The Collection: Or, Do you have Something for Everyone?

There is only one way to learn about your library's collection. You have to use it. The longer you work in your library the better you will know your collection. There are some ways to quickly learn what you have.

First take a slow "tour" of your library's collection. Begin by looking at how it is arranged. Here are some questions to answer:

- **Where is the reference collection, and how big is it?** (Reference books are not designed to be read through; instead are used to answer questions in the library. They are normally not checked out.)

- **How is the non-fiction section arranged?** Usually, nonfiction in public libraries is in the Dewey classification system. However, sometimes special sections, such as biographies or Idaho materials, are placed in a section that is out of order. Be very aware of these special sections, as they are usually separated for a reason.

- **How is the fiction arranged?** Typically, fiction is shelved alphabetically by author, so all fiction written by the same person is together. Sometimes, though, there are special sections for popular genres, such as westerns, mysteries, science fiction, or romance. This allows fanciers of these books to find them in one place. Since these sections contain very popular items, be aware of them.

- **How are paperbacks arranged?** If they are on racks, do different racks contain specific kinds of books, or are they all intermixed?

- **Is there a separate section for children's non-fiction?** Many small libraries interfile children's and adult's non-fiction together so patrons can readily find all the information on a subject in one place.

- **How are children's fiction books divided?** Most libraries have a separate section for "picture-books" for younger children. These books may be kept in bins, so they are easier to see. In general, they are very difficult to keep in any order, although some libraries use colored tape to identify authors in broad alphabetical categories. Many libraries mark these books with the letter "'E" for easy readers.

- Older children's fiction is usually shelved in alphabetical order. Typically, they have a special call number designation such as "J" or "JF" to indicate they are juvenile books. A few libraries still try to divide children's books according to grade level. This is not recommended as it may discourage good readers from reading "above" their grade, and it may embarrass poorer readers when they have to choose books below their grade level.
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- What magazines does the library receive? How long does it keep back issues? Are current and back issues, kept together?
- What kind of audiovisual materials does the library have and where are they kept? Are there special precautions to prevent theft of these materials?
- Are there sections that look very strong and that have a lot of newer books? Are there sections that look weak, that is have few or no books or the books look old or dilapidated? From what you know of your community do these strengths and weaknesses make sense?
- Are new books kept in a special section? If so, how long are they kept there?

While you are "touring" the collection, you should also look at the condition of the materials. Does the collection look new and vibrant, or is it made up of books that look worn and dilapidated? Are the shelves crowded or are they half filled? Are you using the top and bottom shelves to store materials?

In general, you should probably not make major changes in the way the collection is arranged until you have been on the job a year. For one thing, it can be very time consuming and there will have plenty of other things to do the first year on the job. Making major changes right away will not allow you to know why things were done the way they were. While something may look foolish on the face of it, you may discover the previous librarian had a very good reason for doing it that way. (Make sure the "very good reason" has to do with convenience for library users, not just the convenience of the library staff.) Lastly, major changes can be very disconcerting to your patrons and your staff. It is best to establish a good trusting relationship before stirring the waters too much.

This does not mean you can't begin planning for changes in the first year. Discover why things are the way they are, then plan a new arrangement if you find it to be necessary. Get your collection development policy in order. Make sure your weeding policy is ready to go, and discuss the value of weeding with your board.

During the first year, you may want to begin a formal collection assessment process in a few parts of the collection. For help in doing this, you will want to

1. Call your Public Library Consultant.
2. Take the ABLE Course on Collection Development.
   [http://libraries.idaho.gov/able]
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Censorship and Intellectual Freedom

Unfortunately, we cannot talk about library collections without also talking about censorship. As a librarian, it is your duty to provide as much information on as many different subjects of interest to your community as possible. Because some of these subjects are controversial, people may occasionally become upset because your library contains certain opinions or materials. This situation becomes particularly difficult for people when it involves their children.

As a librarian, it is your professional responsibility to support the cause intellectual freedom. No individual or small group in your community should have the power to tell other people what they cannot read. Because of this, it is vitally important that your library board write a collection development policy which includes a strong statement of support for intellectual freedom and procedures about how such challenges are to be handled. All staff members should know this policy and know exactly what they are supposed to do if the challenge is brought to them. The typical procedure is to ask the person challenging the material to fill out a form, which states their objections. If the person refuses to put their objection in writing, then the matter goes no further. If they do fill out the form, the librarian or the board then make a written response. If this does not satisfy the patron, the matter is then taken to a hearing at a board meeting. The board’s decision at this point is final.

People who challenge library materials are people who care about their children and their community. Treating these people with respect will often help avoid a major confrontation later. In most cases, you will find simply hearing people out will be enough. In a few cases, the challenge may go to your board. It will then be important they understand the principles of intellectual freedom that they are called upon to defend.

Giving in to censorship will only lead to more challenges and it is not just “dirty” books that are attacked. Among books subjected to challenges are The Bible, Huckleberry Finn and Silas Marner. In a real sense then, when you and your board are defending one book in your library, you are defending them all.