



# THE FUTURE IS SELECTION PLANS

Rialto's Innovative Solution to  
Legacy Approvals

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Approval plans have been used for decades by librarians as a tool to reduce staff time in selecting newly published titles the library is likely to purchase. However, this approach has led to five critical problems that current solutions are unable to resolve.

- Unpredictable and uncontrollable spending
- Changes to plans require vendor support
- Primarily designed to acquire new titles
- Profiles require significant librarian time to maintain
- Purchases are not based on usage outcomes

The ProQuest Rialto team studied the longstanding problems and took a different approach. Applying next generation technology and innovative thinking, Rialto created Selection Plans. Selection Plans are library-configured queries, rules, and spending caps that allow libraries to prioritize the purchase of the highest-value titles available at any time.

At each purchase interval, Rialto identifies relevant content, sorts and ranks results on outcomes as determined by the library, chooses actions to take on those titles and can present for review by librarians before final actions are taken.

Rialto offers an innovative solution to legacy approvals because its Selection Plans:

- Precisely control spending
- Prioritize selections based on outcomes
- Acquire (or add to DDA) the best titles, not only the newest
- Allow library to configure its profiles
- Allow for broader profiles to meet multiple needs

## QUICK COMPARISON

	RIALTO SELECTION PLANS	LEGACY APPROVALS
<b>Eligible titles</b>	Any available titles	Only newly published titles
<b>Frequency</b>	Library-defined intervals	When a new title is added
<b>Ranking</b>	True or false + data-driven ranking of best titles	True or false + subjective quality assessment
<b>Amount purchased</b>	Best matches up to caps	All matches
<b>Managing budget</b>	Caps define exact spend	Restrict profile or pause program

## BACKGROUND

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Approval plans were originally created in the 1960s as a way for librarians to purchase print books as they were published. Vendors automatically shipped new print titles that met the criteria established by the library in a profile. Libraries then reviewed the titles to “approve” which to keep and which to reject and return.

As academic publishing grew, publishers began sending print titles to vendors to facilitate the matching process by appending metadata to newly published titles. Teams of experts reviewed the new titles to “treat” (the process of appending metadata to the title’s bibliographic record). Libraries with the help of a vendor’s collection development experts created profiles to define which titles the libraries would be interested in purchasing.

As shelf-ready services became popular, shipping became more expensive and electronic books came on the scene, vendors provided ways for librarians to review and approve titles virtually.

Approval plans found great adoption in North America, especially the United States, because the process freed librarians from the time-consuming task of reviewing and selecting titles and allowed them to focus their time on identifying titles that required expertise. Approval plans also provided faster delivery of materials (as libraries could acquire books immediately upon publication), lower operating costs, and the ability to build comprehensive and timely collections on par with other peer institutions. (Roncovic, 2017) Other regions around the world rely more on reading lists developed by faculty for their courses to guide the selection of new titles, instead of approval plans.

As reliance on approval plans increased, librarians discovered this automated workflow created challenges.

## PROBLEMS WITH APPROVAL PLANS

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### UNPREDICTABLE AND UNCONTROLLABLE SPENDING

Because current approval plan purchases are based on the release of new titles by publishers, libraries are unable to accurately predict the timing and amount of purchases. Librarians must continuously balance the challenge of over or underspending, a challenge elevated by unstable budgets during the recent economic downturn. Overspending may force the library to pause or stop an approval plan and miss out on desired titles. Underspending is also problematic as the library may lose the use of the allocated funds as they are absorbed by other departments or utilized for other purposes.

Unpredictable and uncontrollable spending of their approval plans drove librarians at University of Tennessee, Knoxville to find a solution to control costs. *“Book approval plans are intended to save the time of selectors by providing titles that meet pre-defined criteria. Unintentionally, approval plans can be a source of seemingly uncontrollable overspending.”* (Mezik & Becker, 2020) Tighter budgets forced UT Knoxville to scrutinize the effectiveness of their approval plans for monograph purchase.

To contain spending within budgeted amounts, UT Knoxville developed the best solution they could with their current tools - more tightly focused profiles to control the approval plan. *“We decided that narrowing the criteria to stay within our current allocated amount for approvals was the appropriate goal!”* (Mezik & Becker, 2020)

## DESIGNED TO ACQUIRE ONLY NEW TITLES

Approval plans were designed for libraries to automatically acquire new titles. When a new title is published, the library is only presented one time with the buy-or-not-buy question. If there is no match to the current version of the library's profile, the book is rejected, never to be presented again. If the library's approval plan is on pause or out of date, then these titles must be sought out and purchased manually by library staff at a later date.

