
Collection Development in a Public Library Branch

Patrice Gaffney Ebert

Collection: "An assembly of objects or specimens for the purposes of education, research, or interest." *Development:* "Gradual advance or growth through progressive changes." As these definitions from *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* imply, a library collection is a dynamic creature. Libraries have the power, as well as the responsibility, to shape their collections.

This article will attempt to explore the problems and opportunities in developing the collection of a large metropolitan branch. Some of the strategies, which can stretch even a fairly large budget, should have universal applications to the development of any branch library collection.

At first thought, one usually equates collection development with the selection of new titles to be purchased. While this is probably the greatest expenditure, many other factors enter into the overall strategy of collection development: replacement titles, added copies, mending and rebinding, gifts, weeding, and special collections. In the interplay of these factors, weeding dated and unattractive materials ranks as high as acquiring new and attractive materials. Equally important is the relation of the branch collection to other collections in the library system.

The Sharon Branch Library houses some 50,000 books and circulates 425,000 volumes annually. The fact that I manage a branch collection, even one which circulates more materials than the main library, takes some of the stress out of book selection. I do not have to make sure that I acquire every important title in any field; that is the central library's job. If our branch does not own a title requested by our patrons, we call the main library. The branch collection can be more tailored to the needs of our patrons. One of the most important lessons library school teaches is the admonishment to the professional: know your community. Branch libraries, as cogs in the machinery of a library system, allow the fine-tuning of a collection to the needs and wants of a neighborhood clientele.

Patrice Gaffney Ebert is Branch Head of the Sharon Branch Library of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County.

The central library in a system houses the research materials, costly reference titles, and comprehensive collections. The branches may then concentrate on recreational reading and books for homework topics. Let the main library get the costly, scholarly, and esoteric titles. The branches can borrow as needed.

Questions of literary merit versus popular demand are not so critical in a branch library. The selector must address this issue, to be sure, but patron requests must be considered in the neighborhood library. Some two hundred patrons, for example, queued up in a waiting list for Robert Ludlum's *Aquitaine Progression* at the Sharon Branch. One can always use rental plans to furnish multiple copies of massively popular titles. Weeding after demand subsides is no problem: simply return excess copies. Even if the library chooses to purchase multiple copies, cheaper book club editions are often available for mass best-sellers. (Book clubs are a marketing tool for the publishers who, as rumor has it, predetermine best-sellers with advertising budgets and marketing schemes.) Given the poor quality of many book bindings these days, there's a good chance that the extra copies, book club or not, will self-destruct fairly quickly anyway.

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Given the popular tone of branch collections, the selection of new titles will always be the backbone of collection development. Branch patrons want a continually replenished supply of new books. I'm sure that every branch library has patrons who never venture past the new book shelf (or reserve shelf) into the stacks. They read book reviews and keep up with developments in the publishing world. Fiction—lots of new fiction—must be provided.

Genre Readers

Then there are the genre readers. These patrons would not only love to have all the mystery, romance, science fiction, or westerns shelved together; they would never leave these areas were the library arranged this way. One way to save both time and money is to subscribe to the genre book clubs. I am not sure that the quality of this fiction is always top grade, but the patrons do not seem to mind. If they do object, they simply avoid the book club titles. In the best of all possible worlds, librarians would spend all their time on book selection and not have to worry about canned offerings. These genre book clubs, however, take some of the worry out by supplying a number of titles automatically each month.

New popular non-fiction also features prominently in selection needs. While each branch profile will differ because of community interests, some topics are of universal interest: crafts, cookbooks, how-to books, World War II, pop psychology, and so forth. Paying attention to topics in the news also pays off. In recent years, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa have become "hot topics" for popular reading. On the other hand certain topics will be of local appeal. Sharon Branch, for example, offers a large collection of Judaica and Holocaust materials for our Jewish patrons.

