

James Parrigin and Christopher Woodall

Sending our faculty to MaRS

The Materials Request System

The Salisbury University (SU) Libraries developed a hosted library materials ordering system in 2018 and has begun to survey discipline faculty users to determine enhancements that they recommend and are possible to enact.

Now, before we go any further, we would like to point out that I, James Parrigin, am not in a collection management or library technology unit. I am SU Libraries' coordinator of library instruction. At our mid-size, public, regional comprehensive university of approximately eight thousand FTE and more than four hundred full-time faculty, eight faculty librarians liaise with forty academic schools and programs. I am the subject librarian to the communication, English, and modern languages departments. Like my librarian colleagues, I provide several kinds of support including information literacy instruction one-shots, personal research consultations for students and faculty, research guide creation, course-embedded research support in the Canvas learning management system, and associated development of learning objects ranging from handouts to learning tutorials.

Our libraries use a decentralized approach to collection development. For context, many larger libraries have adopted centralized approaches in the form of purchase plans or otherwise preselected packages of materials (sometimes on a massive scale), which guide the bulk of collection selection rather than relying on individual liaisons to build and mediate collections first-hand.

Often without subject expertise in their assigned areas, the subject librarians collaborate with faculty in academic departments to select library materials for acquisition. In doing so, some librarians began to identify recurring (and seemingly unending) gaps in communication with our disciplinary faculty colleagues from item identification through cataloging and addition to our collection. Most often, these gaps emerged from our own modes of communication: email, phone conversations, meetings, and otherwise spur-of-the-moment interactions that are nearly impossible to track. Within these exchanges, liaison librarians encounter high volumes of questions such as:

*Hey! I forget. Did I ever order X? When did I order X?
When will X arrive?*

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What has my department ordered during the months of March and May? When did my colleague order those films?

How much money is left in our book budget?

Can I order X and have it placed on course reserve?

The department chair needs to prioritize remaining book funds. Can we get a list of everything we've ordered since September?

Remember that conversation we had in the hall about that musical score three months ago? Is it in?

To help this process, our technology librarian (co-author Chris Woodall), the liaison librarians, and circulation and collections management staff developed, tested, and implemented the Materials Request System, or MaRS.

The web-hosted MaRS platform allows departments and their faculty to view and plan requests around budgetary information, submit requests for materials that faculty will use for teaching and research, submit “rush” orders, request to place new items on course reserve, view intradepartmental requests, and more. Librarians and discipline faculty benefit from having a centralized list that accurately documents time-stamped departmental activity, increases transparency of a historically mystified process (for faculty), and ultimately streamlines what has been, until now, a neglected and critical part of the selection process.

Pre-launch diagnostic

Parrigin approached Woodall about the idea to develop a system for tracking faculty purchase requests and departmental budgets in 2017. After a series of meetings to outline the system's requirements, development began in February 2018. Initial development was completed by May 2018, and testing began with a small pool of liaisons. The full roll-out to all liaisons occurred in August 2018.

MaRS is web-based, hosted on a remote Linux VPS (virtual private server) maintained by a third-party provider. It runs Apache web server software and hosts several web applications used by the libraries—both open-source software and custom applications developed by the SU Libraries.

The system was developed primarily using the PHP programming language for its server-side code, as well as HTML, CSS, and JavaScript for client-side code. The data itself (such as faculty and liaison accounts, department budget information, and the requests themselves) is housed in a MariaDB database on the same server.

These technologies are either free or very low-cost, making the system inexpensive to develop and maintain (assuming you have the in-house programming expertise). In addition, it is not dependent on any third-party provider or closed-source software other than our VPS provider, which means the entire application could be moved to a different server or system with minimal effort, and we maintain control over all data in the system.

