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Out With the Old, In With the New: Revitalizing a Leisure Reading Section in an Academic Library

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Abstract

Every university has a different way of providing its patrons with popular or leisure reading titles. In academic libraries, mission statements and collections policies focus on resources supporting research and teaching. A leisure reading collection within academic libraries may be tended with care or fall by the wayside when resources are needed elsewhere. It can be overwhelming to find oneself responsible for a collection that has not been the priority.

This case study will discuss how a relatively stagnant leisure reading collection was revived to engage users with library spaces and collections. While such a task can seem challenging at the beginning, intentional selection, care, and marketing can increase the accessibility, visibility, and usability of the collection. Over five years, the leisure reading collection at the University of Tennessee Libraries became a tool for engagement and a visible connection to library values.

Introduction

Popular reading collections, or leisure reading collections, have always had to fight for their place in academic libraries. Brookbank (2013) discusses how some believe “leisure reading collections are not core to an academic library’s mission; that they are at best a nice but low priority extra and at worst an unnecessary extravagance outside of the ‘serious’ work of supporting the academic curriculum and students’ needs as learners and researchers” (p. 53). However, multiple studies contest this and discuss the importance of leisure reading collections in academia, as seen from articles such as “Growing Adult Readers: Promoting Leisure Reading in Academic Libraries” by Bosman, Glover, and Prince (2008) and “Pleasure Reading and the Role of Libraries: A Review of the Literature” by Biswas (2023). Nevertheless, the collections tend to fizzle out over time for many reasons, including lack of funding, change in student reading habits, or organizational priority changes. It is important to note that maintaining these collections supports students, faculty, and staff.

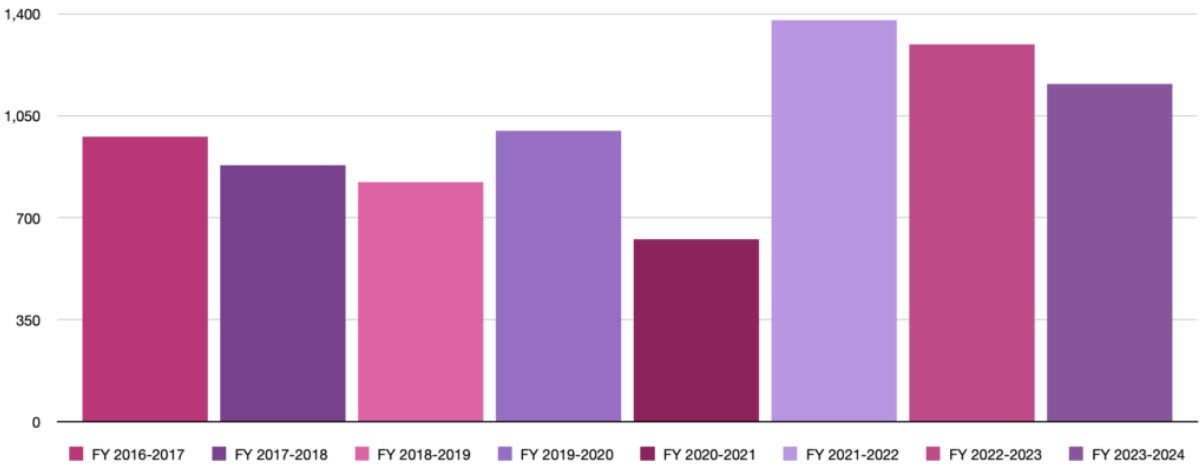
For a while, pleasure reading was a main priority for academic libraries. Brookbank, Davis, and Harlan (2018) discuss the history of leisure reading and how its importance seemed to wane and see a resurgence between the 1960s and 1990s. With literature abounding on the importance of these collections and assessing student use of the collections, this case study focuses on what has been done at the University of Tennessee's John C. Hodges Library to reinvigorate the collection to fit the interests and needs of the current population on campus.