## PURCHASES ARE NOT BASED ON OUTCOMES

*"Approval plans are all about buying books on the chance they might be used."* (Nardini, 2016). Most libraries today no longer have the mission or budget to support building collections for "just-in-case" usage. Not surprisingly, the titles purchased through approval plans show disappointingly low circulation.

For University of Tennessee at Knoxville, a four-year study found that 95% of the print titles acquired through the approval plan did not circulate. A 2012 study done by a large library in the Southeastern United States compared the library's usage of e-approval titles vs DDA titles. The study found that e-approval plan titles saw an average of 5.2 circulations per title from January-March 2012, while DDA titles saw an average of 38.7 circulations per title. (Elmore, 2013)

Over the years, however, usage has become a more prominent factor in acquisition strategies as libraries shifted focus to supporting patrons and faculty and measuring business metrics like ROI. Approval plans can only match on metadata for titles. The current profiling systems do not have access to analytics of usage or trends so cannot add that data into decision about purchase of titles.

*"How many new books - and which ones, and under what conditions - will academic libraries buy without good evidence their patrons will discover and then open them? Those are the questions faced today by everyone in the business of academic books".* (Nardini, 2016)

## CHANGES REQUIRE VENDOR MEDIATION

The profiles on which an approval plan is based reside with a vendor who maintains and makes changes at the library's request. Because of this, the library has to follow the vendor's timetable for changes and updates. A vendor may not be able to respond quickly to each library's request for changes, possibly pushing changes out by weeks and causing the library to miss new titles.

The reliance on the vendor and their timetable discourages libraries from making minor tweaks to a profile, instead choosing to save them up for a major revision.

Since 73% of UT Knoxville's budget runs through their approval plan, the vendor willingly worked alongside to make the desired changes. However, any further significant changes to the approval plan were to be pushed out for three years. *"We plan to perform a thorough review of the approval plan again in about three years unless overspending becomes an issue before then."* (Mezik & Becker, 2020)

With the changes made to their approval plan to control spending and increase usage, UT Knoxville could only wait and see if the revisions accomplished their purposes. *"... (W)e do plan to monitor spending and refresh our data over the next few years in hopes of seeing an increase in circulation due to more appropriate titles being received."* (Mezik & Becker, 2020)

## REQUIRE SIGNIFICANT TIME AND EFFORT TO MAINTAIN

While approval plans may save time in reviewing and selecting titles, they still require significant effort to monitor for effectiveness, and coordinate with the library's other purchasing models to prevent duplication. Too many complex profiles are expensive in terms of staff time to manage and increase the difficulty in predicting spend.

In 2011, the Music Collection Development Librarian at the music library of Indiana University reflected on their use of approval plans over the previous three years and found that the plans required scrutiny to ensure they are effective yet fiscally responsible.

*"While I have found that they [approval plans] do save a significant amount of time, they also require careful attention for a number of reasons...avoiding duplications between the plans and firm orders; coordinating the plans with standing orders already in place; modifying them as needed to bring them more closely in line with the interests of students and faculty; and finally monitoring the plans' budgets in relationship to other expenditures". (Cochran, 2011)*

## IT'S TIME FOR A NEW SOLUTION

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Even though there is general agreement in the library community that these plans are not an ideal solution, until now, approval plans have been a popular option for unmediated purchasing of monographs. With increased demands on library staff, managers want librarians to spend their time on tasks requiring expertise, so continuing automatic purchase of obvious titles to acquire is essential.

While libraries try to resolve their pain points by refining their approval plans, they have been stuck using old tools to solve longstanding problems.

Yet, for years, librarians have been imagining a better solution.

*"Ebook 'approval' plans should profile a larger set of the best eBooks that the library would purchase - if it could afford them all. These profiles then establish the eBooks that will be available for DDA, counting on a predictably-sized subset of them being triggered for purchase, and allowing users to select the most useful from among a set of the best possible". (Price & Savova, 2015)*

