

## Reference Collections and Formats

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### Group Charge

To analyze current library collections and their formats and determine how our collections and collection development processes should be changed to reflect usage and needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century library.

### Where are we now?

Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh is an urban public library with a robust reference service. We are a Statewide Resource Center for Commonwealth Libraries and have a long and proud tradition of providing answers to reference questions and research assistance to scholars, both formal and informal, since our inception in 1895.

We continue to provide outstanding reference service today, but the methods in which we answer these questions and provide reference service and research assistance have changed profoundly over the last 10 years. Especially noticeable are the changes in the reference resources we utilize to provide that service.

For more than one hundred years our service to customers was primarily through traditional print resources: monographs, reference books, scholarly journals, newspapers, and popular books and magazines.

Libraries have always been innovators as well, when information became available in new formats Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh has been quick to find ways to adapt and offer that information as well. However, whether the new information was in the form of easier to store microfilms, large format maps, photographic negatives, fine art for loan, music on lacquer records, then vinyl records, then audio cassettes or CDs, movies on 16mm film, VHS cassettes and then DVDs, the focus has always been on something with physical properties that were housed in the library in some way. Although there is much of value in these historical items that need to be preserved in the library, the way forward is vastly different.

This is a time of change in the publishing industry potentially as profound as the invention of movable type. The pace of change continues to accelerate.

- In one month, Apple has sold two million iPad devices, all of which are capable of downloading and reading electronic books.
- In just a few months Google will unveil a selection of platform-independent e-books—to be named Google Editions—which may well be seen as the tipping point event in electronic publishing.
- Scarcely a day goes by that there is not an article in the New York Times or other national publication about the future of print and electronic media.
- eBook formats had a prominent place at the recent trade show Book Expo America
- In late 2009 the Nielsen Company decided to cease publication of a large number of prominent trade journals such as Editor & Publisher, and sold other publications which are converting to all digital formats.
- Nearly all scholarly research in current journals is done through full text electronic databases rather than through print copies of the same journals.

In 2009, CLP had 489,885 adult reference items in contrast to 829,045 in the circulating collection. In the

last 5 to 10 years, both here and nationwide, circulation has increased but in-depth reference questions have declined. Having almost 40% of our adult collection coded as non-circulating is hardly supportable in this climate. Specifically, in the Main Library, the amount of non-circulating items is 49% of all adult material with 473,469 adult reference items to 488,194 circulating items. Certainly, a major urban public library should have significant reference holdings, but undoubtedly many of these items are in reference status for outdated reasons: “It might get checked out and never returned...” “It’s an expensive book...” “We’ve always put those in reference...” and so on.

Traditionally, a reference collection was defined by its status as an assemblage of non-circulating materials and because of this very nature, circulation data or other measures of usage are nearly impossible to obtain. The items were not permitted to leave the building for a number of purposes: the items were used frequently by the staff and public to answer questions, they were too expensive to risk circulating, or they were tools for librarians to find items for the public in the circulating collection.

All these traditional reasons have, frankly, much less justification these days. Libraries have seen a considerable decline in the volume of simple reference questions that they receive. Many patrons use online search engines to find “good-enough” answers from various sources regardless of editorial oversight or a publisher’s imprimatur. This disregard for the authority of the answer devalues reference collections in the aggregate as well. When answers to questions can be found from multiple sources, many of which are online and free, many don’t take the trouble to seek out an authoritative source. One refrain common in current research is that people no longer care about sources, they only want answers.

Therefore, the library should continue to provide and promote reputable resources to both the casual information seeker and serious scholar, but present-day expectations about the speed and convenience of finding answers must be acknowledged.

### **Research on Topic**

In researching this question, we attended the biennial conference of the Public Library Association and discussed collection development trends and issues with our colleagues from other libraries. We have done extensive literature searches as well. We find, however, that there is very limited research regarding collection development trends in the public library, and that the research for academic libraries is tightly focused on their mission of supporting research departments.

Furthermore, the focus of library collections varies widely in relation to the service provided by the library. Certainly our library collections are on par with our peer libraries across the country, but a full statistical analysis of current library collections might be of limited future utility given the pace of change in the publishing environment.

### **Where do we need to go?**

What we need to do is understand the traditional role of reference collections in the library setting, and then look at the trends that will affect going forward and try to plan accordingly.

There are three different paradigms that the library might adopt in serving the public:

- The Free University
- The Lifelong Learning/Statewide Resource Center
- “Give the people what they want”

The Free University model is more of an ideal than a sustainable goal, although it is probably most people’s ideal of the large urban research library. Essentially all of human knowledge would be

accessible to the public at no charge through such a library. Library users would be able to educate themselves in any discipline and research any topic they choose, and access any materials they need. In principle this model is much beyond our financial means and it would be a mistake to choose it as our goal. In practice, however, aspects of that ideal are more attainable than ever through the advent of electronic resources in all their formats.

