April 1992

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Recommended Citation

Hamaker, Chuck (1992) "Nemesis/Is Collection Development Narcissism?," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 9.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.1171>

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The Probing Nemesis

Is Collection Development Narcissism?

by **Chuck Hamaker** (LSU)

A little gadflying at the library profession never hurt anybody. Read on.

Academic and research library collection development officers have often failed to communicate what it is we do, why we do it and what the outcome is, to the bodies that in the end will judge our success or failure—the community of peers within our libraries and the community of scholars, researchers and yes, students, who use the collections. We may be involved with a group of university faculty, we may be involved in professional specialty fields, but we are unlikely to have convinced many within the larger communities that what we do is either unique or important. We seldom even bother to explain to other professionals why a particular title or group of titles is important to a specific collection or a specific type of patron. Because of this basic failure to communicate as the number of books purchased declines, we may become, to use a British phrase, redundant.

Perhaps this failure to explain why we do what we do is why, even in fairly large libraries, collection development may be just one of many duties an assistant or associate director has assigned to her. Perhaps it is why the professional field of Collection Development, born in the money flush period after World War II, may be on its way to extinction. Even in the largest of libraries its *raison d'être* is being questioned.

The literature, other than the recent spurt of activity in serials pricing, has generally been addressed to other "CD" types. Much of the serials pricing literature, in fact, has been written by "serialists," library directors and generalists. Because of its audience, those who have written about the serials wars have gained tremendous prestige as individuals who understand and measure and explain a very complex system. What literature has collection development produced of equal stature and importance? As reference librarians

become more involved in CD, in fact they are re-inventing the wheel, in essence ignoring the literature of the last 20 years in CD. The conspectus effort comes the closest to a significant body of literature, yet its lofty goals cannot be said to have materialized. It stands as CD's monument of the 80's and has become as funding support for collections evaporates, an artifact and training tool. Concrete results from its adoption are fairly small for the amount of effort expended in spite of the efforts of dedicated individuals and theorists. Until the last year however, it was heresy to suggest the conspectus was a failure in its broad outlines. We need a brawling, lusty contentious literature, not one dominated by a few themes. There is just too much that needs to be done in the field to feel complacent about any accomplishment.

Attempts to quantify what it is bibliographers and collection development librarians do have been infantile at best, and non-existent at worst. We can make some judgment as to cataloging productivity and even quality. There are internal measures of productivity in serials and acquisitions and a growing body of national literature addressing standard claiming, ordering and negotiating techniques and outcomes. There is nothing similar that even suggests what appropriate measures of bibliographer or CD activity might be. There have been countless studies trying to assess through peer review and "unobtrusive measures" and direct questioning how thorough a job reference librarians do. Yet these two fields, reference and collection development have proven difficult to judge. This evidence of complexity, while it has not hurt reference, where there are more practitioners than probably any other field in academic and research libraries, is ignored in evaluating Collection Development activities. The old saw about selection being the epitome of professional ac-

tivity has been defeated in practice while being paid lip-service to by all.

Number of books ordered is sometimes seen as a substitute for measuring CD output. But even intuitively that is a false measure. The prize would consistently go to the third world foreign literature bibliographer for the most "output" because the items cost the least and "more" can be ordered than for other fields.

Bibliographers have shunned books used per size of collection or per title purchased as an outcome measure, with a multitude of reasons why a particular subject would behave differently at a given time, or uniquely in a given institutional setting. In fact, good articles attempting to define precisely this type of criteria have routinely been ignored over the last twenty years. Bibliographers and CD specialists have never suggested a "standard" use measure, a standard goal for "non-use," i. e. "research material," or anything else except percentage of coverage of a field—which is a function of fund availability. Instead, "standard" bibliographies and list checking have substituted for research into the appropriateness of collections decisions. We have failed to use the tools of the new electronically sophisticated library to defend collections, funding and selections. At LSU I can demonstrate that close to 60% of the new books we add each year are used within 12 months of addition to the collection. That is well above the use level that I believe should exist for a research collection, but that is personal opinion. There are no comparison figures: even in this quantifiable observation; there are no targets to distinguish "current" collections from "research" collections and not even a theoretical approach to what this level of use means to survivability of the collections. A range of "short term or immediate use" targets would provide a clearer definition of research versus

"core" collections. That is a basic and simple statistic to gather with current technology, but even it would be light-years ahead of where we are. ARL could take the lead in using this type of criteria to distinguish research collection purchasing from "core" collection additions.

