

# From Niche to Norm: A Case Study of Zines in a Circulating Collection

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Zines present unique opportunities and challenges across traditional library functions: access, cataloging, preservation, digitization, and special collections. They also provide incredible possibilities to redefine what research looks like and to engage students in a new way. This article tracks our goals and process for conceptualizing and implementing a social justice–focused zine collection. We contextualize our case study with both a literature review and a survey to establish current practices and reflect on how former practices have changed. Our findings indicate that zines are becoming more readily incorporated into library collections and are more frequently cataloged and allowed to circulate than in previous years.

## Introduction

Zines, underground publications that exist outside of mainstream publishing and distribution sources, are often used to express and create a community based around experiences and opinions underrepresented in traditional publishing. At their essence, they are stalwarts of self-expression and freedom from censorship: covering all conceivable topics, passed in informal networks from person to person, for free or minimal cost. However, their variety in topics, design, and format makes them complex, and zines continue to be edged out of most library processes—too ephemeral to be cataloged, too undervalued to be preserved, too fragile to circulate, too sporadic to be ingested as serials, and too continuous to be processed as monographs.

The University Library at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign (U. of I.) launched the Social Justice Zine Collection (SJZC) in the fall semester of 2023. The two authors, Emilee Mathews, Head of the Ricker Library of Architecture and Art, and María Evelia Emerson, Student Success Librarian, collaborated with our colleague Mara Thacker, South Asian Studies and Global Popular Culture Librarian, to create the SJZC. Our goal was to foster a sense of belonging and enhance student engagement with library materials. To that end, the scope of the collection is focused on zines that center on different social justice issues. In this context, social justice is defined as advocating for equity across underrepresented groups, including but not limited to race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, neurodiversity, and ability. Zines and social justice have a mutually enriching relationship: social justice champions the identity, perspectives, and rights of those not in majority groups, while zines are tools commonly used by underrepresented groups to create community and advance agendas. The

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combination of social justice and zines reflects Bishop's "windows and mirrors" metaphor she coined in 1990.<sup>1</sup> Social justice–focused zines, many of which share personal experiences, can serve as the "mirror," reflecting shared experiences for those seeking solidarity, or the "window," showing different lives and experiences than those of the reader.

Zines are a subcultural phenomenon, and as such, libraries seeking to build more diverse collections outside the mainstream canon would be well served to acquire zines scoped to the interests and needs of their patron base. By examining past and current practices, our article provides insights into how the evolution of these workflows can make library zine collections more impactful and accessible to our communities. Our article explores how library zine collections have evolved by presenting a case study on the implementation of the Social Justice Zine Collection, supported by a literature review of past zine collection practices and a survey analysis of current zine collection procedures. We also share lessons learned and recommendations about starting a new zine collection, and how to maximize the impact of existing collections based on our experience with the SJZC at the U. of I.

## Literature Review

Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts shows that zines first appeared in library literature discourse in 1995 when Chris Dodge and Julie Herrada separately introduced zines as important publications for libraries to collect.<sup>2</sup> Herrada articulated the importance of zines' ability to diversify the viewpoints in a collection but also cautioned library workers to exercise patience and open-mindedness in their acquisitions and cataloging. Nine years later, in 2004, Richard A. Stoddart and Teresa Kiser conducted a survey to better understand current practices in zine collecting.<sup>3</sup> They identified twenty libraries with zine collections and received fourteen responses. They found that few collections cataloged their zines, and only two of these libraries circulated their collections. Overall, Stoddart and Kiser's findings showed that libraries still had trouble acquiring and cataloging zines, and approaches to circulation, preservation, cataloging, and shelving practices varied widely. The same year, Julie Bartel offered a comprehensive view on the evolution of starting the zine collection at Salt Lake City Public Library (SLCPL), including their eventual decision to both catalog and circulate their zines.<sup>4</sup> In 2022, Lauren DeVoe and Sara Duff's edited volume *Zines in Libraries: Selecting, Purchasing, and Processing* extensively demonstrated not only Herrada's original point about the clear importance of zines in library collections, but also provided documentation on the many challenges still inherent in incorporating zines into library collections.<sup>5</sup>

### Finding Shared Community

As Berthoud says, "Zines are built around community, and so is zine librarianship."<sup>6</sup> In the United States, the website Zinelibraries.info, created by a zine librarians' interest group, brings together expertise and resources for colleagues to learn more about zines and ways to incorporate them into libraries. This community has created several important tools for zine librarianship: the Code of Ethics,

which compiles best practices for acquiring and cataloging zines, the Zine Union Catalog, and the zinelibraries listserv. The group organizes a zine pavilion at the American Library Association (ALA) annual conference, as well as a Zine Librarians unconference. In the United Kingdom, Callaghan describes a vibrant community among art librarians and zinemakers who collaborated to make the UK and Ireland Zine Librarians zine.<sup>7</sup>

### Starting a Zine Collection

All approaches to starting a zine collection must consider the institution's mission, as well as resource needs, including staffing. Some collections start through a large gift, such as the Factsheet Five archive donated to the New York State Library.<sup>8</sup> Others are instigated through librarian involvement in zine communities, such as the zine collections at Vassar College, SLCPL, Barnard College, and Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL).<sup>9</sup>

The importance of top-level administrative buy-in to ensure success is emphasized by both Freedman and Perez.<sup>10</sup> Some reasons for failure include unfamiliarity with the material, lack of flexibility in acquisition policies and procedures, and complex cataloging requirements. Furthermore, different libraries have varied comfort levels in being early adopters versus letting other libraries establish best practices first.<sup>11</sup> Many sources recommend putting together a proposal to gain institutional support.<sup>12</sup>

### Ethical Considerations for Institutions Collecting Zines

One of the challenges for libraries that collect zines is the tension between what zines are created for—a free, independent, person-to-person exchange—versus how libraries operate. As Siobhan Britton cautions, libraries and zines can be challenging partners, since “the controlled, owned, nature of something like a library collection seems to be the antithesis of many of the fundamental ideas that are central to zine making: independence, estrangement from mainstream culture, and the zine as an ephemeral object.”<sup>13</sup> Andy “Sunfrog” Smith provides a zine author's perspective: at first, they were reluctant to have their zine in a library, for the reasons Britton discusses above.<sup>14</sup> However, Smith came to decide that library “collections are as vital as the struggle to keep controversial classics on the shelves when threatened with censorship. Along with the post office, libraries comprise one of the few public services actually worth treasuring.”<sup>15</sup>

Kassir explains “that there is a tension inherent in collecting the material culture of radical or subcultural movements,” going on to say that it created “. . . contradictions and compromises . . .”<sup>16</sup> Librarians have worked through this conundrum in multiple ways. Callaghan suggests only acquiring zines if there are multiple copies, reasoning that with enough duplication, taking one for a research library does not unduly reduce accessibility to others.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Collingwood and Kassir reason that because access for all is part of their library's mandate, adding zines to the collection does not interfere with their ability to be used by the public.<sup>18</sup>

