CHAPTER 5*

COMMUNITY COLLECTIONS: Nurturing Student Curators

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Introduction

With peer-assisted learning flourishing at many academic libraries, student involvement in reference and even instruction is becoming increasingly common in higher education. But can students play a similar role in collection development? Can undergraduate circulating collections benefit from the involvement of student curators?

In 2012, librarians at the UCLA Powell Library, which supports undergraduate curricula, began to reexamine Powell’s popular reading collections. Consisting of recent fiction, graphic novels, and travel guides, the collections were small and had been curated for many years by librarians, with little to no input from undergraduate students. While most undergraduates don’t have formal collection development training, multiple factors led Powell librarians to rethink this traditional collection development model.

The first factor was the reimagining of Powell Library’s mission, a vision for Teaching and Learning Services (TLS) that included “foster[ing]
undergraduate engagement in UCLA’s scholarly community and beyond,” “support[ing] the ‘whole’ 21st-century student,” and “building foundations for lifelong learning.” The second factor was the need to update Powell’s historic Main Reading Room for the needs of undergraduates. The Main Reading Room previously housed bound periodicals and outdated reference materials that were removed due to low use rates, and Miller began to explore the possibility of expanding the popular reading collections to fill the room’s now-empty shelves. This move would turn one of Powell’s most popular spaces into a “public library” for over 10,000 students who live on campus. After encountering student groups that were actively curating independent collections, Powell librarians realized the potential of partnering with students to co-create popular collections. Thus, the Community Collections were born.

The value of popular reading collections in academic libraries is well-documented; they make the library relevant and responsive to student interests, and promote lifelong reading habits. However, many recreational reading collections are limited to fiction and popular nonfiction. Powell librarians, on the other hand, have taken advantage of campus-wide initiatives and Los Angeles’s creative communities to produce five innovative thematic collections: cookbooks, science fiction and fantasy, sustainability, zines, and travel literature. The Community Collections also include more traditional collections, including the extant recent fiction and graphic novel collections, and a newer collection of career guides. The goal of the Community Collections is to support and promote student intellectual growth, health and well-being, and creativity. Reflecting the diversity of the student population, the collections aim to foster curiosity about the world and empathy for others, while nurturing lifelong reading habits.

Although the collections developed organically, they fall into roughly three tiers of engagement for students. The highest tier involves identifying existing student-built collections on campus and using the library’s

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* For additional information about Miller’s initiatives at Powell Library, see “Imagine! On the future of teaching and learning and the academic research library” in *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14 (3), 329–351.
resources to make those collections more widely accessible. The second tier involves inviting students to select titles for collections initially built by librarians. Finally, the third tier consists of soliciting student work to add to the collections.

This chapter will describe the inception of each collection, the process of building it, and tips for librarians looking to establish similar collections at their own institutions.

Top Tier: Incorporating Existing Student Collections into the Library

*The Enigma Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Gaming Collection*

The first collection to incorporate student curation was born in a moment of happenstance. Anyone who has visited the UCLA campus is familiar with the Bruin Walk: a lively path between the student union and the library where student organizations set up sandwich boards, hand out flyers, hold bake sales and singalongs, and promote their activities. One day in 2012, after articulating the new vision for Powell and TLS, Miller noticed one particular organization amid the cacophony: Enigma, the science fiction, fantasy, and gaming club. When she struck up a conversation with the students, they told her that the organization had a library of more than 1,000 titles, along with an elected club librarian to keep track of the collection. The problem, though, was that they had no space to permanently house the collection, so it was stored in approximately forty-five banker’s boxes that migrated from apartment to apartment as students joined the club and then graduated. Although the club librarian kept careful inventory of the collection and each box was accompanied by an item list, the arrangement made the collection virtually inaccessible to most students.

It was decided that in order to promote the club and increase access to the collection, Powell Library should house it. Librarian Simon Lee, who took on a liaison role with Enigma and became Powell’s science fiction and fantasy selector, and Lise Snyder, Powell’s collections manager at the time, took on the logistics. The UCLA Library’s acquisitions policies, coupled with the large size of the collection, complicated the process of transferring the collection to the library. There were no procedures in place for moving
and cataloging an independent campus collection, so the collection had to be treated as a gift to the library, with the rationale that it would increase curricular ties with the teaching and learning community while giving students leadership experience by engaging them directly with collection development. The Enigma officers signed the deed of gift and the boxes were “donated.”

