
The Public Library Acquisitions Program

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THIS EFFORT TO PRODUCE a précis of the public library's special problems of selection and procurement is based primarily on the returns from a questionnaire sent to 105 libraries throughout the country. Eighty-five replies were received and a number were accompanied by policy statements and procedures followed in book selection. Of the 19 large libraries receiving the questionnaire—those with a book fund of more than \$100,000—all replied; in the next group which ranged from \$10,000 to \$100,000 the questionnaire was sent to 62 libraries and 53 replies were received; and of 24 sent to libraries with less than \$10,000 to spend for books, 13 answered. Current practice as revealed in the returns suggests that the smaller libraries are more beset with problems than are the larger libraries, and almost all are coping with budget limitations, book selection and procurement difficulties, and need for a policy statement.

It is appreciated that the limiting factor in all library service is the budget but this article is not concerned with questions of support except as related to acquisitions policy. East coast libraries near the publishing centers have many advantages in selection and procurement of in-print and out-of-print titles over libraries in other parts of the country. However, regardless of location, size, and support there are problems common to all public libraries.

The abruptness with which so much material goes out of print is frequently a serious matter. Such a recent and needed title as *Turkish Delights* by M. N. Kelly, published by Transatlantic Arts in 1952, is out of print, and so are L. Scarfe's *Venice—the Lion and the Peacock*, Roy, 1953, and W. M. Inge's *Come Back Little Sheba*, Random House, 1950.

Certain titles by such well-known authors as Havelock Ellis, H. J. Laski and Rabindranath Tagore cannot be obtained from the publishers. *Book of the Dead* cannot be located in a suitable library edition, the Barnes & Noble reprint being out of print. Examples of out-

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of-print titles that should also be in every library are: Alphonso Jennings' *Through the Shadows with O. Henry*, The H. K. Fly Co., New York, 1921; and William F. Cody's *Story of the Wild West*, Historical Publishing Co., Philadelphia, 1888, also B. F. Johnson & Co., Richmond, Va., 1888. Others are such basic books as Froude's *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, which is only partly in print in the Everyman's Library; and H. A. Giles' *Introduction to the History of Chinese Pictorial Art*, Quaritch, 1918.

The type of material needed will vary with local interests and activities. Early editions of certain classics, such as Seneca's *Morals*, Lippincott, 1879, may be wanted in connection with a Great Books program. Early indexes to magazines, such as *Harper's* Vol. I-XL (June 1850-May 1870) cannot be obtained from the publisher. Older titles in the fields of art, religion, history, and literature are in the "want" file of most libraries and will be obtained by only those who are staffed to check second-hand catalogs and the stocks of the local book shops, or engage the service of a book scout. For instance, there is considerable interest today in the writings of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, the Irish writer of terror stories and the macabre, and all of his books appear to be out of print. Contemporary accounts of the Titanic disaster have gone out of print and were asked for by readers long before the recent movie stimulated further interest in the subject.

Technical books and titles on military history tend to disappear from the library shelves and many can only be replaced through the second-hand market. Haven and Belden's *History of the Colt Revolver*, Morrow, 1940, and Marshall McClintock's *Story of War Weapons*, Lippincott, 1945, are two examples.

The reprinting of a series of basic scholarly works of limited but permanent interest, such as J. L. Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, Harper, 1841, reprinted in a fine two-volume edition by Rutgers University Press in 1949, would be a worthy project. Admirable reprint work has been done in the field of Californiana by the Grabhorn Press of San Francisco but even these go out of print. Many of the titles in Dawson's *Early California Travel* series, short accounts of classic and semi-classic works, have served to strengthen library holdings but now they are out of print.

A special alertness to the publications of local societies, individuals, and publishers is necessary to insure that this material which is so often issued in limited editions is added to the library. In the field of local history the public library has a particular obligation and oppor-

tunity for service. In a number of fields public libraries cannot meet the reading interests and needs of their communities because of a dearth of printed material offered by the publishers. Subjects on which one library is seeking suitable material include: installation services and ceremonies for clubs, laying out miniature golf courses, pigeon raising, making wax figures, La Savotte (French foot boxing), and building a trampoline.