Berthoud recommends making acquisition decisions based on transparency: “. . . remember that it is best practice to pay creators directly for zine content whenever possible and always, *always* notify sellers that you are a library, not a private individual, and that their content will be available on the shelf for all to enjoy.”<sup>19</sup> Although acquiring zines can be accompanied by difficult decisions, such as how to catalog and whether to circulate, Herrada argues that “[zine] collections will provide an understanding for future generations of how our society has challenged and transformed the walls of censorship and control of information by mainstream mass media.”<sup>20</sup>

## Collection Development

As Abel states, “Library zine collections are generally small and reflective of their communities, so collection development policies, selection processes, and promotional strategies will differ according to the impetus for and evolution of each collection.”<sup>21</sup> The Zine Code of Ethics recommends using collection development policies in order to demonstrate the library’s vision to the public, the zine creators whose work is or may be part of the collection, and the administration.<sup>22</sup> Collection development policies for zines, as with other collection types, articulate how the collection furthers the particular library’s overall mission as well as define what constitutes the collection.<sup>23</sup> This is helpful for accepting—as well as soliciting—donations, and can provide inspiration for marketing materials. Further, these policies are helpful to libraries as they consider how the zine collection overlaps with other aspects of their collections, such as periodicals or comics, as zines can be issued in a periodical style, or sometimes include comics. Defining what a zine is in relation to similar types of publications can help ensure materials are organized intentionally within a library’s collection.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, policies can help by limiting by type of zine, allowing for clear-minded acquisitions and collections.<sup>25</sup>

Zines cover anything and everything: from the highly introspective perzine or “personal zine,” to the DIY (do-it-yourself) zine, which focuses on breaking down steps to do a task so that the intended audience can be better informed and more independent, to many more topics. An important reason that many libraries invest in zines is that they help them increase their collection’s diversity in creators, content, and publishers. Zine collections are often curated to complement the institution’s mission; for example, Barnard’s emphasis on “womxn and non-binary people, with a collection emphasis on zines by womxn of color and new (2019) effort to acquire more zines by transwomen . . .” intentionally reflects their student population.<sup>26</sup> Vassar’s zine collection emphasizes the institution’s pedagogical practice of using primary sources.<sup>27</sup> The University of Michigan’s Labadie Collection, which documents protest materials, contains many zines whose content fits that collection’s parameters.<sup>28</sup> Cox describes how zines enhance the British Library’s mission to reflect the United Kingdom’s cultural record, as examples of living knowledge and contemporary culture.<sup>29</sup> The London College of Communication Library’s collection focuses on design in communication; consequently, Collingwood and Kassir collect zines through this lens.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, many libraries document local and regional culture through their zine collection.<sup>31</sup>

## Acquisition Processes

As DeVoe states, acquiring zines using the general library acquisitions workflow can be an “adventure and conundrum.”<sup>32</sup> Many acquisition departments predominantly work with mainstream publishers and vendors rather than self-published authors, small businesses, or nonprofit distributors, which are hallmarks of zine production. However, as Berthoud points out, best practices remain: “. . . build a network of preferred sources, forge relationships, and be a good consumer.”<sup>33</sup> Describing more granular levels of acquisitions, Collingwood and Kassir work with the finance team to use receipts and release advance funds when zine fairs are imminent; Grimes and Freedman each describe a similar process.<sup>34</sup> Most libraries accept donations as a way to acquire zines, with some relying solely on donations.<sup>35</sup> Collection development policies help to make prudent and consistent decisions on what to add as in scope with the collection, and are especially helpful when donations are at play.

## Cataloging

Catalogers use many different strategies to catalog zines. The zinelibraries.info group coordinated several cataloging initiatives, including xZinecorex and the Zine Union Catalog, to help with the complexity of cataloging zines.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, zine catalogers have identified a need for controlled vocabulary and worked toward sharing thesauri, such as that maintained by the Anchor Zine Archive Library.<sup>37</sup> Berthoud, as well as Freedman and Kauffman, provide excellent in-depth discussions of cataloging zines, including common issues and real examples.<sup>38</sup> Freedman and Kauffman provide the sound advice that “When cataloging unruly materials like zines, it’s a good idea to be adaptable.”<sup>39</sup>

Bartel discusses title, author, subject, and other notable entry points.<sup>40</sup> In reality, however, catalog records vary much like zines themselves; some zines lack even the most basic bibliographic metadata, such as title and author. Perez describes a minimal approach used for the LAPL zine collection, which only catalogs title, author, and size of the zine.<sup>41</sup> Freedman and Kauffman consider the end user’s needs, recommending “invaluable” information such as “. . . subject, title, author, and summaries . . .”<sup>42</sup> Subject headings are useful, yet few zine topics are adequately covered through controlled vocabularies.<sup>43</sup> Both Berthoud and Freedman and Kauffman recommend utilizing keywords and summaries, particularly with student input, to make the zines more reflective of natural language and therefore searchable in the catalog.<sup>44</sup> Freedman’s earlier essay focused on the AACR2 cataloging framework describes the “flexibility” needed to fit zines into that cataloging framework.<sup>45</sup> O’Dell’s findings suggest that Resource Description and Access (RDA) would overall facilitate better description and access to zines and other alternative publications because of increased plasticity in rules about authors and titles, but lacks instruction in how to handle intellectual property and has limited applicability for graphics-based description.<sup>46</sup> Berthoud also discusses adding zine genres as well as more specific local genre types in her cataloging-focused article.<sup>47</sup>

Due to the complexity of and resultant time commitment for cataloging zines, some libraries intentionally choose not to add zines to their library catalog.<sup>48</sup> Instead, they help users locate zines



in other ways, such as creating a separate database or spreadsheet. Several libraries make these publicly accessible, although for some, this is an intermediary step before cataloging as the final discovery tool.<sup>49</sup> Others use a finding aid approach to describe zines at the collection level rather than the item level.<sup>50</sup> However, Freedman and Kauffman argue against this method, saying that item-level cataloging is more likely to be useful to the end user and therefore increases the likelihood that the zines will be used.<sup>51</sup>

Processes differ in terms of classification and organization. Vassar originally shelved their zines by author name but feedback indicated greater interest in topical groupings.<sup>52</sup> At LAPL, zines are sorted by size, then alphabetized by title.<sup>53</sup> In its early stages, SLCPL created a homegrown subject classification scheme rather than utilizing the more commonly used Library of Congress or Dewey Decimal classification systems in order to create a flexible, user-friendly browsing schema prior to its decision to catalog the collection.<sup>54</sup>

### Circulation

Per the literature, many libraries elect not to circulate their collection due to cataloging and preservation considerations.<sup>55</sup> One exception is Vassar, who, as Berthoud describes it, planned for circulation and cataloging from the outset.<sup>56</sup> Libraries that center the zine's ephemeral nature tend to treat them either as special collections with restricted use or as something they leave uncatalogued and thus do not monitor their use. Barnard splits the difference by collecting two copies each: one for preservation and one for circulation.<sup>57</sup> The Zine Archive and Publishing Project aims for three copies.<sup>58</sup> Bartel describes an evolution to their library's approach but explicitly connects the decision to circulate to the ability to catalog. Discussing a potential collaboration with their technical services department to catalog the zine collection, Bartel remarks that "Being able to move from in-house use to a circulati[ng] collection was a huge bonus, and together with the immeasurably improved access that cataloging would give patrons, convinced us that this was the right thing to do."<sup>59</sup> Adding zines to the catalog allows more patrons to discover these materials, and also enables them to be requested, which is helpful for libraries with multiple branch locations.<sup>60</sup>