Background

John C. Hodges Library at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, or UTK, is the main library on campus where we see around 1.5 million visits annually to our libraries from students and others with a variety of backgrounds. UT houses about four million volumes and electronic books including the leisure reading section.

Creating a space for our patrons to enjoy books is an important part of the library's ecosystem, and through the last five years, it can be seen through circulation numbers and personal accounts the impact this section has on a university campus. However, these numbers and accounts were few and far between when the section was left untended for many years.

Before responsibility for the collection was transferred in 2019, one librarian tried to maintain the collection by buying books once every few months or when requests came in. Given time constraints, their ability to look up new titles, weed the section, or promote it in any way was limited. This left the section unweeded which created an unhealthy collection full of old and unused titles. Adding to this, the collection, which was moved due to renovations, was located on the third floor of the library, flush with the stacks of other resources and near the Children's and Young Adult section. Even though it was on a popular study floor, there were no indications the leisure collection was anything more than another shelf of books. With few new titles being purchased and the location of the collection hidden in an unassuming place among the stacks, circulation had plummeted, forcing the collection into the background (Fig. 1).



Fig, 1: Circulation by academic year

Considering past issues with the collection and the library's desire to foster student engagement, the collection was assessed in multiple ways over time. A plan was created to increase the circulation and usability of the collection with a focus on cultivating an atmosphere of belonging. Attention was given to

treating topics of interest to students and increasing the diversity of authors and subject matter in a visible collection placed in a high-use, student-centered area.

In its current state, the leisure reading section at John C. Hodges Library consists of new and popular titles ranging from *New York Times* Bestsellers to titles trending on BookTok to graphic novels and manga. The current collection houses around 1500 items in a singular location in one of the library's quiet study areas. The current setup has comfortable chairs and small tables to accompany the leisurely aspect of the collection with the books shelved on either side as patrons enter.

Utilizing all of the steps found in the discussion and impact section not only brought awareness to the collection but also increased the circulation of the collection (Fig.1). Except for the academic year of 2020-2021, due to the shutdown of the library during the pandemic, circulation numbers increased to near or over one thousand annually. This data shows that the goals for the collection, based on relevant research, work to engage with the patron base and increase engagement with the collection.

Discussion and Impact

What started as a simple question of how to run a leisure reading collection quickly turned into a rabbit hole of how to make a collection more user-friendly and frequently circulated in an academic setting. The librarian who took over this collection first looked through articles to provide more context on how academic libraries run their leisure collections and how other universities maintain them. From the research, one of the first items most frequently found was to assess the collection in its current state. Examining past circulation records, it was found that in addition to declining use of the collection, many items had not circulated in over a decade. This started a process of weeding out the old to make way for new titles.

Out With the Old

Weeding is an important part of the process of collection development, even though the topic is rife with contention both for and against (Reno & Lowe, 2017). While some librarians embrace weeding to create more space, others feel an attachment to preserving a collection and print materials. However, it is important for librarians who oppose deselection to remember that some books, especially those in leisure reading, can be found through other libraries. If it's possible to procure it through Interlibrary Loan services then there is no need to keep a title that is not being used in the section.

Strategies for weeding the UTK leisure reading section were taken from multiple sources on weeding such as "Better together: Assessing a leisure reading collection for an academic and public library partnership" where the authors discuss how they created a retention plan for leisure reading specifically (Lacey & Lomness, 2019). Weeding a leisure section is slightly different from weeding a subject collection. The most important thing is to figure out which parameters are needed to ensure the health of the collection.

For this collection, the main goal was to have a collection of titles that were new and popular. If a book had not been circulated in over four years, it needed to be weeded or sent to the main stacks. Next, consideration was given to authors who were popular and what series were in the collection. If it is part of a popular series, then all books were kept even if they all had not circulated. However, if circulation of the series declined it would be assessed again and potentially weeded. The retention plan also covers books bought within the previous three to five years. If the titles are not circulating and it has been more than five years, titles are

flagged as needing to be weeded or relocated. The only exceptions would be if they are popular authors, a part of a popular series, or their circulation numbers are high and current.

