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# Why Your Academic Library Needs a Popular Reading Collection Now More Than Ever

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## **Why Your Academic Library Needs a Popular Reading Collection**

### **Now More Than Ever**

**ABSTRACT:** Do popular reading materials belong in college and university libraries? Although some librarians think not, others believe there are compelling reasons for including them. The trend towards user-focused libraries, the importance of attracting patrons to libraries in the age of the Internet, and, most importantly, the need to promote literacy at a time when it has reached its lowest levels are all reasons why academic librarians are reconsidering their ideas about popular reading materials. Librarians who decide to implement a leisure reading collection should consider a number of key issues.

**KEYWORDS:** popular reading collection; literacy; academic libraries; leisure reading; popular fiction; recreational reading

In 2009 our academic library explored the idea of introducing a popular reading collection. There were certainly enough reasons against doing so: budgetary and spatial constraints; a perceived collection policy conflict; and a lack of certainty about our role in this matter. Should we be buying books that are traditionally associated with public libraries? Despite the uncertainty we decided that it was important to pursue the matter. Why? We believe that it is our job to understand and meet our patrons' needs in order to effectively serve them.

At our library, students frequently asked for popular reading material, especially at the beginning and end of term. They want to browse the shelves in order to find a good book to read. Up until now, we have directed them to genre subject headings in the

catalogue or the literature call-range areas in the library but these methods have had limited success. LC is not an effective classification scheme for browsing fiction. We have also directed students to our local public library. Many of our patrons do not understand why a library includes some books and not others, and most of them are surprised that we do not own more leisure reading materials. Researchers point out that students do what is handy and if reading material is not conveniently located on campus, they frequently choose another activity instead (Christensen 1984; Elliott 2007). All too often we felt as if we were disappointing our users, and that they were not getting the book they were looking for. We started to consider creating our own popular reading collection.

### **Past and Present Trends**

The idea of creating a leisure reading collection in a university library is not new. In the 1920s and 1930s, academic libraries actively promoted the recreational reading interests of students by creating browsing collections of popular literature (Rathe and Blankenship 2005, 76; Zauha 1993, 57). In fact during this period, college librarians considered the promotion of reading to be paramount according to Farber (Zauha, 57). It was not until the late 1940s and 1950s that recreational reading collections started disappearing from academic libraries (Elliott 2007; Zauha). The war years took their toll on library budgets, and as the century progressed, popular reading collections in academic libraries simply fell out of favour.

However, the twenty-first century has brought a resurgent interest in popular reading collections and a dramatic change in librarians' attitudes towards them. Slightly more than 70% of college libraries surveyed in the U.S. contain recreational reading

collections (Elliott 2007, 37). Today's public librarians, according to Saricks (2005, 7), are in the midst of a readers' advisory renaissance. This trend in public libraries suggests a renewed interest in fiction and reading, an interest that is also affecting academic libraries. An increasing number of university and college libraries have "adjusted their policies and overcome budget restrictions in order to provide leisure reading materials to their users" (Hsieh and Runner 2005, 200). According to a recent survey, the majority of English liaison librarians "responded favorably to including popular fiction materials into their contemporary fiction collections" (Alsop 2007, 584), and universities are now offering greater numbers of popular fiction courses. In May 2008, Lewis and Wyckoff presented a session called "Making Room for Ludlum: Supporting Popular Fiction in the Academic Library" at the annual Canadian Library Association convention. This presentation inspired librarians from a number of Canadian university libraries to start their own leisure reading collections.

### **Why Create a Popular Reading Collection?**

Three recent trends in university and college libraries have prompted academic librarians to rethink their ideas about popular literature collections.

#### **Trend towards User-focused Libraries**

Adapting to the needs of the contemporary user is one of the biggest challenges that academic librarians face today. The OCLC report, *College Students Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, provides an eye-opening window into the thoughts and perceptions of the academic patron. According to this study of users from six different countries, college 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 Web, and believe that libraries lack relevance in their lives (De Rosa et al. 2006).

In recent years, many academic libraries have responded to these realities by shifting their focus to the user's perspective. "It is clear that during the past decade," Hsieh and Runner point out, "many academic libraries have been actively engaged in re-examination of their policies and missions in order to become more user-centered" (200). The very survival of the academic library, argues Woodward (2009), is dependent on understanding and responding to the needs and preferences of its patrons. She points out that "those academic libraries that are prospering have been evolving deliberately and rapidly," partnering with their users and listening to their concerns (10).

