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Using Evidence in Practice

Evidence for Development and Enhancement of a Popular Reading Collection in an Academic Library

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Setting

The University of Maryland is a major public research university located in College Park, Maryland, USA. It is the flagship institution of the University System of Maryland and offers 127 undergraduate majors and 112 graduate degrees through programs in 12 colleges and schools. The University has a total enrollment of 36,102 (26,474 undergraduate and 9,628 graduate) and a tenured/tenure-track faculty of 1,464 (4,410 total faculty). The University of

Maryland Libraries includes eight campus libraries, the largest and most central of which is McKeldin Library, with 1.2 million volumes in the humanities, social sciences, life sciences, business, government documents, and East Asia collection.

In 2011, the Librarian for English and Linguistics proposed the creation of a Popular Reading Collection in McKeldin Library, in response to frequent requests from users for non-academic reading material and

audiobooks. Because of the nature of these materials, the librarian decided to lease, rather than buy, them, and chose Brodart's McNaughton plan as the best way to receive new titles that could be returned once they were no longer popular. Under the plan, the library receives 30 books per month (up to 330 per year) and approximately 60 audiobooks per year. The librarian set up a selection profile for books which identified the genres that the library did and did not wish to receive, and selected audiobooks individually from the McNaughton catalogue. The first monthly shipment of books and audiobooks arrived in December 2011 and were shelved in the busy Learning Commons on the library's second floor. The collection was promoted heavily at first via social media, the Libraries website, posters in McKeldin Library, and a feature in the campus newspaper; ongoing promotion has been through inclusion in the Libraries' printed promotional materials and occasional website news items. Popular Reading Collection materials can be identified through the Libraries' ALEPH catalogue, but not through WorldCat Local. Students, faculty, and staff at the University of Maryland can borrow items for three weeks at a time, plus one three-week renewal.

Problem

The purpose of the Popular Reading Collection is to provide a variety of current reading and audiobook materials that can be continually updated to reflect our users' changing interests.

The problem we face is how to identify those interests and predict what will be popular with our users, so that we can assess whether we are receiving the "right" titles from the vendor. In the interest of efficiency, selection of new titles has been ceded to Brodart staff, who, in theory, have a better understanding of popular publishing trends. However, they serve a variety of libraries and user communities across the country, so they cannot predict what will be popular among a heterogeneous group of students, faculty, and staff at one particular university. Once items

are received at the library, there is also the problem of weeding the collection appropriately to retain the items that are still popular and to keep it to a browse-able size.

Evidence

The primary evidence used in managing the Popular Reading Collection is circulation data. Since May 2012, we have exported reports from our ALEPH Integrated Library System (ILS) on a quarterly basis, which show identifying information, format (book or audio CD), when the item was added to the collection, the number of times the item has circulated, and the date the item was last returned. This last piece of data was not originally included, but as one of our goals is to keep the collection fresh, we began including it in 2014 in order to identify items that have not circulated recently. As our McNaughton selection profile is genre-based, it was also necessary to capture genre information for every title in our collection. This information is not tracked by our library system, so it is added manually by looking up titles in GoodReads, a social media platform for sharing and receiving book recommendations that includes crowd-sourced genre information.

Initially, this evidence was gathered to demonstrate the collection's popularity to administrators and funders. In reviewing the data, it became apparent that circulation statistics would be the best way to identify items that were not popular (had not circulated) and therefore should be returned to allow for new items. Popular Reading Collection items circulate at a much higher rate than our general collections, and the statistics show that they are providing a needed service to our users. All our data can be viewed online at <http://hdl.handle.net/1903/15567>.

Secondary evidence used to manage the collection includes questions asked through our online reference system or at the Library Services Desk, and requests for particular titles submitted via email.

Implementation

At first, using the circulation data for weeding decisions was rather straightforward: every quarter, we returned those items that had not been checked out. After nearly a year, however, there were fewer and fewer items with zero checkouts appearing on the reports. At that point, we began to rely on how long items had been on the shelf combined with number of circulations (e.g. items that have been on the shelf for at a least six months and have circulated fewer than five times). Now we also consider the last time an item has been checked out.

In the summer of 2013, we decided to review returned books by genre to determine whether our selection profile was meeting users' needs, and also by format to generate a profile for audiobooks (which had been selected individually up to that point). Genre was manually added to the weeded book reports, and subsequent calculations based on circulation rates showed that we should decrease the percentage of Mysteries/Thrillers and Westerns and increase Romance and Sci-Fi/Fantasy.

The circulation data is obtained from ALEPH reports that are provided in Microsoft Excel. We have utilized the built-in sorting and filtering features a great deal in determining which items to weed. When we began carrying out more in-depth calculations and assessing the entire collection as opposed to just the weeded books, we combined the data using Open Refine (formerly Google Refine), which is a free and open source tool that facilitates cleaning and organizing irregular data. In this case, the circulation reports had been generated over two years and so column headings and cell formats varied slightly. Open Refine also allowed us to easily combine the quarterly circulation reports into one large table with uniform data. We could then use that clean data to create an Access database to facilitate the addition of genre information through a user-friendly form, and the generation of complex queries such as the

percentage of items from each genre that had circulated more than five times.

Outcome

Location had the largest impact on circulation statistics, which increased by over 10% when the collection was moved to a prime spot by the entrance on the first floor of McKeldin Library, even though advertising had ceased almost entirely. Not only does every person entering and exiting the library see the collection, it is also next to an elevator, where users often browse while they wait. Users looking for "the fiction section" get something much closer to what they were expecting.

Adjustments to our profile to include more of the popular genres and fewer or none of the genres with lower circulation mean that 75.5% of items have circulated at least once. Popular non-fiction has proved more popular than anticipated, while Westerns have been dropped completely.

The popularity of the collection led to requests for a DVD lending collection and a graphic novel collection by the library's student advisory committee. The evidence from the Popular Reading Collection gave weight to these proposals. The collection has also helped us promote other, related collections. Questions about the graphic novels in the collection are often a jumping off point to introducing users to the other graphic novels in our regular collections.

Reflection

Adding genre information to all 928 popular reading item records was time-consuming and, unfortunately, of limited use in the end. After we collected the genre information, we were disheartened to learn that Brodart does not use genre designations in the way we had thought.

Selections are made by our account representative from a list of titles that Brodart believes will become popular based on past sales by the author, pre-release publicity, and

other factors. That list does not include genre information; it is up to our representative to judge whether or not a book fits into a genre we want. (This may explain why we ended up with a number of Christian romances in our collection, despite the fact that we had asked specifically to exclude Christian fiction, after we increased the percentage of romances in our profile.) In practice, this means that the data we have collected on circulation by genre is of limited use; we can adjust the selection profile but have little control over what titles are actually sent based on that profile. Working with Brodart to improve the selection profile and process will be one important outcome of this assessment.

Future topics for investigation include: the effects of location changes or promotional efforts on circulation statistics; comparisons of Popular Reading and regular Stacks items with similar call numbers; identifying an ideal size for the collection (e.g., do circulation statistics stop growing when the collection becomes too large to browse easily?); and circulation statistics for various users types (faculty, graduate students, undergraduates).