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Popular Reading Collections in Academic Libraries: Goals, Parameters, and Campus Reactions

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Link to slides and results: <http://go.ncsu.edu/phsp48>

Abstract

Popular reading collections are just one of myriad ways that academic libraries contribute to the cultural, recreational, and community endeavors of our campus populations. Based on the perspectives from three libraries (one private medium-sized university, one large public STEM-focused, one large public comprehensive university), this paper discusses opportunities and challenges of popular reading collections as well as collection/acquisition strategies, target audiences, promotion of the collection, use of the collection, content types (including graphic novels), and perceived impact of the popular reading collection on campus.

Introduction

As academic libraries seek to enrich and engage the “whole student” experience, they intersect with cultural, recreational, and community endeavors to help develop smart, engaged citizens and leaders. Popular or recreational reading collections are just one of myriad ways that academic libraries contribute to these efforts. This paper features perspectives from three libraries (one private medium-sized university, one large public STEM-focused, one large public comprehensive university) and their take on the role of the popular reading collection in academic libraries. We address opportunities and challenges of popular reading collections, as well as collection/acquisition strategies, target audiences, promotion of the collection, use of the collection, content types (including graphic novels), and perceived impact of the popular reading collection on our campuses.

We focus on print materials as the primary format of the three popular reading collections featured in this paper, but recognize that there are many different flavors of “popular, recreational, leisure” collections that can include a variety of formats and content types.

For the purposes of this presentation, we define popular reading collections as collections that “[f]ulfill the role of reading for entertainment, not related to curriculum . . . and are selected by the library . . . and

are physically separate from the general collection,” as defined in the recent survey article by Brookbank, Davis, and Harlan (2018).

Origin and Purpose of Our Popular Reading Collections

The popular reading collection at Wake Forest University was established prior to 1960.

Materials selected include literary fiction, international fiction, award nominees, and hot topics in non-fiction. A graphic novels collection was added in 2017.

The popular reading collection at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was established in 1997. It was developed in order to provide easy-to-access leisure reading for UNC-CH students, but it is open to the entire campus community. It complements other collections including audiobooks and popular film as well as popular material acquired via approval plans focused on media reviews for the permanent collection and a modest number of titles on circulating Kindles.

The popular reading collection at North Carolina State University launched in January 2018. The goal was to create a showcase space for leisure reading for students, faculty, and staff in context with existing specialty collections such as Science Fiction, Data

Science, and the NC State Faculty Authors collection. The goal is to enable the audience to engage with this casual browsing collection in the same way they do with games, videos, audiobooks, and Kindle e-books in a space that was previously underutilized (it held print reference and board games).

Cost, Compositions, Selection, Sourcing of Our Popular Reading Collections

For our three libraries, the annual costs of supporting our popular reading collections ranged from \$8,000 (UNC-Chapel Hill) to \$15,000 (Wake Forest University) (Table 1). As the popular reading collection at the NC State Libraries is relatively new, approximately \$13,000 was used to seed the collection, with an expected ongoing expenditure of \$9,000 per year.

In terms of the funding sources used to acquire materials for our popular reading collections, Wake Forest uses the regular materials budget and a separate fund for graphic novels; UNC-Chapel Hill and NC State both use endowment funds.

At Wake Forest University, print popular reading materials are purchased by a designated librarian selector and moved into the general stacks after two

years (Table 2). There are 1,635 titles in this collection, 50% of which are in the “P” class of the Library of Congress classification system.

The popular reading collection at UNC-Chapel Hill is a leased collection sourced via the McNaughton service. Certain titles are added to the permanent collection every year as part of UNC-Chapel Hill’s leasing agreement, and beyond that, titles can be added at a very low cost. Materials are selected for retention based on a range of factors including popularity and because they fill gaps in the existing collection. Selections are made by a support staff member who has additional acquisitions responsibilities. As of September 2018, there were 1,618 titles in the UNC-Chapel Hill popular reading collection, 65% of which are classified as fiction.

For the NC State popular reading collection, print-only materials are purchased via a shelf-ready approval plan administered by GOBI based on a profile that selects titles reviewed by National Public Radio (NPR). As of September 2018, there were 695 titles in the collection, including fiction (62% in “P” class), nonfiction, graphic novels, and art books, with the expectation that 600–700 titles will be added annually.

