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You Want to Do What? Graphic Novels in an Academic Library

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Preparing for the Inevitable Drought

Endangered Species — The Endangered Species list was created to monitor our ongoing subscriptions using the criterion created during the budget crisis. These resources, as well as those newly added to our collection, are given three years, during which time the liaison librarians promote or review the resource. The ongoing and open nature of the list offers our liaisons ample opportunities for feedback and awareness not previously provided. The analysis gives us valid reasons for cutting a product and using the money in other, more productive ways.

Open Access — Beyond the current methods outlined above, we must prepare for a lack of funding. Including high-quality, librarian-evaluated Open Access materials in our library's catalog is one method of preparing for the future. However, simply pointing a patron to an Open Access resource may not be enough. We are exploring ways to harvest and archive a local copy of Open Access resources through collaboration with our Digital Library. Furthermore, our current budget allows us to support Open Access Initiatives, such as Knowledge Unlatched or Independent Voices, providing current and future access to scholarly materials and ensuring the future of our collection.

Parting Thoughts

As we approach our uncertain future with funding for collection development, our decisions become more important in providing access to quality resources that are in demand now. Cost for materials and demand for items increases every year, but with strategic growth and detailed plans, we are able to transition and remain relevant to our users. We were fortunate to gain a temporary infusion of funding. With these funds the ABCD group, DDA, and targeted subject area enhancements will prepare us for the possible drought. The continued detailed monitoring and analysis of our electronic resource subscriptions and the addition of open access resources will take the collection in new directions.

References


Emily Billings

BORN AND LIVED: I was born in Mount Vernon, TX and have lived all my life in the East Texas area.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: While I pursued my undergraduate degree in English, I received a job in the university library. I LOVED working there so much I decided to become a librarian. My first professional position was as a Public Services Librarian at a community college. I have participated in the Association of College and Research Libraries, Immersion program teacher track as well as the Texas Library Association, TALL Texas leadership program.

FAMILY: I am very close with my two younger sisters and parents.

IN MY SPARE TIME: I spend a lot of time knitting and reading fiction. I volunteer with the SPCA, the Junior League, and the Zeta Tau Alpha sorority.

FAVORITE BOOKS: I enjoy reading romance or science fiction novels. I have read Frankenstein by Mary Shelley numerous times.

HOW/WHERE I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: I see the industry improving and expanding on the evaluation of electronic resources especially in the areas of accessibility and usability.

You Want to Do What?: Graphic Novels in an Academic Library

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I
n the spring of 2015, a series of coincidental events took place at the Kraemer Family Library at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs: we had a faculty member approach the librarians with a request for us to be involved in the annual Denver ComicCon and noticed that more faculty on campus were using graphic novels in their classrooms. This led a group of librarians to question whether the library was truly meeting the graphic novel needs of the campus. Specifically, we wondered if more students than we were aware of were interested in graphic novels and if the demand was being met. In order to explore that question, we designed a student feedback survey and began to reach out to faculty already integrating pop culture materials into their curriculum.

We focused our survey efforts on reaching a wide-range of students to gauge interest in graphic novels and to try to understand the level of awareness of the library’s collection. The results were eye opening. Of the 459 students who completed the survey, over 57% responded that they read graphic novels, but 74% of the same population did not know that the library had a collection of graphic novels. This lack of student knowledge about the collection prompted an investigation of how well our current graphic novels collection was, or was not, circulating. When the circulation statistics were run, we found that 58% of the 230 titles had been checked out at least once in the past year. We also found that there had been over 150 consortium requests for graphic novels to be brought in from other libraries. Some people were obviously finding the collection and it was getting good use, but we were not keeping up with the demand for more and newer titles, as in that same year only 22 new volumes were added to the collection.

