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Focus Group Report on the Teaching Resources Collection

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Lesley University Libraries

Assessment Workgroup

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Abstract

The Lesley University Libraries' Assessment Workgroup conducted focus group interviews with faculty and students in order to plan for the future development of the library's Teaching Resources Collection, which includes K-8 curriculum materials and the Evelyn M. Finnegan Collection of high-quality children's literature. We spoke with a total of seven faculty members and two students, a very small sample, but our conversations did offer the library a starting point for thinking about how to improve the visibility of the collection, the space in which it is housed, and patron ability to access the materials. Focus group participants gave feedback on the collections and services that they found most useful in the TRC, and offered ample ideas regarding additional types of material that they would like to see in the collection, and potential ways to re-design the space.

During the month of November 2015, the Lesley University Libraries' Assessment Workgroup conducted one phone interview and two focus groups on campus, one with faculty and one with students. We spoke with a total of seven faculty members and two students. This sample is too small to offer statistically significant data regarding the populations that use this collection, but did offer us a good starting point for thinking about the future of the collection. Our goal was to understand our patrons' points of view on the following topics related to current and future TRC collection, space, and services:

- who uses the TRC and how, and how could the collection be used
- useful collections – current items, wish list
- useful services – current services, wish list

After a tour of the TRC room and the Juvenile Literature corridor, we asked our participating faculty and students the following questions:

1. What kinds of things do you want to see in this collection? (Do we have the things that you're looking for? Too old, not the right subject areas, don't understand the value of these things? Have you used them or is this collection new to you?)
2. What do you do with these items? (Do you use them for lesson plans or to generate ideas for projects or . . .?)
3. When you're working with these objects, where do you work with them? (Do you bring them back to your office or dorm room? Do you use them in the library?)
4. What could a librarian do to help you use this collection or provide service in this collection? (Organizational help, demonstrations, building the collection?)
5. What could we do in terms of content, space or service to help you take more advantage of this collection?

Overview of the TRC

As stated on the library website:

“The Teaching Resources Collection (TRC) in the Sherrill Library consists of resources for working with children. It includes K-8 curriculum materials and the Evelyn M. Finnegan Collection of high-quality children's literature. These resources are used by students for teaching and counseling, class assignments, internships, and practicums.”

The TRC comprises juvenile fiction, juvenile non-fiction, picture books, manipulatives, textbooks, early readers, and oversized books and bins of material for classroom instruction. The collection contains 19,641 items, of which 2,761 items--approximately 15% of the collection—circulated in 2014. By comparison, only 6% of items circulated in other areas during the same year, so this collection, while specialized, is considered high-use.

REPORT FINDINGS

Promote the collection and facilitate access

Respondents thought that the library should promote the collection to all programs. Many people are unaware of the collection, or assume that it is relevant only for education students; they do not realize that it includes items relevant for expressive therapies, counseling, and art majors.

Faculty recommended that the library facilitate access to the collection by either providing space in which expressive therapies and education classes could meet in Sherrill, or implementing an efficient delivery system to U-Hall and LUCAD. Several faculty members who participated in the focus group expressed interest in a portable collection, such as a bin of related items on a particular theme delivered to their classroom at U-Hall. Because this collection includes many items that are larger and bulkier than typical library materials, patron concerns about portability seem particularly important to address.

One student, also a library employee, who lives on the Brattle campus, said that she uses the space and collection because of its proximity to her dorm. She said before she started working at the library, she had “no clue” about what the library had, but now she appreciates it so much more and wonders why she hadn’t used the library before. This comment, and similar comments from the faculty focus group, suggest that marketing and promotion of the collection could increase its use. As one LUCAD faculty member said in the focus group, “most [LUCAD faculty and students] don’t know this is here.” This same student’s comment that she found access to the collection to be very convenient was a minority opinion; the majority of focus group participants felt that the collection was challenging to access, but that knowing that materials could be checked out and could leave the site might motivate more people to explore the collection.

Both education and expressive therapies faculty said they have their own collections of relevant materials housed at U-Hall, because that is where they do most of their teaching. Nevertheless, they could foresee using a variety of the materials if access were improved. Some faculty already request items and have them delivered to U-Hall. Other faculty would like classes scheduled at Sherrill, perhaps in a space dedicated to use of the collection.

While some faculty focus group participants were already aware that they could request inter-campus delivery of items from the library, including TRC materials, others did not know the service existed. Those who did not know about this service were very interested to learn about it, and felt that it would be a convenient way for them to make use of materials from the collection.

One faculty member recommended that the library create a marketing infographic or video, showing the types of resources that are here and where they can be found, so that students and faculty across Lesley’s schools would have a better idea of what was available to them in the TRC.

Expand and redefine content to reflect university wide programs – LUCAD, GSASS, CLAS & GSOE

The collection is relevant for many programs and schools—not only GSOE—but does not currently have the visibility that it needs and deserves. Overall, people were pleasantly surprised by the collection, especially the LUCAD faculty who weren't aware of its scope. Faculty focus group participants suggested that the mission of the collection should be more clearly defined. Given its size, the collection cannot replicate those of local public libraries, but it can supplement those collections in important ways by filling gaps and highlighting particular types of titles, such as those that represent diversity, in all formats. The education faculty tend to use the public library, and their personal collections, when they need access to a wide variety of current titles. Updating materials such as the collection of basal readers could help to keep the collection relevant for these faculty members.

