Assessment of Public Library Collection
Meeting the needs of the community

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Drexel University: INFO 665: Professor John Wiggins
Diana Austin, Briana Cahill & Deepti Dutta
# Table of Contents

- Literature Review .......................................................... 3
- Evaluation Planning ......................................................... 4
- Data Collection ................................................................ 5
- Collection-Based Assessment ............................................ 5
  - Internal Assessment ................................................................. 5
  - List Checking .................................................................. 5
  - Collection Standards .......................................................... 6
  - Expert Opinion ................................................................. 6
- Use-Based Assessment ....................................................... 6
  - Circulation Studies ............................................................. 6
  - Retrieval Studies ............................................................... 7
  - Use of other Libraries ....................................................... 7
  - Electronic Resources .......................................................... 7
- Collection Management .................................................... 7
  - Assessment ................................................................. 8
  - De-selection ................................................................. 9
- Responsibility for Collection Management ....................... 9
- Frequency of Collection Management ................................ 10
- Conclusion ...................................................................... 10
- Project Planning and Responsibilities ................................ 10
- Bibliography .................................................................. 11
LITERATURE REVIEW

An article by Agee (2005) serves as an introduction for a librarian wishing to develop a collection. *Collection Evaluation* teaches the merits of good collection evaluation in gauging the progress of the library's goals. He discusses three main approaches that help a librarian become more aware of the current condition of the collection: user-centered evaluation, physical assessment, and subject-specific assessment. In order to plan, it is very important to know where the collection stands. The first method, user-centered evaluations, focuses on how well the collection meets the needs of its users. For example, surveys can be conducted through a questionnaire or by looking at circulation statistics. The physical assessment method is a hands-on approach where the librarian judges the materials' condition and content in relation to other available titles. Specific subjects can be assessed by comparing the library's holdings to checklists, collection guides, and suggestions by professional organizations or publishers within a certain field. This article emphasizes the importance of using and combining different methods depending on the type of collection and the particular patron needs and circumstances in the library. Agee's methods are useful because they combine statistics with flair of subjectivity.

Agee's first method is discussed in more detail in an article by Nie (2009), which concerns surveying a public library. The survey uses the online tool Counting Opinions to collect a combination of statistical data and user opinions. The unique amalgamation of information allows a library to further development by processing the information for the librarian. Counting Opinions avoids the pitfalls associated with traditional methods, such as suggestion boxes and telephone surveys. One of the best features is that as this survey is ongoing in nature, it is able to provide updated statistics that reflect changes in a library's development. Libraries are able to use the survey results to plan a course of action and then measure the results. In terms of collection development, the survey is able to track circulation in tandem with comments. The survey also allows various libraries to compare numbers, providing a unique service. Contributors to the subject of collection evaluation agree that periodic updates allow for the best planning practices, but Nie's article drives this point home. This survey method provides ongoing real-time updates, allowing a library to better serve its user's collection needs.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the physical assessment method, librarians can look at how other libraries have evaluated particular subject areas. Hudson discusses a hands-on evaluation for the Accelerated Reader (AR) materials in juvenile and young adult collections. The focus of this method is to compile lists of books that should be discarded, replaced, or added to the collection. These lists come from cross-referencing circulation statistics with lists of titles from the local schools. Titles judged to be useful but in poor condition are priced for replacement copies. Now that Hudson has built a routine around this process, it is an ongoing project, much like the ongoing updates from the Counting Opinions tool in Nie's article. A collection that is consistently weeded and evaluated is a better investment for the library, as Nie demonstrates in the article's collection development statistics. Hudson also shows that, “Juvenile and young adult patrons looking for AR materials deserve and should have access to a well-selected and properly maintained collection of materials that meet their needs and expectations” (2007, p. 31), praising the benefits for library users as well.
Boulé’s article meets the needs of the libraries where collection evaluation is focused around the needs of its users. This article is an account of a Spanish speaking community’s needs assessment used alongside literature review. The assessment and reviews are used to evaluate if the Spanish language library collection meets the needs of the community, and also to compare the Spanish and English non-fiction collections in an anonymous library. Boulé notes that one of the problems is the lack of core lists of Spanish titles (p. 404), however the literature does promote heavy purchasing of periodicals (p. 405), which is a start. Areas that are also recommended include: politics, poetry/short stories, fotonovelas, and multiple topics throughout the 600s (p. 409). Demographic data is also useful when it is broken down into meaningful statistics other than the usual age, gender, and income such as country of origin, vocation, and level of English proficiency or integration need. In order to get a comprehensive picture, a library should also gather data from surveys and focus groups. Boulé concludes that the most appropriate percentage of books for a collection should be equal to the percentage of patrons interested in that topic, which is not the case for the anonymous library in question. To remedy the situation, Boulé suggests educating the staff on user needs, finding the gaps in the collection, and rerouting funds. In keeping with the findings of the previous articles, current information will need to be gathered repeatedly in the cycle of evaluation and re-evaluation.