Where approval copies are not supplied for titles under consideration the inadequacy of reviews is a problem; too many reviews are written to gain interest in the books rather than explain their contents. Many reviews are too late to be helpful in book selection and often publications of merit from individuals and small publishers receive no notice in the reviewing periodicals. For certain fiction titles, reviews are not always satisfactory; more evaluative, critical and comparative reviews are needed for fiction and non-fiction. These are pressing problems where most of the budget must be spent on current publications, and where there are insufficient staff and time to survey and analyze the book collection it is unfortunate that so much reliance must be placed on inadequate reviews. Libraries some distance from publishing centers deplore the lack of adequate reviews for technical books especially because the libraries are isolated and they rarely have the chance to examine books before they are purchased.

Implicit in such questions as obtaining a representative collection of new books, balancing demand against value in book selection, surveying, weeding, and building the book stock, providing housing space for books needed only occasionally, is the matter of financial support, as well as policy. Many libraries have adopted the American Library Association's Bill of Rights as a policy guide and, of course, there is no better statement of principle that should govern the service. This, however, should be incorporated in a policy statement adapted to local conditions and it should include the procedures followed in developing the collection of books and other reading material selected for local community use.

In regard to policy statements, practically none of the small libraries, and not many of those in the medium group, have put in writing anything setting forth the criteria by which their books are selected and the techniques for applying the criteria. Statements from the large libraries include several that were carefully worked out and that should prove of value to the profession. The excellent statement of the Enoch Pratt Library has been drawn on by others and it, along

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with the policy statements of the Buffalo, Cleveland, Indianapolis, and New York Public Libraries, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and for smaller libraries the Long Beach, California, guide to buying, deserve careful study.

It is conceded that book selection is an art, that the decision to buy or not to buy is a personal judgment, but with clearly laid down objectives and guiding principles giving direction and a frame of reference to the acquisitions program many of the problems of book selection and service will be illumined and simplified if not solved. Trustees, staff, and the community will be served by having a clear statement of the library's goals. Coupled with this should be a step-by-step account of the book selection process: the information assembled on each title under consideration, the criteria applied and their interpretation as related to the library's policy and objectives. It is appreciated that full approval from all segments of the community cannot be expected; moreover, it must be recognized that in a free democratic society complete uniformity of opinion is neither feasible nor desirable.

A further point to note is that in only a few significant characteristics can books lend themselves to objective analysis. It is the subjective opinion that determines to what degree a book meets the required criteria. Careful scrutiny and documentation should be given to the following points in evaluating a given title: 1) Qualifications of the author, 2) Factual accuracy, 3) Timeliness of the publication, 4) Presence of propaganda or objectionable material, 5) Degree to which the contents present representative points of view and objectivity of treatment, and 6) Literary and esthetic standards. While each title must be considered on its merits the decision to buy or reject must be based on its contribution to the objectives of the library. Where several staff members are involved in the selection of books with variations in reading background, training, and experience, a sound policy statement will guide and make the decisions more articulate.

A degree of statesmanship is required in giving direction to the library's program in resisting the pressures for the most popular reading, in promoting the use of the more significant books and other material, and in building a book collection for the next generation that will represent what is most significant in this one as well as in the past. The policy statement should describe the community in general terms and the trends evident in its development, the library's place in the present and future community, and its contribution to the

community's growth. Account should be taken of the service resources and future program of other libraries in the area, inter-library loan service, and reciprocity arrangements among local independent libraries.