Finally, if a book comes back damaged or missing, the idea was to not replace it automatically, but assess whether the title was popular enough to replace. For example, if a book with high and current circulation numbers turned up missing, the title would be replaced, however, if the circulation of the title is low and not current, the title may not be replaced. While his does require some hands-on collection development, it is worth it for a collection such as popular reading.

During this process, the collection, which had not been weeded in over a decade, released over 300 titles which were about 25 percent of the collection. Currently, the collection is weeded once a year which not only helps keep the section healthy but keeps the collection from being overcrowded.

Once the weeding process was put in motion, the next step was to come up with goals for the collection. While the idea of wanting popular and new titles in the collection was a good start, keeping in mind how the section would look in the future was also considered.

In With the New

When thinking about what this collection could be, an overarching goal of adding new and updated titles was important, ensuring that new titles were consistently being brought in. This brought about the idea of purchasing titles once a month to keep up with what new titles were being released. It was hypothesized that continued collection development would increase the usage of the collection at the time, which is believed to have helped increase the circulation (see Fig.1).

Another goal for the new books was to find titles that were from a variety of genres, including graphic novels and, more recently, manga. This could help support not only those with interests in those genres but also courses that discuss graphic novels and manga and their cultural and thematic importance. Finally, a goal to find titles that were not always easily accessible through Interlibrary Loan Services was taken into consideration. This would not disqualify titles that were popular and easily accessible, but the idea was to consider titles that may be from lesser-known publishers such as titles from popular online platforms like BookTok.

Considering these goals, the next step was to figure out what method of purchasing materials would work best. The literature discusses different methods for libraries to purchase materials. However, the two methods that seemed to work best for this collection were either a book rental program, as can be seen in Nicholson (2012 pg. 184), or purchasing books specifically for this section. After looking at the limitations of rental programs though, it was determined purchasing titles individually worked better for the main goals of the new leisure collection.

Now that goals were thought out and written down for guidance on what to purchase, a variety of studies, ranging from library-related and business-related, were consulted to determine the best methods for promoting the collection. From these studies, a goal was set for the collection to increase the visibility, usability, and browsability for patrons.

Visibility

The first step in this process was to find a way to make the section more visible without moving its location. In searching for ways to increase visibility, Camacho, Spackman, and Cluff's (2014) describe how placing titles within the collection face out for visibility increased circulation (Camacho, et al., 2024). In contrast to the main collection, the leisure collection modeled itself after bookstores that faced books out within its shelves to create a more aesthetically pleasing view of the titles. Though facing books out within the shelves was not possible given the amount of time available to maintain displays, creating three shelves at the beginning of the section for "New Arrivals" seemed to have the same promotional effect. Books began to disappear from the shelves as more patrons were attracted to the section.

Having books faced out brought more attention to the collection. However, it should be noted that the research showed this would only work if the jacket or book cover was still intact (Smith & Young, 2008 pg. 522). Keeping this in mind, our cataloging department did their best to make sure the covers of the books for the leisure section were left on the books to create more appeal and interest in them.

Next, signage needed to be created and placed on the shelves that held the leisure books. Since it was in a spot where there was no visible separation from the main collection, marketing, and facilities were contacted to find out how to make the section more noticeable. However, as these changes were under way, the facilities manager realized the section was meant to be moved back to the first-floor location after renovation, which ended up being an optimal location once said renovations were complete. Shelves were purchased and eventually, the section was moved to its current location on a first-floor quiet area with comfortable lounge chairs and aesthetically pleasing tables.

Usability

Another step to creating more visibility to the collection was to increase the usability of the collection. While having a separate section for leisure reading is good, as an academic library, we currently use the Library of Congress Call Numbers or LOC call numbers. Reading LOC call numbers, while making finding subjects easy, makes browsing a separate section, like a popular reading section, less than ideal. As seen in a study done by Murphy, Long, and Macdonald (2013), not all students understand the call numbers even when they know the specific book's number, let alone use it to browse a collection like leisure reading (Murphy et al., 2013).