Table 1. Annual costs and funding sources for popular reading collections.

	Wake Forest	UNC-Chapel Hill	NC State
Cost	FY18 spent: \$14,530 FY19 budget: \$15,239	Annually \$7,920	FY18 (Jan–June) spent: \$13,253 FY19 budget: \$9,000
Funding	Regular materials budget (graphic novels have separate fund)	Endowment funding	Endowment funding

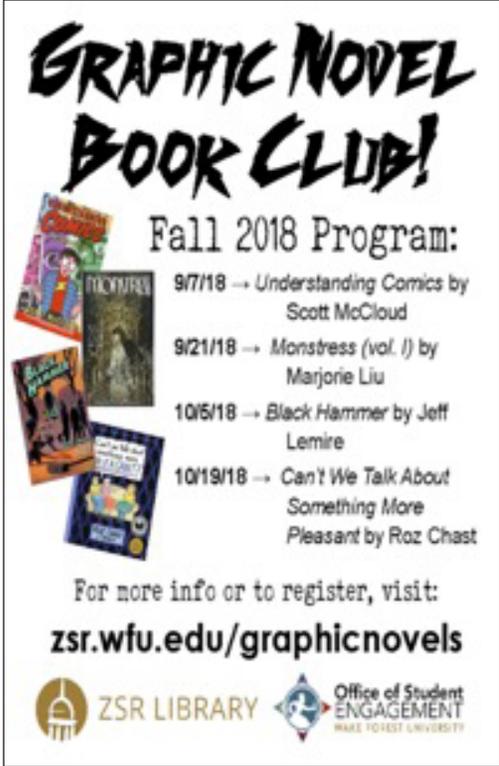
Table 2. Selection process and sources of popular reading collections.

	Wake Forest	UNC-Chapel Hill	NC State
Owned/Leased?	Owned	Leased, with the option to own	Owned
Format	Hardbacks only	Print	Print
Source	Firm orders (mostly GOBI)	McNaughton	GOBI–NPR reviews (approval plan)
Preparation	Mylar wrap done in house	Shelf-ready	Shelf-ready
# titles	1,635 titles	1,618 titles	695 titles
Subjects	All subjects, 50% “P”	65% fiction	All subjects, 62% “P”

Display and Promotion of Our Popular Reading Collections

The popular reading collection at Wake Forest University has been positioned in a high-traffic reading room on the main floor of the library since 2007 (Figure 1). Promotion for this collection has been minimal with the exception of the graphic novels (Figure 2).

At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's University Libraries, the popular reading collection is housed at the R. B. House Undergraduate Library, which is geared toward undergraduate students and is a high-traffic destination with approximately 1 million visitors annually. In the early 2000s, there was a popular reading collection in both the main Davis Library and the Undergraduate Library, but they were reduced to a single popular reading collection due to redundancy. Today, the popular reading collection is located in a popular study room by the entrance of the building (Figure 3). The yearbook collection and bound periodicals are also in this room, but the popular reading is the real draw. Because the collection has a long legacy, the collection is lightly promoted, and awareness is primarily via word of mouth.



GRAPHIC NOVEL BOOK CLUB!

Fall 2018 Program:

- 9/7/18 → *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud
- 9/21/18 → *Monstress (vol. 1)* by Marjorie Liu
- 10/5/18 → *Black Hammer* by Jeff Lemire
- 10/19/18 → *Can't We Talk About Something More Pleasant* by Roz Chast

For more info or to register, visit:
zsr.wfu.edu/graphicnovels

ZSR LIBRARY Office of Student ENGAGEMENT
WAKE FOREST UNIVERSITY

Figure 2. Promotion of graphic novels at Wake Forest University.



Figure 1. View of popular reading collection at Wake Forest University. Photo ©WFU/Ken Bennett.



Figure 3. View of the popular reading collection at UNC-Chapel Hill.