McMaster University Library is one example of a library that has modified its approach to reflect the needs of its patrons. The 2008 Excellence in Academic Libraries award was given to this institution for transforming "from a traditional research library to an innovative, user-centered library using technological advances to accomplish its goals" (ACRL 2008). According to a 2007 report from the ACRL research committee, one of the top ten assumptions for future academic libraries concerns the patron: "Students will increasingly view themselves as customers and consumers, expecting high-quality facilities and services" so the academic library must be "a strong advocate for high-quality, customer-friendly library facilities and services" (Mullins et al. 2007).

Brookover and Burns (2008, xiii) suggest that "embracing what is popular in your community is about embracing relevancy." We know from the OCLC study that "libraries lack relevancy in the lives of younger respondents" (De Rosa et al., 6-4). If librarians want to attract users, they need to counteract this negative perception.

Academic libraries need to re-examine their policies and assumptions to ensure that they are patron-centered. College and university librarians know that their patrons have been asking for popular reading materials. If anyone is resisting the idea, it is library personnel, not students. In her book about customer-driven academic libraries, Woodward points out “Academic libraries often find that popular fiction doesn’t quite fit into their policies and procedures, so they may tend to avoid it. Yet such collections are often the most heavily used in the library, improving circulation statistics and making students feel at home” (90-91). Creating a leisure reading collection is one way of accommodating student requests.

### **Revitalization of the Library as Place**

As more and more information is available in electronic format, librarians are reassessing the library as place. Students today have high expectations that all information is available online. As one English professor claims, “Many of today’s students figure that if you can’t find it on the Internet, it must not exist” (Carlson 2001). Research indicates that 89% of college-age students begin an information search with a search engine, and 93% of them are either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of information found on the Internet (De Rosa et al., 6-2). A growing number of students are aware that they can access the library’s databases from home or anywhere else outside the library building. Clearly, there are fewer reasons to enter a library building. In fact 39% of students reported using libraries less frequently as a result of Internet use (De Rosa et al., 6-1). “More and more students,” as Carlson indicates, “are entering libraries not through turnstiles but through phone lines and fiber-optic cables.” If patrons believe that they no longer need to visit the building, we must show them that libraries offer more

than just online resources. Indeed we must convince students that the library is not “redundant in an age of electronic information” (Leckie and Hopkins 2002, 359).

Hopkins believes that a recreational reading collection can serve as a “hook” to get patrons into the building (Elliott 2007, 41). Brookover and Burns (7) point out that many people do not view the library as “indispensable to their daily lives. Enhancing your library’s popular culture collections and pop-related programs is one way to change that perception and make your library indispensable to its community.” Popular culture, as they remind us, can be “a powerful lure into the library, not only for your supportive veteran users, but also for those elusive and tantalizing non-library users” (7). People who do not use the library are unfortunately the very individuals who can substantially benefit from its resources and services.

It is the novice user and the non-library patron whom the library should try to attract through outreach efforts. As librarians, we are completely at home in a library setting and can easily forget that many patrons do not think the same way. For many students, the library represents “stress, anxiety, and deadlines. Creating spaces and services both within the library walls and online to promote leisure and relaxation is one way to overcome the perception that the library is a stressful place” (Bosman, Glover, and Prince 2008).

### **Promotion of Literacy and Lifelong Reading**

Academic libraries have traditionally collected material that supports the teaching and research interests of their institutions. In recent years, however, many of them have revisited their collection development policies in light of a renewed emphasis on student

reading. As O'English, Matthews, and Lindsay (2006) point out, libraries play an important role in the recreational reading mission of academic libraries.