Instead of changing the way we catalog the section, stickers were created by marketing to be placed on the spines of the books to denote Fiction, Non-Fiction, and Young Adult titles. This way, if a patron were to browse the section instead of looking for a specific book, they could easily tell the difference between these three major categories. The reasoning behind having a "young adult" tag was to promote the importance of young adult literature and its popularity and impact despite constant efforts to marginalize it (Garcia, 2013, p. xi).

Another way we created visibility of the section was through creating a physical display in the library. Initially, it was for specific events like a partnered event with another branch library, Blind Date with a Book, or specific displays for months like Women's History Month. What started as simply a table covered in a white tablecloth next to the circulation desk, turned into a full-blown book display case which was purchased specifically for displays (Image 1).

Image 1: Improved displays

While the book display is not strictly for leisure reading promotion, the vast majority of the displays are done with leisure reading books. This has created a way to showcase the collection on the most trafficked floor of the library and create a visual representation of what titles the library has available to its patrons. This is also a great way to show the diverse holdings of an academic library in a fun and interactive way.

Browsability

Creating browsability within the physical space is important, but it is also vital to create that same feel in a virtual environment. There is no way to search specifically for popular or leisure reading within the library's catalog. With that in mind, a research guide specific to browsing what can be found in the collection was the next best option. Utilizing the virtual space and creating a more visually appealing guide increased the visibility and browsability of the guide in a more aesthetically pleasing way to find materials. The impact of the guide not only greatly increased the browsability of the section, but also allowed more separation of titles by genre.

All books were put into genres such as fiction, nonfiction, young adult, and graphic novels. From there, the books were sorted into more detailed genres such as mystery/thriller, general fiction, biography and memoir, and self-help. Since the physical collection cannot be separated into these categories, separating it virtually was the next best option. A major feature of the guide was to show off the title cover, which is shown to draw readers' attention (Camacho, Spackman, and Cluff, 2014).