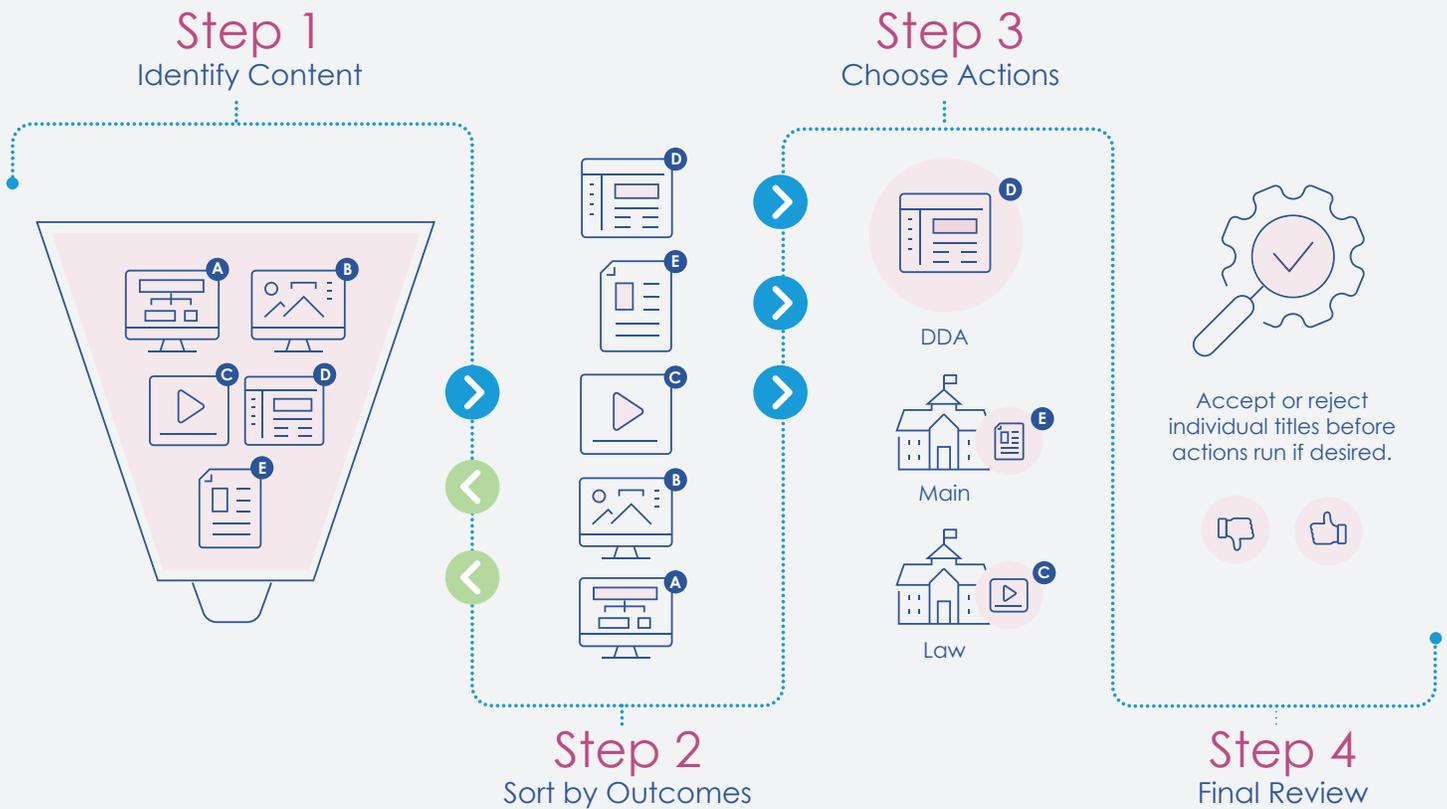
## RIALTO'S SELECTION PLANS

The ProQuest Rialto team studied the longstanding problems and took a different approach. Applying next generation technology and innovative thinking, Rialto created Selection Plans. Selection Plans are library-configured queries, rules, and spending caps that allow libraries to prioritize the purchase of the highest-value titles available at any time.

Selection Plans address the challenges of legacy approvals in managing profiles, predicting spend, and coordinating disparate profiles.

Rialto provides libraries with the support of its Customer Success Managers who have content profiling experience and familiarity with library workflows to assist with Selection Plans. Initial Selection Plan set-up is run as an implementation cycle with milestones and an agreed upon timeline to ensure new programs meet library needs and existing programs are transitioned to take advantage of enhanced options with Rialto.

## THE FLOW OF SELECTION PLANS



At each purchase interval (defined by the library), Rialto:

1. Identifies relevant content by searching the whole catalog based on a query configured and controlled by the library. This query searches all titles, including but not limited to newly published works.
2. Sorts and ranks results on criteria determined by the library. Ranking creates results sorted in the order of best fit according to the library's policies. Rialto's ranking factors provide for both data- and outcome-driven sorting (example: similarity to past purchases, usage, other libraries' purchases, etc.)
3. Chooses actions to take. Rules define whether to purchase titles and/or add to DDA. Caps are attached to each rule to control spend. Caps allow the library to purchase or add to DDA the best resources up to the limit.
4. Presents selections for review by librarians (optional) before final actions are taken.

Rialto's Selection Plans are an innovative solution as they provide spending control, acquisition of best fitting titles, selections based on usage, the ability to set and tune profiles and reduces the need to maintain multiple profiles.