The declining interest in reading today, especially in college-age students, is a sobering reality according to four major and influential studies. The authors of the OCLC survey conclude, "College students are reading less and using the library less since they started using the Internet" (De Rosa et al., 3-19). A survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau at the request of the National Endowment for the Arts indicates not only a steep decline in reading over the last twenty years but, more importantly, a particularly sharp drop-off in the reading habits of young adults aged 18 to 34. The study points out that "the decline in reading correlates with increased participation in a variety of electronic media, including the Internet, video games, and portable digital devices" (National Endowment for the Arts 2004, xii). The NEA's 2007 report, *To Read or Not To Read*," updates and expands upon information from this study, warning that "both reading ability and the habit of regular reading have greatly declined among college graduates" (5). In fact, by the time students become college seniors, one in three reads nothing at all for pleasure in a given week (National Endowment for the Arts 2007, 9). The situation in Canada also indicates a decline. Even though there is little indication that young Canadians are reading less than older ones, 16 to 24 year-olds constitute the lowest percentage of heavy readers in the population (Department of Canadian Heritage 2005, 48). According to this report, people are continuing to read for pleasure, but since reading is "under constant and probably growing pressure from other competing activities," librarians are advised to be proactive in sustaining this interest (4, 22). Salter and Brook (2007) use the term "aliterate" (able to read but lacking interest in doing so) to describe



college students today. Academic librarians have an important role to play in helping to reverse this troubling trend.

There has been a renewed interest in promoting reading not just because of its declining popularity among college-age students but also because research is proving its many benefits. A number of studies have demonstrated a relationship between reading, cognitive development, verbal skills, and academic achievement (Gallik 1994, 486; Krashen 2004, 35; Stanovich and Cunningham 1992). The National Endowment for the Arts (2007, 14) concluded that “reading for pleasure correlates strongly with academic achievement.” Research has shown that leisure reading makes students more articulate, develops higher order reasoning, and promotes critical thinking (Elliott 2007, 41; MacAdam 1995; Rathe and Blankenship, 82). In addition, it improves reading comprehension and helps develop writing style (Block and Mangieri 2002, 572-573; Cullinan 2000; Krashen, 37; Rathe and Blankenship, 82). In summary, a recreational reading collection, as Zauha (60) points out, serves “as a general stimulus for the intellectual life of students and faculty.”

Academic librarians are increasingly mindful of their role in the reading process. Many of them believe that they should be “advocates for reading in all its forms and formats” (O’English, Matthews, and Lindsay, 175). The current literature is filled with recommendations such as these. Van Fleet (2003, 69) argues that leisure reading has a role to play in “developing lifelong learners.” Salter and Brook advise librarians to promote student reading “by purchasing popular literature for recreational reading collections” (39). Librarians should, according to Rothbauer (2006, 126), “take an expanded view of what writing is and what it means to read,” providing “access to

materials that reflect up-to-the minute cultural interests of young people: comics, graphic novels and other drawn books, including self-published ‘zines’ and independent magazines.”

We need to foster reading as a lifelong interest. Fuderer (2008, 5) believes that it is important for us “to do what we can to encourage young people to take up reading as a habit and a hobby.” She surveyed academic librarians who had implemented a leisure reading collection, and “most of the respondents agreed on the value of acquiring popular fiction because any text may be grist for the literary scholar’s research or for classroom study. Most also felt that the academic library has an obligation to respond to students’ wishes for leisure reading. Some of them actively promote leisure reading through discussion groups and blogs” (4). Kaiser identifies the single most important reason for creating a popular fiction collection: people need to “know books as friends and to experience the sheer joy of reading” (Zauha, 57).

Students will experience this “sheer joy of reading” when they love what they read. Somerset Maugham observed, “Who is going to acquire the habit of reading for reading’s sake, if he is bidden to read books that bore him?” (Zauha, 61). There is an underlying assumption in our society that if a book is popular or if a person reads for pleasure, then the book must be inferior and the person wasting time. As Van Fleet states, “Most librarians – and indeed, taxpayers and faculty – regard reading for pleasure or personal growth as secondary to information seeking” (2003, 69). When reading is done for pleasure, observes Ross in her influential *Reading Matters* (2006, 13), “the suspicion arises that it may be unproductive and involve an escape from or even a substitute for

life.” Yet who among us wants our students to leave college without a love of reading that will continue throughout their lives?

Reading, Ross points out, is an acquired skill: “People learn to read by doing lots and lots of reading” (4). Pleasure is the motivating force that inspires readers to spend the thousands of hours it takes to hone the skill and make it an effortless and enjoyable activity. Krashen also argues that pleasure reading is “the best way of increasing literacy” (1). Popular fiction, he concludes, can act as a stepping stone, “a conduit to heavier reading: It provides both the motivation for more reading and linguistic competence that makes harder reading possible” (116).

