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The Future of Library Collections:

Patron Driven Acquisition and eBook Desirability in Libraries

**Introduction**

Ultimately, the main goal of any library is to get patrons connected with the material they want or need, quickly and efficiently. In public libraries, that might mean finding the most recent Stephen King thriller, in academic libraries that might mean finding an article for a paper due the next day. Regardless, in recent times, libraries have become focused on patrons. It makes sense, then, if a library turns to the patrons to further develop their collections, as the point is to get the materials that patrons need. Recently, there has been a lot of attention given to the digitization of materials, eBooks, eReaders, and how much online presence libraries should or should not have. Are these things really the wave of the future, or are they just a new trend that will fade? When patrons connect with their libraries, are they just looking for a way to download a fun read, or are they still looking to browse the shelves as they always have? Although libraries have changed significantly over the last decade and are now providing services that have turned away from printed materials and physical items, the wave of the future is not solely about eBooks. Patron-driven acquisition (referenced throughout this paper by the acronym PDA) is, however, the smartest way to manage a collection, and collections that have been built by PDA prove that eBooks, while useful, are not as desirable or as prevalent as publishers would lead people and libraries to believe and therefore should not be the primary focus of the modern library.

**PDA Collections**

For some librarians, the very idea of letting patrons decide what materials the library will acquire may seem quite horrifying. However, changing economic and financial climates have forced libraries to change their tactics. In an article exploring the inner workings of the PDA model, it states,

“in the past, it was possible [for libraries] to invest in ‘Big Deals’ from information providers in order to provide a large number of resources for library patrons. In the current climate, ﬁnancial necessity requires librarians to seek alternative models for funding information resources” (Fisher, Kurt, & Gardner, 2012).

A shortage of funds has been a driving force behind this model, but it has grown to something bigger than that. It’s simply illogical to have a collection full of unused material, even if the material is of excellent quality. An unread book does no good for anyone, librarian or patron alike. Librarians often spend a great deal of time agonizing over what to purchase for the library, reading over multiple reviews and looking at the collections of other libraries similar to their own, trying their best to maintain a collection that will be widely-loved and well-used. That knowledge by itself is an argument to keep a librarian-selected collection, because librarians are often the “gate-keepers” of quality information. However, PDA collections, while they are relatively new, are doing well in academic and public libraries alike.

In academic institutions, there have been recent studies pertaining to the low use of librarian-selected materials, despite their quality. One such study done by R2 Consulting showed “unimpressive results of what was termed ‘expert selection’ and strongly suggested that low circulation rates for librarian-selected books demanded the exploration of alternatives” (Fischer, Wright, Clatanoff, Barton & Shreeves, 2012). Another criticism about the librarian-led model states that,

“This collection-building model, often called the "Just-in-Case" model, unfortunately has had a number of shortcomings. The first and foremost may be economic, as ‘price inflation for print and electronic products, the increase in the production of scholarly material, and the increased cost of storing materials that might never circulate’ (Hodges et al. 2010) has rendered anything approaching comprehensive collection building no longer feasible” (Tyler, 2011).

One might suggest in argument that the alternative to the PDA model is to simply acquire materials for patrons through inter-library loan (ILL), but there are shortcomings there as well. ILL is a system that satisfies one person at a time, and there is still a cost per-use associated with ILL. Ultimately, the library’s collection does not change because of patrons using ILL and it is not always possible to get the materials needed through ILL for one reason or another. The PDA model provides a way for the library to continue to be a valuable resource by constantly increasing the collection that also allows for patron involvement.

This PDA model doesn’t only benefit patrons; it benefits librarians too. In an extensive review about the effects of this model, the reviewer says, “POD [purchase on demand, also known as patron driven acquisition] programs have provided excellent PR for libraries and have improved staff morale and led to greater efficiencies in some instances” (Tyler, 2011). Librarians benefit in giving their patrons more control in all of these ways.