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Retrospective collection building is just as important in developing the collection as selecting new titles, but it requires more time, effort, and thought. Librarians know they are going to read all the reviews and get as many of those wonderful new books as their budget will allow. Taking the time to find gaps in your collection and then selecting titles to fill them is just not as much fun. It is easy to see gaps in the collection when following another selector. We are quick to notice deficiencies in areas where we have expertise or concerns. No matter how hard we try to be unbiased and complete, personal interests invariably influence book selection. As professionals, we must strive to overcome personal bias and provide balanced collections.

Patron requests for books and information that cannot be found in the collection identify areas that need development. It helps to keep a notebook at the desk for staff to jot down observations about titles and subjects in demand. Keeping records of materials borrowed from the central library and other branches also provides information about gaps in the collection. If a subject area consistently shows up, that collection needs some work.

Due to space and staff limitations, the reference and circulation functions are not separate in many branch libraries. This fact makes staff input all the more important. Everyone on the staff fields reference questions. These same staffers handle every book that crosses the desk. Their observations about patron needs and wants make significant contributions to collection development.

The Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County uses a formal scheme for ordering retrospective materials. Orders for certain Dewey classes and fiction are placed at specific times of the year. This plan facilitates the coordination of weeding and selecting new titles in subject areas. We keep a "collection development file" at Sharon Branch. Staff can note a needed title or subject at any time, then slip it into the proper class file. When the time to place orders for that subject area rolls around, comprehensive decisions about developing that collection are possible. Rather than building collections one title at a time by intuition and memory, this scheme offers the opportunity to evaluate a section as a whole.

Records of lost books also play a prominent role in retrospective collection building. While we never know all the materials which are lost, stolen, or strayed, we do know which books have been checked out but never returned. We review receipts for materials lost and paid, as well as long overdue files, and consider these titles for replacement.

Since the tax law no longer encourage publishers to warehouse copies of backlist titles, many books are going out of print more quickly. How distressing to find that the very titles one needs to replace are either out of print or available only in paperback! Paperbacks may be second best in some case, but at least they allow our patrons access to the books. Binding techniques which mount the paperback in a sturdy binding, such as Super-Flex or Permabound, or plastic jackets permanently applied to the paper binding, called "Cover-Ups," offer a longer circulation life. These pseudo-hardbacks stand up to as many circulations as the recent hardback offerings do. It makes sense to

catalog these and shelve them in the stacks rather than in a browsing collection, since they are intended as permanent replacements.

Homework Topics

Homework topics feature prominently in retrospective collection building. As the largest branch with the largest reference collection outside of the main library, Sharon Branch attracts many students who live in the affluent southern part of the county. This is our greatest service to the older elementary through high school population; they are too busy with school and community activities to attend programs. They come to study and do research for their assignments. Their school libraries are closed after school hours. The public library must meet student needs for books and information. While we should not be expected to supply circulation needs, supplementary and research materials must be made available. This is perhaps the best way to serve our young adults and keep them as library patrons.

One way to supply enough copies for hot homework topics and mass assignments is to purchase multiple paperback copies. Identify titles by requesting reading lists from the schools. If the lists are not available, photocopy the lists students bring with them to the library. Even though the teachers may not assign the very same titles next year, be assured that those titles will cycle up as assignments again soon. The "summer reading lists" often contain standard YA titles and non-fiction titles anyway. All the more reason to purchase multiple copies. Certain subject areas inevitably show up as mass assignments every year: mythology, tree identification, science projects, Indians of North America, Shakespeare, and so on. Reach for the standard catalogs and select paperback titles for mass purchase.

Retrospective collection building is just as important in developing the collection as selecting new titles.

Adult patrons have collection needs that can best be met with multiple paperbacks as well. Every branch librarian has ordered these materials over and over again: résumé books, study guides for the Armed Forces placement tests, names for babies, and wedding etiquette. Since these books are subject to high loss rates, it makes

sense to order paperbacks. Rather than investing in more expensive rebinding procedures, a strip of sturdy book tape on the spine will prolong the life of these paperbacks.