Reading for pleasure provides opportunities for the focused and sustained reading that students are doing with less frequency since the advent of the Internet. Carr argues that online reading is having a profound effect on cognitive functioning. “Immersing myself in a book or a lengthy article,” he admits, “used to be easy. My mind would get caught up in the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I’d spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That’s rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration often starts to drift after two or three pages. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel as if I’m always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle” (2008). The director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University also finds this decline in sustained reading disquieting: “I do wonder whether typical young readers view the analysis of text and the search for deeper levels of meaning as more and more anachronistic because they are so accustomed to the immediacy and seeming comprehensiveness of the on-screen information – all of which is available without any

apparent need to go beyond the information provided. I ask, therefore, whether our children are learning the heart of the reading process: going beyond the text” (Wolf 2007, 225). Screen-based reading – which is characterized by browsing, scanning, keyword spotting, and non-linear activity – is indeed replacing in-depth and concentrated reading, according to Liu’s study (2005, 705).

Today’s students have grown up in a wired world that facilitates electronic multitasking, a situation that has also contributed to the erosion of focused and sustained attention. Friedman identifies our time as “the age of interruption,” claiming that “all we do now is interrupt each other or ourselves with instant messages, e-mail, spam or cellphone rings. Who can think or write or innovate under such conditions? One wonders whether the Age of Interruption will lead to a decline in civilization – as ideas and attention spans shrink and we all get diagnosed with some version of Attention Deficit Disorder” (2006, A17). Linda Stone has coined the phrase “continuous partial attention” to describe individuals who display an “always-on, anywhere, anytime, any place behavior that involves an artificial sense of constant crisis” (2007). Students today, according to a recent survey, are certainly spending a considerable amount of time multitasking electronically (Mokhtari, Reichard, and Gardner 2009, 618). They may be creating “a cognitive style based on quick, superficial multitasking rather than in-depth focus on one task such as reading” (Levine, Waite, and Bowman 2007, 565). This habitual multitasking, argues Wallis, “may condition their brain to an overexcited state, making it difficult to focus even when they want to” (2006, 39).

Electronic multitasking and online reading are reducing students’ capacity for concentration and contemplation, hindering their ability to interact with texts. “Slowly

and insidiously,” argues Alsop (2005), “our capacity for reflection is slipping away.” Following ideas through to their conclusions and “not darting off on tangents” is crucial to the critical thinking required of students, a skill that is fostered by leisure reading (Smith and Young 2008).

Narrative is a powerful medium, one that transmits the accumulated wisdom of our heritage. Taylor (1996, 11-12) points out that “if cultural conservation is the fundamental mission of education, story is its fundamental medium.” While reading novels, people learn about other times, places, peoples, cultures, ideas, and viewpoints (Bruner 1990). Recreational reading extends our experiences. “When we settle down to read a novel,” Gold (1990, 31) reminds us, “we agree to put to put on the mind of the creator, to try on for size another world view, another way of looking at things.” In a recent study, leisure readers stated that education through recreational reading is easier and more engaging than through traditional types of learning (Moyer 2007). Although these readers did not specifically choose books for their educative merit, they did indeed value what they learned through fiction. Research demonstrates that we remember facts better if they are stored in our minds as narrative. Evidence from studies compiled by Mandler shows that “what does not get structured narratively suffers loss in memory” (Bruner, 56). Taylor (37) contends, “Stories preserve memory best because they give them a shape that attracts the mind.” By creating a popular reading collection within the campus boundaries, librarians will increase the likelihood that students will turn to reading as a pleasurable activity, one that will educate their minds, stimulate their imaginations, and inspire their spirits while simultaneously fostering the communication and critical skills they need to succeed in school and the world beyond.

### **Academic Libraries in the Context of Other Libraries and Institutions**

One way of gauging the response of academic libraries to popular reading collections is to view this response within the larger context of other institutions. Educators from primary grades to graduate school are increasingly recognizing the merits of popular fiction and recreational reading. The emergence of courses, degrees, and research in the field of popular culture (for example Hoover 2006; Lewis 1998; Millard 2003) attests to a gradual shift in thinking, one that accepts this field as an area worthy of study. Having witnessed firsthand the dramatic decline in reading that begins in middle school and continues in high school, teachers are now focusing on popular reading as a solution to declining literacy rates. Research reveals that avid readers are products of families who value reading, believe in its worth, and view it as a highly pleasurable activity. These families make it a priority to read aloud to their children, take them to libraries, buy books as gifts, read for pleasure themselves, and spend time talking about books (McKool 2007, 121-22; Strommen and Mates 2004, 193-96). Schools have increasingly adopted the strategies and practices used by such families. Lifelong readers flourish in environments that are first and foremost book-rich, include a wide variety of interesting materials, and provide easy access to these materials.