### Preservation

Format-wise, a "one-page folding zine" is a frequently used structure that uses a typical 8.5-by-11-inch piece of paper that quickly transforms into an eight-page booklet through simple folding and cutting techniques, or a compilation zine (also known as a comp zine), which brings together multiple authors, to contribute multiple perspectives on a given topic. Freedman and Kauffman's 2014 article provides a non-exhaustive list of common content types and formats.<sup>61</sup> Zines typically have few pages, small overall dimensions, and frequently lack sturdy covers to protect the pages. As such, preservation treatments can be warranted but are ultimately determined by the intended use and context of the item. For example, in a special collections or noncirculating environment, zines can be put into folders but are otherwise unmarked, minimizing preservation labor.<sup>62</sup> This has implications for cataloging as well—a

collection-level finding aid can easily be subdivided into folders; however, under that system, individual titles are harder to locate. In some cases, the lack of cataloging is interpreted to increase access and preservation needs. For example, Botimer and Peach detail a practice to leave zines uncatalogued, and instead digitize everything that flows into the collection.<sup>63</sup> Brett confirms that digital preservation can be “the wisest, most practical, and resource-effective course of action.”<sup>64</sup> Yet Brett also acknowledges the need for buy-in and permission from the creators of the zines themselves. Wooten argues against digitizing zines as this practice can be ethically murky. Additionally, it can fundamentally alter the original presentation of the object.<sup>65</sup>

When considering the general public’s ability to access and check out zines, measures should be implemented to ensure a longer shelf life for the materials. Some form of protective enclosure, such as clear folders, a covering, or simply reinforcing spines with tape, is frequently used to boost the sturdiness of the objects for eventual shelving and patron use.<sup>66</sup>

In summary, the literature demonstrates that zines are still under-collected, yet there is a plethora of practices and possibilities developed to suit a wide variety of library types and missions, as discussed in the zine *Zines in Libraries: Collecting, Cataloging, Community*.<sup>67</sup> As more libraries start to collect zines and best practices around zine materials continue to evolve and coalesce, these unique works are becoming less challenging to ingest due to the increase in example procedures and processes from others.

## The Library Social Justice Zine Collection

In the spring semester of 2022, coauthor María Evelia Emerson, Student Success Librarian, began to explore the possibility of starting a zine collection in the Library. She had started a social justice zine collection in her previous position at a small, liberal arts college, and saw firsthand how well students connected with the materials. However, the U. of I. is an R1 doctoral institution with very high research activity, and home to the fifth largest library in the United States.<sup>68</sup> Differences in the environment and scale required an adapted strategy.

María sought librarians to partner with to develop the collection. After several exploratory meetings and discussions with different librarians, María partnered with coauthor Emilee and Mara to develop and establish a social justice zine collection as discussed above. We collaborated to access collection funds, secure space to house the collection, and build capacity to promote the collection and incorporate it into library programming and campus teaching and learning.

Zines are not new to the Champaign-Urbana area, both within the university as well as within the local community. Prior to the founding of the SJZC, the Library already had some zines in the collection, such as the zines collected by the Global Popular Culture Librarian from buying trips to India. The University Laboratory High School Library, a high school that works closely with and is located on the university campus, also collects zines and offers them for in-house use only for the high school

students. The University Archives offers *Pandora's Rag*, a student-run zine from the 1990s. Meanwhile, the Ricker Library of Architecture and Art (Ricker) at U. of I. has a small but burgeoning collection of zines, which they collected alongside artists' books and other independent, creative publishing. Beyond the Library, the city of Urbana is also home to an impressive collection of zines at the Independent Media Center's Zine Library. Additionally, there is a biannual Small Press Fest that brings attention to alternative publishing, including zines.

Although zines and their community already had a presence at the university and local area, we designed the SJZC to support the students at the university by providing a collection that is cataloged, collocated together, and circulating in one location rather than dispersed across multiple locations. As mentioned previously, U. of I. is a R1 university with over 55,000 students as of fall 2023, with a library collection comprising over 15,000,000 volumes and twenty-five service points.<sup>69</sup> Although that provides us with a wealth of opportunity to provide comprehensive and unique materials for research and teaching, the sheer scale of resources—in terms of collections as well as campus libraries—tends to overwhelm our undergraduates. Additionally, U. of I. is a land grant institution, which makes the broader public's needs fundamental to our mission. We are charged not only with serving our university's faculty, staff, and students, but also to better our state and add value to Illinois residents' lives.

Our institution's land grant and educational missions affected our development of the zine collection. We envisioned that the collection would specifically focus on undergraduate students' needs through developing a collection of materials that enhanced their sense of belonging. Zines have always served to let the reader know that they are not alone. By their nature, zines provide space for underrepresented voices and experiences and have a prominent history as a mechanism to share information and messages that are often missing in mainstream media.<sup>70</sup>

### Collection Scope

Social justice encompasses a wide range of topics, subjects, creators, and stories. Examples of topics that can be found in the social justice zine collection range from body image, sexuality, microaggressions, mental health, social class, physical health, and more. Students can use the SJZC for personal reading and comfort or as sources in research assignments, providing a holistic approach to research through the lived experiences conveyed in zines.

### Circulation

The three SJZC collaborators discussed ways that students can use the collection, and how those factor into cataloging, preservation, budget, and circulation. As seen in the literature review, zine collections vary widely across libraries. Like the essence of zines, no library zine collection is identical. Since one of our goals with the SJZC was to make the library more approachable and inclusive, we decided to circulate materials, as that could encourage student use and allow for readers to engage with zines in a less public setting than the library. This is especially important since, despite the Champaign-Urbana area being home to several amazing zine collections, none are



circulating aside from the SJZC. A circulating collection also enables the zines to easily be brought to workshops, classes, and campus resource fairs. Workshop leaders can bring a laptop and let students check out zines at the event, thus increasing visibility and lowering barriers to use. Circulation helps us serve our core land grant mission as well—by allowing the zines to circulate, we enable them to be used beyond our building. Anyone who has an Illinois identification card can apply for a free library card. Moreover, SJZC items may be requested through the statewide consortial system or interlibrary loan, thus increasing access to the materials not only beyond the university but also beyond the state and country. Further, the focus on social justice as a topic creates more information equity for the state and regional population.

Originally, we envisioned the zine collection to function similarly to Ricker's new books temporary location. This location shows in the item record in the Online Public Access Catalog and has a more restricted circulation rule with shorter loan periods and is limited to local requests only. Our circulation colleagues have strict parameters for establishing a new sublocation, however, and encouraged us to try other options before moving in that direction. After further consideration, we determined that our access-oriented mission for providing the collection would be further served by allowing the items to circulate freely.