Request data is entered into the application manually by either the liaisons or the faculty themselves. Entering budget information was tricky because we wanted it to be as up-to-date as possible. The acquisitions specialist exports a CSV file from Aleph on a weekly basis that contains the current budget data and imports it into MaRS. This is made possible by a custom import tool built directly into MaRS, which parses the CSV file exported from

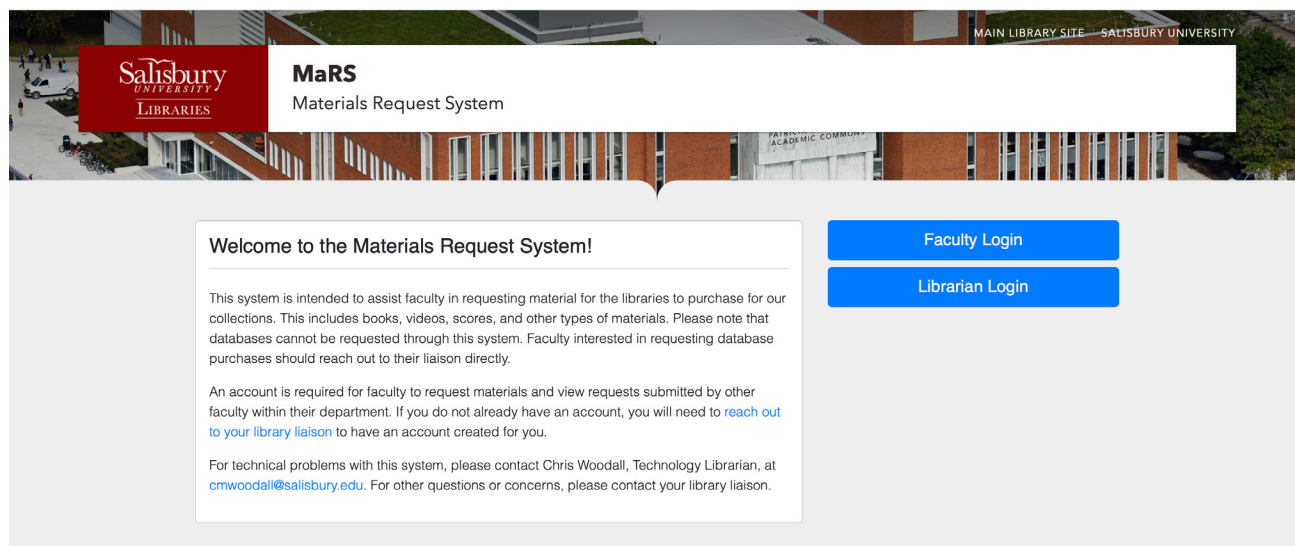
Alph to extract the current budget values. Although this means the data can be up to a week old, this is far more frequent and easily accessible than our old system, which involved the acquisitions specialist emailing an Excel file to all liaisons at irregular intervals.

Destination: MaRS

The system assists faculty in requesting material to add to SU Libraries collections. This includes books, films, music scores, software, and other materials, with the exception of standing orders. MaRS is intended to enhance communication between faculty and SU Libraries by

- helping faculty keep track of materials they have and have not yet requested;
- increasing department awareness of requested materials;
- helping department liaisons submit requests on behalf of their colleagues, if needed; and
- helping departments prioritize budget allocations through a graphical budget representation.

MaRS originated after several years of close collaboration with a department chair in the humanities in which the liaison librarian and disciplinary faculty began to explore the idea of a shared spreadsheet containing criteria needed by the library, mainly for book requests from the department. The liaison librarian discussed with the technology librarian the idea of a shared library request “dashboard” that could have the dual purpose of serving discipline faculty and librarians, which resulted in identifying a platform that would allow us to partition the service into a librarian view and a department view that is password protected.



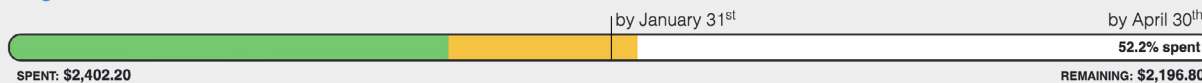
MaRS login page.