Research has shown that avid readers “learned from family, or other members of their social circle, that reading can be an entertaining, diverting, enjoyable, sociable, and therefore, worthwhile activity” (Strommen and Mates, 193). Although reluctant readers in McKool’s study (2007, 122) came from homes where family members did indeed read, these family members read only work-related materials. The reluctant readers rarely saw family members read books or novels for pleasure. We know that older children and

teens prefer scary stories, comics, series fiction, and magazines – popular material that was once in short supply in classrooms and school libraries (Hughes, Hassell, and Rodge 2007, 25; Ivey and Broaddus 2001, 365; McKool, 123; Worthy 1996, 488; Worthy, Moorman and Turner 1999, 18). Now savvy teachers and school librarians stock their schools with a wide variety of material, including popular works as well as award-winning books.

Most schools have adopted programs such as Silent Sustained Reading or Drop Everything and Read to promote a love of reading. These programs set aside specified periods, usually daily, for recreational reading. These leisure reading programs are successful because they allow children to not only choose their own books but also read popular material if they so wish (Gambrell 1996, 21; Ivey and Broaddus, 367; Krashen; Lapp and Fisher 2009, 561; Worthy, 485). Most of the librarians in Worthy's study (1996, 488) believe that the way to hook students on reading is to let them read material that interest them, a belief shared by most school librarians today. The fact that schools set aside regular periods of time for pleasure reading testifies to the value they place upon it. Teachers are increasingly devoting time to dialoguing about leisure books, another successful strategy for increasing literacy and fostering lifelong readers (Bryan, Fawson and Reutzel 2003, 67-68; McKool, 124-25). Other programs such as Accelerated Reading which award points and prizes for reading have had short-term rather than long-term success (Thompson, Madhuri, and Taylor 2008, 550-51). Research has demonstrated that intrinsic rather than extrinsic rewards work best.

Like the education system, public libraries have adopted a number of strategies to foster recreational reading. Fiction accounts for 60% of public library collections – a

figure that has remained relatively stable over the years (Ross, 13; Saricks, 115). Yet librarians have traditionally held an ambivalent attitude towards leisure reading, one that associates guilt with pleasure reading (Ross, 13-14). As Towey points out, “our puritanical heritage values work (information) as more important than play (reading for pleasure)” (2001, 138). Ironically, “leisure reading has long been a motivator for public library use, but has only recently been widely acknowledged as a potential role for libraries” (Adkins, Esser, Velasquez, and Hill 2008, 66). Attitudes towards fiction have dramatically changed over the past decades as librarians have begun actively promoting their leisure collections and adopting the role of readers’ advisor. Developments in readers’ advisory began in the 1980s with the publication of books such as Betty Rosenberg’s *Genreflecting* (Kimball 2006, 18). In 1984, the Adult Reading Round Table was created by readers’ advisory advocates (Ross, 211-12); in 1994, ALA’s Reference and User Services Association established a readers’ advisory committee (Saricks, 7); and in 2000, *Reference and User Services Quarterly* began publishing a regular readers’ advisory column (Kimball, 19). Significant increases in the number of readers’ advisor courses in library schools (Van Fleet 2008, 227), and conference sessions on readers’ advisory topics attest to a growing interest in the role of popular literature in the public library. A dramatic increase in the number of readers’ advisory tools also speaks to a changed perspective on recreational reading. Databases such as What Do I Read Next and Novelist, listserves like Fiction\_L, and readers’ advisor series such as *Genreflecting* and the Readers’ Advisor Guides have fundamentally changed the way librarians provide guidance on popular reading materials.



