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Publisher Routledge

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Public Services Quarterly

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792306948>

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Online Publication Date: 01 July 2009

To cite this Article Sanders, Mark(2009)'Popular Reading Collections in Public University Libraries: A Survey of Three Southeastern States',Public Services Quarterly,5:3,174 — 183

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/15228950902976083

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15228950902976083>

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Popular Reading Collections in Public University Libraries: A Survey of Three Southeastern States

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Offering a separate, popular reading collection can be a valuable public service in academic libraries. Popular reading is also known as leisure reading, recreational reading, and reading for pleasure. These phrases are synonyms for an interest in reading bestsellers, mysteries, romance novels, biographies, graphic novels, humor, self-help, or popular nonfiction, among other literature categories. This article examines the survey data of popular reading collections in the public universities of three southeastern states. It also discusses the popular reading collection at the author's library, also located at a southeastern public university, and analyzes the data from both circulation records and a survey of more than 100 patrons who used the collection during the fall 2008 semester.

KEYWORDS *popular reading, public university libraries, recreational reading*

INTRODUCTION

As professionals in a career that involves so much time working with printed books, librarians often hear from others that we “must love to read!” While this characterization is obviously stereotypical, it often rings true that reading for pleasure is an activity many of us enjoy. However, in academic libraries with collections built to support the research and teaching mission of a university faculty, popular reading can be an afterthought or left to public libraries to provide. Academic library patrons who value “curling up with a

Received 2 March 2009; accepted 14 April 2009.

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good book" should not be neglected, despite the unfair perception that the Internet and other electronic distractions have diminished a love of reading. Fortunately, many public university libraries recognize this and have developed a popular reading collection.

Popular reading is also known as leisure reading, recreational reading, and reading for pleasure. These phrases are synonyms for an interest in reading bestsellers, mysteries, romance novels, biographies, graphic novels, humor, self-help, or popular nonfiction, among other literature genres. This reading is not necessarily based upon the need to complete an assignment, prepare for a presentation, or increase one's knowledge of an academic topic; instead, it is similar to listening to music, admiring art, or enjoying the theater. These are all acts that enrich our lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A 1999 survey of Tennessee academic libraries discovered some interesting trends among those that offered a separate browsing collection of popular titles to support recreational or leisure reading (Kerns & O'Brien, 2001). The authors received 30 responses from a survey sent to 40 academic libraries in the state and found that 21 (70%) responding libraries had a separate recreational reading collection. Among these libraries, the collections themselves were varied. The collections included hardcover and paperbacks, and books that were leased, purchased, and donated. There was wide variation in the amount of bibliographic control for providing access. The collections were all located in high traffic areas and encouraged significant patron input into acquisitions. "Overall, the survey results seem to show that despite static or declining book budgets, recreational reading collections continue to hold a place in many Tennessee academic libraries" (Kerns & O'Brien, 2001). Community colleges were far more likely to have these collections than four-year institutions. This finding was particularly interesting, as it would seem that four-year institutions would not only have more resources to provide a popular reading collection, but also that such a collection would be more valued on a campus supporting a residential population.

In early 2003, librarians at the University of Northern Colorado began a popular reading collection with 400 books, a mix of fiction and nonfiction. Survey data were collected from users the following year. Fifty-five surveys were returned, 25 from undergraduates, eight from graduates and 22 from faculty/staff (Rathe & Blankenship, 2005). The response, backed by circulation statistics, was overwhelmingly positive. Circulation in the first year, 2003, was 669, which jumped to 1,118 in 2004. An interesting finding by Rathe and Blankenship was that while leisure reading was the most popular use of the collection, 11 students indicated that they also used the books to support class assignments.

As early as 1993, a survey of 85 academic libraries in the southeastern United States revealed that 38 (45%) had some form of a leisure reading collection (Morrissett, 1994). Of these 38 libraries, the size of the university served by the library was evenly distributed among smaller and larger institutions. Libraries at private institutions were slightly more likely to have leisure reading collections than publicly supported institutions. Forty-four percent of private university libraries indicated they had a leisure reading collection, while only 39% of public university libraries offered one. This may be because many private schools are small, liberal arts colleges and their collections are more likely to include popular reading materials than public universities, which in general are more likely to be research institutions.