One of the most rewarding aspects of ingesting the collection was the inclusion of Enigma’s club librarian in the process. The student, who was interested in pursuing librarianship as a career, worked with library staff to design an independent study in which she helped process the collection, learning about librarianship and receiving course credit for her work. Through the combined efforts of the UCLA Library, the student librarian, and the Enigma membership, which was kept abreast of the process through updates to its Facebook page, the collection was completed in May of 2014.

Meanwhile, collections funds were allocated, and the Enigma membership began selecting new releases to add to the collection. The student librarian, whose club duties had evolved into a liaison role with Powell Library, used multiple methods to engage the Enigma community. She photocopied reviews from *Booklist* and distributed them at their weekly meetings, and posted calls for title suggestions on the group’s Facebook page.

Four years later, the collection has grown to more than 2,000 items. Under the leadership of a new student librarian, Enigma formed a book club to promote and have discussion sessions around the collection, and worked with Powell to put on events tied to the collection, such as a reading by science fiction author, Greg Van Eekhout. During every step of the process, the librarians were delighted and gratified at the skill the students demonstrated in selecting titles and facilitating the workflow. Although processing could be a challenge at times, especially when dealing with brittle or damaged items, the students laid the conceptual groundwork for the collection years before librarians ever knew of its existence. Rather than “letting” the students build the collection, the library supported them in work in which they were already engaged. Not only did this project help the library offer a popular reading collection that was demonstrably of interest to undergraduates, it also served as a teachable moment, allowing students to look behind the scenes at their campus library and take the lead in shaping its offerings. The message it sent to the under-
graduate population was a powerful one: *This is your library, and we see you as equals.*

**The Sustainability Collection**

In 2014, UCLA launched the Grand Challenges, a series of large-scale research projects aiming to solve societal problems. The first Grand Challenge, Sustainable LA, focuses on achieving water and energy sustainability in Los Angeles and improving the city’s ecosystem by 2050. The university describes the Grand Challenges as “the biggest, most collaborative, and potentially most transformative efforts UCLA has undertaken to date,” and campus departments are encouraged to weave them into their instructional activities.

Powell librarians decided to add a new collection to the Community Collections, with a focus on sustainability. Following the success of the Enigma Collection and the Zine Collection (discussed below), Julia Glassman, the selector, approached student organizations to gauge their interest in helping to build the collection. She first contacted E3, a student sustainability organization. That organization was unable to help build a collection, but their president introduced Glassman to another group: the Sustainability Resource Center (SRC), run by two graduate students and an undergraduate assistant. Upon meeting with the SRC, Glassman discovered another hidden collection: a multidisciplinary student-built library consisting of titles on ecology, climate change, economics, human rights, social justice, urban planning, and other topics. The thought and experimentation that had gone into the collection were impressive. Rather than reducing sustainability to questions of recycling and limiting carbon emissions, the collection presented the concept as a broad mosaic of interconnected issues, from sweatshops to income inequality to the military industrial complex. The collection was more than a compilation of resources for students studying sustainability, it was a political statement, put forth by students, which expands the conception of sustainability so often espoused in popular media.

Like Enigma, the SRC suffered from a lack of accessible space. The collection was kept in the SRC’s office, which had to be locked whenever the student leadership wasn’t working there. Furthermore, the office itself was hard to find, as it was tucked away in a seldom-used hallway of an administrative building. The original SRC leadership had envisioned the
collection as an open resource for the entire student body, but few people even knew it existed, and would be largely unable to browse it even if they did.

Because Powell Library had already started building its Sustainability Collection, the process of ingesting the SRC’s collection differed from that of Enigma’s. Glassman took inventory of the SRC’s titles, and any titles that were already in Powell’s stacks were moved to the Community Collections. The remaining 200 titles, as of this writing, are being processed; however, in the spring of 2015, Powell and the SRC were able to collaborate on a soft launch of the collection in the form of a social media contest in which students described what sustainability meant to them. The winners, chosen by the SRC leadership, won gift cards to the UCLA student store.