A policy reported by one library is the limiting of the number of titles to be added in any given year. By doing this the flow of work through all processing departments can be accurately estimated and controlled. It is a sound practice to anticipate demands wherever possible although admittedly all needs cannot be foreseen. Book selection is controlled when a definite number of titles to be added is known in advance. The allocating of the book fund among the several subject classifications in the library is general practice and has proved though experience to be sound. A fair proportion of the book appropriation is set aside for titles of significance in the several classifications. From this allocation a book committee reviews approval copies, checks the book reviews, and makes recommendations for purchase. A contingency fund is usually held in reserve to be spent by the chief of circulation or by the head librarian. In most cases the libraries request approval copies; many unsolicited approvals are books that do not come up to the library standards and they are not welcome because of the amount of clerical time involved in returning them. Where a large number of requested approval copies are received the inadequacy of reviews is not too serious. Usually all books in question are read by members of the staff; in some cases this reading is assigned and is done on the staff member's own time.

In at least one library the book selection committee is not made up strictly of professional staff. Questionnaires were issued to all employees to ascertain their academic background, their professional or avocational interests, and their willingness to serve on the book selection committee. It was found that a number of the staff did have special interests and were pleased to volunteer their service on the committee. This committee determines which of the older titles are to be discarded as well as the new publications to be purchased. An index to all fiction reviews is maintained for public use; also the reviews by members of the staff are kept on file. In large systems with branch libraries the general policy is to duplicate for the main library everything that is at the branches. Branch staff members serve on the book selection committee. The branches develop their book collections pretty much tailored to the local community interests with no effort or emphasis placed on so-called balanced book collection.

In one of the larger libraries a concerted effort to reduce the num-

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ber of fiction titles is made and stress is placed on the purchase of only the most significant fiction books. Mediocre fiction is not replaced. The attempt is made to encourage and promote the use of non-fiction by display, publicizing, and reviewing, and wherever possible non-fiction is substituted for fiction. Some libraries depend on the pay-duplicate collections to satisfy the demand for new fiction. One library located in an area where there is a large number of good rental libraries leaves the providing of the light popular fiction titles to them and has a very limited pay-duplicate collection. It is the general practice in the large systems with good book budgets to increase automatically the number of copies of a given title with an increase in the requests received. A number of libraries add a copy of a book for every five requests received. In cases where the book is not of particular significance the readers are expected to wait their turn and the initial order is not increased.

A book collection of maximum utility will be developed when the public library's selection is based on a knowledge of the resources and service program of the college, university, special, and research libraries in its region. The first steps in coordinating library resources on a large scale have been taken with the establishing of bibliographical centers for the Pacific Northwest at Seattle and for the Rocky Mountains area at Denver. These repositories of bibliographical information have demonstrated their value as agencies contributing to the coordination and development of public and other library book collections in their respective regions, as noted by David and Hirsch elsewhere in this issue. The practice of referring all proposed last copy discards to the center for clearance has preserved for the regions many valuable titles that would otherwise have been lost.

The consolidating of secondary material and titles rarely used in regional collections would relieve local libraries of housing and shelving problems that are acute in numerous instances. The adding of housing facilities to the Denver and Seattle Bibliographical centers and equipping them with resources comparable to those established at the Midwest Inter-Library Center for the participating universities in that area would provide agencies of far reaching influence in the development of public library book collections. Thus the archival function of the local public library in a given region could be consolidated and coordinated with the program of the other public libraries in the region and all would gain. Problems of selection and procurement are simplified when all units of library service are integrated on a regional basis through union catalogs, reserves of second-

ary books, complete bibliographical information for the region, interloan service, and a full cooperation by all local libraries in the program.

In summary, a balanced acquisitions program is possible only with a well-trained and well-informed staff, an adequate budget, and a broad and varied service that is described and given direction in a policy statement. Current experience points directly to the limitations of the middle group and smaller libraries in regard to policy, support, and service, and suggests strongly that they would gain much by a study of the procedures and policies of the libraries mentioned earlier in this paper. The limitations of the small independent library are only mentioned to point up the interdependence of all units and areas in developing a book collection and service that will meet the reading interests and needs of the local community and the individual reader.

General References

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