Weeding, the essential converse to acquiring materials, also develops the collection. It is a simple mathematical truth that branch libraries have only so much room. Unless the branch has serious hope of moving to larger quarters, one book must be weeded for every book acquired. In evaluating the collection, look for dated materials, superseded editions, ugly, ragged volumes, and materials that have not circulated in a given time period. Every library system should have a weeding policy with guidelines for weeding the various Dewey classes. An American Library Association publication, *Evaluating and Weeding Collections in Small and Medium-Sized Public Libraries: The Crew Method* (Chicago, 1980), offers valuable advice. Be ruthless. Systematic weeding not only frees space for more attractive and up-to-date titles; it also makes the branch library more appealing to patrons.

While the weeding process is continuous, I devote a good deal of time each summer to the books that have not seen any use. Pages read the shelves and pull any book that has not circulated in two years. These become weeding candidates. We then check the titles against the standard catalogs: *Fiction Catalog*, *Public Library Catalog*, *Children's Catalog*, and the *Junior High School Library Catalog*. We also consider availability at the main library and at other branches. Sharon Branch may not need a copy if the title is readily available elsewhere. Certain titles are retained because of literary merit or anticipated demand, but very few weeding candidates get back to the shelf.

Rebinding and mending worthy titles can be budget savers. Some libraries never rebind, figuring that patrons will want a clean, shiny, new copy. If the title is still in print and not very expensive, this theory works well. Sometimes, however, it is more cost-effective to rebind a used copy for one-fifth the cost of a new copy. At the time of this writing, it costs about \$4.00 to rebind a standard sized novel, yet a new copy may cost \$20.00. If the book self-destructed because of cheap binding practices, it makes little sense to purchase yet another copy from the publisher. Better to rebind and retain the original copy in a guaranteed binding. Paper jackets can be saved and then replaced with a clean, new plastic cover. Simple mending with glue and book tape can often prolong the life of a useful book. This is especially important for out-of-print titles or for

books one just wants to keep around until replacements arrive.

Stringent standards should, of course, be applied to any bindery or mending candidates. Items to be rebound must have at least half-inch wide inner margins. The rebinding process trims away part of the pages at the spine. Consider whether illustrations will still be useful after trimming. Books mended with tape should never be sent to the bindery, as tape will gum up the binding machines. Never mend a book that you may want to rebind someday. Send it right to the bindery instead. No bindery or mending candidate should have dirty, stained, torn, or defaced pages. The paper should be of good quality, not yellow or brittle. These books, in general, should meet the same standards of quality as items considered for purchase. Non-fiction should be examined for accuracy and timeliness. If a newer edition is available, discard the superseded edition and purchase the newer. Fiction titles should either be listed in the *Fiction Catalog* or, if not, be of potential lasting interest in the collection because of the author or subject. Inspect mended books carefully after completion. They should still be clean and attractive. A bad mending job can ruin an otherwise useful book.

Weeding, the essential converse to acquiring new materials, also develops the collection.

Gifts can play a role in collection development, but some of the same caveats for rebinding and mending apply. Inspect gifts closely for condition, currency, quality, and need. Do watch for clean copies of out-of-print standard titles. Include only sterling candidates in the collection, remembering that even a "free" book costs the library its handling and processing time. Cash donations for new memorial books or magazine subscriptions are true budget savers.

Every branch library may develop special collections unique in the branch library system. While the central library holdings should be all-inclusive, branches can strive to share resources among themselves. In Charlotte, for example, the South Branch collection includes the North Carolina General Statutes, while Sharon Branch houses the largest business reference collection in the branch system.

Every branch library contains a unique collection of materials. Careful attention to the

details of collection development should result in a balanced, up-to-date, and complete collection especially designed for the needs of the branch patrons.



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