One challenge that the SRC’s collection posed was the rotating student leadership. In Enigma, an officer might be elected as an underclassman and serve for three or even four years, which gives librarians time to form solid relationships. Officers in the SRC, however, are limited to a one-year term, and the undergraduate leadership volunteers on an informal basis. This system delayed the process of ingesting the collection, as the project had to be re-introduced to the new leadership multiple times. It also poses a challenge to having students continue to curate the collection by selecting new titles, as the students need to be re-trained every year, and the collection may not be a priority for every new set of officers. A nine-month school year is simply not enough time for students and librarians to get to know one another.

However, the Library has still greatly benefited from incorporating the SRC’s collection into the Community Collections. Not only does the collection make the same statement as Enigma’s, it has also enabled librarians to view sustainability in new and interesting ways. Would a librarian have selected Barbara Ehrenreich’s Blood Rites or Noam Chomsky’s Necessary Illusions for a sustainability collection? Probably not. The students’ selections transformed the collection into something more ambitious and thought-provoking than it would have been had librarians acted as gatekeepers. Now, as those titles sit alongside books on urban gardening and permaculture, the collection invites students and other patrons to consider the myriad issues that contribute to problems like climate change. The SRC students have benefited from the increased visibility of their hard work,
and the Library has benefited by pushing the boundaries of what a collection can do.

**Second Tier: Student Selectors**

*The Cookbook Collection*

The idea to start a community cookbook collection was sparked by a convergence of two related initiatives: the Library’s annual Edible Book Festival, in which students and staff prepare dishes and desserts based on books and the UCLA Healthy Campus Initiative, a set of programs designed to improve the health and wellness of UCLA students and staff. At the 2012 Edible Book Festival, the president of the student Bruin Culinary Community (BCC) served as a judge. He and Associate University Librarian Kevin Mulroy struck up a conversation, and the BCC president said that interest in food was “definitely taking off” among students at UCLA. Mulroy put the student in touch with Powell librarian Danielle Salomon to discuss possibilities for collaboration. Together, they developed a cookbook collection co-curated by the Library and the Culinary Community, tying it into the Eat Well part of the Healthy Campus Initiative by providing students with materials to learn how to cook for themselves, try new cuisines, and explore healthier food choices.

In contrast to the existing cookbooks held at UCLA, which are housed in the Research Library and used for research and instruction, the Powell Community Cookbook Collection was envisioned as a working collection—one that would go home with students, get splattered with cooking grease, and be used for practical purposes. Academically, it would provide an entry point for undergraduate students to become interested in the study of food and culture, a cross-disciplinary field that is examined in courses in different departments. When it came time to begin ordering titles, the Library provided seed money ($2,500) and the Culinary Community students compiled a list on Amazon of cookbooks they wanted. Salomon ordered the books and the club president organized the initial display on the shelf.

The following year, Snyder attended UCLA’s Enormous Activities Fair, at which student organizations seek to promote their activities and attract new members, and she discovered a second organization: the Cooking and Baking Club. In contrast to the Culinary Community, which was interested
in modern, sophisticated cuisine, the Cooking and Baking Club focused more on everyday cooking. Salomon formed a relationship with the organization and, like the Culinary Community, the Cooking and Baking Club students compiled a list of titles on Amazon. The title list from each organization reflected that organization's interests: the Culinary Community, for example, selected *The Professional Chef* by the Culinary Institute of America, while the Cooking and Baking Club selected titles like *All About Braising: The Art of Uncomplicated Cooking*. Interestingly, the two organizations had little interaction with each other, so each worked independently with the Library.

In addition to selecting titles, the presidents of the two organizations have continued to serve as judges at the Edible Book Festival, and since the launch of the Cookbook Collection, the festival has served as a showcase for new titles, which are displayed near the contestants. Salomon still solicits title recommendations from students, although the number of recommendations has shrunk since the initial title lists from each organization. Because the students and the librarian all had busy schedules, and the students’ interests lay primarily with cooking instead of library collections, it proved difficult to coordinate collection development among all three parties—especially since the students were essentially asked to perform unpaid labor for the library. Challenges such as this one are discussed in more detail below.

