

# TECHNIQUES FOR EVALUATING THE SMALL LIBRARY PRINT COLLECTION

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**Description:** This presentation is an introduction to collection evaluation, its justification, planning, and responsibilities. It will include a description of quantitative, collection centered, and qualitative, user centered, techniques useful in evaluating the small library print collection, focusing on books and magazines. The techniques include measure of collection size, scope and depth, updatedness, physical condition/space, materials' availability, use, user opinion and satisfaction. Also covered: Making decisions about which combination of techniques to use; gaining support for collection evaluation; implementing changes as a result of the process.

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## Introduction

Collection evaluation should be considered an integral aspect of collection development. By “collection development” we mean the systematic and dynamic process of identifying, selecting, obtaining, evaluating, weeding, managing and maintaining in good physical condition the materials that a library makes available to its users, through its different collections.

“Collection evaluation” is the systematic and dynamic process of critically examining what is included in the library’s collections. It involves the gathering, organizing and analyzing of both quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (descriptive) data about the collections, presenting the results, conclusions and recommendations.

There are many reasons for evaluating a collection. These include identifying the strong and weak areas of the collection; determining how well the collection is satisfying the needs and interests of the users, its use and usefulness. Part of the justification for evaluating a collection is to determine the quality of the collection, in terms of including titles considered most important by experts or scholars. In addition, through evaluating a collection a profile can be obtained of its actual state, its scope and subject areas included, its breath and depth. Titles can be identified that should be weeded out of the collection. Specific data can be obtained that is necessary for making policy and budgetary decisions, for planning cooperative projects, including resource sharing. As a result of evaluating a collection, staff and users’ knowledge of the collection can be improved. Greater interest in and support of the collection can result.

Evaluating a collection should be a shared responsibility involving library staff who are selecting and acquiring materials, as well as patrons who are using them. Ideally the planning and carrying out of a formal evaluation project should be a team effort, including staff at different levels, as well as users. A specific section of the entire library's collection, for example, the biographies or the material on the Holocaust, should be identified as the focus of the evaluation. Alternatively a specific group or format of materials, such as videos or compact discs can be selected for evaluation.

The time frame for evaluating a collection depends on many factors, including the size of the collection, the personnel involved and their time constraints, the resources available for the project, the problems associated with the collection (or part of the collection to be evaluated), and the present and future library and institutional plans and projects.

When decisions need to be made concerning selection of new materials, provision of new services, obtaining greater support for library operations and activities, starting joint ventures with other libraries or using new technology effectively, then information obtained from evaluating the collection becomes important.

Planning for collection evaluation involves both formal and informal approaches. Informally collection evaluation can be considered a continuous process, based on daily work with the collection, careful observation of the quantity and quality of library materials and their use. However formal evaluation projects provide specific, concrete data that can be used in making policy and budgetary decisions, and in improving the status quo. These projects require systematic planning, including the identification of the collection (or part) to be evaluated, the formulation of written goals and objectives, the selection of specific techniques to use, the development of instruments to collect data needed to carry out the techniques, the organization and analysis of the data collected and its presentation (in graphic and descriptive form) in a final report that includes results, conclusions and recommendations.

### **Quantitative, Collection Centered Evaluation Techniques.**

Quantitative collection centered evaluation techniques include measures of collection size: total number of titles (or volumes); number of titles in each subject area (reflected in the classification system used) or individual collection (for example, fiction, biographies, picture books, etc.). In addition, measures of collection scope and depth are important: number of subject areas included in the collection, types (or formats) of materials, number of titles in each format (for example, reference books, magazines, cassettes or compact discs).

Measures of updatedness of the collection, particularly the nonfiction collection, require other evaluation techniques, such as the identification of the number of titles published in succeeding five or ten year intervals: for example, between 2001-1997; 1996-1992; 1991-1987; 1986-1982; before 1982.

