in an intensive collection development effort since 1980 when substantial sums of money for retrospective purchases were received. Prior to the infusion of funds for retrospective purchasing, the library was staffed to acquire and catalog some 10,000 to 12,000 book and bound periodical volumes per year. With the new emphasis on retrospective purchases, the University increased staffing in both acquisitions and cataloging to enable the library to acquire and catalog 40,000 book and

bound periodical volumes per year. The initial emphasis was on acquisitions and it was expected that a cataloging backlog would develop. The increase in staffing in cataloging was to come later, and with the time necessary for training cataloging staff, the acquisitions rate exceeded the library's ability to catalog. In anticipation of the backlog, a portion of the stack area in the library was closed off to house materials.

The initial solution to handling the backlog was simply to organize the materials in the storage rooms. Shelves were designated for materials in various languages, for collections, and for regular purchases. Maps were then prepared showing what was housed on what section of shelving. These maps were periodically updated as materials were moved, cataloged, or withdrawn. However, this arrangement did not permit the finding of an individual title, and as the backlog grew, it became impossible to find a title in it. In an attempt to provide some access, the Cataloging Department and the Acquisitions Department developed a system of numbering the titles, marking that number on the "on-order" slip, and refileing it in the title section of the on-order file in acquisitions. In the storage rooms the books were arranged in numerical order with a flag in each book to indicate its number. This permitted at least one point of access to the title. As the acquisitions rate continued, the system of numbering and refileing titles in the on-order file in acquisitions became more time-consuming.

As a way to improve access to the backlog, the assistant director for technical services and the director determined that the campus computer could be utilized to provide access to these titles by simply adding the bibliographic records for the titles in the backlog to the locally produced COM (Computer Output on Microform) catalog. Trinity University Library has long had a machine-readable database of all its cataloged titles. The library actually maintains three separate bibliographic databases at the campus computer center. One database contains all the cataloged titles within the library; a second database contains all the United States government documents cataloged since 1976; and the third database, an OCLC processing database, contains all the titles searched and found on OCLC, but not yet cataloged. The bibliographic records for the titles in the backlog remain in the OCLC processing database until they are cataloged. Because these titles were not cataloged they had never been included in the COM catalog. After discussion with the catalogers and reference librarians, it was decided that even though these titles were not fully cataloged, the OCLC records would provide more access than the slips in the on-order file and would require less staff time.

The following procedures have been developed to implement this expanded access to backlogged materials in storage rooms. The books, once searched on OCLC, are placed on the shelves in the backlog, first by language and then by OCLC tape

⁷Nelsie P. Rothschild, "Arrearages: How One Library Eliminated the Problem," *Southeastern Librarian* 7 (Winter 1977):235-37.

⁸Ellen P. Neville and Antonia M. Snee, "Aging of Uncataloged Monographs," in *Academic Libraries: Myths and Realities*, Proceedings of the Third National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1984), 275.

⁹Donald Share, "Management of Backlogs," *Library Journal* 111 (September 1, 1986):161.

¹⁰Karen L. Horny, "Minimal-Level Cataloging: A Look at the Issues—A Symposium," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 11 (January 1986): 332-42.

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number. Within the tape number, the books are placed in accession number order. When the OCLC tape is received, the uncataloged titles are added to the OCLC processing database. When the COM catalog is now produced, records from the OCLC processing database, the cataloged database and the U.S. documents database are merged, sorted and used to produce the COM catalog. Once a title has been cataloged, the bibliographic record is automatically removed from the processing database and added to the cataloged database. The changes in the computer center were minimal to add this database to the COM catalog.

“Ask at reference”

The COM catalog in the Trinity University Library is formatted with brief entries in either a single-line entry or a two-line entry. For example, in the author catalog authors' names are followed by an alphabetical list of their works. Full bibliographic information is not available in most of the catalogs, although microfiche copies of the catalog with full bibliographic records are available if needed. Since the accession number is the local computer control number for the titles, it was not thought desirable to print this number in the catalog since the processing file would be merged into the regular catalog at the time of COM catalog production. After some discussion, it was decided to use the phrase “ask at reference” in lieu of a call number or accession number for these uncataloged entries. Thus, access is provided for locating known items that are in the cataloging backlog. “Ask at reference” items are not given subject access, only author and title, in the public catalog.

But, how does a patron physically locate a title when she or he finds an “ask at reference” call number in the catalog? Ideally, the patron goes to the Reference Department and asks the librarian for help in finding a title that says “ask at reference.” The reference librarian then fills out a form. The patron supplies the author and title of the book, is told that it will be available at the circulation desk within 48 hours, and is asked to check back at the circulation desk for the title.

The form is then sent to the OCLC supervisor, who actually retrieves the title from the backlog and sends the book with a printed copy of the OCLC record to either a copy cataloger or the cataloger who does rush cataloging. The OCLC supervisor notes the amount of time spent in looking for a title, and the cataloger or copy cataloger notes the call number on the form and sends the book through processing to circulation with a copy of the “ask at reference” form. The average search time is 23 minutes for cataloging staff to find and retrieve the title in the backlog.

Trinity has been utilizing this system for fifteen months and there have been 103 requests for titles from a backlog that started at an estimated 25,000 titles and is estimated currently at 8,000 titles. The

titles are requested by both faculty and students, with a slight majority requested by students. Most of the titles are in English, with a range of imprint dates. These statistics do not support the 1984 study by Ellen Neville and Antonio Snee that materials lose their usefulness with age.¹¹

At times patrons finding “ask at reference” in the call number field in the catalog assumed that the title was a very important one that was literally being held at the reference desk and were disappointed when told otherwise. To respond to this misperception, other phrases were considered for the catalog, but a short data field limited choices. Some patrons were unwilling to wait 48 hours to obtain a title and were assisted by reference librarians in finding other materials to meet their needs. We also do not know how many patrons did not go to the reference desk to ask for help when finding “ask at reference” in the call number field and left the library without locating the item they were seeking. Overall, patrons seemed quite pleased that uncataloged materials could be made available relatively quickly for their use.

Conclusion

In summary, “ask at reference” provides access to a large portion of the cataloging backlog. However, the materials received after OCLC searching and updating of titles to the processing file are not available, nor are the titles that are not found on OCLC and need original cataloging. There has been discussion about the use of minimal level cataloging for materials requiring original cataloging as well as discussion about placing the backlogged books in an open stack area to be available for browsing. The materials that are generally not accessible through OCLC tend to be non-English-language items and esoteric English-language materials. We are now reviewing the data and considering making these uncataloged materials available for browsing in a public area.

This simple approach to providing access to a backlog could be used by any library that has its acquisitions or cataloging backlog in machine-readable form. It has not been very time-consuming for the Cataloging Department and has not added substantially to the rush cataloging load. It supplies patrons with titles identified by author or title searches of the public catalog which have been delayed in cataloging. The procedures help patrons take advantage of the library's acquisition investment and at the same time give the library enough control to keep track of the materials temporarily backlogged. The reference staff has not found the procedures intrusive, but rather a good way to initiate discussion with patrons about research interests and problems. We offer this evidence to the growing literature which describes the utility of making backlogs available to library patrons. ■■

¹¹Neville and Snee, 273-75.