
Collection Development in a Municipal Public Library

Robert C. Russell

Elbert Ivey Memorial Library is a municipal library for the city of Hickory. According to surveys of our borrower registration files, we serve a population of approximately fifty-five thousand people. Our citizens are well above the state average for both education and per capita income. The library has a collection of about 80,000 volumes, with an annual book circulation of about 180,000. We are essentially a single-unit library system: we do not offer bookmobile service, and our one branch circulates fewer than 3,000 books a year. We have a staff of 15.5 FTEs, with three professional librarians (director, reference librarian, children's librarian). Our book budget is approximately \$55,000 a year.

This is not a "how we do it good" article, because we don't do it good, or at least we don't do it as well as we should; and I would guess that many, if not most, small and medium-sized libraries share this failure. Yet I am convinced that nothing we do is more important than collection development in determining the quality of library service that we are able to give to the public.

What follows is a discussion of the methods for collection development used in our library; some problems which result from the use of these procedures; and some changes we have made this year, which we hope will result in a better book collection and better procedures for maintaining this collection. I assume that most medium-sized and small public libraries use similar methods for collection development, encounter similar problems, and thus might find much of this information applicable to their situations.

I define collection development, in a public library, as the process of building a collection that meets the needs and interests of library patrons and that represents the best works available, for the layman, in all fields of knowledge. To the extent that these goals are in conflict (and because of budget limitations, they always will be), the balance will be determined by the person responsible for collection development in a particular library.

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Collection development, as practiced in our library, can be divided into three major areas: current selection, retrospective selection, and collection evaluation. By collection evaluation, I mean the process of determining what materials we have in the various subject categories, as compared to what is available and also as compared to the demand for materials in each subject area.

I will now discuss the process of collection development in our library. For the sake of simplicity, I will confine my discussion to the area of adult non-fiction books.

At the beginning of the fiscal year, I divide our book budget among several areas: adult fiction, adult non-fiction, children's services, local history, and so forth. This gives us the total dollar amount available by area to purchase books during the year.

Most of our time and energy is devoted to selecting current titles. For selection tools, we use *Library Journal*, *Booklist*, *Publishers Weekly*, *New York Times Book Review*, state and local newspapers, and occasionally publishers' catalogs. We also rely heavily on patron requests in selecting new titles. We have a large number of active book clubs, whose members frequently request new titles well before they are reviewed. And finally, we of course look at the best seller lists and lists of books discussed on radio and television programs.

Four staff members participate in the book selection process: two veteran staff members, who have a good knowledge of the reading interests of book club members and other frequent users of the library; the reference librarian; and I. The selection sources are routed to all of these persons; they mark their recommendations and pass the journal on to the next person on the list. I am the last person to see each selection source and I make the final decision as to what will be purchased.

Retrospective Selection

The procedures for retrospective selection are much less precise. A few subject areas present no problems: we know that we must fre-

quently replace or update materials on such subjects as resumes, armed forces and college entrance exams, and auto repair. Beyond this, the procedure becomes rather haphazard. The circulation staff may become aware of a need for materials in a given subject area because of comments by patrons or reserve requests. Staff members discover some obvious gaps while shelf-reading or shelving books. We go through discarded overdues (though not as thoroughly or as promptly as we should) to find titles that need to be replaced. When we run across subject bibliographies in *Library Journal* or other sources, we check these against our holdings and purchase what we think we need.

None of these methods is really satisfactory. No staff member has the knowledge or training to identify every weak area in the collection by looking at the shelves. We do not have the available personnel to divide the collection among subject specialists. Many discarded books are out of print, and we often do not have (or at least do not take) the time to see if they need to be replaced with other titles on the same subject. And we certainly can't count on patrons to point out every gap in our collection. I suspect that the typical patron who does not find the materials he needs simply leaves the library without saying anything.

Last spring, we decided to make collection development one of our major goals for 1984-85. As we looked at the process described above, we became increasingly aware that we needed to do a great deal of work in the areas of collection evaluation and retrospective selection, as well as doing some fine-tuning of our methods for current selection.