These four articles outline similar paths to success. The backbone of these methods appears to be accurate and current information from which to start. Even though all of these methods rely partly on statistics, human judgment and labor-intensive study need to be applied in order to create complete assessment. Even though Agee outlines three clear-cut methods (user-centered evaluations, physical assessment, and checking the collection against recommended lists), the examples from the literature are successful because they mix methods: surveys to augment circulation statistics, demographic data to augment core lists, and so on. These collections, if not having their first evaluation, have not been evaluated recently enough. All of these articles show that recurring evaluation is the key to success, much like weeding. If libraries do not fall behind in collection evaluation, then the process is easier to repeat. When a librarian decides it is time to evaluate a collection, these articles provide a solid introduction to many of the methods that are available. Different circumstances call for different methods; however, a combination of evaluation methods is usually the best choice.

**EVALUATION PLANNING**

A carefully planned evaluation project will create an effective measure of the use and quality of a public library’s collection. Johnson (2004) discusses the necessary steps in designing an effective plan. One of the first steps in creating a plan is to define the purpose of the evaluation by stating the objectives of the project and defining questions to answer. All stakeholders should understand why the information is going to be collected and how it will be used within the organization. The plan should designate the assessment techniques, such as what data will be collected, how the results will be analyzed and what format will be used to present the results. The intended audience for the report should be determined during the planning stage. For example, will the information be generated for the library director, the funding board or will it be used for internal purposes? Additionally, the project planners should review the collection development policy, the mission or vision statements and any previously conducted evaluation reports. From these reports and statements, the evaluators will be able to develop a project that
Assessment of Public Library Collection

will directly address how well the library is meeting their stated goals. Planning and preparation also includes setting realistic goals of how much time and staff will be required to conduct the evaluation (Crosetto, Kinner, & Duhon, 2008).

One of the next steps in the project will be to develop evaluation criteria. There are many criteria, which can be used to determine the value of the collection, “the value of an item or a collection fluctuates depending on the yardstick one employs” (Evans & Saponaro, 2005, p. 315). The evaluation criteria create the framework for the project and provide guidance to the evaluators when interpreting the results.

DATA COLLECTION

After completing the plan, the evaluator will begin to collect data. Several techniques or methodologies have been discussed in the literature. These range from qualitative collection centered assessments such as list checking, collection mapping and brief tests of collection strength to quantitative user centered data such as circulation statistics, in-house use statistics and shelf availability statistics. “All seek to provide organized, pertinent, specific, and accurate information about the collection” (Johnson, 2004, p. 270). A balanced evaluation project will employ several methods of assessment.

COLLECTION-BASED ASSESSMENT

Internal Assessment

The Arizona State Library recommends four measures that are essential to analyze the library collection. 1) determine the size of the collection/subject segment; 2) determine the average age (mean or median) of the collection/subject segment; 3) determine the turnover rate for the collection/subject segment; and 4) objectively scan or examine the collection/subject segment (ASLAPR, n.d.). Determining the size of the collection will allow evaluators to compare usage statistics with the number of titles. The median age of the collection will indicate currency and/or retrospective strength. The turnover rate of the collection may identify subject areas or material formats that are heavily used. Scanning the collection is subjective in nature but important to determine how the collection “looks”. By looking at the collection from a user’s point of view, evaluators can determine if the collection is inviting. Public libraries want to attract users and must take action if the collection looks dirty, old or out-of-date.