Public libraries are not just providing readers' advisory services. They are adopting an arsenal of new strategies to promote leisure reading. New catalogues such as Bibliocommons allow patrons to rate books, add their own reviews, and create tags. Public libraries are incorporating data from LibraryThing into their catalogues (Trott 2008, 134), and using services such as Syndetic Solutions to provide supplemental information that facilitates book choice. A number of libraries are providing better access to their fiction collections by adopting bookstore models that segregate fiction by genres. Librarians are delivering book talks, actively scanning the environment for the newest fiction, reading genre literature, facilitating book clubs, and creating blogs and wikis to promote their fiction collections (see for example, Fister 2005, 303-09; Hoffert 2003, 44-46; Hoffert 2006, 34-37; Saricks, 136-60; Scharber, 2009; Trott 2008, 134; Wyatt 2008, 42-45). They are also promoting and marketing their leisure collections by creating readers' advisory bookmarks, enhanced signage, annotated book lists, and attractive book displays. Online form-based readers' advisory services (Hollands 2006, 205-12; Trott 2005, 210-15) and reading maps organized around themes (Wyatt 2006, 38-42) are further examples of innovative strategies that promote leisure reading.

Up until now, college and university libraries have lagged behind other institutions in promoting literacy and lifelong reading. Granted, they have operated under a different mandate than schools and public libraries, but this mandate need not be a barrier to literacy goals. The next wave of recreational reading promotion strategies will emerge from academic libraries. Trott (2008, 134) predicts that colleges and universities will follow the lead of public libraries: "Readers' advisory services offer academic

libraries the opportunity to expand their contact with readers in their university community and to attract new users into the library.”

### **What Are Possible Impediments to Implementation?**

#### **Budgetary and Spatial Restrictions**

Lack of money and space are two of the biggest impediments to the creation of a popular reading collection in an academic library (Alsop 2007, 584; Elliott 2007, 35; Elliott 2009, 341; Zauha, 59) University budgets have remained static for the last twenty years but costs have dramatically increased, and a library is only one among many contenders for a university’s financial support (Lynch et al. 2007; Wegner and Zemsky 2007). In addition, libraries are expected to carry both print and digital resources at a time of diminishing budgets. However, the creation of a leisure reading collection does not have to be expensive. Libraries can start with as few as fifty or a hundred books, adding more material over time. A small collection does not require extensive space; a nook in a location such as the current newspaper area can suffice.

#### **Desired Image of Academic Collections**

There has been a long-standing resistance on the part of some library personnel to including popular books in a university or college library. Eleven percent of respondents in Elliott’s survey of academic library deans and directors said they do not believe in extracurricular reading promotion. They claim that it is not their mandate (2009, 342). Another reason academic librarians have not promoted extracurricular reading is that “it might detract from the image of the librarian as information specialist” (Elliott 2007, 39). Many academic librarians tend to value nonfiction over fiction. Van Slyck (2007) points out that university and college librarians have had a lengthy history of distrusting books

of the imagination in favour of nonfiction. Indeed, university libraries tend to value “‘serious’ scholarship and underserve other types of reading” (Smith and Young, 522).

Elitism in academic libraries is a barrier to the development of a recreational reading collection (Elliott 2007; Zauha). Yet, librarians should be wary of passing judgment on leisure reading. What one person considers popular, another deems literary. For example, scholars are reassessing “chick lit” (Alsop 2007, 581), and educators, librarians, and researchers are studying graphic novels (O’English, Matthews, and Lindsay, 174). Brookover and Burns recommend building the collection your users want, not the one librarians think they should want. “Don’t play ‘Librarian Knows Best’” they advise (40). Students do not and should not spend all their time reading course material.

### **Collection Policies**

Leisure reading has traditionally been viewed as inconsistent with the academic library’s mission to support teaching and research on campus. The introduction of a popular reading collection may be perceived as mission or collection development policy conflict (Rathe and Blankenship, 73-74; Zauha, 59). Although the common view of the library’s purpose is to support the academic program of the institution “libraries have always had a reading agenda as well” (O’English, Matthews, and Lindsay, 175). In fact a survey of academic libraries reveals that many have been engaged in some form of compromise or exception to their policies (Hsieh and Runner 2005, 200). A number of these libraries have not mentioned popular reading in their collection policies but have in fact provided this material (202). It is clear that traditional policies are not preventing most libraries from creating recreational literature collections, and, if they are, libraries should consider re-examining them in the light of current research.

## **Implementation Issues**

Once a library decides to create a popular reading collection, it needs to consider a number of important issues. Anticipating and reflecting upon these issues will help librarians more effectively meet the needs of patrons.

### **A Separate or Integrated Collection?**

There are two distinct ways that libraries can provide physical access to popular reading material. Most academic librarians gather the books together and house them in a separate area. The alternative is to leave the books interfiled with the general collection. The biggest problem with the first approach is that the library must have the room for a separate area. This arrangement also requires staff to change the location code on existing catalogue records and physically move the books to a new site.

