

Full Length Research Paper

Handling Issues of Backlog: The Covenant University Library experience

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The study examined issues of backlogs and how Covenant University Library known as Centre for Learning Resources (CLR) responded to the challenge. Relevant literature was perused for causes of backlogs and how other libraries tackled the situation when they were confronted. CLR was quick to address the issue of backlog through the employment of more Librarians; acquisition of web-based Library Management Software; all Librarians were made to be involved in cataloguing with close supervision by the Technical Services Librarian and record of individual's work generated weekly. Further ways of handling backlogs were also suggested.

Key words: Backlog, information, catalogue/ Cataloguing, Library

INTRODUCTION

The hallmark of any academic library is the timely provision of information to their users. It is very essential that the public catalogue either manual or automated be modified daily to enable users get information they require with minimal stress. Cataloguing is a significant part of the technical services provided by a library. Catalogue records enable patrons to find the information they need quickly and efficiently. The need to catalogue and process backlogs in libraries is therefore so crucial. Backlogs are an accumulation of jobs not done or materials not processed that are yet to be dealt with. Reitz (2010) defined backlog as 'an accumulation of work that remains to be done, often the cause of delays and bottlenecks in workflow.'

Howarth et al. (2010) cited George Gordon who defined backlog as library materials which include books and non-books which have not been treated by the Technical

Services, and this treatment include cataloguing and classification, machine data inputting and other preparation which other materials acquired by the Library are prepared or transformed (that implies the process of adding value to a product) for the use of library patrons.

Charles and Jay (2002) specifically defined backlog as any item held more than 30 days after being purchased in the Technical Services before being processed.

Backlog can also be referred to as materials acquired waiting the processing of cataloguing and classification.

Rogers (1991) identifies two types of backlogs. These she referred to as Normal and Historic. According to her, "Normal" backlogs routinely develop whenever the volume of incoming materials is high and sometimes are used to stabilize the cataloguing workflow when the volume is low. They also might be created purposefully by libraries preferring to wait for cataloging copy or

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authority records to become available from the bibliographic networks. Whereas the "Historic" backlogs found in many libraries often consist of thousands of volumes that have been awaiting cataloging for years.

Covenant University was established in the year 2002. The University is a growing and dynamic institution committed to pioneering excellence at the cutting edge of learning. Hence the Library started operations at the take-off of the University.

The Library in Covenant University is known as "Centre for Learning Resources" (CLR). All routine activities at CLR are fully automated. The Library started its operations with in-house built software using Microsoft Access. When the collections exceeded 10,000 volumes, the software could no longer accommodate it; therefore, by 2004 CLR migrated to the use of Alice Software for library operations. In a bid to enhance the services of CLR and meet up with the demands of a world class University, in 2011 CLR migrated from the use of Alice Software to Millennium ILS, which is web-based. Hence the CLR catalogue can be viewed from anywhere in the world with access to the Internet. The migration from one software to another (among other reasons) led to the accumulation of backlogs in CLR. This study, therefore, seeks to discuss causes of backlogs and how Covenant University Library was able to tackle the challenge.

Causes of Backlogs

Backlogs are created when increase in Library materials resources expenditures outpace increases in the size of cataloguing and processing staff. The imbalance between acquisition growth and lack of growth in cataloguing staff can have negative impact on staff morale and this eventually will affect the cataloguing unit from handling backlogs.

Rogers (1991) stated that backlogs develop when more materials are acquired than can be processed. There are various reasons why this imbalance occurs. While citing White and Roos (1989), she listed materials budgets, staffing levels in cataloging departments, special projects such as retrospective conversion, collection-development policies, and cataloging priorities of a library as factors that could contribute to the growth of backlogs. The quality of record used for copy cataloging could also influence the increase in backlogs. In some cases, the cataloguer would have to edit the record to delete the unwanted fields and add the required ones which might have been omitted, this could take time.