List Checking

Collection-based techniques allow evaluators to examine the size, depth, and balance of a collection to determine how it compares to external standards. List checking is an important part of the process. This method compares suggested lists of titles against the library’s holdings. The collection is assessed by finding the percentage of titles on the lists that are owned by the library. For instance, many public libraries purchase items recommended by “best of” lists such as those issued by the American Library Association or The School Library Journal. In addition, librarians will look at lists of award winning books and the New York Times bestseller list to determine selections. Evaluators will compare the library’s holdings to these recommended lists and the results will help guide selector’s decisions in the future (Baker & Wallace, 2002). If gaps in the collection are identified, the evaluator may recommend changes in the collection.
development policy to address these deficiencies. Evans and Saponaro (2005) discuss many shortcomings to the list checking method. It is important that evaluators review external lists with the understanding that lists may be out-of-date or that the lists do not include special materials directly related to local needs of the user community.

**Collection Standards**

Evaluators should consider external collection standards such as those published by the American Library Association when evaluating the library collection. These standards are authoritative and set a minimum number of volumes, expenditures and collection levels for a library. When assessed according to these, a library can achieve favorable ratings (Johnson, 2004).

**Expert Opinion**

Further qualitative analyses will look at a collection’s strengths and weaknesses by considering the opinions of evaluators, experts, and users (Johnson, 2004). To employ this method, subject specialists will physically examine the collection to determine how well the collection meets the goals of the library. An evaluator will look at the age, language of publication, percentage of duplication and subject coverage of the collection. Additional qualitative data can be collected from the opinions of library staff members and soliciting recommendations from community interest groups or local hobbyists (Baker & Wallace, 2002). The subject expertise of these groups may inform the library’s evaluation by suggesting subject areas to add to the collection.

**USE-BASED ASSESSMENT**

**Circulation Studies**

Analyzing library circulation transactions is an effective way to gather usage data. “Information can be collected for all or part of the circulating collection by user group, location, date of publication, subject classification, and type of transaction, such as loans recalls, reserves, and renewals” (Johnson, 2004, p. 285). The data can be used in a number of ways to evaluate the collection. Little used parts of the collection can be identified to inform weeding projects. Evaluators may also want to look at heavily used materials to determine how these materials share characteristics with other highly used items (Baker & Wallace, 2002). For example, if the materials identified as having high use are intended for similar audiences or have award-winning status, evaluators can report that information to selectors to influence future purchases.

Baker & Wallace (2002) also emphasize the fact that libraries will want to identify formats, genres, and subject areas that receive high use. Patron satisfaction will increase if the library has popular items readily available. Public library systems may want to organize this data to compare circulation of various categories of fiction in each branch library. From this information, collection decisions can be made about where larger mystery, young adult or romance collections should be housed (Johnson, 2004). Other useful measures used to identify heavily used titles are inspecting reserve lists, examining circulation records of individual materials and checking circulation totals (Baker & Wallace, 2002). This information can be used to modify collection development policies or influence future funding decisions.
Circulation studies have inherent problems because they do not account for in-house use of materials and do not provide information about a user’s failure to identify, locate and borrow materials (Johnson, 2004). In-house use studies are best used to evaluate non-circulating collections such as periodicals and reference materials.

**Retrieval Studies**

“Shelf availability studies, also called retrieval studies, are intended to find out if an item that the library is supposed to own can be located and retrieved by the user” (Johnson, 2004, p. 288). This method of assessment will reveal whether patrons have difficulty locating items they want and will inform staff of the exact reasons why patrons did not find desired items. The evaluator will analyze data to recommend actions that will eliminate or decrease barriers that inhibit use of the collection (Baker & Wallace, 2002).

**Use of other Libraries**

Interlibrary loan statistics are an important factor in any assessment project. ILL requests can be analyzed by author, format, genre and subject area (Baker & Wallace, 2002). Evaluators should look at the detailed data to discover if patrons are consistently requesting specific titles or formats. This information will help selectors determine what areas of the collection need more coverage to handle user demand. One disadvantage to this data is that ILL statistics do not include information about users who did not find needed resources at the library and looked elsewhere instead of requesting materials through ILL (Johnson, 2004).

**Electronic Resources**

Studying the use of electronic resources is becoming an increasingly important part of public library evaluations. Electronic resources, including online databases, free and fee-based websites, CD-ROMS and DVDs, can be costly in terms of access, training, and equipment (Puacz, 2005). Evaluating the usage statistics will allow libraries to measure the cost of local as well as remote access to electronic resources. One method of evaluation includes assessing the database usage and cost per use statistics. “By dividing the price of the database by the number of searches performed, it is easy to see how much each individual search costs the library” (Koehn & Hawamdeh, 2010, p. 170). By studying the cost-effectiveness of acquiring digital resources, libraries make better purchasing decisions in response to user demand.

