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Random Ramblings - Demise of Traditional Collection Development

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Demise of Traditional Collection Development

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The last time that I taught collection development I had an epiphany. Had the class become useless for students who wished to work in certain types of academic libraries? While some of the topics like information needs assessments, collection development policies, and intellectual freedom remained important, I worried that these students didn't need to know much anymore about core book selection activities: book reviewing sources, selecting from book reviews, acquiring these materials, and preserving them. In many academic research libraries, patron driven acquisitions means purchasing "just-in-time" research monographs requested by faculty and students and perhaps getting core materials from the approval plan. They will not select individual print or electronic books very often. The students will still face some choices about ordering packages of eBooks and serials and some individual journal subscriptions. These students, however, will not need to follow the traditional steps well know to me in my thirty years of selecting: following developments in each subject field to know what a core collection should look like, pouring over book reviews to make selections that balance importance versus cost, building up comprehensive collections in areas of specialization for both today's and tomorrow's scholars, and examining items in the stacks for preservation or replacement.

Since **Dean Sandra Yee** has responsibility for collection development policy at **Wayne State University**, I asked her what she thought about my revelation. She concurred that she supported eliminating most individual purchase decisions and especially those for possible future use "just-in-case." She felt that fiscal resources and staff time could be used more productively in achieving other goals such as making library resources more accessible and teaching students and faculty how to conduct more efficient research. As I thought more about her comment, I realized that technological innovations, the increase in distance education, and economic constraints have changed the way that collection development occurs in my library. The new mantra is: "We may not have it, but we can get it for you quickly."

While I have some concerns about this model, the general principles make sense. When I visit the stacks, I can look

at the collections that I've painstakingly built up over twenty years under the old model and wonder why so many items haven't circulated. I was so proud of a collection that I had enhanced in a specialized research area of a faculty member who has now retired with no one to take her place. While not many eBooks support my foreign language areas, I agree that accessing an eBook immediately makes more sense than waiting six weeks for a print book to arrive the old fashioned way by mail. I don't particularly miss making the individual selections because I have more time for my research. Finally, I agree with the principle that current users deserve support more than some mythical future generations, especially in an era of limited resources.

On the other hand, I predict that traditional collection development will take longer to disappear in many academic libraries and in public and school libraries. Surprisingly, traditional collection development will continue to thrive, at least in some areas, in very large research libraries. These libraries will continue to collect comprehensively in some subject areas though fewer than in the past. Collecting comprehensively at Conspectus Level 5 requires ferreting out the difficult-to-find materials including foreign language publications, grey literature, and perhaps the best of the increasing volume of self-publishing. Collecting at this level is collecting for future generations and creating a magnet collection for research by visiting scholars. Area studies collections and special collections will also continue to require individual attention. To acquire publications from Third World countries, bibliographers still need to identify items that have a brief window of availability and to know enough about local publishing to work with local vendors who may need close supervision to supply what the library wants. Special collections also still depends upon the bibliographers' knowledge of the rare book market and how to spend funds wisely to purchase materials that complement existing holdings. I doubt that even the richest libraries today have any money to scoop up large quantities of rare materials just because these rarities become available. These bibliographers continue to need expertise to deal with donors and to seek out aggressively donations of collections in the libraries' areas of specialization. I'll hasten to add that

my course doesn't provide much of the special expertise that these two types of bibliographers need.

The size of the collection will be a key factor in how much individual collection development occurs in master's plus, liberal arts, subject specialty, and community college libraries. Very small libraries of all types will continue to focus on individual selection because doing so won't take as much time and because libraries with very small budgets cannot afford mistakes. For most, a mistake is an item that doesn't circulate within the first year since the goal is to select items that will be immediately used from among the large universe of potential purchases. The other issue for these colleges and universities is supporting students who often start their assignments too late to use purchase-on-demand or interlibrary loan. Having access to collections of eBooks for rent or purchase may help, but the issue may be cost. For specialized undergraduate colleges, for example in engineering, art, or business, finding appropriate collections of eBooks may pose problems. If students are used to browsing the stacks for whatever is available, they may discover success in completing their assignments requires increased use of the ILS to find what they need since eBooks are not physically browsable. For the reasons above, I predict a continued focus on collection development activities using the traditional resources that I cover in my course.

I can quickly deal with school libraries, where they still exist, by putting almost all among the very small and the very poor. With so little money to spend, the school media specialists must use all the tools that help make the right choices. I know that my school media specialist spouse agonizes about all but the most obvious selections.

Another issue for school media specialists and for youth services public librarians is the simple one that their users don't usually choose the materials in the collection. Perhaps their parents sometimes do, but I doubt that this exception disproves my point. Elementary school students don't arrive in the library with lists of what they want to read or what they need for their school assignments. They also don't use the catalog to select among the available eBooks. According to my school librarian spouse, some high school students suggest books; but

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I expect that, for most of them, their interests are elsewhere than choosing books for the collection in either type of library.

Public libraries will also need to continue to build collections that meet the needs of their patrons as they walk through the door. Except for the large public research libraries and some users in other public libraries, people arrive with the goal of having their questions answered right then or of taking something interesting home to read from what is currently available. The public library must have the right stuff on hand and also anticipate high demand for popular items. Services exist that can supply bestsellers automatically and eBook collections might meet some needs, but the person wanting to have a good mystery is most likely going to expect to find it on the shelf rather than having to ask for its purchase. In this sense, they are a bit like the undergraduate students above who want to browse among available materials and not wait for a special order.

As for teaching collection development, what should I do? I think that my course, which does include increasing emphasis upon digital resources of all types, remains relevant for all types of libraries except some academic research libraries. For these libraries, I have several thoughts on the subject. First, many students wind up working in libraries that weren't their first choice so that the students headed for an academic research library might find themselves working someplace else. In this economy, casting a broad net for all types of jobs is a good strategy. Second, I could try to find alternate content for these groups. Last semester, one of the groups pretending to be a large research library was expected to buy materials for the undergraduate library as well as the graduate research library. Third, I also teach the academic libraries course and could work with the other instructors to make sure that the remaining collection development aspects, mostly digital resources of all types, get covered in that course. I am concerned that some key aspects taught in collection development such as identifying and serving patron needs and socialization issues such as intellectual freedom remain important enough to be reaffirmed in as many parts of the curriculum as possible.

I've never seen such a rapid period of change in my forty year career as an academic librarian and library science professor. Perhaps the pace of the change will slow down, but other events such as the rise of eBooks as the new publishing model will most likely reward the nimble for the foreseeable future. 🐼