Finally, in "Finding without seeking: What readers say about the role of pleasure reading as a source of information" (2000), Catherine Ross conducted 194 intensive open-ended interviews with adults who describe themselves as "heavy readers," meaning they read at least a book a week. Ross' thesis was that information seeking can be nonpurposive, unintentional, and passive; something described in other studies as "information encountering" or "incidental information acquisition." She states that:

It turns out that in the course of their often very extensive reading, avid readers encounter information that helps them. They normally do not think of themselves as involved in information seeking as such. Nevertheless helpful information crops up when they are reading extended narrative forms, particularly biography, history, and fiction. Readers choose books for the pleasure anticipated in the reading itself but then, serendipitously, they encounter materials that helps them in the context of their lives. (Ross, 2000)

The interviews she conducted demonstrate that reading achieves several goals that parallel the mission of higher education. These include: awakening new perspectives/enlargement of possibilities, models for identity, connection with others, awareness of not being alone, and courage to make a change.

RESEARCH AND FINDINGS

This article attempts to build upon the existing research by presenting the findings from a survey of popular reading collections and their users at public four-year universities in three southeastern states. It examines the data from 45 institutions in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia. It also discusses the popular reading collection at the author's university library and analyzes the data from both circulation records and a survey of more than 100 patrons who used the collection during the fall 2008 semester.

The results provide data that public service librarians will find informative in understanding the use of existing popular reading collections. These findings will also be useful to librarians who are considering the creation of a popular reading collection at their institution. Finally, the patron survey provides insight into the leisure reading habits of today's students and can help guide collection development decisions.

Popular Reading Collections in Three Southeastern States

Institutional profiles from the College Blue Book (35th ed.) were used to identify the 45 public, four-year universities. A list of these institutions appears in Appendix 1. An initial e-mail asking for participation in the survey was sent to librarians identified as Head of Service for either Access Services or Collection Development, depending upon the organizational structure of the library. The five questions asked by the survey appear in Appendix 2. They include information about when the popular reading collection was established, the size of the collection, circulation statistics, and descriptions of popular genres and user classification. Of the 45 institutions contacted, 30 responded to the initial e-mail. The remaining institutions were contacted for follow up via e-mail or telephone. Answers gathered from the survey were compiled in a spreadsheet together with information about undergraduate and graduate student enrollment for each university.

Twenty-nine libraries (64%) responded that they offer a separate collection of books for patrons' leisure or recreational reading (see Table 1). Sixteen (36%) indicated they do not. However, many of those that do not have a separate collection indicated they were considering such a collection or that they collect popular reading in the general collection. The size of the institution appears to be a strong indicator of whether or not a library provides a separate popular reading collection. Fifteen (88%) of the 17 universities with enrollments exceeding 10,000 students had a popular reading collection. Only half (50%) of the 28 institutions with enrollments below 10,000 students offered a popular reading collection.

Information about when the popular reading collections began was less precise. Some institutions could not provide a year and others could

TABLE 1 Popular Reading Collection Response (n = 45)

Enrollment	Popular reading collection	No popular reading collection
10,000–35,000	15	2
6,000–9,999	4	4
0–5,999	10	10

only give the decade in which the collection was established. The oldest collection had been in existence since at least the late 1960s; the newest collection was established in 2008. Most had existed for at least 10 years. Descriptions of the sizes of the collections were also somewhat inexact. The smallest collection was estimated to number 50 volumes; the largest collection was at that state's flagship university and numbered 7,364 titles. The mean size of circulating titles was 800 volumes. Circulation statistics for the 2007–2008 academic year were unavailable for approximately 30 of the libraries offering a popular reading collection. Of the 15 libraries that did have statistics, the highest circulation total for the past year was 20,975 and the smallest was 138.

The most popular genre of leisure reading among the libraries surveyed was fiction, especially best-seller fiction. Within this category, respondents mentioned anecdotally that mysteries and romance novels were of especially high interest. These were followed by best-seller nonfiction, especially biographies and self-help. No single group was identified as the heaviest users of popular reading collections among undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and staff. Most library respondents reported relatively uniform use among all groups, although in most libraries undergraduate students just barely edged out faculty and staff. Several respondents noted that this is likely because undergraduates make up the largest number of library users. Comments from survey respondents were unanimous in their approval and support of the popular reading collection. They include statements such as: “our recreational collection is very popular and heavily used”; “serves a valuable function for our readers”; and “is a very popular collection in our library.”