**COLLECTION MANAGEMENT**

Collection assessment helps library administrators plan and adapt the collection according to the needs of the community and budget changes. It also provides the library staff “a better understanding of the collection, a basis for more selective collection development, improved communication with similar libraries, and enhanced professional skills in collection development” (ASLAPR, n.d.). Constant assessment helps a library stay focused while adding new materials to the collection, and helps evaluate the ‘useful careers’ of the library material so that they can be retired by discarding (Boon & Segal 1995, p. 3). Reports generated by automated circulation systems provide various statistics, which can help in collection evaluation, collection development and collection management (Doll & Barron, 2002, p. 15).
Assessment

Collection centered methods like comparing “library’s holdings against one or more standard lists of materials for a subject area” (Evans & Saponaro, 2005, p. 319) can “help demonstrate the quality of the collection” (Blake & Schleper, 2004, p. 462) as well as reveal gaps and weaknesses in the collection. Reviewing “best of the year lists” published by various associations can also aid in selection. Comparative Use Statistics help in comparing a library’s collection with those of other libraries. It shows how a library compares to others on issues such as staffing levels, budgets, or number of subscriptions and can be helpful in managing the collection in resource sharing environments.

Collection assessment through use-centered methods, like usage data in the form of circulation statistics and user input in the form of requests or surveys, can help in the acquisition of popular items and also in de-selecting materials which are no longer of interest to the community. According to Evans and Saponaro (2005, p. 328), Inter Library Loan (ILL) statistics can also “reveal areas of collection that are too weak to meet all the demands or may need a greater strength coverage”.

The Integrated library system (ILS) statistics can provide the age of a collection and number of titles in a class number. It also provides the circulation statistics for each class, which can help determine the subject areas that are heavily used (Evans and Saponaro, 2005, p. 331). ILS can also be used for subject – data analysis “with parts of the collection or call number ranges on one axis and publication dates or ranges on the other providing an at-a-glance picture of the historical depth and breadth, strengths and weaknesses of the collection” (Blake & Schleper, 2004, p. 461). Average price for titles or class numbers can also be calculated using some systems, which can help in budget planning (Evans and Saponaro, 2005, p. 331).

Agee (2005, p. 93, 94) further argues the importance of Physical Assessment of the collection. “Physical evaluation of a collection gives librarians an opportunity to develop an overall awareness of the collection… Physical handling of books or perhaps a designated sample such as every third book on the shelf, yields results that cannot be gleaned from computer generated data”. This can include content evaluation in addition to gathering information about physical condition, copyright date, language, number of copies, and density of titles in a classification area.

Assessing online databases can be a challenge but a “library needs to review and assess the use of databases. Who is using what and for what purpose” (Evans & Saponaro, 2005, p. 328). “It is also possible to get statistics on both the database and the individual titles” (Blake & Schleper, 2004). This data can help a library assess the impact of e-resources on other services and manage them accordingly.

Gathering data on cost-per-use for books, videos, journal subscriptions or titles within an electronic database can provide cost “for a patron to browse a book, view a video, perform a search or view an article in a database”. In addition to providing information for reconsideration of resources, it shows patrons and management the cost of information (Blake & Schleper, 2004, p. 463).
De-selection

“Library collection should always be evolving to reflect changes in the information needs of its users and changes in information itself.” (Doll & Barron, 2002, p. 59). Selection in reverse or weeding is an important aspect of collection management and involves reevaluation of the collection in order to determine which resources need removal. In addition to a library’s collection development policy and professional judgment of the librarian, Crew guidelines for weeding are recommended for de-selection. The CREW Method lists the following criteria for weeding library collection – number of years since the book’s latest copyright data, the number of years since its last recorded circulation and the presence of various factors labeled as ‘mustie’. Boon and Segal (1995, p.31) define MUSITIE as – Misleading, Ugly, Superseded, Trivial, Irrelevant to the needs and interest of the community and if material may be obtained expeditiously Elsewhere.