The causes of backlogs can further be traced to the following

1. Technology
2. Human Resources

3. Staff skills

4. Assigning priority – Cataloguing verses other Library task

Technology: Technology with its several advantages also has its pitfalls. Howarth et al. (2010) stressed that in a survey carried out in some Libraries, it was discovered that automation contributed to backlogs, this is because more framing and skills are required of staff to create Machine-Readable Records that conform to National and International standards. An example of this is the Millennium ILS that requires Machine-Readable Records for data to be uploaded to it.

Human Resources: Backlogs in Libraries are usually attributed to imbalance between materials budgets and the budgets for human resources. Research has shown that administration of some University Libraries may raise the budgets for materials acquiring and human resource budgets may not be affected. Reitz (2010) affirmed that cataloging backlog may result when staffing is insufficient to meet the demands of acquisitions.

Ibrahim Abdul-Kadiri and Kofi Christian (2012) observed that one thing is common in Ghanaian University Libraries; all the Libraries have not been able to have the number of professionals and para-professionals to handle library operations and this has affected the performance of cataloguers as they are given other responsibilities apart from cataloguing thereby leading to backlogs.

Staff Skills: The skills and expertise of cataloguing staff is as important as the imbalance between increase in acquisition budgets and the size of cataloguing staff. There is a significant relationship between increase in cataloguing backlogs and lack of professional trained cataloguers, this variable can be traced to why there are backlogs in most academic libraries as they cannot hire and retain highly skilled cataloguers. In other words, there is inadequate wage structure to attract trained professional cataloguers. In the same vein, materials that are non-English Language require cataloguing staff with knowledge of the language of the work. Charlene (2007) noted that the main reason for the delay in cataloguing of materials in German-Language is that none of the professional cataloguers (Librarians) in the University of Colorado Library had sufficient knowledge of the language to provide adequate subject analysis of the materials.

Assigning priority – Cataloguing versus other Library tasks:

Backlogs are left as backlogs because in some cases they lack the same urgency as other Library tasks.

To buttress this point, Howarth et al. (2010) cited Black

and Granskog (1997) who noted that cataloguers in charge of these processing at Michigan State University Library were reassigned other duties during the reorganization of the Library. This led to the suspension of cataloguing which resulted to an increase in the backlogs of these.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIES

Backlogs usually take up valuable storage space that possibly could be put to better use. Many of the materials become obsolete and it might no longer be worthwhile adding them to the library's collections. Some volumes are unusable due to physical deterioration. Rogers (1991) noted that while "historic" backlogs can stabilize the cataloging workflow in times of severe financial exigency when materials budgets are drastically reduced, they are not desirable. They are evidence of a prolonged imbalance in the scheme of technical processing that should be addressed by library administrators.

THE COVENANT UNIVERSITY LIBRARY EXPERIENCE

The Library in Covenant University, also known as "Centre for Learning Resources" (CLR) has as part of its acquisition policies the purchase of 10,000 volumes per annum. This is planned for by the Covenant University Management along with other University budgets. The acquisition of 10,000 volumes per annum has ensured a steady growth in the Library's collection hence; cataloging is a continuous process at the CLR. The Cataloging Section enjoys the supervision of the Technical Services Librarian, while 7 Librarians engage in classification, 7 in cataloging of library books, 3 in the processing of serial materials while 1 person is responsible for theses and dissertations. The migration of data from one Integrated Library System (ILS) to the other over the years resulted in the accumulation of backlogs. In 2011, While Covenant University students were on long vacation break, a workforce, which consisted of all the librarians and para-professionals working in the various sections of the library was set up. These included those handling classification, cataloging, serials, reference, circulation and other units of the library. They were made to clear the backlog that was inexistence. This was achieved within 3 months.

STEPS TAKEN AT CLR TO ADDRESS BACKLOGS

In the bid to address the issue of backlogs in CLR, certain strategies were deployed. These strategies are discussed below.

The continuous acquisition of books as against the

number of professional librarians available to catalogue them was a major cause for the growth of the backlogs. The CLR Management therefore deemed it fit for the employment of more staff and this was made possible with the support of the Management of Covenant University.