Popular Reading Collection at East Carolina University

East Carolina University's (ECU) Joyner Library, with generous help from its Friends of the Library organization, developed a popular reading collection in June 2004. Located in Greenville, North Carolina, ECU enrolls nearly 26,000 students. It is a constituent institution of the University of North Carolina and offers 106 bachelor's degree programs, 71 master's degree programs, 4 specialist degree programs, a first-professional degree in Medicine (MD) program, and 16 doctoral programs in its professional colleges and schools. ECU's popular reading collection is leased from Brodart's McNaughton Book Service and currently numbers 450 titles including best-sellers, biographies, mysteries, graphic novels, and more. The collection began with 200 titles, but after adding approximately 10 books per month, it has grown to the current maximum number of titles permitted under our leasing agreement. Joyner Library's designated selector for popular reading titles chooses titles based on best-seller lists, recommendations, and available printed and electronic selection tools. Titles selected represent mysteries,

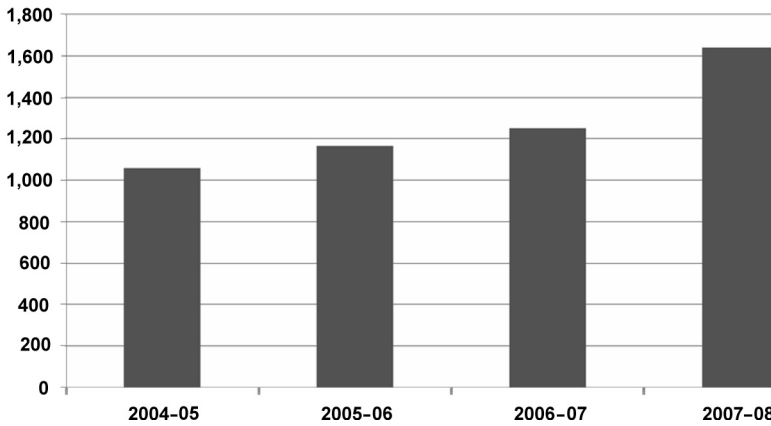


FIGURE 1 Popular reading collection titles circulated at ECU.

biographies, graphic novels, and bestselling fiction and nonfiction. The library returns a small number of undercirculating titles twice a year and automatically retains 20% of the books for its permanent collection without an additional cost.

The collection was originally located near the rear of the library, along the main pathway to a computer lab. In 2006, an effort to increase awareness of the collection resulted in its move to the library’s entrance where it is adjacent to the circulation desk. The effort appears to have worked; circulation statistics have increased each year since the collection debuted. There were 1,637 checkouts during and 2007–2008 academic year, or about four checkouts per title. During the fall 2008 semester, about 100 books were checked out at any given time. Figures 1 and 2 provide information about annual circulation statistics from the past four years and the mean number checked out during the fall 2008 semester.

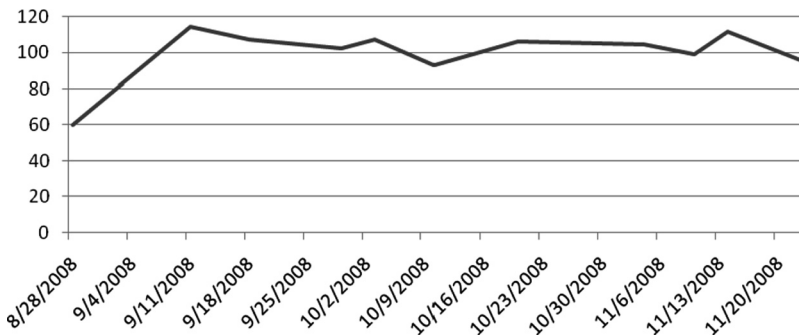


FIGURE 2 Mean number of popular reading collection titles checked out at given times during the fall 2008 semester.

TABLE 2 ECU Survey Respondents (n = 107)

Undergraduates	66	62%
Faculty	14	13%
Graduate students	11	10%
Staff	10	9%
Community residents	6	6%

To better understand the users of our popular reading collection, a brief survey was administered during the fall 2008 semester and appears in Appendix 3. A total of 107 patrons responded to the survey (see Table 2). The results were intriguing. In some cases they confirmed existing suspicions with quantitative data and in other cases shed fresh light on the reading habits of our users.

Reading for pleasure was by far the leading motivation for checking out popular reading books; only one survey returned did not indicate reading for pleasure as a factor for using the collection. Although the findings from the University of Northern Colorado found that 11 of 55 respondents indicated they used the popular reading collection to support a class assignment, only one respondent at ECU indicated that as a reason. No respondents reported using the collection to learn more about a particular topic of personal interest. These two findings from the ECU survey appear to confirm that the use of the collection is overwhelmingly of a leisure nature rather than academic or for personal edification. Accordingly, decisions regarding selection should likely focus on books that provide enjoyment and entertainment, not necessarily information or instruction.