In order to monitor their collection most libraries rely on automated computer reports to identify items with low circulation or those that have not circulated in the past X years (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2003, p. 79). The data is quantitative and demonstrates relative use of individual items and areas of collection. According to Evans and Saponaro (2005, p. 305), past circulation statistics or use data can help predict future use and can be considered as a cheaper and faster criteria for de-selection. Other methods employed by libraries include meeting quotas for weeding each year, making periodical trips to the stack on the lookout for overcrowded shelves and monitoring the condition of circulating collection to set items aside for weeding (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2003, p. 79).

Arizona State Library Archives and Public Records (ASLAPR, n.d.) recommend ‘quick and dirty’ weeding that temporarily helps the situation by allowing withdrawal of handful of things “The obvious can be spotted on the shelves: worn, dirty, unattractive, binding that is older than you are, dust on the top of the book, unnecessary duplicates, etc.” Doll and Barron (2002, p. 64) suggest removal of formats which have become obsolete with the changes in technology, unsolicited gifts which do not meet the criteria in the selection policy, items which may have been acquired by mistake (p. 67) and materials which are not indexed (p. 68).

RESPONSIBILITY FOR COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

The plan for collection assessment should also list the staff who would be involved. Since the collection development officers for the library are familiar with the library holdings, they should be responsible for collection assessment and collection management also. According to a survey of 294 North American Libraries on the practice of weeding, the team responsible for assessing the collection and weeding it, ranged from solely ‘professional librarians’ to ‘professionals and paraprofessionals’, and occasionally ‘volunteers’ (p. 83). 86% libraries indicated that at least two people were involved in the weeding process. In 67% libraries, the materials to be potentially weeded were selected by assistants, but a person with the “title of Director, Chief Executive Officer, Chief Librarian, Collection Development Manager, Assistant Director, Reference Librarian, Branch Manager, Head of Reference and Head of Technical Services” took the final decision (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2003, p. 83).
FREQUENCY OF COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

In order to keep up with the changes in technology and societal changes due to economics, politics and demographics, ASLAPR (n.d.) recommends repeating collection assessment every three to four years. Accordingly, a weeding schedule ranging over a period of three or four years is suggested, where the total number of shelves or storage units is divided by 36 months to give the target amount to be reviewed during each month.

The survey of 294 North American public libraries’ weeding practices indicated that: 33% libraries weeded as the need arose, 4.8% weeded every 3, 4 or 5 years, 6.1% weeded every two years, 16.3% weeded yearly, 11.6% weeded monthly, weekly, daily or bi-annually and 23.8% libraries weeded on an ongoing basis (Dilevko & Gottlieb, 2003, p. 79). Evans and Saponaro (2005, p. 297) insist that public library collection should turn over every ten years.

CONCLUSION

“Collection assessment measures the extent to which the collection, both on-site and accessed remotely, meets the goals, needs, and mission of the library and its parent organization” (Johnson, 2004, p. 291). “By recognizing the variety of evaluative approaches and adapting them to local needs and standards, librarians have powerful and effective techniques to produce specific and very meaningful assessment results” (Agee, 2005, p. 93). Evaluation should be an on-going process, which can help uncover the character of current collection, highlight weaknesses, measure depth and coverage, and reveal accuracy and age of the collection (Agee, 2005, p. 93). A good project plan will facilitate repeated collection assessments.

PROJECT PLANNING AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The final project of INFO 665 was a group effort by Diana Austin, Briana Cahill and Deepti Dutta. The project was divided into three sections – literature review about assessing a public library collection, additional approaches towards assessing/evaluating the collection and various measures involved in managing a collection through constant assessment. Finding comparatively recent articles for the literature review was most challenging. Compared to Academic Libraries, the extent of research done in the assessment of Public Library Collection is less. Briana and Deepti helped Diana in compiling a list of articles for the Literature Review. Diana reviewed four articles suitable for this project and wrote a review. Briana worked on the Collection Evaluation and Planning, listing the practical approach towards evaluating a given library collection. Deepti worked on the section for Collection Management, citing the staff involved and the frequency of the task. She also edited, compiled and formatted the material for the report. Briana and Diana helped in proofreading and gave a final approval before submission.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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- This paper/project/exam is entirely my own work.
- I have not quoted the words of any other person from a printed source or a website without indicating what has been quoted and providing an appropriate citation.
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Signature  Briana Cahill/sig
Date       12/03/10