However, there are numerous reasons why many libraries consider this alternative. In their study of academic libraries as place, Antell and Engel (2007, 170) conclude that respondents value “serendipitous browsing” (170). In fact, browsability is key to the success of a fiction collection. Many library patrons looking for a novel do not have an author or title in mind. They prefer to browse the collection, leafing through books to make their selection. Placing books in a separately housed area facilitates browsing. When books are assembled in one area, the collection is more visible and convenient for students. These books have far more exposure in a separately housed area than they do if they are buried on shelves in the main collection.

A university library introduces students to the world of books on a scale that many of them have never seen. Students new to the library may feel overwhelmed with its vast size. A separate collection can act as a bridge to the larger collection, especially

for first-year students and other newcomers. A small popular reading collection of a hundred books or so can serve as a less intimidating collection due to its size and browsability (Rathe and Blankenship).

A recent study of the library as physical space concludes that “although some students may seek out the library as a place for interaction with the university community, others appear to be looking for a place to find relaxation and restoration” (Waxman et al. 2007, 430). Students need a place to relax, and a popular reading area within a library is perfectly suited to meet this need. After surveying academics, Antell and Engel (175) observed that “in the physical library’s space, scholars find the solitude and sanctuary necessary for the life of the mind to flourish.” An area set aside for recreational reading would attract users who want to read and unwind.

Resources in a library will be underutilized if people are not comfortable in the physical space itself (Rizzo 2002). Users will always avoid “a confusing, uncomfortable, and unattractive library” in favour of a pleasurable and convenient place (459). Given’s (2007) study of academic space and undergraduates also concludes that comfortable, welcoming spaces are important to students. A quiet nook in the library set aside for leisure reading will attract patrons and increase the use of the material.

### **The Location of a Separately Housed Collection**

Many leisure collections are housed in a prominent place on the main floor of the library, sometimes in a Learning Commons area or close to an in-house coffee shop. Housing the material in a prominent area on the main floor of the library has distinct advantages. If the collection is highly visible, it will promote itself, and in turn, demonstrate the importance of reading (Rathe and Blankenship, 77). Placing the

collection in a high traffic area will attract students, even those who might not think of reading. As one student expressed it, “Like @ the bookstores, how they have all new books right when you walk in” (Rathe and Blankenship 2005, 81). If your library has an in-house coffee shop, locating the collection nearby can attract students. The coffee-shop model of browsing, reading, and relaxing is certainly well worth considering. Another possibility would be to place the collection in the current newspaper area of the library. This is usually a quiet place suitable for leisure reading. Comfortable seating is regarded by most libraries as an important feature of a leisure reading area. Library web sites that promote their leisure reading collections often draw attention to their “comfy chairs.”

### **New Books or Used**

Another issue to consider is whether to use books already owned by the library or to buy new material specifically for the collection. By using existing books, the library can save money, a particularly attractive option in the current economic climate. However, since preexisting books were probably bought to support English courses, they might not be available when needed for coursework.

Buying books specifically for the collection is an attractive option. Doing so will create a visually interesting collection that will attract patrons. Most academic libraries toss book jacket covers, since they do not have the facilities for gluing Mylar protectors over them. The hardcover books that most academic libraries own have another serious drawback. They do not have summaries of their content or other dust-jacket information essential for browsing. Libraries that buy new books for a popular reading collection can purchase inexpensive paperbacks with vibrant covers that include this information.

### **Types of Books to Include**

One of the questions that must be decided is how popular or literary the collection will be. The novels that most university libraries already own are usually far more literary than popular. Whatever the library collects, it should focus on books that the users, not the librarians, consider “great reads.” If the library decides to buy new books for the collection, it has an opportunity to acquire books considered popular.

What genres and types of books should be included? Current best-sellers, movie tie-ins, and popular genres are obvious starting points for the collection. Nonfiction such as biographies, survival stories, true crimes, contemporary issues, memoirs, and the occult are also popular with readers and might be suitable for a popular reading collection. Many college-age students have grown up with graphic novels, comics, and manga, forms of literature made popular by the digital-age trend of favouring images over text. Duke, MIT, Michigan State, Chicago, UC Berkeley, and Rutgers all collect extensively in these genres (O’English, Matthews, and Lindsay, 175).