### Acquisitions

As cited in the literature, zines are not sold at mainstream vendors, which can challenge the typical library acquisition methods. We select and purchase zines through different zine distros that have a strong social justice focus instead of using the library's typical vendors. Zine distros are typically businesses but sometimes individuals that sell and distribute zines. As Berthoud noted, building a relationship with small vendors such as zine distros is a good practice to develop.<sup>71</sup> We recently saw the benefits of relationship building when a distro we frequently purchase from included several free zines in a recent shipment to thank us for our loyal purchasing. Although we typically purchase print zines for the collection, we occasionally receive zines in a digital format. After discussing this with other librarians who work with niche materials like sheet music, we learned that digital files can be sent to the campus document services to be printed and added to the collection. Another issue that sometimes arises is that a zine may sell out before we can purchase it. If the zine is reprinted, we purchase it. However, due to the small print runs of zines, we often lose the opportunity to add that zine to our collection.

### Cataloging

Due to a long and complicated history, some U. of I. library units classify collections with Dewey call numbers while others utilize the Library of Congress classification system; several libraries use both. Although Ricker has used a specialized Dewey system for decades, Dewey does not have a specific call number for zines. The two main options in the Library of Congress Classification system are the genre-focused Z692.Z56 versus analyzing each by subject. We elected to use the former, to keep



**Figure 1.** Word cloud of subject headings for the SJZC. In addition to general stop words, we also added “zines, fanzines, periodicals.” Visualization created by Voyant Tools, February 7, 2025.

all the zines in the SJZC together into Z692.Z56. This especially made sense since many zines have subjects that do not make up any substantive collections in Ricker, such as reproductive justice, race relations, and more (see figure 1 for a word cloud visualization of common subjects).

Classifying by format also echoes the rationale for why we located the zines in Ricker: as modes of creative expression. Still, we wanted to have a distinction in the catalog for the SJZC collection, to make it easier for both patrons and staff to locate the materials, so we included a public note on the record stating “Social Justice Zine Collection” (see figure 2).

## LOCATION ITEMS

Architecture and Art Library  
 Out of library , Stacks ; Z692.Z56 B43  
 from:1 until:1

On loan until 09/09/2024 21:00:00 CDT (0 requests)  
 16 Week Loan

v. 1

Copy: 1

Note: Social Justice Zine Collection

Material Type: Book

Location: Architecture and Art Library Stacks Z692.Z56 B43

Barcode: 30112122772236

**Figure 2.** Example of a catalog record in Primo with a public note.

The zines are treated as any other monograph or serial in cataloging. All records received the level of information called for in general cataloging guidelines: author (person or organization), title, physical description (e.g., size, illustration, color or black and white), publication information (place of publication, publisher, and date of publication and/or copyright date), any additional descriptions, and subjects. These are added in both fixed and descriptive sections of the record, with codes, free text, or controlled vocabularies. The cataloger applies Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH), the number of which depends on the number of subjects covered by the item. The cataloging rules for the general (circulating) collection across the Library are to use LCSH. In special instances, catalogers will use other controlled vocabularies or local metadata, but this treatment requires advocacy and approval from the cataloging advisory team. The only additions are that all zines receive the 655 field genre “zine” and the special application of the LC classification, despite the general Dewey guidance for the location. The Ricker cataloger did original cataloging for approximately 40 percent of the zine titles, adapting the rest from Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) records. Per our catalogers’ assessment, these records came from approximately fifty-five different libraries and, overall, were of high quality and complete.

### Space Allotment and Location at Ricker

While the Z692.Z56 classification made it possible to achieve our goal to collocate the zines together, the physical location within Ricker where that call number range would normally be shelved is one of the most hidden places in the library. We identified a new space just for this collection where the zines would be treated akin to a display, complete with bold signage to make the collection visible and accessible (see figure 3). The items themselves are housed using a different preservation treatment than those already in Ricker: a distinctive, clear front pamphlet binder labeled on the back near the barcode with an orange label, “Social Justice Zine Collection.” Our revised treatment, discussed below, replaces the pamphlet binder with a plastic bag with a cardboard insert behind the zine, which was also distinctive from the usual Ricker collections’ housing.



**Figure 3.** Social Justice Zine Collection (SJZC) in its display style setting at Ricker.

## Preservation

Zines are a format known for limited durability. In light of our decision to circulate these materials, we sought a proactive preservation strategy. We needed to provide a sturdy, external structure because most zines are only a few pages and would lean, bend, and suffer damage to their corners. The fragility of these materials not only risks the need for repair and replacement but also carries implications for shelf reading and browsability.

We worked with the preservation unit to determine a solution flexible enough for most zines while being sensitive to our budget and processing time constraints. We first used clear-front, 7-by-9-inch pamphlet binders. These worked for most zine dimensions and provided structure through their paperboard backing, while also permitting visual browsing through the transparent cover. Zines could be pocketed or stapled to their housing; Emilee chose staples since zines are often bound by stapling, reasoning that it would fit the aesthetic and material properties of the zines before preservation treatment and therefore be a more naturalistic fit. However, since the zines tended to be so much smaller than the binder, the cloth tape reinforced-hinge hid a significant portion of the zine cover, thus reducing the suitability of the preservation treatment whose purpose was to retain the visibility of the covers while protecting the contents (see figure 4). To address this issue, we asked for more pockets mounted toward the fore edge rather than stapling, especially for smaller materials. We no longer staple zines.

Not all zines in the collection required pamphlet binders. Sturdier zines did not require any housing, while moderately thin zines need structure but are too thick for pamphlet binders (see figure 5). The preservation department created custom enclosures with clear fronts for zines in this latter category.

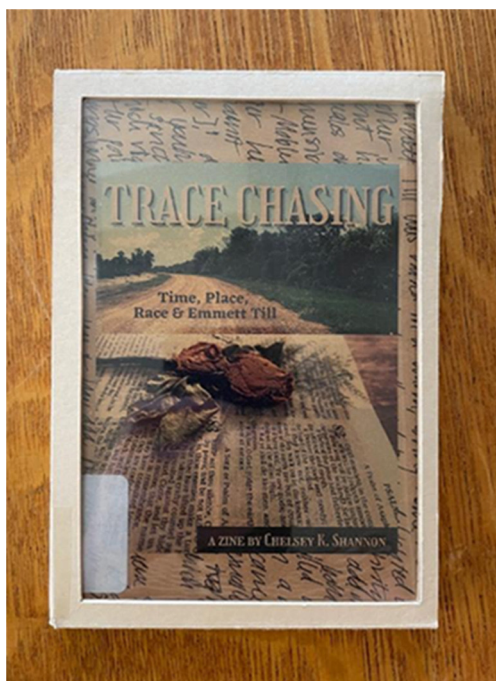




**Figure 4.** Examples of small zines in clear-front 7-by-9-in. pamphlet binders.

After acquisitions and cataloging, each zine requires an individual preservation work order, but they are sent over as a group. After housing the zine in a binder or custom enclosure, the zines are sent back to Ricker and affixed with a call number, barcode, and given a special “Social Justice Zine Collection” sticker before shelving. The circuitous workflow from the point of placing the order until the item was available for checkout could take months, depending on supplies and student staffing ebbs and flows.