**eBooks**

Between Smartphones and eReaders, it’s obvious that the way patrons and readers are looking for information has changed from exclusively using print materials. Databases, for example, are an incredibly sensible way for a library to store articles and journals without taking up valuable space in their libraries, as well as often *encouraging* the use of a PDA model by turning to purchase on demand as patrons need them. There is no doubt that digital materials have changed libraries and have, in some ways, provided sensible ways for libraries to function. To believe that libraries can and will function entirely on electronic materials in the future, however, seems unrealistic based on patron usage as it stands, the large impasse libraries have with publishers, and the overwhelming variety of formats necessary to access digital materials, especially eBooks.

The biggest problem with libraries and eBooks continues to be the publishers themselves. In an article reflecting about the “eBook elephant” in the *Library Journal*, author Matt Enis explains, “many publishers remain reluctant to sell eBooks to libraries” (2012). What eBooks and resources that libraries have, they often have at steep prices and low usages. Academic libraries often have higher usage rates of electronic materials than public libraries, and both libraries have different priorities about their materials, but digital materials provide a new set of problems for librarians. Enis goes on to say “Unlike with print books, eBook collection development requires librarians to weigh factors unrelated to content. Libraries must choose an eBook interface, content that is affordable and compatible with that interface, and vendors with whom they can establish sustainable business relationships” (2012). This can then go on to create difficulties when a library is trying to create a PDA environment. If a patron requests a book in physical format, it can be ordered and then checked out without a single consideration about eReader format. If a request is made and a book is only available for a Kindle reader, then it automatically limits future usage of the material.

Even though patrons are increasingly more technology-minded, “A new report from the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project finds that 12% of readers of eBooks borrowed an eBook from their libraries in the past year” (Clark, 2012). Twelve percent. Not even half of library users, (and the same research shows 58% of the nation are library-card holders) have checked out eBooks in the last year. While this statistic might show proof of the negative opinion about patrons of public libraries, there is evidence that even in Academic libraries, the “net” generation still prefers to use traditional print materials over eBooks, despite their extreme online presence. In an article found in *Reference & Users Quarterly* it was stated plainly that,

“Students -- even NetGen Millennials who are characteristically more at home in front of a computer screen -- have mixed feelings about e-books, as comments such as ‘E-books would be a good source to find things but I wouldn't like it if all print went away’ and ‘E-books are handy but nothing compares to a print book’ help illustrate” (Gregory, 2008).

There is no denying that digital materials are a part of the modern library. A large number of public and perhaps all academic libraries have access to digital materials that are available to patrons and students. It is not to say that they are a negative impact on the modern library, only to say that as long as libraries continue to have several crushing impasses, it is nearly impossible to function on a completely digital collection. Librarians would do well to recognize the continued importance of their print collections, and not to ignore them in favor of an overwhelmingly electronic collection. At this time, it is not the best way to provide service and information to patrons.

**Conclusion**

When building a collection for *any* library, librarians will face a multitude of problems and options that will stand as obstacles to the best collection that they can achieve. An important question librarians can ask themselves about patron involvement was asked at an ALA Roundtable by Sue Polanka, “The big question with PDA is what kind of library do you want to be?” (Thornton-Verma, 2012). Librarians are asking themselves this question almost daily. What kind of library do you want to be? A PDA model allows for a deeper level of interaction that requires commitment to the very people that the library services, but can in turn truly show the value of a library in any public or academic community. EBooks, on the other hand, are simply not the most important thing about libraries and their services at this time. Even with a PDA model in place, eBooks and digital materials will not consume libraries, as many would believe. The best way to reach patrons’ needs at this time is to give them more control over their materials and to focus less on digital materials until they become much more feasible for libraries to handle and they truly become what patrons want over printed materials.

Libraries and librarians can have a monumental impact on their patrons and their communities. Investigated here is a way to keep patrons involved with their library, and an argument about what patrons really want from their library versus what outside influences think libraries should provide. In the end, it is up to librarians to do what is best for their communities. Donna Alward, a director of a public library, says, “librarianship still involves working closely with patrons. Communication skills are crucial . . . but this intimacy phenomenon requires a higher level of sensitivity, tolerance, and the ability to really listen” (2000). Investigation, research, and focusing on community needs are some of the things that librarians do best, and not one facet can be forgotten in building a sensible, affordable, well-loved, and well-used collection for both public and academic libraries.

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