For security purposes, a faculty member must submit their institutional email address for the system to email a link that allows them to sign into the system. Once the faculty user has logged in, they have access to a graphical and numeric representation of the department budget, which is updated each month, as well as requests that have been made from within their department.

English Budget

English

updated 6/16/22



English Requests

Search Requests

+ New Request

Title/URL	Author/Director/Composer	Requested By	Dates	Status
Transgender Turn	LaFleur et al, eds.		Submitted: July 8, 2022 Last Edited: July 11, 2022	Ordered (GOBI)
Two Heads: A graphic exploration of how our brains work with other brains	Uta Frith, Chris Frith, and Alex Frith		Submitted: July 5, 2022 Last Edited: July 6, 2022	Ordered (GOBI)
Nasty, Brutish, and Short	Scott Hershovitz		Submitted: July 5, 2022 Last Edited: July 6, 2022	Ordered (GOBI)
The Ceiling Outside	Noga Arikha		Submitted: July 5, 2022 Last Edited: July 6, 2022	Ordered (GOBI)
Desperate Remedies	Andrew Skull		Submitted: July 5, 2022 Last Edited: July 6, 2022	Ordered (Non-GOBI)

English department faculty view example.

Selecting the New Request button opens the request form, which contains several fields into which the faculty member can submit information that will allow the librarian to identify the requested item. The faculty member is restricted to only their department. The user can submit as much or as little information as they want, and it is understood that the more precise the request (specific edition, for example), the more information is warranted to add to the form.

The form is flexible enough to accommodate nearly any faculty request, ranging from books, films, music, and others, although requests for streaming film or standing orders are not accepted in MaRS and are rerouted appropriately. In addition to basic information, the form allows faculty to select their format preference if an alternative to print is available, and the Date Needed By field can be used for requests that should be expedited as “rush” requests. Faculty tend to use this function when they request required readings for a course or otherwise materials that are an integral part of course content.

New Request
Cancel

Department

English ▾

Item Type

Book	Film or Video	Score	Other
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URL

Get Item Info from URL

Title

Change to Title Case

Author(s)

ISBN	Publication Year	Publisher
<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 20px;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 20px;"></div>	<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 20px;"></div>

Edition	Format			
<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px;">Any edition</div>	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; text-align: center; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="background-color: #007bff; color: white;">Physical</td> <td>Electronic</td> <td>Doesn't Matter</td> </tr> </table>	Physical	Electronic	Doesn't Matter
Physical	Electronic	Doesn't Matter		

Notification & Course Reserves *required

Place on course reserves	Notify me when received	No notification needed
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NOTE: If you select "Place on course reserves", you will be asked to enter your class details after submitting this request.

<p>Date Needed By</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px; margin-bottom: 5px;">Not needed soon</div> <p style="font-size: x-small; margin-top: 5px;">Standard requests can sometimes take several months to arrive. If you need it sooner, please provide the date you need it by above.</p> <p>Requested for</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 2px; background-color: #f0f0f0; margin-bottom: 5px;">None Selected ▾</div>	<p>Other Information/Comments</p> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; height: 80px; margin-top: 5px;"></div>
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Request Item

Faculty view of item request form.

Each liaison librarian mediates requests submitted by faculty in their assigned departments or programs. Librarian liaisons are responsible for managing faculty accounts. When a faculty member submits a request, the librarian receives an automated email notification. The librarian then reviews the request and can discuss the item further, or they can begin the process of moving the request forward from Pending status to Processing, which submits a liaison request to the library's distribution center (most typically for our library, GOBI, or Amazon).

Request Status					Status Descriptions
Pending	Processing	Ordered (GOBI)	Ordered (Non-GOBI)	Received	Cancelled

Item request status bar.

The liaison order request is received by an acquisition specialist in the library’s Collections Management unit, where the monetary transaction is authorized. Finally, once the item has been cataloged and is ready for patron use, the acquisition specialist updates the request status to Received, and MaRS sends a corresponding email to the liaison and patron (if they requested to be notified) of the item’s availability.

