



## BENCHMARKING: PATHWAY TO KNOWLEDGE SHARING

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*ABSTRACT : This paper explores the possibilities of benchmarking technical services operations and collections in veterinary libraries. Collections are areas most often measured in surveys by numbers alone. A technical services operation involves much more than those final tallies. Benchmarking is a means of identifying best practice in those processes to improve performance. This paper focuses on the intersection between collection development and acquisitions. Specifically, how do libraries identify, select and acquire materials (in all formats) in veterinary medicine? How well plans work for print materials in veterinary libraries? What other methods are used to identify and acquire veterinary resources? Possible measurements include: total amount of veterinary materials added, number of materials acquired through approval plans, number of materials acquired through other means, and number of staff/librarians involved in process of discovery.*

According to the Medical Library Association website: "Benchmarking is a structured improvement process you can use to determine and implement a 'better way' to do a job, a technique that provides you with a common measuring stick to evaluate process performance."<sup>1</sup> Benchmarking studies are most often undertaken to improve direct client services such as reference and interlibrary lending. These are areas in which performance (and improvement) are most visible to both clients and management. Collections are most often measured in surveys by numbers alone: number of monographic titles owned/added/withdrawn, number of current subscriptions, total number of volumes, etc. A technical services operation involves much more than those final tallies. There are a myriad of processes in a single library's technical services department, and despite similarities of operations, processes differ from library to library. Benchmarking is a means of identifying best practice in those processes to improve performance.

One of the first steps in benchmarking technical services operations is narrowing the scope of the initial benchmarking project. Most sources advise potential bench markers to select a process using the following criteria:

- Is it important to stake-holders?
- Does it face external competition?
- Does it emphasize the librarian's skills?
- Can it be improved?<sup>2</sup>

Bindery processes, while important to preservation of printed material, are less obvious to stake-holders, are already out-sourced to commercial binders, and do not need a librarian's skills. Cataloging processes are somewhat site-specific, since they are tied to the automated library system used by a library, but meet some of the above criteria. Cataloging makes the information in a collection accessible to users, and although often outsourced in large libraries, access can be enhanced by using a librarian's skill in additional

subject analysis. Collection development is an area that meets all of the criteria. The purchase of library materials is very important to stake-holders, and to decide what to purchase requires knowledge of users' interests. Most libraries use approval plans from commercial vendors (the external competition), but can these vendors find and offer everything in such a specialized area as animal health? We believe that a vendor does not offer everything and that the librarian's skills can help discover resources.

This paper proposes a benchmarking study to look at the intersection between collection development and acquisitions in veterinary libraries. Specifically, how do libraries identify, select and acquire materials -in all formats- in veterinary medicine? Do approval plans work for print materials in veterinary libraries? What other methods are used to identify and acquire veterinary resources? Possible measurements include: total amount of animal-related resources added, number of titles acquired through approval plans, number of resources acquired through other means, and number of staff/librarians involved in the process of discovery.

Why propose this benchmarking study? One reason is that we found what we believe to be a gap in our performance, and we are looking for a means of improvement. This was graphically illustrated to us in the last year. The General Libraries at Texas A&M University suggested that we join with them in using their approval vendor (Blackwell). In the past we primarily used Majors Scientific Books for approvals, but knowing they covered only the major publishers in veterinary medicine, we also had a Blackwell approval plan for printed form notification (forms) only. We agreed to the proposal, but asked Blackwell to cancel our old profile, since we suspected it was too narrow. We put together a new profile with three divisions. The first division was the strictly veterinary medicine-one for which we would receive books directly. The second division was the animal-related-one for which we would

receive forms. We chose forms for this division because some of the animal-related materials were in larger subject areas and could not be narrowed. The third division was for medicine and biomedical research and was also limited to forms. After turning in the new approval plan profile, we asked that Blackwell run a report of all titles they had offered in the last five years that matched the first two divisions. There were 755 titles in that report. A staff member searched that list against the catalog and discovered 241 titles that were not owned. We then examined those 241 titles, removed those that were outside the scope of our collection development policy, and found a total of 129 titles we would have purchased, if we had known about them. As you can imagine, this gave us quite a shock. A closer examination of the 129 lessened the shock; only seven were purely animal husbandry or veterinary medicine. The majority of the remaining titles could be described generally as animal welfare and zoology.

This brief project illustrated three main points for us. One point was that our old Blackwell profile was not well matched to our collection development policy. The second point was the demonstration of the broad range of publishers Blackwell handled. The third was the discovery that the Blackwell file only included eleven titles that were conference proceedings or workshops, even though the file covered a period of five years. We know there were more than eleven conferences and workshops over that time period; Blackwell's coverage must not be as broad as we hoped. Conference proceedings are often difficult to track and purchase. We have been able to set up some as standing orders with a vendor, but this is not completely satisfactory. A standing order set up with an association for its conference proceedings and workshops may not be valid when the association moves from one host institution to another. We recently had some examples of the failure of standing orders. The World Congress of Buiatrics ([Gr. *bous* ox, cow + *-iaticos* surgery, medicine] the treatment of diseases of cattle.)<sup>3</sup> has been held twice since we received the proceedings of the 21<sup>st</sup> in 2001, and the standing order with Blackwell has yielded nothing. Another recent example of standing order failure was a directory: the Conservation Directory published by the National Wildlife Federation. In January we received an invoice for the 2005 50<sup>th</sup> edition, and found that we had missed the 47<sup>th</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup> editions. The staff member who received the 49<sup>th</sup> edition should have inquired about the missing issues at that time, but did not. The vendor in this example was Majors, and after investigation they reported that these editions were no longer available from the publisher. These examples and others demonstrated that approval plans, although successful for most resources, cannot provide all the resources available in this subject area. Some library must have a better process to track this type of resource. It is my hope that a benchmarking project for

collection development would identify that better process.

Another reason for proposing a benchmarking project in veterinary collection development can be found in the introduction to the 2000/2001 Survey of Veterinary Medical Libraries in the United States and Canada. Only twenty-three out of the thirty-one libraries participated in the survey "due to retirements and some other unmitigated circumstances."<sup>4</sup> The 1996/1997 survey was the last with responses from all thirty-one. When veterinary librarians retire, their knowledge and experience accompany them, and their successors are left to learn as they go. Librarians are, by profession, people who want to help others find information, and veterinary/animal health librarians are a small, closely allied subset. Geographically distant, we can connect with our colleagues through the listserv, vetlib-l. But a listserv, however helpful in filling the unfillable article requests and publicizing locally published items, cannot fill the need for a process to identify resources for acquisition. A benchmarking study that worked to identify successful processes and perhaps organize a community of practice for collection development would help bridge the growing void left by retirements.

I hope that there are other veterinary librarians who feel that such a benchmarking study would be beneficial. If you think that you have a good process for identifying animal-related resources and are willing to share your knowledge, please let me know. If you are dissatisfied with your current processes, and want to join in an effort to identify a 'best practice' process, again, please get in touch with me. I believe that building a community of practice for collection development would be advantageous to all of us.

#### References

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