



## Patron Preferences: Recreational Reading in an Academic Library



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 4 May 2016

Received in revised form 26 August 2016

Accepted 29 August 2016

Available online 2 October 2016

#### Keywords:

Academic libraries

University libraries

Recreational reading

Popular reading

Leisure reading

Collection development

### ABSTRACT

In 2014, Sam Houston State University Library librarians distributed a survey to students, faculty and staff to better understand how the university community was using library materials for recreational reading. The survey found that patrons had preference for print materials with a growing interest in other formats. A significant number of respondents did not view the library as a source of recreational reading materials; those who did read across a broad swath of genres. Greater understanding of patron recreational reading preferences empower the library to expand the library collection to meet all patron demands.

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### INTRODUCTION

The appropriateness of deliberate inclusion of recreational reading material in academic libraries' collections remains unresolved (Odess-Harnish, 2003). Libraries are obliged to decide whether to collect specifically for that purpose, or whether their existing policies and collection meets that objective. Many libraries support recreational reading via various methods (Elliott, 2007). While some Sam Houston State University (SHSU) librarians were in favor of exclusively collecting academic curricular or research materials, others felt that reading in any form was beneficial to patrons and that the library had a responsibility to offer extracurricular materials as well.

Whereas the permanent collection of the Newton Gresham Library (NGL) at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) primarily supports the curriculum and research needs, it is also used by some patrons in their pursuit of reading for fun. In the 1980s, the Library made the decision to include a collection of fiction to supplement recreational reading materials in the main collection. Termed the "Browsing Collection", these selections are an impermanent paperback collection. The collection development policy for these books states that, "Books from various popular fiction genre are included. In particular mysteries, romance, science fiction, suspense, and general fiction are collected." At this time the collection is entirely in print format.

The resurgence of discussion in professional literature concerning recreational reading collections in academic libraries encouraged

reevaluating the Browsing Collection and its' appropriateness within the overall library. The original intent to evaluate the effectiveness of this limited collection expanded into a desire to measure patrons' broader recreational reading preferences and to align collection development policies to reflect that.

Sam Houston State University is located in Huntsville, Texas, a city located about an hour north of Houston. The university community is comprised of approximately 20,000 students, staff and faculty. While SHSU faculty staff and students may have access to public libraries at their home and/or within Huntsville, these patrons form a distinct community and the SHSU library's purpose is to serve the needs of community. Knowing patrons spend time on-campus and at the library, some SHSU librarians envision that recreational reading materials provide a convenience which promotes reading and supports the library's mission of lifelong learning.

Although the researchers know that books in the Browsing and permanent collections are used for reading recreationally, SHSU librarians are interested in finding out what patrons prefer to read and in what format. The purpose of the research is to provide information about recreational reading, such as:

- What patrons like to read in both fiction and non-fiction
- How patrons learn about and obtain materials
- In what language they would prefer to read
- In what format they would prefer to read their selections
- If their format preference changes and why

The authors intend to use the information obtained through the survey to inform selection in the Browsing and the various permanent collections.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

### RESPONSIBILITY TO PROVIDE RECREATIONAL READING MATERIALS

There is still an ongoing debate over whether or not it is an academic library's responsibility to support recreational reading (Odess-Harnish, 2003). Though the Association for College and Research Libraries' (2010) *Guidelines for University Library Services to Undergraduate Students* states that "Collection policies should include access to information on current events, cultural interests, careers, and recreational reading, among others, to encourage exploration of information resources as a part of everyday life," the focus is on access rather than actual collecting (Resources and Collections section). In the early twentieth century, academic libraries provided extra-curricular materials and readers advisories for their students. By mid-century, many of these collections had been circumscribed due to budget and space pressures (Zauha, 1993). Oftentimes, an academic library may point to its Interlibrary Loan Department or the public library as a place where popular fiction may be requested and accessed (Alsop, 2007; Hsieh & Runner, 2005), though access through the academic library is more convenient (Nelson, 2014).

It is generally acknowledged that academic libraries collect popular fiction, typically as it supports coursework (Van Fleet, 2003). Popular fiction is still often viewed as worth less than literary or highbrow fiction, until it becomes part of the literary canon and "deemed worthy" (Harris & Crawford, 2001). Van Fleet (2003) found "the perception that popular fiction collections do not support the missions of public or academic libraries is commonplace and the impact is severe" (p. 74), even though such a collection offers physical, mental, social, and educational benefits and supports missions "that focus on personal growth, cultural awareness, and constructive leisure" (p. 80–81).

Studies show that modeling behavior is important and faculty attitudes can affect a student beyond the classroom (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). It is of utmost importance to consider the recreational reading habits and preferences of those who are teaching in order to help and encourage them to model ideal literacy behavior (Burak, 2004). Admittedly the research shows a conundrum: faculty most often judge libraries on how a library's collection "can meet their teaching, learning, and research requirements" (Oseghale, 2008, p. 7). Libraries also judge themselves on the same criteria (Van Fleet, 2003), even if popular fiction has the highest circulation statistics and makes a more welcoming atmosphere (Woodward, 2009). Recreational reading materials are not seen to meet said requirements, though some students will use materials in a specifically created leisure reading collection to help with coursework (Rathe & Blankenship, 2006). It is reasonable to conclude that encouraging leisure reading can help students develop the skills faculty demand of their students.