Nevertheless, the Cookbook Collection may never have come to be if it weren’t for the involvement of the BCC president and other student cooking enthusiasts. It’s one thing for librarians to be aware of and involved in campus initiatives like Eat Well, it’s quite another to be able to see these initiatives from a student’s perspective. Communicating and working with students ensures that libraries build collections that are truly responsive to undergraduate interests.

**The Zine Collection**

In 2012, the first annual Los Angeles Zine Fest launched at The Last Bookstore in downtown Los Angeles. Although zines (often thought to be killed off by blogs and other new media) had been increasing in popularity over several years, LA Zine Fest arguably marked the beginning of a zine renaissance in Southern California. Enthusiasm for zines blossomed at UCLA as well, and multiple student groups began to create and distribute them.
Among these groups were the Bad Art Zine Collective (BAZC) and the Student Committee for the Arts (SCA). Although the SCA was primarily an arts organization with some interest in zine culture, BAZC was a collective of student zinesters who were committed to bringing a greater awareness of zine culture to campus. In a stroke of good fortune, after the Library decided to create a zine collection, Glassman, the zine selector, discovered that a student circulation desk worker was a member of the collective.

Selecting and purchasing titles for a zine collection can be more challenging than for a collection of more traditional items like monographs. These challenges have been described in chapter 6 of Julie Bartel’s *From A to Zine: Building a Winning Zine Collection in Your Library* (2004). Simply put, librarians cannot rely on infrastructures like approval plans or purchase orders to acquire small-scale, self-published materials like zines. Thus, when the UCLA Library began the Zine Collection, it was decided that items for the collection would be purchased by hand at the various zine fests, and online from vendors like Etsy or Quimby’s Books. Although the process of selecting zines one by one—not to mention meeting and forming relationships with zinesters—is immensely enjoyable, it can be time-consuming. Furthermore, Glassman faced the added challenge of tableling at LA Zine Fest herself, limiting her ability to browse other booths. So, in preparation for the 2014 Zine Fest, she approached the student worker for help with purchasing.

Because the vast majority of vendors at zine fests only accept cash, asking a student to purchase items on a librarian’s behalf requires a good deal of trust. At the 2014 Zine Fest, Glassman brought personal funds, which would later be reimbursed by the Library, and gave the student cash and a receipt book for use in purchasing. The student then walked the floor and searched for zines to purchase while the librarian worked her own table. Although this arrangement isn’t necessary at every zine fest, it is useful because, as with other student-curated collections, the library is able to make selecting decisions from a student’s perspective.

However, even though enlisting student assistance for purchasing is helpful, student involvement in the Zine Collection truly becomes a symbiotic relationship in programming. The Library has hosted several events connected to the Zine Collection, all of them either proposed by or coordinated with students. For example, in the fall of 2013, the People of Color Zine Project, a collective of writers and performance poets, performed at the library. Glassman invited the performers to campus and coordinated
logistics for the event. Then, after the performance, BAZC led a zine-making workshop, guiding their peers through the creation of original zines.

**Third Tier: Soliciting Student Work for Collections**

In the previous two tiers, students have taken a decisive leadership role, actively building and shaping collections. On the surface, including student work in existing collections may not seem to be a leadership opportunity, but when it’s part of a larger practice of putting students in leadership positions within the library, it supports the philosophy that the library values students’ knowledge and contributions. The practice allows the library to include student voices in scholarly and creative conversations, which in turn allows students to share knowledge and creative work with their peers, bolstered by the institutional weight of the library.

**The Zine Collection Revisited**

As discussed above, involving students in purchasing and programming is an integral part of the Powell Zine Collection. However, what makes a zine collection stand apart from more traditional collections is the ease with which students can contribute their own work. Zines are cheap, easy, and enjoyable to produce, which means that librarians have access to a wealth of creative work by students. The Powell Zine Collection benefited from three groups in particular: a student collective authoring a zine series called *Nothing New*, and two classes, one on writing and another on race and the sex industry.

*Nothing New*’s inclusion in the Zine Collection was relatively straightforward: the students approached Glassman and donated a copy of the first issue to the library. From then on, Glassman acquired new issues through a combination of donations and purchases at zine fests, where the students frequently tabled. (The students offered to donate every issue, but considering the extremely low cost to the library versus the relatively high cost of production for the students, it was decided that the library would purchase issues whenever possible.)