Fiction is the most popular genre by far at ECU. Eighty-six (80.3%) users selected it as among the popular reading genres they read most. Forty-two (39.2%), or less than half, selected nonfiction. Twenty-seven (25.2%) reported reading both genres, but only five (4.6%) said they read neither fiction nor nonfiction. Magazines were selected by 27 (25.2%) patrons and newspapers by 23 (21.4%). Comic books or graphic novels were the least popular genre. Only 10 (9.3%) respondents included them among their most-read categories. Three genres that elicited at least one response in the "other" category were horror, humor, and romance novels.

One of the most interesting findings of the survey was that 52 (48.5%) patrons reported that they were checking out popular reading books for the first time. It is unclear whether this is due to successful marketing efforts, the annual fall semester arrival of new students, or some other factor. The fact that 71 people (66.3%) indicated that they read more than three hours a week suggests that almost two-thirds of users are relatively heavy readers. This is bolstered by the data that 55 were self-identified repeat customers and only six respondents (5.6%) reported that they read less than one hour per week.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Both the external and internal surveys confirm that fiction is the most popular genre of a popular reading collection and students, especially undergraduates, are among its heaviest users. This contradicted the author's perception that faculty and staff were the user groups who most took advantage of the service; however, the results align with findings from an earlier study that discovered faculty members were among the heaviest users during the first year of a popular reading collection, but by the second year students accounted for the majority of the total circulation (Rathe & Blankenship, 2005). The surveys' confirmation of fiction as the most popular genre also has a collection development implication for ECU's popular reading collection, which is currently split almost evenly among fiction and nonfiction titles. A higher proportion of fiction titles would likely reflect users' taste more accurately at both ECU and many other public university libraries. Current circulation reports also support this; eight of the top 10 most circulated popular reading titles are fiction. Conversely, nonfiction titles are overwhelmingly represented among the books that have never been checked out.

Directions for further research could include investigation of both private universities and community colleges with popular reading collections to determine the use in different types of institutions. Extending the survey to other states would be valuable for comparing such collections and their users in various regions of the country. Further analysis regarding patron categories (including student classification), reading habits, publication genres, and even gender would be informative to collection development and access services librarians. However, it is certain is that popular reading collections are heavily used and enjoyed by many faculty, student and staff patrons of the university library.

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APPENDIX 1: INSTITUTIONS SURVEYED

Albany State University	Lander University
Appalachian State University	North Carolina State University
Armstrong Atlantic State University	North Carolina Central University
Augusta State University	North Carolina School of the Arts
Citadel	North Carolina State University
Clayton State University	North Georgia College & State University
Clemson University	Savannah State University
Coastal Carolina University	South Carolina State University
College of Charleston	Southern Polytechnic State University
Columbus State University	University of Georgia
East Carolina University	University of North Carolina at Asheville
Elizabeth City State University	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Fayetteville State University	University of North Carolina at Charlotte
Fort Valley State University	University of North Carolina at Greensboro
Francis Marion University	University of North Carolina at Pembroke
Georgia College & State University	University of North Carolina at Wilmington
Georgia Institute of Technology	University of South Carolina
Georgia Southern University	University of South Carolina – Aiken
Georgia Southwestern	University of South Carolina – Upstate
State University	University of West Georgia
Georgia State University	Valdosta State University
Kennesaw State University	Western Carolina University

APPENDIX 2: FOUR-YEAR PUBLIC UNIVERSITY POPULAR
READING SURVEY

1. How long have you had a popular reading collection?
2. What is the approximate size of the popular reading collection?
3. What was the approximate circulation of popular reading titles for the 2007–2008 academic year?
4. Which genres appear to be the most popular among patrons (e.g., biographies, fiction, nonfiction, self-help, mystery)?
5. Who appear to be the heaviest users of the popular reading collection (e.g., faculty, staff, graduate students, undergraduates)?
6. Please mention which university institution you represent and feel free to leave any comments about your popular reading collection here. Thanks!

APPENDIX 3: EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY POPULAR
READING SURVEY

1. Please circle your ECU status

Undergrad Graduate student Faculty Staff Community Resident

2. How do you use the Popular Reading Collection? (Please circle all that apply)

A class assignment or research
My own reading pleasure
To learn more about _____

3. Which genres do you read most? (Please circle all that apply)

Fiction
Non-fiction
Magazines
Newspapers
Comic Books or Graphic Novels
Other: _____

4. Have you ever checked out books from the Popular Reading Collection before?

Yes No

5. How many hours do you spend reading for pleasure a week?

Less than 1 hour
1–2 hours
3–5 hours
6–10 hours
More than 10 hours

6. Comments or Suggestions?
