CHAPTER 1

Library Collections

The material we hold within our libraries' walls (and, in some cases, outside our walls) constitutes that body of work we have chosen to provide for the community around us with the intent that they will use it. Understanding what a collection is (and is not) and some of the challenges associated with providing a collection is covered in this chapter.

WHAT IS A COLLECTION?

It might seem obvious that as a collection developer you would know what constitutes a collection, but this assumption might be trickier than you think. For example, are grains of sand on a beach "a collection"? Is a junkyard just a collection of trash? What commonalities should we consider in turning our library from just a junkyard of books or a bunch of shelves of books into a collection of appropriate information? Most dictionaries will define a "collection" using similar terminology. Likely to turn up in these definitions are words such as "coherent," "cohesive," and "appropriate." These words tend to point out important concepts of every collection: The items in a collection *must be connected to each other* in some way. Furthermore, these same items *must be connected to an intended audience* or user in some way. The intended audience or users define or are used to define what items are "appropriate" for their use. The collection developer assists in making sure that these appropriate items connect to one another within the body of the collection as a whole.

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To illustrate this concept, imagine that each book in a library's collection is (ideally) something of relevance and use to the surrounding community members. If a public library's surrounding community is a predominantly English-speaking populace of children with low-level educational achievement, they would likely be demanding easy-to-read picture books in English. Therefore, the collection developer would be doing a disservice to that community by collecting technical books of use only to an audience of engineers and architects. In this example, the collection has been defined by the audience intending to use the material—the community's youth. Looking once again at our conceptual definition of just what constitutes a collection, however, we must not forget that items in a collection must also connect to one another just as well as they do to the community intending to use it.

Books on the library's shelves must share a common purpose. The collection developer's role, therefore, is to collect items that illustrate to the community that a unifying purpose or goal prevails. While there is always temptation to add an item to the library's collection on a certain topic simply because it looks good and we think someone might use it, we have to ask ourselves just how that book complements material already on our shelves. Such a concept implies that collection developers must have in-depth knowledge, and understand the purpose, of their library's collection, and be keenly aware of the collection's strengths and weaknesses. In selecting material for the library's collection, the collection developer must be able to demonstrate how an item selected for the community's library supports the collection's strength or how that item addresses the collection's weakness.

What Is Collection Development?

Keeping in mind what defines a collection, the process of collection development seems easily stated as the act of building a coherently connected selection of appropriate items intended to serve an easily identifiable body of users. Simply stated, the successful collection development process puts the perfect piece of information, in the right format, into the hands of the right person at just the precise time he or she needs it. Of course, ensuring that the right information has been purchased at the right price and has potential for repeated use makes the process ideal.

Collection Management versus Collection Development

Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world, or even in a world in which ideal concepts are easily applied. Most public libraries have more than one audience. In fact, almost every public librarian could likely identify five, or even ten, disparate intended users of the library's services. Therefore, a public library collection cannot meet only the needs of one single audience. In its mere existence as a publicly supported institution, the public library must be held accountable to multiple users and *nonusers* alike. A collection developer soon realizes that public libraries need to identify specific priorities, audiences, goals, and objectives in order to remain vital. Once these have been identified, collecting some items necessarily becomes more important than collecting others. At this point, the collection development activity has moved into the realm of collection management.

Collection management and *collection development* are commonly used interchangeably. Although there seems to be no consensus in our profession about the correct distinction between the responsibilities of collection management and development, generally,

our profession tends to think of any management function as the umbrella under which all other processes are created and developed. For instance, when it comes to building a library mission, vision, and goals, we look to library management to lead the way. So, too, when we look to strategic planning, budgeting, personnel, and the like, management tools direct and chart the course all our other activities follow. The same is true when we look at collection management. The collection management process helps in determining policy and priorities for the collection. The collection developer uses these priorities to identify a focus audience (or audiences) and to build the library's collection in a way that supports the organization's mission and stays true to the tenets of what a true "collection" is.

INITIAL ISSUES TO CONSIDER

While we tend to forget that we are not alone in developing collections, every collection developer struggles with certain common issues. Upon checking any professional journal, such as *Library Trends, RQ,* or *Library Journal,* the collection developer will immediately note that librarians all around the world are pondering the same questions and facing the same challenges. In thinking about developing public library collections, it is helpful to consider many of these common issues right now, while you have time to do additional research and data collection, rather than at a time when you may be forced to make a knee-jerk, on-the-spot decision. The following list of issues is certainly not exhaustive, but it does provide a framework on which you will want to base many other collection-related decisions:

- *Should I provide the actual item, or is providing a means of access to that item enough?* Until the last decade or so, many collection developers assumed that ownership meant that the library must physically, and permanently, have an item available on its shelves. In fact, having an item on the shelf was at one time the only true way to ensure the item would be available to a user at the necessary time and place. The Internet, online databases, and other technological innovations have changed that notion. Now that technology has provided alternative means of access to material, for example, in eBook, html, or pdf format, perhaps physically owning a hard copy of an item is no longer necessary. Rather than concerning themselves with the best way to acquire a permanent copy of an item, collection developers must now grapple with the most beneficial means by which to provide access. Access versus ownership opens a myriad of new considerations about the possibility of temporary ownership (rental agreements, book leasing, subscriptions databases, etc.), licensing agreements, and cooperative collection development.
- *Should I have it here at my library, or is having it available at the main library sufficient?* A relative of the "access versus ownership" question is whether to have an item on your own shelf if it's available on the shelf of one of your branches or regional libraries. Certainly, more multibranch library and cooperative library systems tackle this issue than do single-site libraries. However, the collection developer must now weigh the benefits of providing immediate satisfaction of an information need against promising delivery of that same information within a few days, which may be more than sufficient. With online catalogs and branch-to-branch delivery systems common in the public library world, more and more librarians consider their collections as one whole unit, even if this collection is housed in many facilities around the community.