The process of collecting zines originating from classes was more complex. It is difficult to say how many instructors at UCLA use zines as assignments. A challenge for librarians—as in so many other aspects of academic librarians’ work—is making faculty aware of opportunities to collaborate with
the library. For example, faculty may know the Zine Collection exists, but have no idea that student work is welcome in it. Thus, the Powell librarians found that in order to collect zines resulting from coursework and add them to the collection, it was necessary to form a relationship with the instructor and students, and provide library resources to help students create the zines.

The first instructor Glassman worked with taught upper-division thematic writing courses: one focusing on water and the Los Angeles Aqueduct, and another on cities in literature. For each of these classes, the instructor had students create art and poetry to compile into a group zine. The second instructor was a teaching assistant for a year-long freshman lecture course that broke into seminars in spring quarter. Instead of assigning a traditional research paper in her seminar on race and the sex industry, the teaching assistant had students compile research, interviews, and creative work into individual zines. For each class, Glassman took an active role from the beginning. Early in the quarter, she visited each class to talk about zine culture and show the students samples from the collection. In the writing courses, the librarian returned for the final class session to help the students compile their poems and drawings into a master copy, then made copies for each student—plus one for the collection. In the race and the sex industry seminar, Glassman encouraged students to make an extra copy of their zines for the library. Thirteen out of twenty students donated copies to the library. In each instance, she was proactive in offering help and resources to the instructors and students. It is important to note, though, that each instructor had a preexisting relationship with the library. It is crucial to perform outreach and establish relationships ahead of time, rather than wait until an instructor happens to assign work that the library would like to collect.

The Travel Collection
As one of Powell’s extant popular reading collections, the Travel Collection was originally launched and developed with little to no student involvement and without direct ties to campus community groups. In the fall of 2015, librarian Doug Worsham, who took over selection duties for the collection, began to address this by revising and updating the collection’s mission statement and seeking out opportunities for community engagement. The new vision for the collection shifts the focus from “travel guides” to “the traveler’s experience” and aspires to continue to “help travelers prepare for their journeys,” while also
exploring the experience of travel from diverse perspectives and sparking community conversations about travel, world languages and cultures, and study abroad. The collection includes guidebooks, travel writing and narratives, photography collections, and language learning resources for destinations worldwide as well as local travel in the greater Los Angeles area.6

Early partnerships have included a collaboration with UCLA’s International Education Office (IEO), which coordinates study abroad initiatives on campus. Shortly after the launch of the re-envisioned collection, the IEO and Powell Library co-curated a library exhibit of exemplary travel photography by students, with each photograph accompanied by a brief narrative and a related set of travel books from the collection. This exhibit was a promising first step in collecting student work. In addition to the physical exhibit, the event featured social media marketing focused on students and student groups (primarily through Facebook and Twitter), as well as a website allowing UCLA students and the broader community to view and vote on their favorite student photographs.1

The juxtaposition of student-generated digital travel photography and social media engagement alongside the print collection led to a number of brainstorming sessions in which Worsham worked with the IEO to explore possibilities for incorporating digital and multimedia student work into the collection. Moving forward, Powell librarians plan to work with the IEO as well as directly with study-abroad students to collect, preserve, and share the photography, video, audio-recordings, and multimedia travel narratives already being created by students. Often posted to course blogs for study-abroad students, these UCLA student-generated digital ephemera have potential long-term relevance for University Archives, as well as immediate applicability for students interested in embarking on a study-abroad experience. Powell librarians are exploring the possibility of publishing collections of these born-digital creations in both print and e-book formats.

In addition to generating many new ideas and directions for collection development, the student photography exhibit and associated online engagement led directly to increased circulation for the collection, and paved the way for other campus partnerships, including the International Student

1See https://www.wishpond.com/lp/1163006/.
Ambassadors program in UCLA’s Dashew Center for International Students & Scholars. Given the many community groups on campus, librarians see opportunities to foster face-to-face and online ties with student groups focused on world cultures, multiculturalism, internationalism, as well as travel writing and narratives by authors from traditionally underrepresented communities.

**Challenges and Tips for Co-Curating with Students**

As with any new initiative, developing the Community Collections has been a process of trial and error, with successes and setbacks. Below are some of the lessons Powell librarians learned from working with students to build collections.