It is worth noting that over recent years, our preservation unit has had to absorb



**Figure 5.** Example of a custom enclosure for a thicker zine.

several budget reductions, impacted further by the global supply chain crisis instigated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Compounding this challenge, preservation supplies prices have risen, and reliable suppliers have become increasingly scarce. Altogether, these problems created instances in which zines awaited preservation treatment for months. Simultaneously, we began to host zine workshops and market the materials, which entailed time-intensive pre-planning and coordination across multiple units.

To alleviate the workflow lag, we discussed alternate options, including reproducing the front cover on the front of a standard pamphlet binder. Preservation colleagues conducted experiments but determined that it would lead to potential bumping and delamination of the covers over time and use. They instead offered the solution of a “comic book style” presentation, in which the zines would be housed in clear plastic bags with boards in the back to create stability (see figure 6). We agreed to move forward with this solution,

since it combined the advantages of browsability, simple treatment, and readily available, inexpensive materials.



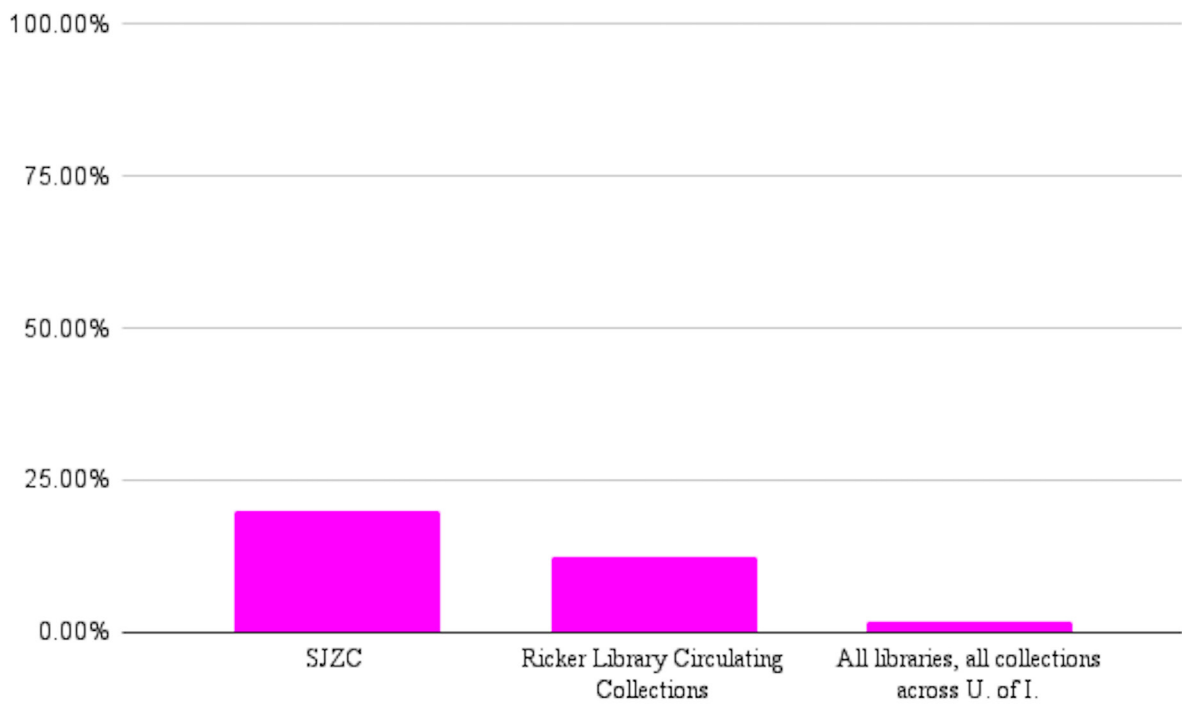


Figure 6. Example of current “comic book” preservation style.

### Collection Usage Data

Data showed that the SJZC circulated at a much higher rate than other collections. As of August 2024, the SJZC had approximately 142 items that had circulated 189 times, an average of about 1.5 times per zine. Another approach to understanding is the percentage of items that have circulated within fiscal year 2024, the most recent year with complete information. In this case, approximately 20 percent of the SJZC had circulated, compared to 12 percent of Ricker’s total circulating collection, which is approximately 1.75 times higher than its most comparable group. This compares favorably across all libraries’ circulating collections in the U. of I.’s system, which is approximately 1.7 percent. So, comparing the SJZC against other areas of the U. of I.’s collections, their circulation is 1.75 to 10 times higher, indicating that the decision to circulate these collections was met with appetite by our users.

When we originally discussed whether the SJZC should circulate, we knew one of the risks was lost or damaged materials, especially small and fragile materials like zines. While we considered these concerns, as of the time of writing (approximately two years after the pilot launched), zero zines have been declared lost or missing, and we are not aware of any damage. This is especially promising since the SJZC circulates at a higher rate than the rest of Ricker’s collections, which suggests that the preservation process we use protects the zines well and that students treat the zines with the same respect that they have for other library materials. Additionally, the higher circulation rate than the other collections in Ricker demonstrates that users connect with the collection.



**Figure 7.** Average number of circulations per item during FY24, comparing the SJZC to other circulating collections in the Ricker, where the collection is housed, and all circulating collections across the Library at U. of I.

The SJZC benefits both the campus and the library. The collection quickly experienced uptake among students, staff, and faculty, and its zines are frequently used in workshop requests, classroom settings, campus events, and in discussions with faculty while discussing new ways to engage students. Since the implementation of the zine collection, María created a graduate student hourly zine position and hired two students to assist with responsibilities like zine workshops, collection development, and marketing and promotion. Introductory composition classes have begun to incorporate zine assignments, with guidance and assistance from the library. These classes highlight the SJZC, as they provide zine examples and demonstrate different ways to communicate and disseminate knowledge. Next steps include exploring more ways our circulating collection engages students through personal and academic ways, as well as through community building at the university.

### Survey Methodology

Nearly thirty years separate Dodge’s and Herrada’s articles from DeVoe and Duff’s edited volume, yet the topics that they covered and the challenges in library zine collections remain. Has there been progress made in zine acquisition and provision of these collections, or is it just as challenging and difficult? To answer these questions, we also present a survey and its findings à la Stoddart and Kiser, asking colleagues to detail their practices and challenges. In the initial stages of the SJZC development and implementation, we used our experience in zine librarianship, gained through previous work

