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Should Academic Libraries Collect Popular Fiction?

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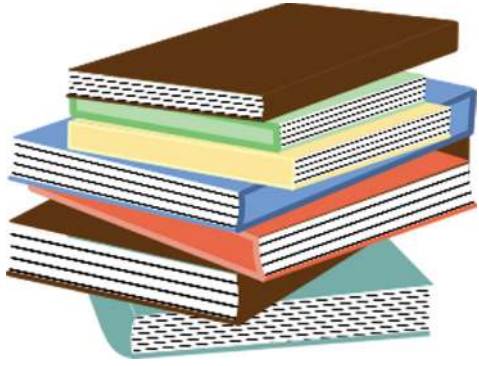
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Should Academic Libraries

Students often ask where to find popular reading material in their academic library – especially at the beginning and end of term. They want to browse the shelves to find a good book to read. We can direct them to genre subject headings in the catalogue or the literature call-range areas in the library, but LC was not useful for browsing fiction. We can also direct students to the local public library, but if the library is not close, or if the weather isn't the greatest, students may find this proposal inconvenient and may therefore turn to another activity altogether. There are certainly enough reasons against stocking popular reading materials in an academic library: budgetary and spatial constraints, a perceived collection policy conflict, and a lack of certainty about our role in this matter. Should we buy books that are traditionally associated with public libraries?

Three recent trends in university and college libraries have prompted academic librarians to reconsider their notions about popular reading collections: the promotion of user-focused libraries, the recognition of the need to attract patrons to libraries in the digital age, and the necessity of promoting literacy at a time when it has reached its lowest levels are three important reasons for revisiting this issue.

Trend Towards User-focused Libraries

Adapting to the needs of the contemporary user is one of the biggest challenges that academic librarians face today. According to the OCLC report, *College Students Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, students prefer a self-serve environment, have somewhat outdated views of libraries, are very satisfied with information from the internet, use libraries in inverse proportion to their increased use of the internet, and believe that libraries lack relevance in their lives (De Rosa, Cantrell, Hawk & Wilson, 2006). In recent years, many academic libraries have responded to these realities by shifting their focus to the user's perspective. The very survival of the academic library, argues Woodward in *Creating the Customer-Driven Academic Library* (2009), is dependent on understand-

ing and responding to the needs and preferences of patrons. According to ACRL, one of the top 10 assumptions for future academic libraries is that students will increasingly view themselves as consumers with high expectations for customer-driven service (Mullins, Frank, Allen & Hufford, 2007). Creating a leisure reading collection is one way of accommodating student needs.

Revitalization of the Library as Place

Many students today believe that almost all information is available online. Research indicates that 89 percent of college-age students begin an information search with a search engine (De Rosa et al., 2006). Most students also quickly discover that the library's electronic databases can be accessed from home. If patrons believe that they no longer need to visit the library, we must show them that we offer more than just online resources. A recreational reading collection can serve as an incentive to attract patrons.

It is the novice user and the non-library patron in particular that we need to attract through outreach efforts. For many of these students, the academic library can be an intimidating place. User-friendly services that promote leisure can counteract this negative perception.

Promotion of Literacy and Lifelong Reading

The declining interest in reading today, especially in college-age students, is a sobering reality, according to four major studies. The authors of the OCLC survey conclude that today's college students are reading less and using libraries far less frequently than they had been in the past. The National Endowment for the Arts's Reading at Risk survey and *To Read or Not to Read* report indicate not only a steep decline in reading over the last 20 years but, more importantly, a particularly sharp drop-off in the reading habits of 18- to 34-year-olds. And in Canada, according to the Department of Canadian Heritage (2005), 16- to 24-year-olds constitute the lowest percentage of heavy readers in the population.

Do Libraries Collect Popular Fiction?

Since research increasingly demonstrates the correlation between reading, cognitive development, verbal skills, and academic achievement, these findings on the decline of reading are especially disturbing. Fostering literacy and lifelong reading should be our top priority. Students will not develop the habit of reading or become lifelong readers until they experience the joy of reading. In *Reading Matters* (2006), Catherine Ross points out that reading is an acquired skill and that pleasure is the motivating force which inspires readers to spend the thousands of hours it takes to hone the skill and make it an effortless and enjoyable activity.

Leisure reading provides opportunities for the type of focused and sustained reading that students are doing less frequently since the advent of the internet. Electronic multitasking and online reading are reducing students' capacity for concentration and contemplation, hindering their ability to interact with texts. Screen-based reading – characterized by browsing, scanning, keyword spotting, and non-linear activity – is replacing in-depth and concentrated reading. The implementation of a popular reading collection does not have to be a complex or expensive undertaking. A hundred books and a few comfortable chairs in a learning commons area or close to an in-house coffee shop will attract patrons. By creating such a collection within the campus boundaries, librarians will increase the likelihood that students will turn to reading as a pleasurable activity, one that will foster the communication and critical skills that they need to succeed. At a time when students' reading skills are dramatically declining, and their perceptions of libraries are at an unprecedented low point, can you afford not to implement a popular reading collection in your academic library?

Note

This article has been adapted from its longer version in *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 17.1 (2010).

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