As Smith and Young (2008) point out, students still ask for recreational reading materials in an academic library, and in turning them away, libraries are turning away "a crucial opportunity for engagement

with the larger community" (p. 521), as well as advocating literacy and supporting each student (and other individuals within the university population served) as a "total individual" (Rathe & Blankenship, 2006, p. 81). The University of Oregon (UO) recognized this idea and in 2011 created their Popular Reading Collection: According to Harlan and Rigby (2015), UO Libraries' aligned themselves with an initiative called "Improve User Experience" in which books that featured characters of color, different disabilities, are LGBTQ, and other diversities were purposefully selected. This raises the question about what types of genres will most likely be read and enjoyed by the population.

### FOCUS OF PREVIOUS RECREATIONAL READING SURVEYS

Recreational reading studies often ask specifically about particular reading preferences—eBooks, audiobooks, and physical copies—or material types (Jeffres & Atkin, 1996)—fiction, newspapers, and nonfiction—but genre, author, and title preferences are often left out of examination. The main focus of past studies tends to be on eBooks versus print, whether or not an academic library should support recreational reading (via provision of leisure reading materials), or what recreational reading habits exist. Yet whether to collect recreational reading materials at all should raise considerations such as what genres to collect and which formats to offer (Alsop, 2007; Davis-Kahl, 2008; Lee & Freedman, 2010; Perret, 2012; Perret, 2013). Notable exceptions include Salter & Brook's, 2007 survey, Gilbert & Fister's, 2011 survey and Diers & Simpson's, 2012 survey. Salter and Brook asked what types of books their respective students liked to read and provided survey-takers with a list of genres. Gilbert and Fister surveyed their campus to determine whether "voluntary reading" is at risk and encouraged students to list genres and authors they enjoyed reading, which in turn helped them locate gaps in their library's collection. Diers and Simpson surveyed the UBC community about their genre, language, and format preferences. They discovered 97% of respondents preferred print although there was a 39% interest in e-reader formats. Finding that their primary collection already contained most of the material requested in the survey (81%), the UBC library utilized the existing materials and added the most requested genres to establish a recreational reading collection.

### INDICATED DEMAND FOR RECREATIONAL READING MATERIALS

Diers and Simpson (2012) point out, "Surveying potential users before the collection is created is an excellent opportunity to see how well users' perceived needs can be met with such a collection" (p. 53). A recent study on recreational reading in academic libraries comes from Conklin and Moreton (2015). They performed an analysis of their text message reference service in which they saw demand for popular reading. This led to the creation of a small recreational reading collection of leased books at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. In their examination of the pilot project, they evaluated undergraduate students via a survey and anecdotal evidence. Conklin and Moreton concluded, "Subject liaisons with collection development responsibilities may want to consider purchasing popular nonfiction titles that will draw readers in and engage them in subject matter they can apply to their personal and professional lives" (p. 76).

As libraries examine patrons' perception of building space and function, leisure reading is occasionally mentioned, either by the surveys or the respondents (Li, 1998; Weber & Flatley, 2008; Whitmire, 2003), which provides information about why a library is used or what types of books might be borrowed (Gardner & Eng, 2005). The dearth of discussion of specific titles, authors, and genres is often the same in the literature on eBooks in academic libraries; though these studies will often allude to or directly ask about recreational reading, it is usually how the text was engaged with or how long was spent reading (Corlett-Rivera & Hackman, 2014; Foasberg, 2014; Keller, 2012; Stern, 2011; Tees, 2010; Walton, 2014). Studies specifically examining recreational reading in

<sup>1</sup> See for instance: Aubry, T. (2011). *Reading as therapy: What contemporary fiction does for middle-class Americans*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press; Berns, G. S., Blaine, K., Prietula, M. J., & Pye, B. E. (2013). Short- and long-term effects of a novel on connectivity in the brain. *Brain Connectivity*, 3(6), pp.590–600. doi:10.1089/brain.2013.0166; Djikic, M., Oatley, K., & Moldoveanu, M. C. (2013). Opening the closed mind: The effect of exposure to literature on the need for closure. *Creativity Research Journal*, 25(2), pp.149–154. doi:10.1080/10400419.2013.783735; Johnson, D. R., Jasper, D. M., Griffin, S., & Huffman, B. L. (2013). Reading narrative fiction reduces Arab-Muslim prejudice and offers a safe haven from intergroup anxiety. *Social Cognition*, 31(5), pp.578–598. doi:10.1521/soco.2013.31.5.578; Koy, C. E. (2003). Keeping English proficient by reading medical fiction. *Medical Education*, 104(6), 2008; Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., Hirsh, J., Paz, J. D., & Peterson, J. B. (2006). Bookworms versus nerds: Exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(5), pp.694–712. doi:10.1016/j.jrp.2005.08.002; Mar, R. A., Oatley, K., & Peterson, J. B. (2009). Exploring the link between reading fiction and empathy: Ruling out individual differences and examining outcomes. *Communications*, 34(4), pp.407–428. doi:10.1515/comm.2009.025; Robble, L. (2009). Diversity and multiculturalism through fiction. *Incite*, 30(10), pp.16–17.

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