In the new era of libraries without book funds or with depressed book buying capacity, who needs a high priced specialist in selection? Can't the reference department which surely knows what it is people really want, do just as good a job as "specialists"? Have we ever proven that just "anybody" can't do collection development effectively? At the least it makes philosophical sense to place selection in the hands of people who have a daily responsibility to help real library users. Yet, even with this approach there are a multitude of problems. Just one minor problem is the lack of standard criteria lists of basic CD competency skills that could guide training of such selectors or reviewers. (Susan Fales at Brigham Young University has made an excellent beginning at such a list and the U.T. Austin CD manual is another important exception.) We are working on a common base level of knowledge at LSU for selection personnel, but this is a basic need. Why haven't we already met it? And why isn't there a premium paid for long-term involvement in an institution's collecting efforts. It is the memory and commitment of individual librarians that really creates long term collecting profiles, not the existence of a conspectus number—but even that is an unproved thesis. Many CD librarians have to move every three to five years to stay even with cost of living increases. This represents profession-wide self-destructive behavior. Continuity is the key in building collections. I have yet to see a CD treatise explain the importance of that concept tied to individuals. Hiring a new collection development librarian every five years should be seen as a measure of failure in a library. It is not.

Administratively, CD has often been a non-line position. It often gets lost "under" public services. Without a significant supervisory function,

why does a CD officer even need to sit in a director's administrative council. Tradition? Only in the very largest of libraries are there enough "lines" reporting to CD to make administrative sense out of the "position" of an assistant or associate librarian. Is there something else central to what libraries are that makes CD unique and essential? Have we defined that essentialness? And whose job is it to do that definition. I would suggest that it is not just the professional collection development librarian's job, but the task of the whole library profession to define and measure and understand what it is a CD librarian should bring to the library, can do for the library. We should create a common understanding, a shared set of expectations that let us know when a CD librarian has done an exceptional job, a mediocre job, an unsatisfactory job.

Where is the philosophical or statistical or theoretical justification for collection development that goes past tradition? Ross Atkinson, Paul Mosher, and Charles Osborne and others have made a beginning in theoretical underpinnings, but that work is not universally accepted and with the new fiscal realities may never stand the test of time.

Area studies librarians have a demonstrable expertise and focus that defends their existence, but often does not defend the funds to support their efforts. Specialized collections are often the first to lose support in a fiscal crisis. What is the effect on the nation of such a loss of diversity in the composite national collection? Why don't we have the reporting mechanisms in place to tell the nation what is happening to international research capacity as area studies collections are hit by cancellations and budget cuts? We are now almost five years into a crisis in acquisition of foreign books. Jaia Barret, Anna Perrault, Asunta Pisani, Gayle Garlock and others are making a beginning at defining the problem. We've all seen it coming but have been unable to prove it.

In the serials wars that we are all losing right now, there will be victors

and there will be losers. My best guess is that among the losers will be collection development librarians who have failed to understand the very system they depend on for existence, and have from some perspectives permitted this system to destroy the bread and butter of their livelihood—which has always been selection, justification, overview, review, protection and access for collections. If selection has died at the hands of the serials collection, then selectors themselves may be unnecessary, not to mention the "supervisors" of selectors.

With widescale use of approval programs there is growing belief that once a profile is set Collection Development oversight is redundant. If approval programs are automatic and serials which only get reviewed in budget contingencies are automatic, who needs Collection Development Librarians? Once the intellectual context is set, then only clerks are needed to receive the material and supply standardized cataloging. Perhaps a new journeyman class of CD experts can move around the country creating the "ideal" collecting profile, location by location. Vendors apply the profile and supply the material, no muss no fuss. Vendor generated statistics show accrediting bodies how much was spent by standardized categories—any good secretary can pull that together—purchasing agents negotiate discounts and service charges, and libraries can't afford OP material anyway. What is wrong with this scenario? It is in the best interest of libraries and vendors and publishers and yes faculty and students to protect the existence of the evaluative function. Can we prove that an approval plan without selector review is any better than an approval plan with regular review?