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The first thing we did was try to determine why we were placing so little emphasis on collection evaluation and retrospective selection; why collection development had become, for the most part, current selection. We came up with the following reasons:

1. We had not developed any precise methods for collection evaluation. We did not have a clear picture of what was in our collection, of which areas were being used most heavily, and of which areas were weak.

2. We had no set of procedures, as we do for current selection, for doing retrospective selection.

3. Since we didn't have any organized method for doing retrospective selection, we had come to identify the book budget as funds allocated for purchasing books reviewed in current review sources. Thus, there was no money available for any significant retrospective selection project. It works something like this: I know that I have \$24,000 available to purchase adult non-fiction books. Without any conscious effort on my part, I establish in my mind what we can and cannot afford and I order about \$2,000 worth of books a month. I don't add figures or calculate discounts each time I read a selection tool and mark my choices. It just turns out that way, and I think that anyone with experience selecting books will find the same thing happening—what you have, you spend.

We then stated the following brief objectives for collection development:

1. Develop a method for determining what we have in our collection, as compared to what our patrons want and as compared to what standard bibliographies say we should have.

2. In both current and retrospective selection, emphasize the subject areas that are in greatest demand.

3. Make sure that we have a basic collection of recommended materials in all subject fields. We will, of course, use our own judgment in determining what is basic in any given subject area.

As stated earlier, goals two and three will often conflict, and we will again use our own judgment in deciding upon the proper balance between the two. (However, we did not see this as a problem, and thus far it has not been.)

Collection Development Project

With these problems and objectives in mind, we set to work on a collection development project. Our first step was to set aside \$5,000 for retrospective selection. This was money in the book budget but not available for selecting current titles from review sources. For the reasons stated above, I felt this was the only way we would have the funds available to do any significant amount of retrospective selection.

Our next task was to evaluate the collection. We needed to find out three things: what we had in our collection; what subject areas were in greatest demand by our patrons; and how what we had compared to what we felt we should have, using standard bibliographies.

The first thing that became apparent was that our shelvest and card catalog did not give an accurate record of what we actually had in our collection, available for the use of our patrons. This was mainly due to the number of long-overdue books that had not been discarded. Our policy was to keep these cards for three years, and we had actually fallen a year or so behind that schedule. We discarded all of these long overdue books and pulled the cards from the catalog and shelvest. (We are now keeping cards for overdue books for one year before discarding the books and will probably reduce this time period to six months. I have done a couple of studies which indicate a return rate of less than 5 per cent after six months. To my mind, this rate of return does not justify keeping these cards in the catalog, deceiving both staff and patrons.)

We conducted a complete inventory of our collection two years before beginning this project. About one year after the initial inventory, we rechecked for all books which were missing in inventory and discarded those which were still missing. This brought us a step closer to an assurance that our catalog and shelvest provided an accurate record of our actual holdings.

Now it was time to gather some statistics. We chose the "quick and dirty" but fairly reliable method of dividing the collection by Dewey numbers and calculating for each area the percentage of our total collection and the percentage of total circulation. We had also kept statistics on discarded overdue and missing-in-inventory books and were able to use this information in our statistical study. Table I is an example of the type of information this study gave us.

TABLE I
Library Holdings, Circulation, and Discards

Classification Range	% of Collection	% of Circulation	% of Discards
170 - 179	.44	.42	.54
700 - 709	.83	.23	.49
950 - 959	.20	.74	.87

We began with the assumption that, within a given classification range, the percentage of the collection, of circulation, and of discards should be about the same. If they were not, then we would need to examine these areas more closely and probably make some adjustments, buying more or fewer books in that subject area. For example, we would conclude that section 170-179 is about right, that we need to purchase more books in the 950-959 range, and that we have

been purchasing too heavily in the 700-709 range. I must stress the fact that we used these statistics only as a starting point not as an absolute formula for allocating our book budget. However, we have now examined all of the areas which the table indicated needed to be examined and have found that, in most cases, the information can be used as a guide to purchasing more or less in those subject areas. (In some cases, we found that what was really needed was a more thorough weeding; in others, we decided, for various reasons, that we could justify over-emphasizing or under-emphasizing that subject area.) We have used this information to allocate the \$5,000 available for retrospective selection. I am also finding it helpful in choosing books from current selection tools.