Measures of physical condition of the collection include the number of titles in which the spine or cover are not in good physical condition; the number of titles with torn or missing pages (not complete); the number of titles with book jackets needing repair. Measures of collection space include the amount of room on the shelves for expansion of the collection; the number of shelves half full or empty; the number of shelves filled to capacity.

Measures of collection use focus on the number of titles checked out (or circulated) during the past two years (by subject area, format or user group); the number of titles used in the library, and the number of titles requested by users which are not part of the library's collection (by subject area, format or user group).

### **Qualitative, User Centered Evaluation Techniques.**

In contrast to the above-mentioned techniques which are based on statistical or quantitative data, the use of qualitative or user centered techniques provides important descriptive information about the use, usefulness and value of the collection. These techniques include measures of user preference, in terms of types (formats) of materials or subject areas. They also reflect the information needs and interests of different groups of library users (such as adults, young adults, students, preschool children), as well as their patterns of use. They explore user satisfaction, the degree to which users are satisfied with the materials they find in the library's collections, their success or failure; their problems or difficulties in using the collection. They also focus on user opinions, including comments, suggestions or ideas about the quality, value, use and usefulness of the collection, recommendations for improving it.

### **Making Decisions about which Techniques to Use.**

It is important to emphasize the need to use a variety or a combination of both quantitative and qualitative, collection centered and user centered, techniques in evaluating a library's collection. In this way a clearer, more complete and realistic perspective on the collection, both its intrinsic quality and its extrinsic value or usefulness, can be obtained. A clearer understanding of the actual state of the collection, its strong and weak points, is possible using both types of approaches, which provide different kinds of information about the collection.

The factors to keep in mind in selecting different techniques to use in collection evaluation include the purpose or reason for the evaluation; the amount of time set aside to carry it out; the resources (particularly personnel) available, their time and experience; the interest, support and cooperation of the users in improving the collection, and the kind of statistics or records available dealing with the collection.

It is useful to keep in mind that different evaluation techniques require different types of instruments. Some data collection instruments, such as questionnaires and interviews, require experience in order to prepare them adequately. They should be pre-tested using a small sample of the participants for whom they are directed. Some techniques and

instruments may require more complex ways of organizing and presenting the results, using statistical analysis and graphic representation. Some techniques may involve printing or mailing costs in order to administer them effectively. It is important to consider the implications of selecting the specific combination of techniques to be used.

### **Conclusions, the What, Why, When and How of Collection Evaluation.**

Collection evaluation is a systematic, critical examination of the collection in order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data to use for making decisions about selection, acquisitions, weeding, planning and policy development, budgeting and resource sharing. It is a process that should be ongoing, on both a formal and informal basis, in response to specific needs or problems with the collection. It demands careful planning, critical thinking, and collaboration among library staff and users. An evaluation plan should be prepared, including the specific part of the collection to be evaluated, the goals and objectives of the evaluation, the specific questions to be answered by the evaluation, the personnel and their responsibilities, other resources needed, techniques to be used, instruments to be developed, and time frame.

In order to gain support for collection evaluation, clear communication between library staff, users and administration about the value and importance of evaluating the collection is necessary. Involving users in the planning and carrying out of the evaluation, in order to gain their support for the process is a useful strategy. Providing feedback on the results of the evaluation is essential, both formally (in a written report) and informally (orally), including plans for making recommended changes. Following through with the recommendations, which result in positive change and improvement, demonstrates the value and purpose of the process; serves as its justification. For this reason, the responsibility for carrying through on the recommendations of a collection evaluation is an integral part of the process. If nothing happens as a result of the evaluation, all the planning and work involved is wasted effort.

### **For More Information.**

Evans, G.E. **Developing Library and Information Center Collections.** 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Englewood, CO, Libraries Unlimited, 2000.

Wallace, D.P. & VanFleet, C. **Library Evaluation, A Casebook and Can-Do Guide.** Englewood, CO, Libraries Unlimited, 2001.