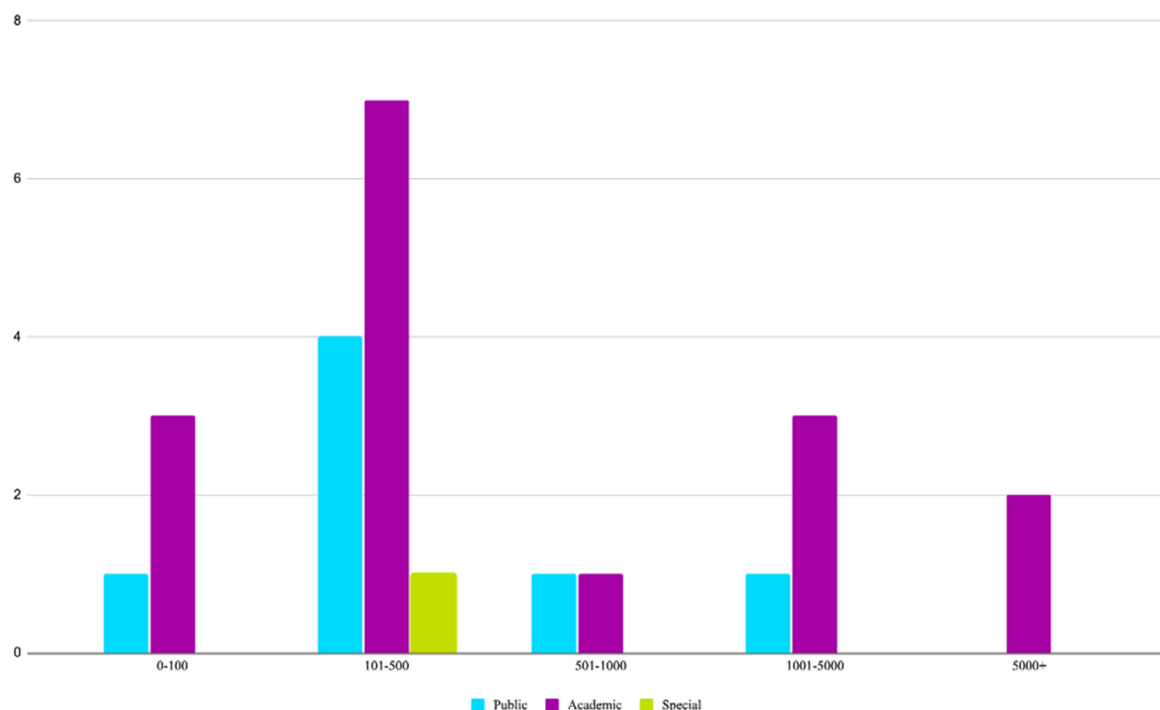
developing zine collections and areas of expertise such as art and student engagement, to guide our work. However, in the process, we realized that our awareness of how others had instituted zine collections was primarily based on literature and anecdotes. We wanted to check our assumptions while adding valuable insight to this study, and so elected to create a benchmarking survey of fellow zine collections.

We created a survey to send to our peers and gather this information about zine circulation policies, cataloging practices, and ways the zines are used. In June 2024, we submitted our research methodology to the campus Office for Protection of Research Subjects, and they verified that we did not need institutional review board approval for our study. We still asked participants for consent to use anonymized responses in this publication. We used Qualtrics software to develop a seven-question survey of five multiple-choice questions and two free-text questions. In July 2024, we distributed the survey on the zinelibraries.info listserv and encouraged all types of libraries to participate, expanding it beyond academic colleagues since public and school libraries have been at the forefront of zine librarianship. The survey was anonymous, with twenty-seven responses in total. We excluded incomplete submissions, resulting in a final number of twenty-four. The zinelibraries.info listserv is composed of librarians who are passionate about and work with zines, so it is important to remember that the results should not be generalized across all libraries. However, we nonetheless found the survey results to be helpful for us to better understand other libraries' zine-collecting efforts in comparison to our own experience.

## Analysis and Discussion

### **Q1:** *What type of library do you work at?*

Academic libraries comprised the majority of the participants (sixteen) at two-thirds of the total participants (see figure 8). Public libraries (seven) had the next largest proportion at 29 percent, and one special library also participated. While analyzing Q4, we learned that most of the academic library zine collections are housed within their Special Collections. This type of location within the academic library influences policy decisions and ways the collection is accessed and used. Recognizing this, we considered the role of collection location when interpreting the survey responses. Unfortunately, no school librarians responded to the survey, which we did not expect, given the existence of the literature focused on introducing K-12 students to zines and structuring assignments around them.<sup>72</sup> However, there may be fewer school librarians on the zinelibraries.info listserv compared to other types of librarians, resulting in the lack of participation.



**Figure 8.** Survey responses to 'How big is your zine collection?', broken down by type of library (public, academic, and special).

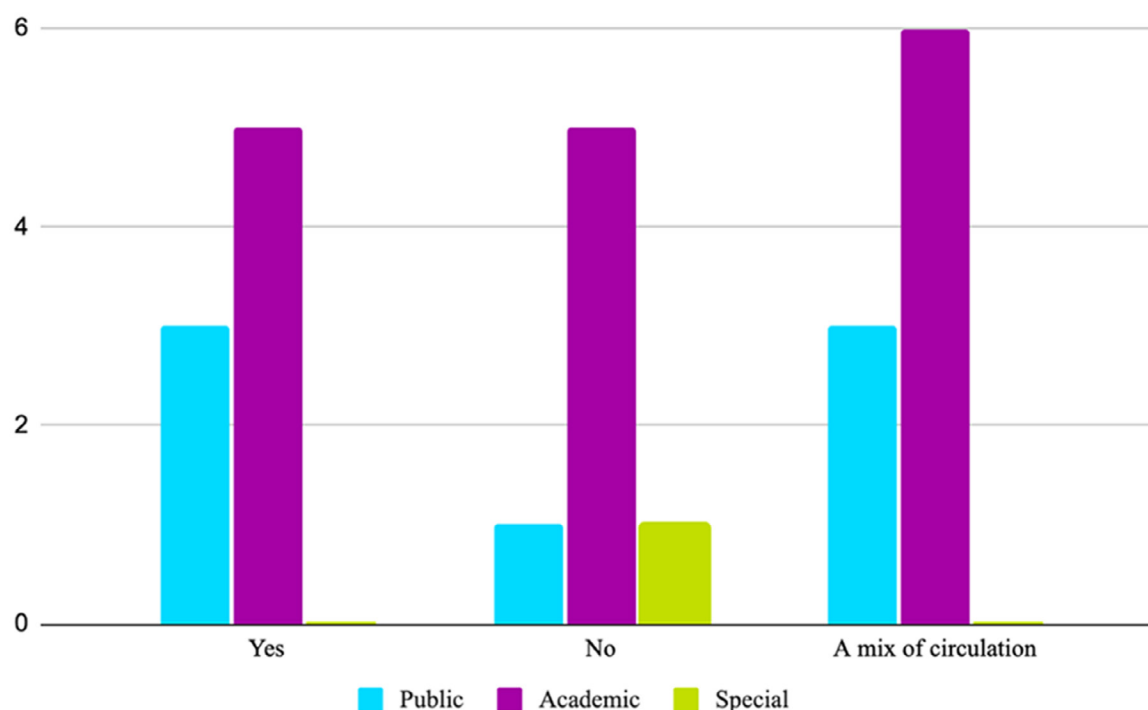
### **Q2:** *How big is your zine collection?*

Fifty percent of respondents possess a zine collection size of 101–500 zines (see figure 8).

Interestingly, academic libraries primarily made up the respondents for both the smallest-sized collections (75 percent of the 0–100 size collection responses) as well as the largest-sized ones (100 percent of libraries with 5,000+ zines in their collection). Fifty-seven percent of public libraries possess collections in the 101–500 range but are also represented in every category except for the 5,000+-sized collection. The one special library that participated in the survey also had a midsize collection, between 101–500 zines.

