

One Root, Many Trees: Reviving Collections Practices

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One Root, Many Trees: Reviving Collections Practices

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Abstract

Collections are undergoing intense change and pressure from technology, budgetary uncertainties, and emerging perspectives on future approaches. Our case study—drawn from our experiences as collections librarians—examines these complex issues facing academic collections, large or small, across the profession. Through the development of “collections of distinction” within the local collection, collaborations and scholarly partnerships with colleagues and faculty, and advocacy for the importance of dedicated oversight to ensure that collections investments fulfill the academic mission, we explore possible solutions to the complicated issues defining contemporary collections practices.

Introduction: The Future(s) of Collections

Transitions underway from print to digital, from seemingly static items on shelves to dynamic digital resources unbound by time or place, are altering all aspects of librarianship in the twenty-first century. Our panel from Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries addressed these changes, sharing insights from our experiences as collections librarians during a period in which the profession is revisiting the nature, structure, and future of academic library collections. As a new member of the Association of Research Libraries, our work joins a larger conversation about how collections, both large and small, can navigate the transformations taking place and yet to come.

Our perspectives are unique, but our common concern is the continued importance of collections oversight—perhaps even more crucial now, as the intricacies of new print and digital resources, their cost, and their alignment with our imperative to provide the most comprehensive and accessible forms of information to our communities require focused attention. Collections have come to be managed by diverse systems, or models, within libraries; not only have models sprouted branches from the collections tree, but a veritable forest of different approaches to these challenges stands before us. Each is rooted in a deep commitment to the value of making collections vibrant for the present moment, and far beyond.

As a humanities collections librarian, I recognize the far-reaching changes underway are not moving

as swiftly in these disciplines, perhaps, as in other fields. The centrality of long-form analysis—as embodied in the printed book—remains important to the humanities as the means of disseminating the scholarly record. “Long-form humanistic scholarship,” Michael A. Elliot (2015) notes,

has been a vital medium through which the humanities achieves impact both within and beyond the academy. . . . We realize that long-form scholarship may change as new forms of digital publication become available . . . *but we recognize that evolution of the monograph will be gradual.* [Emphasis added]

The tide of new print often seems growing, not decreasing, bringing in its wake difficult questions of how to make ever-enlarging collections available and relevant for research scholars. The cold realities of space and storage within library systems are even more complex, and overshadow my observations.

Local large-scale collecting may no longer represent research or the ways information (including print) is accessed in academic libraries. When the mutability of budgets, the decline of monograph usage, and the alarming increase in the cost of both print and digital resources is factored into these deliberations, it quickly becomes extremely complex to weigh local research needs, the preservation and continuation of the scholarly record, and the potential paths forward to the future of collections.

Identifying “collections of distinction” within collections suggests a way of applying subject librarians’ expertise to enhance local collections. This strategy provides regional and national access to holdings that may be unique or scarcely collected. Collections of distinction are framed by the likely move in coming years toward “mega-scale” collection practices. “Mega-scale” collecting for print would build on existing consortia and potentially create regional hubs for shared collections. “Distinctiveness is a desirable feature of local collections,” Brian Lavoie, Constance Malpas, and J. D. Shipengrover (2012) observe:

If a significant portion of each participating institution’s print collection is distinctive—that is, comprised of publications not widely available at other institutions—then combining print book holdings into a collective collection yields a print book resource that is, from the perspective of the user, far more extensive than what is on hand locally.

Local collections practices would cultivate distinctiveness, thus contributing to the comprehensiveness of the whole.

Such initiatives may prove equally as gradual as the conclusive shift from print, and would involve thoughtful engagement with faculty and others in the academic community. Adopting a collections of distinction strategy in my oversight of the humanities areas has led to important enhancements. Our local collections of distinction strive to reflect the strengths of programs as well as the university’s mission to foster a community of inclusion, diversity, and creative exploration. As VCU Libraries has a longstanding engagement with the literary arts, especially poetry, in the campus community, with collections that support a prominent program in Creative Writing, my emphasis became the enhancement of poetry holdings.

My guide for this work is the Levis Reading Prize, a national literary award for poetry. Co-sponsored by the VCU Department of English, VCU Libraries, the VCU Honors College, the College of Humanities and Sciences, Barnes and Noble @VCU, and the family of Larry Levis, the prize is named for the late Larry Levis, who taught poetry at VCU and was an influential mentor for poets across the United States. Celebrating the work of younger poets, the award encourages the diversity of viewpoints, experiences, and artistic approaches that distinguish

contemporary poetry. To broaden the representation of global poetry and of too often unheard voices from diverse communities—and also poets across Virginia and the region—I seek to include poetry in its original language or translations. Gathering these voices enriches the humanities collections and supports the values of the university. As a result of this dedicated investment, the poetry collections at VCU Libraries have grown significantly, so that current holdings are reaching toward the levels of our aspirational peers.