The “Give the people what they want” model has many adherents in the broader library community. The model assumes that the goal of the library is to satisfy as many customers as possible at the lowest cost possible and to that end the collections are heavily weighted toward best sellers, popular music, and current and classic movies on DVD. Circulation is generally high in these libraries, but their overall contribution to the community in terms of education, economic development, and the development of thoughtful citizens is much reduced.

The Lifelong Learning / Statewide Resource Center is where we are now and probably what we need to continue doing. As long as the Commonwealth provides funds for us to purchase resources and provide reference support for other libraries, we will gladly accept that role. We also have a responsibility to maintain a government documents collection as a Federal Depository Library. In addition, our role as a provider of educational resources makes us more attractive to other funders, donors, and politicians. Our mission is to “engage the community in literacy and learning” and our policies should continue to be developed with those ideas in mind.

It is important to note in this context that the reference collections support the service the library offers. If we prioritize “lifelong learning” then a clear understanding of what constitutes lifelong learning is important. Any recommendations about changes in collection development must be closely coordinated with decisions about library service.

### **How do we get there?**

The good news is that it may not take a lot of extra money to develop the kinds of collections we need to fulfill our service goals in the coming years. Rather it will require a reallocation of current budgets toward new types of resources.

These changes will require changes in some of our collection development policies to recognize the new realities. Decisions about which resources to buy and the specifics of collection development policies (currently revised every three years) are now and should continue to be made by the professional staff of Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh in real time. The establishment of formal percentages, specific measurable goals, etc. would be counterproductive. Instead we need to be vigilant and flexible in relation to collection development and choices. At this point in time the following trends should inform those choices:

- Popular materials (fiction, general nonfiction, DVDs, audio, etc) will continue to be popular. They are a core of library service, and we need to continue adding them to the collections at rates that responsibly meet demand. Fortunately, they are also relatively inexpensive and provide a lot of bang for the buck. For the time being, physical format items are still in high demand.
- The book publishing industry is putting more emphasis on e-book formats. This is a rapidly changing area, but as more and more eReader devices are out there, there will be more and more demand. The current models for these services are not library friendly. Customers must purchase a reader device and then purchase titles to be downloaded to the device. These titles are licensed to that device and that customer *only*. Barnes & Noble is experimenting with a system that allows the loan of an e-book but only one user at a time may read the book and only on their Nook

device. The advent of Google's platform independent eBook program may change this equation, but they are currently planning to license the eBooks to a single customer. If libraries are to offer popular eBooks to borrow, the licensing issues need to be resolved. CLP needs to work within the larger library community to make sure the needs of libraries are addressed.

- The trend toward social media and interaction has led to an environment where users expect to be able to create content. CLP also needs to be open to integrating user created content into our resources.
- Physical reference books are used less and therefore, we would propose a radical paring down of print reference collections to justifiable, essential titles. It is not responsible stewardship of public resources to purchase a book that one or two people might use. Nor is it practical to purchase a print item as an alternative to an online resource simply because some users prefer books.
- Our emphasis should shift to selecting electronic reference resources and making them available at all CLP locations. Whereas a print reference book could be used at only one physical location, necessitating multiple purchases for multiple locations, the electronic title need only be purchased once and can be used at all locations. We will need to focus on more training of staff outside of reference and subject departments to fully maximize the return on the investment.
- The library should accept that electronic databases are where most research gets done and we need to be able to afford to keep them. Canceling print periodical and possibly serial subscriptions and reallocating the money toward electronic resources may be advisable. This shift may have an aligned benefit to the Main library especially in that electronic journals and serials require no physical storage space. This may ease future decisions about space allocation at Main.
- The library needs to maintain reliable access to a core collection of journals and serials that support our service regardless of format. Which titles will depend on the services we offer, however, decisions to cancel print resources in favor of online access can only be taken if they do not impact our core service, or if we are in an ownership position and will not lose the access if database licensing issues change.
- We must accept that we cannot provide in-depth research access to everyone on all topics at no cost. Many electronic resources will never exist in print format and may only be available in fee based arrangements. In areas of specialized research we may need to shift the opportunity costs of access to the customer.
- At the main library especially, but also at other locations, attention should be paid to languages spoken in the community and consideration given to purchasing materials in languages other than English if warranted, especially for popular materials and children's collections.
- Special consideration should also be given to materials, such as our collection of musical scores, where Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh has a national reputation for excellence when making decisions about services and collections.
- There is one category of library service and material that should remain the bulk of our non-circulating collections: the unique, irreplaceable materials of local relevance. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh is the free public library for Pittsburgh and has historically been a rich repository of information and other materials related to the history and people of the region. Many of these items are one of a kind and taken as a whole these collections are irreplaceable and of incalculable value. These collections must be maintained even if the library does not currently possess the resources to adequately promote them. However, our long term strategic goal should include a plan to create more accessible lists, indexes, and finding aids to these local materials to make them known to researchers and the general public. When copyright permits and its cost is justified, digitizing some of these materials is also recommended for preservation and access purposes. It must also be mentioned that users of local history materials are some of the most ardent library supporters and often turn into donors.

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