At NC State, the popular reading collection is located in high-traffic area near the “main desk” at D. H. Hill Library. This area will soon feature high-profile current journals alongside selected popular newspapers (Figure 4). Promotion has been minimal with light-weight promotion via the libraries’ website, Twitter, and the library newsletter (Figure 5).

As part of our presentation at the 2018 Charleston Conference, we asked participants, “How does your library promote the popular reading collection?” Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter were mentioned as venues for promotion as well as new book displays and a mobile library that is taken to dining halls and residence halls. Other suggestions included promotion to campus student clubs as well as highlighting popular reading materials in association with current films, events, and speaker series. A particularly interesting mode of promotion was from one library that works closely with a local independent bookseller to allow the students to “shop” for books for the library’s popular reading collection funded by the library.

Usage of Our Popular Reading Collections

For the popular reading collection at Wake Forest University, only 11% are checked out by students (by contrast, 48% of graphic novel circulations are to students). Across a two-year period, the circulation rate per book is outlined in Table 3. Faculty and staff tend to be the predominant users of the popular reading collection. The most used titles are represented in Table 4.

Table 3. Circulation rate per book over two-year time period at Wake Forest University.

	Graphic Novels	Browsing Books
Students	1.91	0.34
Faculty/Staff	1.64	1.69
ILL	0.20	0.15
Friends	0.24	0.93
Overall	4.00	3.10

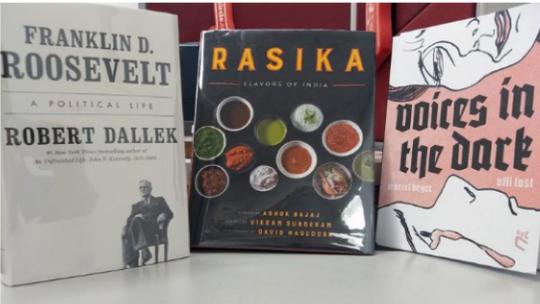


Figure 4. View of the popular reading collection at NC State.

NCSU LIBRARIES NEWS

Popular Reading Collection debuts in D. H. Hill

January 18, 2018 Share   



The D. H. Hill Learning Commons isn't just for study and work anymore. Because the NC State community needs leisure reading too, the NCSU Libraries is proud to announce the debut of a Popular Reading Collection in the southwest corner of the space.

Drawing upon selections from the [National Public Radio \(NPR\) Book Reviews](#), the collection houses over 400 popular titles ranging from fiction to nonfiction and cookbooks to graphic novels. The collection is funded by the Parents Association Endowment and the NCSU Libraries.

Figure 5. Promotion of the popular reading collection at NC State.

Table 4. Most used titles in the popular reading collection at Wake Forest University.

Highest Circulating Titles (as of October 2018)	# of Circulations
<i>The Girls: A Novel</i> / Emma Cline	21
<i>Britt-Marie Was Here: A Novel</i> / Fredrik Backman	20
<i>Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis</i> / J. D. Vance	19
<i>Small Great Things: A Novel</i> / Jodi Picoult	19
<i>Underground Railroad: A Novel</i> / Colson Whitehead	18

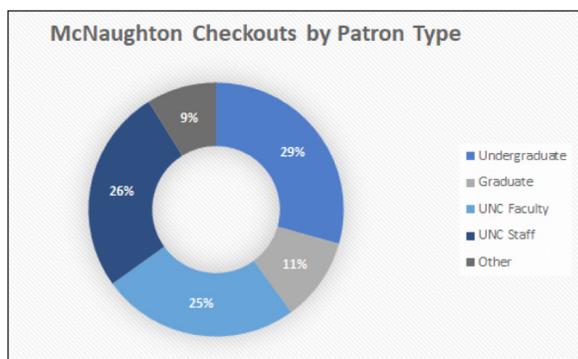


Figure 6. Circulation rates for the popular reading collection at UNC-Chapel Hill.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, while the collection is intended to be used by students, in practice, it is more heavily used by staff and faculty, which does influence selections to some extent (Figure 6). Staff members are most vocal about the materials that are selected for the popular reading collection. Anecdotally, students appreciate the collection, but many feel that they do not have time to read recreationally (based on an informal survey of students in an EDUC 130 course). Table 5 shows the most used titles in the popular reading collection at UNC-Chapel Hill. Note that the circulation numbers represent lifetime uses, which can be impacted by the age of an item.

