I n the not too distant past the Library at So-
noma State University had a three to four
month backlog for adding new materials and
an even longer backlog for processing gifts.
The technical services department worked
hard to bring that backlog down from three to
four months to a couple of weeks at the most.
How have we done it? We looked at all our
processes: acquisitions, cataloging, processing,
 invoicing, paying, and claiming to see where
we can work smarter instead of harder.
We didn’t make all the changes at once, but by fol-
lowing the principal of handling the materials
as few times as possible and training staff to
accomplish a variety of functions at one time,
we made changes that work for us.

SSU is primarily a liberal arts campus with
a student population that has averaged around
7,200 FTE the last few years. Fiscal year 2010/2011
our materials budget was $650,000 with approxi-
mately $78,000 spent on firm or-
ders (monographs and media items). Around
two thirds of our firm orders are obtained
from vendors who provide us with shelf ready
processing.

We currently use YBP’s standard package
of shelf-ready services and get our bibli-
ographic records from OCLC via the WorldCat
Cataloging Partners Program. When new
books arrive at the library, they are now fully
processed with spine labels, tattle-tape, bar-
codes, property stamps and date due slips. A
staff member “receives” the items with a quick
physical inspection and comparison with the
vendor invoice to ensure we are getting what
we ordered.

The next step in the process is to download
the electronic invoice. Electronic invoicing
is an easy way to process invoices with large
amounts of information without having to
type all of the information in. To do this,
our provider used the essential support to help us set up electronic
invoicing and once set up the only real main-
tenance has been to add additional vendors.
This process also brings in full cataloging
records for each item (overlaying the brief bibliographic record that was created for or-
dering purposes) and updates the order record
with the received date, payment information
and order status (from “on order” to “paid”).
An item record is created with the barcode,
location, and correct item type. Lastly, the
downloaded invoice is put into a pay file for
posting. This magic happens through a load
table, which contains all the mapping needed
to deliver information from 9xx fields in the
bibliographic record to the appropriate fields
in the order and item records. This process also
automatically creates an item record with the

Biz of Acq — Where’s the Backlog?

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shelf ready DVDs from Midwest Tape and 78
DVs from other vendors. Media shelf-ready
services are quite slick, and the vendor worked
with us to embed the library’s name across the
cover of every DVD we purchase. We set up
material profiles which spell out what types
of containers to use with different materials,
what to do with multiple discs, how to handle
supplemental materials, and other processing
details. We also set up two different accounts,
one for our popular DVD subscription and
one for media that supports our curriculum.
Our media collection is shelved by accession
number so we supply Midwest Tape with spine
labels to affix to the media containers, as well as
barcodes and other customized labels.

All the vendors we have used for processing
services (YBP, Midwest Tape, The Book-
House, Eastern Book Company) are willing
to work directly with libraries. Bibliographic
records can be obtained from OCLC at no
additional cost if your library has a cataloging
subscription, but quality records can often be
purchased directly from vendors at competitive
prices. If you need items processed differently
for different parts of your collection you can set
up multiple accounts with different processing
profiles. The trickiest part of the process is to
make sure we order materials on the correct
account, but keeping account profiles as simple
as possible and not making the process too
complicated seems to be the key.

It is important to work with the vendor to
decide where processing costs will be itemized
on invoices. We have the processing costs
included at the individual line item level for
each item we purchase. Other options are pos-
sible, including getting a separate invoice for
processing costs, or having all processing costs
associated with titles on an invoice billed as a
separate line item. You have to figure out what
works best for your accounting and spending
practices. Philosophically you have to decide
if these costs should be considered part of the
purchase of the item or whether processing
charges should be paid out of overhead and
expenses.

Another helpful streamlining tool has
been to document all processes and make the
documentation available to everyone in the
department. We used MediaWiki (open source
software) to set up the wiki and since we did
not customize the product, the set up time was
less than an hour. The wiki is only accessible
from the Sonoma State server so there is no
public access and it requires minimal technical
support. The wiki is used by all technical
services staff to document procedures, record
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short cuts and tips, and to keep track of changes in procedures. The entire staff adds information to the wiki and at department meetings any documentation that has been recently added or changed is discussed. This is a great way to make sure everyone is keeping up with the numerous procedures as they change and evolve.

The best part about streamlining our workflow is staff were able to take on new tasks and assignments that keep their skills sharp and reduce much of the repetition that filled their days. Technical services staff now assist in many parts of the library, from Reference to Circulation to digital projects and media. The department is also able to put more energy into data cleanup and data maintenance: cleanup of inventory reports, searching for missing items, correction of incorrect item types, etc. With a clean catalog there is less frustration for patrons and public services staff that are looking for available materials.

By working smarter instead of harder we have been able to considerably cut down on the backlog of materials in the technical services department. Our small remaining backlog consists of materials that need original cataloging and gifts. We can easily make changes to our load tables as well as our cataloging and processing profiles with vendors to accommodate any new types of materials or processes. We have to pay for these vendor services, but the overall savings in staff time makes the additional charges well worth the cost. We have been able to get materials in the hands of patrons quicker and have reduced repetitive tasks. Staff have developed new skill sets, have a tool to assist them in sharing knowledge, and have more time to take on new challenges throughout the library.