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Back Talk -- Obama and Collection Development

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libraries is on its way to the boneyard of library history.[2]

In the past few years there has been a movement by a few libraries to challenge the big collection as the best collection paradigm. In some cases actual reductions with significant weeding exercises have been undertaken, in many others, major portions of the campus collections have been sent to storage. Now a new report from **OhioLINK** and **OCLC Research** has come out which suggests that the old idea that 80 percent of a library's circulation is driven by 20 percent of the collection was a gross underestimation.[3] Based upon 2007/8 circulation data from 16 universities, 23 community colleges, and 50 private and public colleges in Ohio, only 6 percent of these collections was needed to account for 80 percent of their circulation. If this is the case, library funders are bound to ask, do we really need to spend so much on buying, processing, housing and preserving the other 94 percent of the collection? Or, couldn't we meet the needs for the other 94 percent of the materials in a more cost-effective manner?

My own favorite research experience took place more than 30 years ago when I went to the **British Library** to find information about **Robert Morrison**, the first Protestant missionary to China. I had already been using ILL for several years to find information about **Morrison** and his time in China. But on my way to a conference in Moscow I was able to spend a week in London reading. I started out by filling out **British Library** request slips for the materials I had already identified but not read. As I read these books I would find references to other books and would fill out more request slips for books to read — and then repeat the cycle again and again until I ran out of time. This was research, this was fun. This was also the sort of research experience possible only in libraries which do not just try to buy the most popular books needed to meet 80 percent of everyone's needs.

So, where does this leave us? Do these statistics erode the foundation stones of collection development as we know them — e.g., should we only buy that which will fill the needs of most patrons and ignore the rest or make their collection someone else's responsibility? Should our collaborative organizations focus on providing super fast access to the books which would constitute the other 94 percent of our collections and which will only seldom be read? These are good questions. Collection development work can be as hard as it is fun.

Endnotes

1. See "Founding of the American Library Association," *http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/missionhistory/history/index.cfm*.

2. This decline is admittedly slow. **OCLC** facilitated 10.3 million ILL transactions in 2008/9 and 10.2 million in 2009/10. *OCLC 2009/10 Annual Report*, p. 7.

3. See OhioLINK Collection Building Task Force, **Julia Gammon** and **Edward T. O'Neill**. 2011. *OhioLINK OCLC Collection and Circulation Analysis Project 2011*. Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research. *http://www.oclc.org/research/publications/library/2011/2011-06r.htm*

Little Red Herrings — Designer Codes

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Back Talk — Obama and Collection Development

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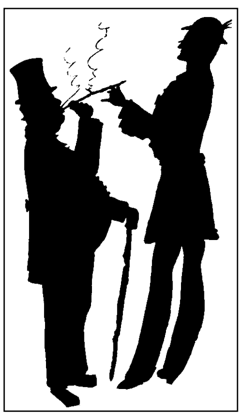
It is perhaps pathetic when someone like me seems to view everything through "library tinted" glasses, but I found this to be the case recently when listening to **President Obama** bemoaning the difficulties of making peace in the Middle East:

> Peace is hard. Peace will not come through statements and resolutions at the UN. If it were that easy, it would have been accomplished by now. Ultimately, it is Israelis and Palestinians who must live side-by-side. Ultimately, it is Israelis and Palestinians — not us — who must reach agreement on the issues that divide them.

I automatically thought to myself, developing collections, while miniscule in importance compared to making peace in the Middle East, is also hard to do effectively. If it were easy, we would have got it right long ago, given the innumerable hours of meetings devoted to this topic even since 1876 when 90 men and 13 women met in Philadelphia to found the **American Library Association**.[1]

Having taught scores of collection development workshops myself over the past 40 years, it is easy to simply say that collection development involves figuring out what your readers need, determining what you already have on your steel and virtual shelves, and then buying content to fill in the gaps.

Having recited the above formula, one of the problems is that getting people to tell you what they want is not easy, when they are not clear about their needs, even when they show up in front of the reference desk (or on the phone, via email, or in some sort of chat room) or in the case of professors, don't have time to talk to librarians. Patrons are all so different, and we can't always understand their jargon. Public librarians have an even more difficult time of understanding needs, given they serve young and old, natives and immigrants, poor and rich, and everything in between.



We librarians have also found it difficult to describe at the macro level what we have already collected — either the printed books on our shelves, the costly electronic articles and book paragraphs which we have purchased, or the even more voluminous body of freebie content to which we strive to facilitate easy electronic access. As an old Conspectus trainer, I believed in the value of using the 0 through 5 Conspectus definitions applied to **LC** and **Dewey** classification number ranges to describe our collections, but this failed to become the lingua franca of the majority of library collection developers when we talked with each other, let alone the common language with which we communicated with our funders.

Assuming one can understand what is needed, what is already owned or accessible, the question of how to best buy needed content is no easy task. By the time I started selecting social science books at **BYU** in the early 1970's, approval plans had already become common in most medium-sized academic libraries. Consequently, whether at the reference desk or at home watching TV, going through tall stacks of **Baker & Taylor** "exclusion slips" to make purchase decisions on the basis of what we thought our readers wanted was a common thing to do. I was a bit surprised when I got to **Columbia** in the mid-1980s that approval plans were still seen by some librarians as a less-than-a-legitimate way of building collections. One seasoned area studies specialist rejected approval plans as well as the entire idea that we should buy to meet current needs. Like the architect of the Brooklyn Bridge, he was building to meet the needs of future generations of travelers.

Overall, however, **Columbia** couldn't live without approval and standing order programs. We had only a few librarians to cover the world and we had the money to buy a good share of the better academic books produced in those countries. We needed the help of the bibliographers employed by book jobbers to comb through everything being published and to send us as much as we could afford.

Columbia, however, was poor compared to **NYPL**, which seemingly could afford to buy everything good (and everything was seen to be good for someone). I well remember hearing the complaints of my compatriot **JD** at the 42nd Street library to the head of **BNA**: "Dang it, **Mervyn**, send me books, not slips." Collection development in those days was really a case where throwing money at the problem was the preferred course of action, and whoever had the most money was seen as having the best chance of being the most successful.

As automatic increases in book budgets became rarer, the catch phrase "access instead of ownership" became the hot way of meeting patron needs. But access was not fast enough at libraries like **Columbia's**. The thoughts of telling a **McArthur** fellow that we would borrow all the obscure books he/she wanted was an anathema. Yet, even we practiced access in addition to ownership. It wasn't until I got to Hong Kong and was able to see a patron-driven book delivery system in operation (**Innovative's INN-Reach**) in a geographically small location that I found that access to printed materials located at other institutions was as good as ownership — but this was 15 years later in time.

While interlibrary access to each other's holdings has been streamlined, with the widespread adoption of "big deal" ejournal packages, the increased purchase of eBooks individually and in large collections, and the retrospective conversion of print to digital forms of information (**Google Books**, **Hathi Trust Digital Library**, etc.), the need for shared access to the printed holdings of other

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