### **Q3:** *Is your zine collection circulating?*

We found the answers to Q3 particularly enlightening on zine collection policies since the zine librarianship literature does not typically focus on circulation policies and practices, with a few exceptions (see figure 9).<sup>73</sup> The survey demonstrated that 31 percent of academic libraries have fully circulating zine collections; of that number, none of the collections are located in their Special Collections, which increases the accessibility to their patrons. Public libraries have a higher percentage of circulating zine collections (43 percent), which makes sense considering public libraries are less likely to have specialized collections with circulation restrictions. The one special library did not have a circulating collection, yet that is expected since materials in special libraries rarely circulate due to their value, uniqueness, connection to the local community, or fragile nature.



**Figure 9.** Survey responses to 'Is your zine collection circulating?' broken down by type of library (public, academic, and special).

Thirty-six percent of academic libraries and 43 percent of public libraries selected “a mix of circulation” for question three. Participants who selected this answer had an opportunity to provide additional comments.

Responses from those who work in public libraries included:

- Duplicate copies of zines purchased, with one copy that circulates while the other is in-building use only;
- Zine collections whose scope is on general topics circulate, while collections with specialized zines are placed in special collections or archives;
- Zines may have “unprocessed” barcodes, which means that while the zines appear in the library catalog and can be placed on hold, they do not circulate out of the library.

Academic librarians whose zine collections had mixed circulation policies had responses similar to public librarians, as well as some additional approaches. One library photocopied the original zines and circulated the photocopies while keeping the originals in the library. Other responses included circulation restrictions dependent on patron status, such as limiting students to in-building use only or restricting circulation exclusively to students enrolled in a specific course. One academic library said they were in the process of circulating their zine collection, “but only for zines where creators have given permission for circulation.” Like Peach and Botimer indicated, libraries self-impose restrictions on access.<sup>74</sup>



**Q4:** *What were the determining factors behind deciding if your zine collection is circulating or not circulating?*

Q4 was a free-text answer. Eighty-five percent of the public library responses shared that their zine collection is either circulating or a mix of circulation statuses, compared to 69 percent of academic libraries. We analyzed the factors that participants indicated contributed to their collection's circulation status and identified four themes: location and staff size, accessibility, and inclusive representation.

### Location and Staff Size

Academic libraries that do not circulate their zine collection (31 percent), as well as one of the public libraries, explained that their zine collections are housed in their Special Collection units, whose policies mandate in-house use only. Location was sometimes determined by availability and interest: one academic library shared that their Special Collections was the only department that expressed interest in developing the zine collection, which determined the circulation status to be consistent with department policy. The one special library shared that its entire library collection is noncirculating. Another academic library raised a common concern with zines that most general collections do not typically encounter: "A major criterion for our noncirculating policy is how quickly zines become sold out or otherwise unavailable to replace." Additionally, some of the public and academic library survey participants echoed Bartel's assertion that circulation and cataloging with zines are closely interlinked and shared that circulation status depended on the staff size and workload of their colleagues from acquisitions and cataloging departments.<sup>75</sup>

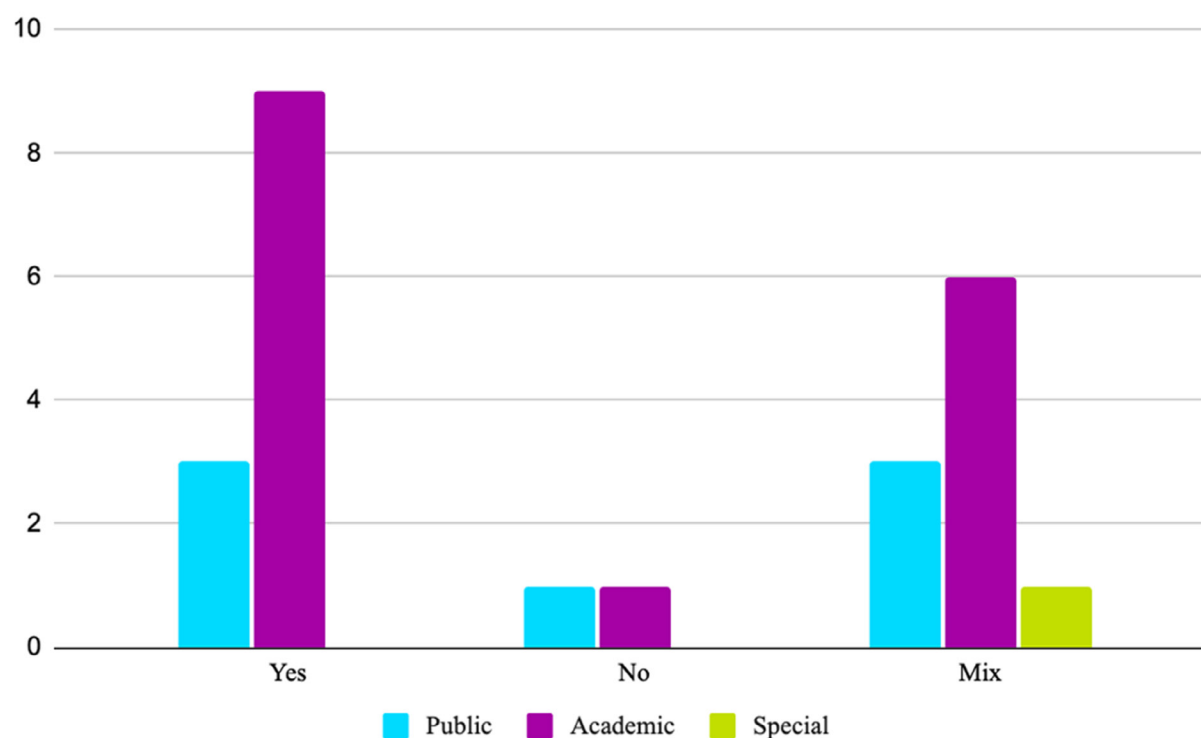
### Access

Public libraries with circulating collections provided reasons such as increased ease of access to their patrons but also shared that some zines are noncirculating because of the age of the zine or if the zine is highly decorative. Interestingly, one public librarian said that "many libraries have zine collections behind an archive or in-library use only." While this observation goes against the data in our survey, it does align with the literature review, which infrequently discusses zines and circulation. Similar to public libraries, some academic libraries said they made their collection circulating to increase accessibility and allow students the option to read zines in more private places. These responses aligned with our perspective as well, since we know students read, engage with, and take inspiration from zines in a multitude of ways. Sometimes, the type of academic institution played a role as opposed to the location within the academic library. For example, one academic librarian said they work at an art school that has a large zine-making culture, so circulating their zine collection makes sense considering the artistic nature and interest of their students.