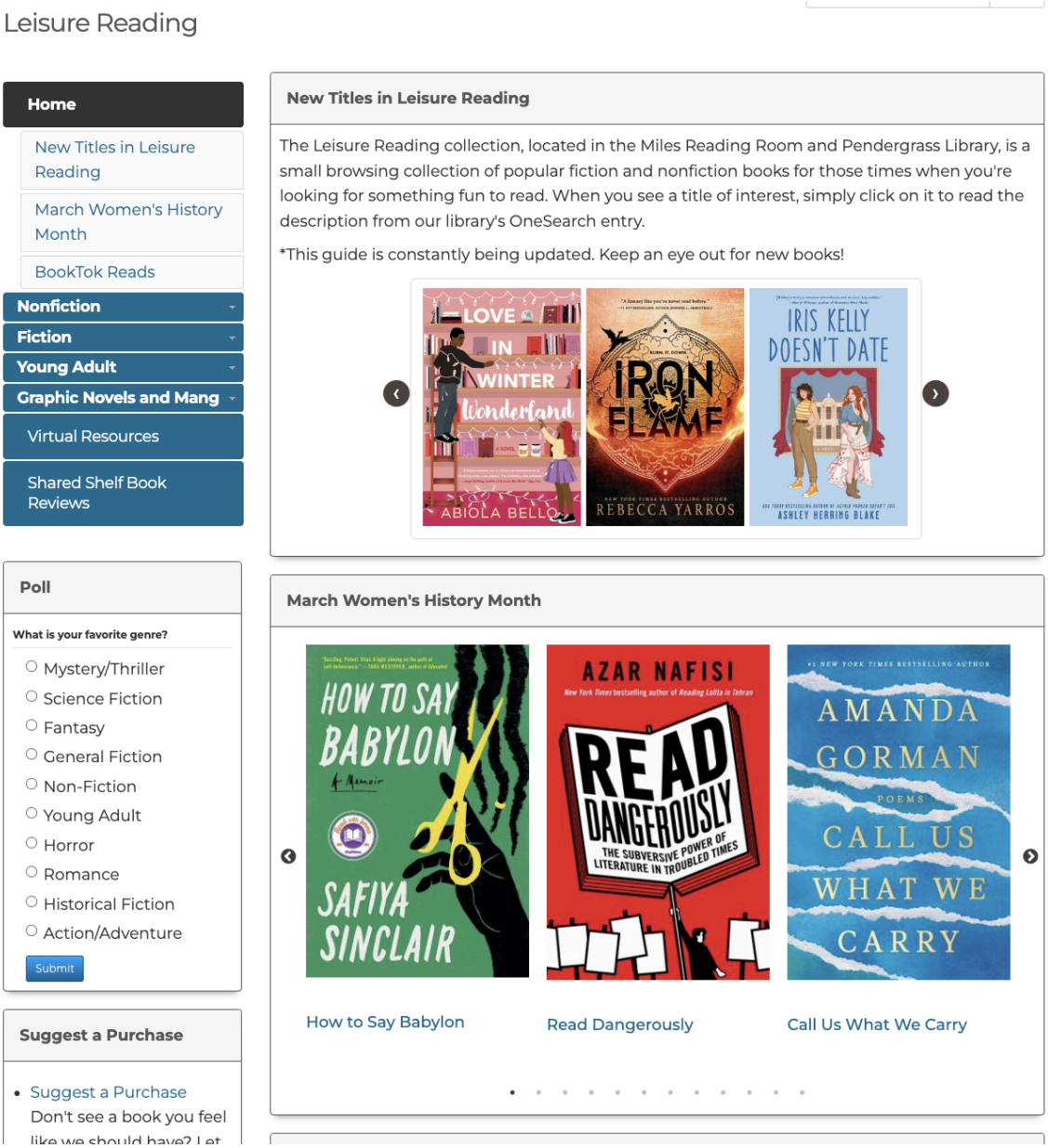


Image 2: Online guide for the leisure collection

This also makes it easy to come up with virtual displays to show off the collection such as Black History Month titles, Women's History Month titles, and BookTok titles. A section of the guide is dedicated to the most recently bought titles for the leisure reading collection. With this, patrons can see what was just purchased for the collection without constantly checking each genre.

Assessment

How does one assess a leisure reading collection? Assessment in collection development varies, but when viewed through the lens of leisure reading, an extra layer is needed to determine a section's success. For this particular collection, the assessment used to determine success focused on whether the circulation of the section increased. The circulation in total increased substantially after implementing the plan to make the section focused on visibility, usability, and browsability, excluding the fiscal year of the pandemic in 2020 (Fig.1). Between the fiscal years of 2018-2019 and 2019-2020, there was a 21% increase in circulation. Between the fiscal years of 2019-2020 and 2021-2022, the section saw an increase in circulation by 38%. Without making changes, an increase in circulation between 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 would likely have

increased only about eight percent. The circulation of the leisure collection fluctuates from year to year, yet even the lowest circulation exceeds the circulation of the fiscal year 2018-2019 by far.

Limitations

It should be noted that every leisure or popular reading section is different. The parameters for retention and goals set for the collection at this location were to ensure the collection focused on the most popular and recent titles and the section's usability, browsability, and visibility. What worked at this library may not work at every library, but the hope is that this will provide clear steps for those struggling with revitalizing their leisure reading collection. Also, unexpected events such as the recent pandemic will affect how a leisure collection is used and assessed.

Conclusion

Setting goals in collection development is not a new concept, however, the goals for a leisure reading section can differ from those of a "typical" subject collection. In academia, it can feel like fighting for a leisure reading collection is an uphill battle, but it is worth the fight and effort to create and curate a popular reading collection for students, staff, and faculty. The purpose of this article is to show that small changes to a section, working with current resources, and creative thinking can shift a stale leisure reading section into a thriving collection of titles, creating a space of belonging and engagement for all those who use the library.

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