Creating a collection that reflects a broad spectrum of readers’ interests is particularly important. A wide array of books from the following genres might be considered:

- Fantasy
- Family Life
- Romance
- Psychology
- Thrillers
- Coming of Age
- Horror
- Graphic Novels
- Comics
- Humorous Novels
- Espionage
- Historical
- Action and Adventure
- Science Fiction

- Biography
- Memoirs
- True Crime
- Mystery and Detection.

Librarians should select from as many categories as the budget allows in order to appeal to a wide variety of student interests.

How do you identify these books? Best-seller lists and library catalogues that have popular reading collections will provide a wealth of ideas. Alsop (2007, 583) reminds us that the *Times Literary Supplement* is an important source for books and Van Fleet (2003, 73) suggests that librarians use popular readers' advisory tools such as *Genreflecting* and *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction*.

### **Catalogue Display and Access**

Key to the promotion of the leisure collection will be the way the books are accessed and displayed in the catalogue. Although the online display is very important for a separately housed leisure reading collection, it is particularly crucial for a collection spread throughout the library. Whether separate or interfiled, the collection should have a link to the entire set of books and this link should be easily located in the catalogue.

The most useful displays of records include both images of the book covers as well as summaries of the novels or other dust-jacket information. Some libraries use Syndetic Solutions, a service that displays dust jacket covers, summaries of books, tables of contents, book reviews, awards, and read-alikes – all useful information for the online browser.

### **Maintenance, Promotion, and Evaluation**

Libraries frequently arrange separately housed leisure books by the author's last name, not by LC number. Many libraries add a colour-coded sticker to the spine of the



books so that library staff will have a visual reminder of their location. If the library decides to create a separate collection for popular material, circulation staff could assign a temporary location code to the records of any existing books. By doing so, it would save the time and money involved in re-cataloguing items.

Key to a popular reading collection is keeping it current. Users will gravitate to the latest “hot” book. A person with knowledge of popular authors and books should be assigned the task of regularly identifying new material. If the library creates a Web site for the collection, a staff member will need to keep it updated. Someone also needs to periodically update marketing materials and weed the collection for books that are not circulating.

Promotion of the collection is essential to its success. Libraries can use their newsletters to introduce and highlight it. Books can be uploaded to LibraryThing, a link to them added on Twitter, dust jacket information referred to in library blogs, and images of book covers added to digital display monitors. Public libraries have had great success with creating bookmarks on popular authors in a variety of genres. Academic libraries could also use bookmarks to advertise the collection. They could also adopt bookstore strategies such as displaying some of the “hottest” books with their covers facing outwards.

Once a library implements the collection, it should examine circulation statistics for weeding the books. These statistics will also provide evaluation data for the collection.

### **Why Should You Advocate for a Popular Reading Collection in Your Library?**

Although it might be argued that popular reading does not fall within the mandate of a college or university library, an increasing number of academic librarians believe that they should be strong advocates for reading, and particularly for leisure reading.

What, in summary, are the benefits of a popular reading collection for your library?

- By responding to student requests for popular reading material, the library will be viewed as a user-centered institution.
- The library will attract patrons by providing interesting books and a comfortable, welcoming area where they can read and relax.
- The library will increase its outreach efforts by attracting novice users and non-library patrons.
- The library will foster literacy at a time when it is declining
- The library will promote critical thinking and communication skills in its students.
- The library will help stem the declining interest in reading.
- The library will become an advocate for reading and will foster a lifelong interest in it.
- The library will encourage an activity that will increase students' capacity for concentration and contemplation.
- The library will promote a pursuit that will stimulate the mind, the spirit, and the imagination of your patrons.

Objections might be raised that many college libraries are within walking distance of public libraries, but research has demonstrated that students will turn to another activity if reading material is not conveniently located. The walk to a public library, especially in cold, snowy, or rainy weather, does indeed act as a deterrent to reading.

Students who live on campus or even commute to their school think of the college as their “home away from home,” a self-sufficient community that meets all their needs. If librarians are seriously committed to promoting reading, they should not overlook the research that verifies these facts.

As important as it is to identify specific steps and practical considerations, it is also essential to remember that the implementation of a popular reading collection does not have to be a complex or expensive undertaking. Certainly research increasingly indicates leisure reading’s numerous benefits. 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?

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