### Inclusive Representation

Although the topic was unaddressed by special and public libraries, several academic librarians noted how zine collections help address the lack of diversity in their collections, as Abel notes in

their chapter.<sup>76</sup> One librarian said, “We wanted our collection to be used by students at the same level as books in our stacks. For us, this is about balancing the voices we make available. Zinesters (zine authors) skew younger, and in our [zine] collection, there are more women/non-binary/femme voices, and voices of people of color, disabled folks, than in our book collection.” Another respondent said they created their zine collection in response to a Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) student survey and focus group, where students said they wanted more content by and about BIPOC authors and experiences. The same participant echoed a concern seen in the literature, how having circulating zine collections can enhance libraries’ ability to reflect the true nature of zines: as Kassir states, “. . . zines were not originally created with the intent to be cataloged at all, and rather to change many hands. A library collection will always be at odds with this, but by letting them circulate, we are able to stay somewhat more aligned with one of the purposes of zines (sharing information and experiences widely).”<sup>77</sup> These librarians’ reasoning to circulate their zine collections is similar to some of the motivations behind circulating the SJZC. While zines in the SJZC do not have to be created by individuals from underrepresented communities, many social justice topics explore and challenge dominant narratives. By structuring the SJZC as a circulating collection, students can use and engage with the materials, which validates the voices and experiences of the collection.



**Figure 10.** Survey responses to the question 'Is your zine collection cataloged?' broken down by type of library (public, academic, and special).

**Q5: *Is your zine collection cataloged?***

Answers from Q5 demonstrated that overall, survey participant libraries have zine collections that are either fully cataloged or have a mix of cataloged and uncatalogued zines (see figure 10). From the survey responses, 93.8 percent of academic library zine collections, and 86 percent of public library zine collections, are either fully cataloged or have a mix of cataloged and uncatalogued status. Only two libraries (8 percent), one public and one academic, did not have their zines cataloged.

Akin to Q3, we prompted participants who selected a mixed status answer to provide further explanation. Lack of time to fully catalog or cataloging of collections currently in progress was reported by 37.5 percent of academic libraries and 43 percent of public libraries. Similar answers explained that libraries prioritized other tasks over original cataloging for zines, often using more efficient alternative workflows like copy cataloging, finding aids, or cataloging at the collection level. The special library shared that although they do catalog their zines, due to lag time in cataloging, they also maintain a spreadsheet of uncatalogued zines that they make available in their reading room so that patrons can discover and access zines as quickly as possible.

Upon reflection while analyzing the answers to Q5, we realized the phrasing should have been more detailed to avoid different ways of interpretation. While some zine cataloging records are very detailed, other records can be quite sparse. The variation in record completeness can be attributed to different challenges, such as a lack of staff time or a lack of details on the zines themselves. While some answers did remark upon fully cataloging or cataloging at the title level, other answers did not. Due to the inconsistency in answers and the unclear phrasing of the question, we are not able to fully understand how respondents define cataloging in this context.

Despite the lack of clarity around how cataloging is defined for the purposes of the survey, it is interesting to note that only two responses said their libraries did not catalog their zine collections. Much of the literature indicates that many institutions cannot or do not wish to catalog their zine collections. Respondents cited reasons such as difficulty placing zines into preexisting categories, the need for specialized treatment with classification, and the challenge of finding appropriate subject headings. More libraries may be relying on others to help with some of the workload and expertise required for cataloging zines. The cataloger at U. of I. found 60 percent of the zines added to the SJZC already had an OCLC record in WorldCat, which indicates that there are an increasing number of records in WorldCat that libraries that catalog zines have contributed for others to use. Additionally, we plan to incorporate local metadata and keyword summaries into the SJZC records to make the zines in the collections easier for students to find and understand each zine's individual subject matter. As more libraries incorporate zines into their collections and share their experiences and best practices, we hope it will lower the barrier for entry and provide encouragement to other libraries that are interested in collecting these important yet often overlooked resources.

In addition to discussing cataloging strategies, respondents shared other ways their patrons can browse their zine collections. One public library explained that their patrons browse their zines on

LibraryThing (a free open-source application where users can share online catalogs of materials) and also links the collection to their website. An academic library shared that their zines are only cataloged in a Google spreadsheet, which is accessible to those who have the link. One of the free-text responses in Q4 from an academic librarian is also worth sharing as it relates to cataloging practices. They shared that their library is currently processing zines in “kits,” meaning that between ten and thirty zines with the same theme are cataloged as a collection rather than individually. The continued use of finding aids and collection-level records is an example of cataloging that both Herrada and Stoddart and Kiser discuss; however, Berthoud, Freedman and Kauffman, and Bartel actively discourage this approach as less helpful to researchers.<sup>78</sup>

We created the SJZC through a shared passion for inclusion and a willingness to collaborate. The survey results helped us learn more about how other libraries work with zines behind the scenes, as well as operationalize them as a tool to engage their communities. In line with the essence of zines, there is no standard way that the participants work with their zine collections. This is also reinforced by the zine literature, which consistently recommends that libraries develop an approach customized to each library’s setting and overarching goals. The survey showed that libraries are heavily influenced by factors like availability of staff time, budget, space, administrative support, and collection scope, which impact their decisions with circulation and cataloging; however, the passion and value from librarians working with these materials is prevalent throughout the varying zine collection approaches and scenarios.

Our case study and analysis of the survey results informed us that while there are still many challenges libraries experience with zine collections, some practices and procedures seen in the literature are evolving with the intent to increase the accessibility of zine collections to patrons. Although the literature review rarely discussed circulating zines, the survey responses and our own collection showed that this is becoming a more commonly seen practice. Many times, the most challenging barrier to implementing and circulating zine collections is a lack of staff time, particularly with tasks such as cataloging and processing. However, information resource sharing from the strong and helpful zine librarian community aids in zine collection development, providing help with workload through resources like WorldCat and the Zine Union Catalog.

## Conclusion

Throughout the literature review, case study, and survey, we explored evolving contemporary zine librarianship practices. The literature review documents even more libraries ready to take on the challenge of collecting zines and, overall, libraries that do so experience a positive impact. In our own case study, the SJZC has positively impacted our work, while also being full of challenges that keep us experimenting, discussing, and collaborating. We conceived of the SJZC as a circulating collection to increase accessibility and foster student engagement, as well as to assert its equal value to other library materials that students frequently use for personal and academic purposes. Many survey respondents reported similar reasoning, eager to provide space for their zines and highlight the creative and

ingenious ways different communities communicate their experiences, thoughts, and information. Our survey analysis shows how zine collection practices have evolved, and highlights librarians' innovative strategies to increase access to these valuable materials. With more information sharing about ways to make the zine implementation process easier for all different library types and budgets—as well as more discussions about ways zines are intended to be used—more students and patrons will have opportunities to engage with these exceptional materials.

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## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Emilee Mathews:** Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Visualization, Data Analysis.

**María Evelia Emerson:** Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Conceptualization, Methodology, Validation, Investigation, Data Analysis.

The authors were in constant communication with each other throughout the research and writing process, brainstorming, adjusting language, conceptualizing the process, and working on the methodology. They did the writing and editing of the article in a Google Doc so they could edit it together easily. The only thing the authors did separately in this article was the survey analysis, which Emerson took the lead on, and the creation of the figures, which Mathews created.

## AI Statement

ChatGPT was used to brainstorm options for the article's title. The prompt was "Create ten titles for a scholarly article about zines and libraries."

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