Many possible futures await collections—our decisions today will greatly influence the depth and availability of scholarly resources far into this century. If local collections gradually merge, either regionally or nationally, into a vast shared resource, a “mega-scale” undertaking, it yet remains likely, to my mind, that book-focused humanities collections will remain a vital part of individual library holdings. Distinctive collections may therefore prove large-scale in their contributions to the cultural life of all.

Kevin Farley, PhD
Humanities Collections Librarian

Curating an Arts Collection

The School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University is consistently ranked as one of the top art schools in the country. Currently, vcuarts ranks first among public graduate programs and second among programs public or private (“Best Graduate,” 2017). Such an eminent program requires strong collections from the library and great value from the library’s collecting practices.

In 2013, an evaluation of the collecting programs for the arts revealed that the approval plan in the arts was not providing the necessary value. The most serious offenses were titles not meant for academic use; that lacked footnotes, a bibliography, even in some cases an index. Many titles received would not be acceptable for an AP art history paper; they were useless to PhD students studying for field exams. There were also titles that were definitely meant for academic use, such as revised dissertations, that were outside of our curriculum needs. We were unable to return most of these titles as they arrived shelf-ready, which was our choice. Conversations with our vendor could not solve the lack of value in our approval plan. The vendor was unable to discern appropriate academic titles for the arts and

unable to send a list of titles ahead of shipments for approval purposes.

As VCU Libraries prepared for a construction project, it became clear that the approval plan was not only wasting money, but these unacceptable titles were also taking up space on our shelves, an increasingly valuable resource. To better serve our arts users, VCU Libraries made an unusual decision in this era of library collections and stopped the academic approval plan for the areas of fine arts and photography. Apart from an exhibition catalogue approval plan provided by an arts-focused vendor, the Arts Collections librarian would acquire resources through intentional collection. Funds for the approval plan were returned for firm orders but kept separate from department budgets. These funds were spent under the same parameters of the approval plan—on titles in the call number ranges closed, that are under the set price limit for approval titles, and which are of the expected quality for an academic research library. Three years of intentional collecting has created value in the collection and has saved a significant amount of money. When we closed the call number ranges for fine arts and photography, VCU Libraries was spending \$33,000. For the 2018 fiscal year, we have budgeted \$15,000 for these ranges.

Collections are becoming increasingly complex with more types of resources and more ways to acquire materials. As this complexity increases, so does the need for libraries to have specialists who understand their particular needs and parameters. Developing a dedicated collections practice allows libraries to strengthen their decision-making, a position of power for libraries. The business of publishing is very different from the business of education and the business of libraries. Libraries need to recognize the corporate intentions existing in their collections and practices, especially when these do not serve their agenda. The Arts Collections librarian works with VCU arts faculty, researches in VCU's collection, and makes daily decisions regarding content, format, and directions of collections; this is the individual who has the knowledge and desire to make the best possible decisions for the faculty and students. Dedicated collections librarians can increase the value of collections, and their skill set of constant and complex decision making helps navigate the increasingly complicated field of academic publishing.

Emily Davis Winthrop, PhD
Arts Collections Librarian

Building the Engineering Collection

The School of Engineering was established in 1996 during a period of slow growth in the collection funds at Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries. With four programs—Mechanical, Electrical, Biomedical, and Chemical—awarding baccalaureate degrees, it was necessary to build the engineering collections very quickly. As a new school, the faculty increased each year with new hires who needed collections to support their teaching and research. On close examination the existing collections in the sciences required enhancements to meet the demands of this new school; this was not the case for the engineering collection. In the area of engineering, the monographic collection was sparse, the journal collection was inadequate and lacked necessary backfiles, and core electronic databases were almost nonexistent. The faculty were depending on colleagues from their previous universities for their information needs. This was an unacceptable situation: It was imperative that VCU Libraries develop a collection.

I came to VCU in 2000, at a critical stage in the life of the School of Engineering. The school was four years old, but the collection was still minimal. It was my responsibility to build and manage collections in the science, technical, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. This was a challenging task, especially with a decreasing and inconsistent budget. However, persistence and consistency reigned supreme. Dedicated collections librarians are able to devote almost all their time to collection building and maintenance, being strategic, cautious, but intentional. In order to build the engineering monographic collections quickly, an approval plan was set up and a comprehensive approval plan profile put in place. New collections management policies informed this process.