Many exciting ideas for expanded content were suggested, including the following:

manipulatives	a streaming music library
poseable items for drawing	math scales of different varieties
non-book items; inflatables	children's e-books and children's book apps
theater props	text sets
historical costumes	de-stress tools
games—students at LUCAD take a user experience game design course, and physical examples could be useful	art supplies (paint, pastels)
animal skeletons—larger objects with visible details	sheet music
natural objects—rocks, tree rounds, natural playground materials	more musical instruments for children
iPad apps for music and art therapy	Library of Congress's Teaching American History primary source packages
microphones	

Research, Instruction, and Outreach with the Collection

Faculty remembered the impact of previous TRC librarians in defining the mission of the collection and facilitating meaningful engagement with the materials. A librarian who knew the collection well, participants suggested, would be a valuable partner for finding and teaching effectively using the collection materials. Focus group participants mentioned the potential impact of working with a librarian with a deep knowledge of the collection, who could advise students on choosing items, particularly when they have a very specific need—for example, content that represents diverse children and families but that is not necessarily about diversity as a theme. A TRC librarian could work creatively with the collection—potentially creating thematically-related sets for specific lessons, for example, that could model the process of building these sets for GSOE students.

The comments of the focus group participants highlight the importance of a professional librarian in developing and facilitating access to the collection. A TRC librarian is needed to maintain and update materials in the collection, particularly the curriculum guides, basal readers, and textbooks. A dedicated librarian could also increase the visibility of the collection through outreach to faculty and students, particularly those outside of GSOE, who might not realize the scope of the collection and its potential relevance for art students, creative writing students, counseling, and expressive therapies students. While the library has had a dedicated librarian for this collection in the past, the position is not currently filled.

TRC physical space

There were very few specific suggestions on improving the physical space of the TRC collection, other than making more room to work and browse items, in addition to adding storage cabinets or specialized closets, such as a costume closet. One education faculty member mentioned that the “classrooms in University Hall are not ideally situated to teaching children’s literature,” so a re-designed TRC could be a space in which to teach. She envisioned being able to gather around round tables filled with books, and a space for a reader’s theater, as features that might make the space more conducive to teaching with the collection materials in the library space, as opposed to needing to bring materials to University Hall. The logistical challenge of coming to the Brattle campus, she suggested, could also be overridden if the collection included all the titles she was likely to need in her teaching, and if she could have them pulled in advance and ready for a class to come in.

Participants also suggested that reorganizing the materials according to themes, or even by like objects, could facilitate the use of the space. Several respondents mentioned that they were unsure about where things were or how the space was organized. It can be difficult to find specific items, such as basal readers, which are “tucked in the back” and not obviously visible to students. The collection is currently organized by type of material and Library of Congress call number, which is not an intuitive system for many patrons.

While participants did imagine some potential improvements to the space, the majority of their concerns were about content and access.

A music therapy faculty member had a very specific need for dedicated space for music technology, such as a sound-proof room where students could record live music and listen to recordings. Such a space is available at the library, outside the TRC, so there may be features already in the building that could facilitate patrons’ use of the collection.

Conclusions

Focus group participants were excited about what they found in the collection, and about the potential for adding an even greater variety of materials. Their comments suggest that the mission of the collection has the potential to grow, from one of filling gaps in the easily accessible collections of children’s literature at the public libraries, to one of serving many Lesley programs with a variety of materials for creative and hands-on learning.

Because many programs could benefit from this collection, the name itself is somewhat misleading—one participant commented that patrons might hear “teaching resources,” “children’s books” or “children’s collection” and not realize how wide-ranging the materials actually are, and how potentially relevant for LUCAD and expressive therapies, in addition to education. Nevertheless, because the collection has historically been seen as education-specific, and has not been marketed to a variety of programs, it is not as visible to the Lesley community as participants felt it should be.

Access to the collection was another major theme throughout the discussions. Faculty want a delivery service to U-Hall, or a librarian who could help choose and organize materials for a specific lesson, class or project. Organizing an efficient delivery service to faculty offices or classrooms might help patrons across Lesley’s campuses take more advantage of the materials in the collection. For LUCAD participants especially, it is the materials in the collection that are of interest—they would like to have access to the materials where they are, rather than use them here at the library.

Though many participants would like the materials to come to them, their comments suggest that reorganizing the space to make things easier to find, and perhaps designing it so that classes could be held there, could make it easier to use. For some events—one participant mentioned a music therapy conference that Lesley hosts on the Brattle campus—the collection’s location is actually ideal, and the key element in increasing its use is simply better promotion of the variety of materials there. Because there are populations in multiple Lesley schools who could make use of this collection in various ways, there is no single location for it that would be convenient for all. However, developing a program to efficiently deliver materials across campuses, and developing the space so that interested faculty could use the materials in situ, would be two complementary programs that have the potential to increase the collection’s visibility and use.