Archivists can point to cubic feet or meters of records processed, as well as reference questions answered and items microfilmed. The fallacy of "numerical" measures has become a substitute in some areas for measures of success. Yet, all CD has as a defense is number of items ordered and percentage of budget expended by date x, with an

estimate of next year's fiscal needs that a competent acquisitions and serials librarian could provide. Yet, it is collection development librarians who provided advance warning of the crisis in serials. Serials librarians very quickly caught on and became "experts" but it was CD librarians who started the public outcry, brought the initial focus. What happens to academic and research libraries when that overview, big-picture responsibility for analysis disappears?

Add to a perceived lack of justification, the enticement of the new "just in time" philosophy which basically says that what we should do is provide what people want, when they want it—and only then—and you have another justification for redundancy.

Some needs are obvious. We need people to order, to catalog, to process, to shelve and to help "patrons". Why in the world do we need an appendage whose sole reason for existence is to oversee selection decisions? Especially as the number of books we can buy slowly sinks into the sunset. Why

haven't we established a national minimum book purchasing level as a protection for academic libraries? A minimum book purchasing level, without which I believe a library should lose any and all accreditation is one book per student per year for general academic libraries. Good libraries buy much more than that. But even good libraries need protection in the current environment. Why haven't we established even a "replenishment" level for collections on the basis of use statistics? Is the math too complicated?

As a profession, librarians have made no case for the absolute necessity for the overview that responds to the interdisciplinary nature of research, for the person responsible for leading a specialist selector to realize that engineers need those new math books even if math faculty don't, that the department of human ecology (in the college of agriculture) is as concerned about chemistry journals as the chemistry department, that ecologists are in all the traditional science disciplines cutting

across traditional boundary definitions and that the field of human kinetics is as concerned about geriatric journals as our medical schools. The foremost proponent of interdisciplinarity turns out to be Eugene Garfield and other information scientists. Yet, in defense of good STM journals, that is how many of them are consciously built. Why has it taken so long to discover this. In fact there are very few articles in the library literature documenting the cross-disciplinary nature of serials collections, or book collections for that matter. Paul Metz's work *The Landscapes of Literature* is the only major study that demonstrates the inter-connectedness of book use. And it is a classic without acknowledgement. Try to find a recent citation to it. Perhaps more surprising, Simon Fussler wrote a paper published in 1946 that documented cross-disciplinary use of the journal literature by chemists and physicists. About 75% of the journal titles they cited in their literature were not in their main subject areas. We have ignored such research literature.

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Instead we re-invent the wheel regularly. How many serials reviews going on right now have in-depth knowledge, i.e. beyond the "intuitive" grasp of individual librarians, on the cross-disciplinary nature of individual serials collections. This is not a new concept, but we have ignored its implications for funding and organization of collections for almost fifty years. Is it any wonder there doesn't seem to be a coherent basis for collection decisions.

As a profession we have not defined in an intellectually defensible manner a minimum goal of new or old titles necessary to support a chemistry program, an undergraduate course in art appreciation, an undergraduate college of 14,000 students, or a university of 25,000 students. We don't know how many different books a college student checks out in her career, we do not know how many books the typical history professor consults in a year, we do not have a clue whether mathema-

ticians really don't use books (just journals ma'am, that's all we need—so they say). We can't prove that a Ph.D. in physics needs more journals than a Master's candidate in music. We have not defended books or collections, we have not defended library use, and ultimately we have not justified the existence of collection development as a specialty. We can't even define that traditional goal of "balance" in a collection. We can't prove what our users need, let alone what they want. And those questions are central to what collection development is and does.

They are tough questions which we should discuss in our library schools. Instead the traditional CD "teaching" and much of the literature is censorious, decorous, or morally uplifting, although we are beginning to see articles supporting scholarship and research in the field. But research supporting the necessity of the existence of the field has not been not convincing. Yet, the need is critical as the number of titles purchased drops.

As a profession librarians have not protected collections; we have not justified them; we have not demonstrated their centrality; we have not explained the importance of immediacy of access, nor the results of availability of important collections to students and researchers. We have assumed centrality as an article of faith. That faith is being challenged by economics and technology. There are platitudes and testimonies, and anecdotes, but hard evidence scarcely exists. (My thanks to Edwin Shelock formerly of the Royal Society of Chemistry for pointing this out to me).

Perhaps we deserve the fate of Narcissus, trapped by the pool, entranced with the vision of self. The problem is, the pool is being drained as we watch, and soon there may be nothing but muddy water left. What will Narcissus find when he can't even see himself? Will he be satisfied without the reflected picture. Certainly there is no one who will tell him how beautiful and essential he is when the pool is gone. ♣