Table 5. Most used titles in the popular reading collection at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Highest Circulating Titles (as of October 2018)	# of Circulations
<i>The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao</i> / Junot Diaz	66
<i>When You Are Engulfed in Flames</i> / David Sedaris	61
<i>The Yiddish Policemen's Union: A Novel</i> / Michael Chabon	58
<i>Bossypants</i> / Tina Fey	56
<i>Better: A Surgeon's Notes on Performance</i> / Atul Gawande	55

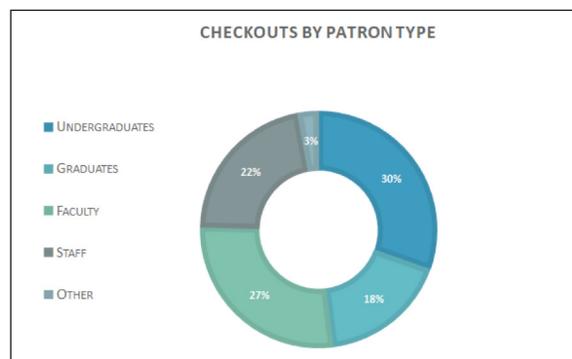


Figure 7. Circulation rates for the popular reading collection at NC State.

At NC State, the majority of circulations for the popular reading collection are by undergraduate and graduate students (48%), followed by faculty (27%) and staff (22%) (Figure 7). As of this writing, the collection is still less than one year old, but the circulation patterns are expected to continue with a larger percentage of use from NC State students and faculty. It should be noted that the loan policies for the popular reading collection mimics that of the general collection (30 days for undergrads, 90 days for faculty and graduate students). Table 6 shows the most used titles in the popular reading collection at NC State. Note that due to the newness of the collection, the circulation numbers are much smaller than those for Wake Forest University and UNC-Chapel Hill.

Table 6. Most used titles in the popular reading collection at NC State.

Highest Circulating Titles (as of September 2018)	# of Circulations
<i>What Made Maddy Run: The Secret Struggles and Tragic Death of an All-American Teen</i> / Kate Fagan	16
<i>Caesar's Last Breath: Decoding the Secrets of the Air Around Us</i> / Sam Kean	9
<i>The World of Tomorrow</i> / Brendan Mathews	7
<i>Lincoln in the Bardo: A Novel</i> / George Saunders	7
<i>The Sun and Her Flowers</i> / Rupi Kaur	7

Challenges Faced with Our Popular Reading Collections

For Wake Forest University, an impending challenge is that the primary selector of the popular reading collection will be retiring, so the focus is on succession planning and coordination with other selection responsibilities. For future changes, Wake Forest is considering a change to purchase more genre fiction versus literary fiction to try to appeal more to students.

For UNC-Chapel Hill, a challenge is that some faculty and staff keep large numbers of books from the popular reading collection checked out for extended periods, making it a challenge for the collection to circulate at a frequent rate. Questions to be addressed going forward include: Who is the primary audience versus who is borrowing the books? How do we balance their needs/interests? A perennial challenge is managing the shelf space for this collection—materials must be returned to McNaughton or rotated into the general collection as space runs low.

For NC State, staffing resources were a challenge from the beginning with a lack of staffing resources to make selections, thus the decision to work with GOBI to make this as low-touch as possible, driven completely by NPR reviews and paying GOBI to do the extra shelf preparation to minimize staff time.

References

Brookbank, E., Davis, A-M., & Harlan, L. (2018). Don't call it a comeback: Popular reading collections in academic libraries. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 58(1).

When space on the shelves runs low, the least used materials will be rotated into the general collection. Concern was expressed about spending state funds on a popular reading collection, so the NC State collection has been funded by an endowment targeted for building student-focused collections. In terms of composition of genres, there were divergent opinions on whether or not genres such as romance novels should be included and if subcollections (e.g., cookery and travel books) should be developed. Because NC State decided to build the collection based on NPR reviews, these concerns were mitigated with easily articulated selection criteria and a plan that includes a diversity of genres.

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