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Communicate with our colleagues about why a standalone graphic novel collection was important to our users. We recognized that not all of the library staff were in agreement about why graphic novels, as a specific format, should be awarded their own collection location. We needed to offer a primer on graphic novels and why they would be helpful for our student population before we could begin to discuss the logistics of moving the collection to a separate location. Additionally, subject librarians needed to agree on what funds would be used to purchase graphic novels. Some subject librarians purchase non-fiction graphic novels to support their disciplines, while others were purchased from a general fund. If there was to be a specific graphic novel fund, we needed to decide how graphic novels would be purchased. For the sake of consistency, we decided that all graphic novels, no matter the subject, would be bought from the graphic novel fund. So despite the ongoing debate about the definition of format and the future location, the collection was granted a small fund from the materials budget, which would be used to purchase all of the new graphic novels. Moreover, once the new location is established, all graphic novels will be housed together, no matter subject area.

Several staff members expressed concerns about the proposed location of the standalone collection. The library recently established a collaborative space which houses group study tables, white boards, and other standalone collections such as young adult literature and children’s literature. Due to the high volume of students in the collaborative space, the nature of that space, and the lack of space elsewhere in the library, we proposed moving the graphic novels to this highly visible shared space. Concerns were raised about the proximity of adult graphic novels to the children’s and young adult books. This discussion was fruitful and allowed the librarians and staff members to debate about censorship and what are appropriate materials for an academic library. Ultimately, we came to agreement that the proposed location would remain the same due to the fact that our primary audience is undergraduate students and that all materials are available to any user, no matter the location.

We learned a number of important lessons from our bid to create a new, highly visible location for our graphic novel collection. Firstly, we mistakenly assumed that all of our colleagues knew what a graphic novel is and why the format is unique enough to warrant its own location. Instead of taking their buying for granted, we should have put together a presentation to explain what a graphic novel is, highlight the diverse subject matters and why authors were using the format to write memoirs, recount biographies of famous historical figures, and address important issues such as racism, LGBT rights, and privacy concerns in the digital age. This would have gone a long way to overcome any negative views of graphic novels and would have better connected the format to the curriculum.

Secondly, we recommend considering all voices before attempting to move forward with a project of this nature. Our library includes employees with the rank of faculty and others who are professional staff. Historically, the faculty/staff divide has been a source of tension in our library, with a feeling that faculty members sometimes ignore the opinions and concerns of staff members. However, some of the best questions were raised by staff members at our library, especially those who work in Technical Services. They expressed philosophical concerns about creating a separate shelving location for graphic novels instead of including them in our main collection. Having this conversation collectively allowed other staff members to chime in with their own opinions. For instance, another librarian pointed out that we had created separate shelving locations for our Young Adult and Popular Reading collections, so creating a new shelving location was not without precedent. By giving everyone an opportunity to voice their opinions, we were ultimately able to reach consensus as a group. Those who initially expressed reservations eventually were satisfied with our reasoning for doing so, which led to increased buy-in. If we had attempted to push through our plan without giving everyone a chance to provide input, our plan would have more likely failed, especially since it was dependent upon the support of the Technical Services staff, who process new items and add them to the collection.

Thirdly, when developing a plan that requires support from multiple departments, we recommend seeking their input before unveiling the plan to the entire library. This was a lesson we learned after the fact. Our original timeline for creating a new shelving location within the year for graphic novels simply was not realistic. It didn’t take into account the other projects that Technical Services was already committed to; for instance, a large reference and microfiche weeding project that would ultimately free up the shelves we needed for our new graphic novel collection. We should have spoken with Technical Services before unveiling our plan to the library. Not only could we have addressed some of their concerns earlier on, we could also have better understood their workload and produced a...
more realistic timeline for the creation of our new shelving location.

Finally, we recommend being realistic about what is possible at your library. Most importantly, be flexible and willing to compromise. We began with the goal of creating a new graphic novel shelving location by the end of 2015. Now, though, it looks like our project will not be completed until the end of 2016, a full year later than what we had originally hoped for. We do not see this as a failure, however. Libraries, particularly academic libraries, are inherently political institutions and compromise is sometimes essential to accomplishing your goals. If we had chosen to stand our ground on the completion date, it would have created considerable friction between us and the Technical Services department, possibly risking the entire project and doing a disservice to the community we serve. By being open to compromise, listening, and considering opposing views, we overcame a number of challenges that could otherwise have derailed our project completely. It is good to have vision, but you must sometimes compromise on the details if you are to make it a reality.

References