Our third goal, as stated earlier, was to make sure that we had a basic collection of recommended materials in all subject areas. We decided that this was too much to tackle at one time, so we narrowed it down a bit. We decided to concentrate upon selected areas of the humanities and other subject fields in which there were likely to be easily identifiable "classics." We then used the appropriate sections of *Public Library Catalog* (most of the 100's, 200's, 800's, and selected areas of the other schedules). These titles were checked against our catalog to determine basic titles which we do not own and need to purchase.

Final Step

The final step in the project was to select and order books; this phase is not yet completed. We are using *Public Library Catalog* to order the "basic collection" books and also for selecting titles in some of the subject areas in which we did not have sufficient materials, according to our survey of the collection and of circulation. It is immediately obvious that *Public Library Catalog* is not sufficient for selecting titles in many other subject areas. In these cases, we are using subject bibliographies, recent (last year or two) reviews in review periodicals, subject experts on the staff or in the community, and publishers' catalogs. (The Dover Press catalog is a good source for selecting books on chess, which was one of our weak areas.)

Surprisingly, we have not spent a great deal of time on this project. The circulation staff gathered the data on circulation by Dewey number while counting daily statistics. A Repay worker measured our shelvest and compiled statistics on the collection as broken down by Dewey number. Several staff members checked our

catalog against *Public Library Catalog*, usually spending no more than thirty minutes a day on this project. This task took less than a month to complete. I evaluated all the data and compiled (and am still compiling) the lists of books to be ordered.

What time we did spend on the project was time well spent. Our circulation staff, from compiling the statistics and checking *Public Library Catalog* against our card catalog, has a better knowledge of our collection. I feel that my own knowledge of our collection and of the reading interests of our public is vastly improved. I have a much better idea of what we need, not only in doing retrospective selection, but in reading current reviews as well.

Along the way, we have developed a few methods and procedures that will be incorporated permanently into our collection development/book selection process. We will allocate funds each year for retrospective selection; we will pull all catalog cards for books within six months to a year after they become overdue; we will conduct circulation surveys at least every six months. These are just a few of the procedures that I feel will give us much better control over collection evaluation and retrospective selection.

The longer I work with our collection development project, the more convinced I become that it is essential that we continue to devote time and effort to the allocation of our materials budget. In every library, we carefully evaluate our personnel, shift job responsibilities, and reorganize departments in an effort to obtain maximum productivity from available personnel. We compare prices in supplies catalogs to stretch this part of our budget as far as possible. We use competitive bidding to get the best equipment at the lowest cost. We turn thermostats up or down to stretch our utilities budget.

Yet, all of these areas are peripheral to our most important function, that of providing materials to our users and making sure that we provide the best materials and materials on the subjects of highest interest to our patrons. I think it is essential that we devote at least the same level of time and effort to selecting books that we do to these other areas.

Cleaver Symposium to be Held

"The Cleaver Symposium: A Consideration of the Contributions of Vera and Bill Cleaver to Contemporary Children's Literature," sponsored by

the School of Library Science and the Southern Historical Collection of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, will be held May 23 through 25, 1985.

Speakers include Dr. Louis Rubin, writer, critic, and Distinguished Professor of English at UNC; John Rowell, author, book reviewer, and Professor Emeritus, Case Western Reserve; Sue Ellen Bridgers, author of children's books; and Pat Scales, library media specialist. Activities will also include a film and readers' theater presentation and a program given by the staff of the North Carolina Botanical Garden.

Mrs. Vera Cleaver will close the conference by responding to the symposium program and, with her editors, discussing the development of the Cleavers' novels.

For further information or registration materials, contact Marilyn Miller, School of Library Science, Manning Hall 026A, Chapel Hill, NC 27514.



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