A state of emergency was declared on the backlogs. Massive stamping and fixing of date due slips were done by the para-professionals while classification and cataloging were done by trained librarians.

All the librarians and para-professionals working in the various sections of the library were co-opted into the workforce that addressed the backlogs. These included those handling classification, cataloging, serials, reference, circulation and other units of the library. An intensive training that lasted two weeks was organized for them as well as the new staff that just came on board. This was to serve as refresher course on their previous knowledge of cataloguing/ classification and to get all the staff acquainted with the use of the new software, Millennium ILS.

Hitherto, CLR made use of an Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) which was accessible only within the premises of the university and not linked to another catalogue. In an attempt to speed up the cataloguing process, the need for a web based catalogue became expedient. Hence, the subscription to the Innovative Millennium ILS. Millennium is web-based and affords the users the opportunity for importation of data from other catalogues such as Library of Congress. Where the data is not available for importation, copy cataloguing was encouraged with the use of Library of Congress Online Catalog and COPAC with minimal editing.

When new edition of materials with existing records were acquired, they were separated for immediate attention. The record was replicated and necessary fields were edited to suit the new edition thereby making the bibliographic details available in the catalogue.

Targets were set for cataloguers with a periodic publication of expected turnout per person in a week, the record of work by cataloguers were collated and circulated.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR HANDLING BACKLOGS

A state of emergency should be declared on the backlogs. Massive stamping, fixing of date due slips, cataloging and classification of backlogs by outsourcing or redeploying librarians from other units of the library would ensure a rapid reduction of backlogs.

The Library should look at the possibility of organizing over time work for Library staff to handle the backlog issue with remuneration for them.

Targets for cataloguers: there should be a periodic publication of expected turnout per person in a week or month, the record of work by cataloguers should be

collated and circulated among colleagues. This will create motivation to work extra, as no one would want to be considered lazy or nonchalant by colleagues or superiors. When new edition of materials with existing records are acquired, the Library Officers who have knowledge of Library Science (may be a diploma in Librarianship - DLS) could be trained to handle the process of duplicating the record and just updating necessary fields such as edition and year of publication.

There should be refresher training session, in this case the best and faster ways of cataloguing should be discussed. Cataloguers should also to be sponsored by their organizations to attend International trainings on current trends in cataloguing.

Two university libraries could collaborate to tackle the issue of backlogs in their libraries by creating a joint taskforce of personnel from both libraries. Flanders (1991) revealed in his study that increase in chronic backlog in federal documents compelled Library Corporation and the International Archives Institute (InterArc) to join forces to tackle the problem because it had reached crisis proportions for federal depositories and other libraries that receive and need to provide access to significant collections of U.S. government documents.

During the 2005 fiscal year, a cataloging backlog reduction project was completed within Harvard College Library Technical Services. Materials eligible for the project had been awaiting cataloging for one year or more. Nearly 100,000 titles were processed by both permanent staff and temporary staff hired for the project (Cline 2006).

Rogers (1991) opines that backlog can be handled through special projects, integrating backlogged materials with the regular workflow, accepting more cataloging copy with less editing, providing temporary or abbreviated cataloging, expanding the role of paraprofessional staff, and improving the efficiency of workflows and procedures. According to her, these strategies are based on the assumption that everything in the backlog should be cataloged. She reaffirmed that uncataloged materials at OSUL are assigned control numbers and are included in the Libraries' online catalog, the Library Control System (LCS). While library patrons generally do not have physical access to these materials, author and title access is provided by LCS. Rush cataloging is done in response to any patron's request for an unprocessed item.

CONCLUSION

Backlog is not ideal for libraries because it hinders access to the relevant literature by library patrons. It is better to prevent backlogs but with the rapid production of

information resources, it becomes inevitable. It is therefore of uttermost essence that when backlogs begin to accumulate, that a 'state-of-emergency' be declared to ensure a rapid processing of the materials and make them available and accessible to library patrons.

Conflict of Interests

The author(s) have not declared any conflict of interests.

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