At any point, discipline faculty can log in to their MaRS account to check statuses of requests submitted by their department. Each request displays each work, the names of the requesting faculty members (removed in the example), date stamps, and each items’ status.

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Department faculty request status page.

Since its launch in January 2019, MaRS has been well-used by liaison librarians and discipline faculty. A reporting tool allows our technology librarian to identify and report usage. This includes the following:

- Librarian accounts: 24 (includes those no longer working at SU)
- Faculty accounts: 231 (of 435 full-time faculty)
- Requests processed: 2102
- Books: 1857
- DVDs: 201
- Musical scores: 42
- Other: 2
- Submitted by librarians: 1622 Submitted by faculty: 480

Requests by department

Department	Count	Department	Count
English	318	Chemistry	21
Leisure Books	231	Education Doctoral Program	21
Diversity	156	Honors	17
Education	120	Mathematics	17
Library	114	Exercise Science	17
Nursing	107	Economics and Finance	12
Environmental Studies	104	Curriculum Resource Center	11
Biology	99	English Language Institute	10
Conflict Resolution	87	Information Decision Sciences	10
Music	77	Interdisciplinary Studies	9
Communication	69	Philosophy	9
Art	63	Health and Human Performance	9
Theatre	63	Physics	8
Modern Languages	62	Athletic Training	8
Health Sciences	59	Physical Education	7
Geography	46	Management and Marketing	7
History	35	Community Health	6
Political Science	33	Psychology	5
Social Work	28	Accounting and Legal Studies	3
Sociology	23	Faculty Publications	1
		Total	2,102

Faculty Survey

In March 2021, approximately two years after its implementation, the MaRS co-creators distributed a survey to discipline faculty to explore their needs with the goal of enhancing system access and usability. Of the 424 full-time discipline faculty, 24 (6%) responded to the survey. Eight departments are represented in responses: English, Communication, Social Work, Health Sciences, Art, Athletic Training, Exercise Science, and Political Science. One respondent chose to not identify department affiliation.

More than half (54%) of survey respondents had never used MaRS, and 91% of these respondents were unaware it was available. The remaining 46% of respondents who report using the system regularly used the system less than once per month. When it is time for these faculty to submit requests, 40% report their preference to use MaRS, while 40% do not have a preference, and the remaining 20% prefer to submit requests directly to librarian liaisons by email. Features that faculty appreciate the most include

- the ability to submit requests to a library liaison;
- getting notifications when materials arrive;
- seeing department library funds;
- seeing requests from department colleagues; and
- being able to look up their past requests.

A future survey will focus more specifically on the usability needs of the faculty cohort who use MaRS, and their comments will be used to further enhance system accessibility and usability.

Benefits of MaRS exploration

In addition to discipline faculty use, MaRS has also unexpectedly benefitted three collections-oriented functions of SU Libraries. The libraries' Leisure Committee, comprising liaison librarians and library staff, routinized the use of MaRS to track and manage requests and budgeting during yearly acquisitions for the libraries' popular reading collection. Similarly, librarian liaisons have also used MaRS to request and track acquisitions of faculty publications in which one copy is purchased to add to general collections and a second is added to the libraries' Faculty Publications special collections archive. Finally, SU Libraries' Diversity and Inclusion Committee also uses MaRS to help organize one of the diversity budget lines that several librarian liaisons are responsible for spending each year. Members of this committee report that MaRS has benefitted their work by providing a central location from which to share selected titles, item cost, and overall diversity budget among the group. The shared list also helps diversity titles to get more notice when the group selects materials to highlight by displaying them in public spaces.

MaRS' popularity among discipline faculty has entirely relied upon liaison librarians informally promoting the system to their designated departments and programs. Neither liaison librarians nor discipline faculty are required to use MaRS; it is intended as a value-added service to users intended to facilitate a historically haphazard aspect of collections selection. ❧