**Identifying Campus Partners**

Both existing student libraries, the Enigma Collection and the Sustainability Collection were happened upon through word of mouth: in the first case, stopping to chat with students on campus, and in the second, reaching out to student groups and being referred to the group that happened to maintain a collection. Librarians would never have found out about these collections had they not been proactive in forming relationships with student groups. Indeed, there may still be student libraries on campus that the Powell librarians don’t yet know about.

Thus, it is crucial for librarians to form a robust outreach strategy. Mutual trust and goodwill should be established before attempting to enlist students in curation. Furthermore, it’s much more effective to work with student groups rather than individual students; individuals may be busy with coursework and other obligations, but groups have both a clear mission (promoting science fiction, achieving sustainability, etc.) that may align with the library’s interests, and an infrastructure that mitigates the challenges of individual schedules.

Furthermore, tying thematic popular collections into campus-wide initiatives can vastly increase interest in those collections. Is your campus launching a major social justice initiative? If so, start a social justice collection and ask student social justice organizations for their input. The benefit of this strategy is twofold: the library both demonstrates that it is an
integral and engaged part of the campus community, and establishes the mutually beneficial relationships described above.

**Training Students**
After spending years as an MLIS student and then a library professional, it’s surprisingly easy to forget what one didn’t know about libraries as an undergraduate. Undergraduate students can’t be expected to know the basics of collection development, and so must be assessed and trained.

Interestingly, the main challenge that arose when working with students at Powell was that they proved to be more timid than expected. For example, when Glassman asked the student to purchase zines at LA Zine Fest, the student came back an hour later with five or six zines, which she had painstakingly selected from the hundreds of zines offered. However, because of the ample budget and the massive size of the fest, Glassman was looking to purchase at least twenty to thirty zines in that amount of time—and many more before the end of the day. Similarly, when asked to recommend titles, students tend to suggest only a small handful at first. The scale at which libraries acquire materials is not apparent to library users, and librarians must give students a firm grounding in collection scopes and sizes, purchasing policies, and other aspects of collection development. Don’t assume that the inner workings of the library will be intuitive for students simply because those inner workings are familiar to you. Of course, adequate training may require a larger commitment than volunteer curators are prepared to give, which makes the following issue central to working with students.

**Compensating Students for Their Time**
There are several reasons why you should avoid, if at all possible, asking students to work for free. First, as mentioned above, effective student curators should receive some level of training, and volunteers may not have the time to devote to that training. Furthermore, that training may go to waste if volunteers quit unexpectedly. Students’ priorities change, and student organizations can be ephemeral. For example, as of this writing, the Bad Art Zine Collective is defunct. Secondly, although student organizations can benefit in the ways described above, the individual students performing the work may experience burnout if they don’t feel they’re deriving any personal benefit from it. Finally, although it may sound obvious, collection
development is work—enjoyable work, yes, but still work. If a task is worth someone’s time and effort, then it’s worth compensation. Librarians would balk at performing collection development for free, so we shouldn’t expect it from students.

One common mistake librarians and other professionals make is telling students that volunteer work will look good on their résumé. This is not a compelling rationale for students. There’s no shortage of unpaid work that looks good on a résumé. Happily, there are several ways that libraries can compensate students. As mentioned above, Enigma’s student librarian received course credit in the form of an independent study. The library may be able to offer internships for credit. If maintaining a collection is integral to a student organization’s mission, the library can work with that organization to formalize the task in their bylaws and assign it to an officer. And, of course, there’s always the holy grail of student work: money. This chapter has mainly discussed student organizations, but student staff positions can be reserved for curators—and a job like that genuinely does look good on a résumé.

Conclusion

The effort, time, and care librarians put into campus collections cannot be overstated. However, inviting students to take the lead in collecting and curation efforts doesn’t detract from the valuable work that librarians do. Instead, student curators augment librarians’ efforts by bringing fresh and interesting ideas into the library and giving librarians a “student’s eye view” of campus trends and initiatives. Furthermore, students can benefit greatly from the expertise and leadership opportunities that collection-building provides. When students and librarians work side by side to build vibrant collections, everyone on campus wins.

Notes

2. Kelly Miller, e-mail message to authors, January 14, 2016.

Bibliography


