

Bunbury Libraries

Library Guides 2018

Collections Part 1

Collections form the heart of libraries. Their creation and maintenance has traditionally been the core work of librarians since human writing was developed and stored in clay tablet archives.

NB: This is a reference to the ancient Mesopotamian libraries, such as the [Royal Library of Ashurbanipal](#), which were not open for public consumption. The first public library, known as belonging to the Commune (i.e. everybody) was the [Malatestiana Library](#) in Cesena, Northern Italy circa 1454. The honour of being the first public library supported by tax dollars goes to the [Peterborough Town Library](#) in New Hampshire, USA which was founded in 1833. God Bless America.

But how do collections function? And what are the guiding principles behind their implementation, preservation and development? This brief primer isn't intended to take the place of the three years of undergraduate study required for a librarianship degree. However, it will shed some light on the processes and policies (the how's and why's) that librarians follow in the never-ending quest to pass down the knowledge of prior generations.

So what are we referring to with the word "collection"?

Good question. In a general sense, a collection is a group of resources, or objects, that are related to each other in some identifiable way (i.e. various coloured gemstones). When this term is applied to a library, it is referring to the total accumulation of all the items that have been purchased, donated or acquired since the library was first established.

Now these items are normally divided in two overarching categories: the reference collection and the circulation collection. The reference collection is made up of works that are said to provide "ready access to information" (think atlases, encyclopaedias, almanacs, dictionaries, digests and directories). These items are not available for loan and can only be used within the confines of the library. In the pre-internet age the reference collection was often the only source of reliable and academically sound information that was available to the public.

The circulation collection, on the other hand, consists of items that can be taken away from the library for a specific period of time. It is this collection that most library users are concerned with, and the majority of the books they peruse will come from here. All of your beloved James Patterson books can be found in the circulation collection.

NB: University/Academic Libraries differ from public libraries by having a third collection, known as the reserve collection. Items within the reserve collection are mostly textbooks and are intended to be used on campus for a short period of time (i.e. hours and days, instead of weeks).

It is important to realise that a library collection should exist in a dynamic state of perpetual change. This is particularly the case for the circulation collection. Books that are not borrowed for a certain period of time are removed from the shelves and discarded in accordance with an established procedure. Libraries call this process **weeding**, and it is performed in order to ensure that there is adequate shelf space for new items.

The City of Bunbury Public Libraries follows the discard criteria established by the State Library of Western Australia (SLWA).



A benefit, and requirement, of using the SLWA criteria is that it allows us to send certain items back to SLWA in order for them to retain or re-distribute as they see fit. Whilst some might accuse the librarians in charge of this practice of hoarding, others would be quick to point out that every item (barring donations) in the SLWA system was purchased with tax dollars and therefore should be kept as long as feasible. But with 20 books being published per hour in the United Kingdom alone, perhaps making room for new stock needs to be appreciated as essential and worthwhile.

So how are books selected for purchase?

The process behind item acquisition can vary greatly between library services. In larger libraries there are often one or more **acquisitions librarians**. These are normally tertiary trained individuals that have undergone further study in order to become equipped with the skills needed for efficient and effective purchasing.

The entry for acquisitions in the fabulous [Online Dictionary for Library Information Science](#) makes it very clear that the work undertaken by the acquisitions team centres around “obtain[ing] resources to meet the needs of the institution’s clientele in the most economical and expeditious manner.” In other words they need to purchase items that will be borrowed by their library users, and do this as cheaply and quickly as possible.

A primary resource used for acquisitions are the usage statistics that can be obtained from the digital library management system. These statistics can be very precise and allow acquisitions librarians to identify user trends and narrow down exactly what author/genre/category is popular for each aspect of the collection (i.e. Adult Fiction/Non-Fiction). This is a powerful when handled correctly and can take a great deal of guess work out of the purchasing process. However, it is essential to ensure that library collections do not become overly one-sided as they are intended to cater for an entire community.

Interesting sidenote: Outsourcing item acquisition to a third party is becoming more and more common as the 21st century progresses. Known as supplier select, this process requires a library service to create a very detailed profile that will be used to guide the third party acquisitions team.

To be continued.

We hope (Part 1) of this brief guide is useful.

Happy Reading,
The Library