## SELECTION PLANS CAN PRECISELY CONTROL SPENDING

Selection Plans contain caps for each rule that define the maximum amount that will be spent per review interval. Rather than estimating spend, Rialto allows libraries to define it precisely. At the start of the year, the library can define a budget for subject areas and set the caps accordingly. If at any point in the year that budget changes or the funds are needed elsewhere, the library can adjust the caps. This eliminates the need to pause programs (when spend is higher than expected) or redirect funds (when spend is lower).

## SELECTION PLANS ACQUIRE THE BEST TITLES, NOT JUST THE NEWEST

While Rialto's workflow for Selection Plans is similar to an approval plan, Selection Plans will buy or add to DDA the best titles per interval (based on the library's preferred ranking of usage, other libraries' holdings, and more).

The Selection Plan query may bring back a title that was initially lower in the ranking as the usage or trending popularity boosts its position. Rialto's Selection Plan allows for broader, more inclusive profiles which help uncover titles that legacy approvals would miss.

## RANKING PRIORITIZES BASED ON USAGE OUTCOMES

Rialto's Selection Plan utilizes machine learning based on previous purchases and activity in the plan (for example, a title is rejected) to optimize the selection of titles for automated purchase. Rialto can leverage the library's data in Alma (usage, purchases, history, etc.) to further tune the Selection Plan over time.

Because Selection Plan titles are recommended based on outcomes, librarians can be confident titles selected will be used by patrons.

## SELF-CONFIGURABLE FEEDS

Rialto allows libraries to move away from approval plans controlled by a vendor. Library administrators initially set preferences to comply with the library's collection development strategy, including a preference for electronic resources. The Selection Plan query can be configured directly by the library or with the support of a ProQuest Customer Success Manager experienced in library profiling.

Queries can be instantly tested by the librarian to see the results of tuning. No longer will the library need to wait or try to communicate changes to a vendor. Librarians can make changes as frequently and precisely as desired.

## BROADER PROFILES MEET MULTIPLE NEEDS

With legacy approval plans, libraries needed to manage many profiles for individual selectors or purposes. Profiling relied on tightly constrained profiles to exclude unwanted results and manage budget. This led to challenges with maintenance and harmonization between profiles, excluded potentially good results, and purchased any titles that matched the profile based solely on metadata signals such as publisher and classification.

Rialto eliminates this need by allowing the institution to define one or more broad baseline feeds that individual users can customize and save without impacting others' view of the results. The profile is enhanced with Rialto's ranking engine to estimate the quality of a title based on data about outcomes drawn from the ordering library and other libraries using Rialto.

## CONCLUSION

ProQuest Rialto takes an innovative approach to solving the need for librarians to acquire monographs that support their patrons' needs with minimal involvement. Rialto Selection Plans provide a new alternative to resolve longstanding challenges with approval plans. Selection Plans provide librarians with as much control over their selection queries as they want and the tools to control spending while acquiring the best titles based on library-preferred ranking. Rialto is a modern tool designed to optimize selection and acquisition of library resources.

## SELECTION PLAN AND LEGACY APPROVALS QUICK COMPARISON

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## ABOUT RIALTO

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ProQuest Rialto is the first comprehensive academic marketplace to enable libraries to achieve a seamless workflow and make evidence-based, data-driven decisions. Rialto is built on the Ex Libris Higher-Ed cloud platform. Through its unification with the Higher-Ed platform, Rialto creates an efficient workflow from selection to acquisition for library staff.

Rialto's market offers are supplemented with analytics and usage data of related content from the library. Using Alma and the library's repository of inventory, financial, and usage data, Rialto provides essential data at decision points to ensure staff make evidence-based purchases.

Rialto is platform-neutral with content from thousands of publishers, as well as many digital publisher and aggregator platforms.

Rialto is distinctively easy to use. Its intuitive page design and navigation is easy to understand and quick to learn.

Rialto is essential for librarians who value efficiency, collaboration, and ease of use in their selection and acquisition workflow.

## ABOUT PROQUEST

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ProQuest, a global EdTech leader, supports the most important work in the world's research and learning communities. Our company curates six centuries of content—the world's largest collection of ebooks, journals, primary sources, dissertations, news and video—and builds powerful workflow solutions to help libraries acquire and grow collections that inspire extraordinary outcomes. ProQuest products and services are used in academic, K-12, public, corporate, and government libraries in 150 countries.

When it comes to books, our core value is providing choice to the academic library community - choice in format, choice in vendor, choice in commercial model. By partnering with our customers to automate workflows around evolving collection strategies, we help libraries better support their stakeholders and missions.