In engineering, as in other scientific disciplines, journal publications are crucial as they disseminate current research results. Society journals are of utmost importance and relevance, hence VCU Libraries began subscriptions to a number of journals from key engineering societies such as the American Society for Mechanical Engineers (ASME), American Institute of Chemical Engineers (AIChE), SPIE, Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), and the Optical Society of America (OSA), to name a few. In addition, subscriptions to journals from notable commercial publishers rounded out our holdings.

In a networked environment, the benefits of a consortial relationship cannot be overemphasized. The Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA), a statewide consortium funded by the Virginia legislature, provided just such an opportunity. Moving earnestly, we were able to join other state doctoral institutions and shared the costs to provide access to core electronic resources such as IEEE Xplore and ASTM Compass. At the same time, commercial publishers and societies bundled journals and electronic books into digital libraries. As funding became available, we began subscriptions to these digital libraries and used one-time funds to purchase backfiles for the major society and commercial journal holdings. These investments extended the breadth and depth of the collections.

No engineering collection is complete without patents and standards. In a medium-size school, subscribing to large standards databases was not cost effective. Therefore, a deposit account was set up with a standards vendor for procuring standards-on-demand. More comprehensive access to standards is provided by the addition of the standards database ASTM Compass and the standards available in IEEE Xplore. Contrary to standards, patents are freely available, offered via open access through the United States Patent Office (USPTO), Google Patents, and Espacenet of the European Patent Office (EPO), to mention a few.

Today, a benchmarking comparison of the VCU electrical engineering collection with those of six VCU peers, using the OCLC WorldCat Collection Evaluation module in the WorldShare Management System, shows the collection has completely erased its initial shortfall. VCU's collection now compares favorably with those of large research institutions of the same size and stature. It moved from holding 20% unique titles to 60% unique titles and moved from a measure of 60% not owned down to 10%. The quality also improved significantly as VCU is labeled as a net lender in interlibrary loan.

It is important to maintain, as this analysis shows, a model of collection management that gives the primary responsibility for the library's strength and reputation in a given subject field to a bibliographer who will place the greatest emphasis on the particular function (Cogswell, 1987). This model allowed me to build the entire engineering collection from the ground up, with confidence, to a national or international level while also developing Collections of

Distinction in Forensic Science and Economic Botany/Medicinal Plants.

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Science and Engineering Collections Librarian

Critical Partnerships

Strong partnerships with stakeholders both inside and outside of their libraries are essential to successful collection development. These include building partnerships with outreach librarians, faculty, acquisitions librarians, and staff and vendors. One of the most fruitful of these partnerships is the one with outreach librarians. A solid working relationship that focuses on the exchange of information and ideas is ideal. For example, in my work as a collections librarian for the school of business, I work closely with the outreach librarian. We meet and communicate on a continual basis and through this approach are able to keep a pulse on the requirements and requests of the faculty and students in a strategic manner. For decisions regarding electronic resources, we have created a shared document listing priorities. We both add, delete, and shift priorities as we gather more information from our independent research and from our stakeholders. We respect each other's contributions, recognizing that a diversity of skills and knowledge, along with working toward a common goal, result in first-rate collections and services for our users.

Another fundamental partnership is with faculty. Here communication and the exchange of ideas and information are vital to success. Faculty may request items, but for the most part, they depend on collections librarians to identify resources that support their research and curricular needs. Faculty may be clear on what library resources *they* need, but it is the collections librarians who have the expertise to curate a collection for the entire discipline, beyond the immediate needs of a single faculty member or research area. The time and effort I have spent developing collaborative relationships with faculty has offered me the opportunity to become an integral part of their research project team.

Establishing and maintaining a robust and collaborative partnership with acquisitions is integral to achieving superior collections. The business of providing resources is complex and constantly evolving. Acquisitions librarians can keep collections librarians apprised about new developments in licensing and

contracts, information about changes with vendors and about related purchasing mechanics. Resource procurement is a dynamic environment that requires consistent and reliable communication that can only happen with mutual respect between collections and acquisitions. While vendors have a role in this partnership, is it the collections librarians and acquisitions department that determine what vendors are chosen, why they are chosen, and when changes are needed in order to meet the goals of the organization as well as the research and teaching needs of the user community.

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Conclusions

This paper reviews our dedicated collections librarian model that has proved successful for many years. We recognize that our model does not exist in a vacuum and that the world of academic librarianship is dynamic. New technologies and organizational approaches will continue to impact the way we work, and while new ideas must be considered, they should not be adopted without proper review.

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