Looking at the "Alert Collector"

Kelly Myer Polacek and Neal Wyatt, Guest Columnists

Kelly Myer Polacek *is librarian at the California Men's Colony, San Luis Obispo, California, and current editor of the "Information LIteracy" column for* RUSQ. ***Neal Wyatt*** *is a PhD candidate in the Media, Art, and Text program at Virginia Commonwealth University. She served as the editor of "The Alert Collector" column from 2006 to 2012.*

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to ***Kelly Myer Polacek***, *California Men's Colony, Highway 1 North, San Luis Obispo, CA 93409; email: kmpolacek@gmail.com.*

The "Alert Collector" is one of *RUSQ's* most popular columns, offering selectors in both academic and public libraries starting points for developing collections focused on specific topics, subject areas, or genres. With a long-running column, it can be useful to occasionally step back, examine the premise of the column, and offer suggestions to readers who might be interested in contributing to the "Alert Collector" in the future. Here, current editor Kelly Myer Polacek and past editor Neal Wyatt collaborate to examine the art of writing about collection development and to give some guidance to potential authors.—*Editor*

Collection development is not a simple task. In 2001, Deborah Barreau conducted an extensive investigation into the responsibilities, strategies, and tools associated with the task of collection development in public libraries.[1] She reported that collection development librarians not only "choose books," but they also contribute to policy design, analyze collections, evaluate offerings, and weed materials. In addition to this extensive list of responsibilities, librarians are faced not only with the confines of time, space, and money, but must also overcome the challenges of evaluating the need for e-materials, developing subject matter expertise, and predicting patron usage (for which there remains no exact science).

Collection development librarians utilize a variety of resources to aid in these pursuits including recommendations by patrons, vendors, publishers, and media sources, among others. Attempting to simplify collection development by relying solely on statistical models derived from usage data or citation analyses can leave a library without the breadth and depth of materials ultimately desired by patrons. Editors of the "Alert Collector" advocate for collection development strategies that allow librarians to use the multiple approaches that will result in the carefully assembled collections that best meet their specific users' needs. We seek to help this endeavor by publishing curation devices that not only describe essential materials on specific subjects but also provide models for thinking about how to develop collections on innumerous subjects.

It is our hope that the "Alert Collector" pieces we publish identify key resources and include annotations that illuminate how and why these items are essential to collections. Instead of simply providing lists of undoubtedly important titles, good columns enable librarians to supplement, start anew, or complete a collection. "Alert Collector" articles should be usable by public librarians, academic librarians, and other professionals specializing in user-oriented information

services. They should include print and e-resources, books, periodicals, individual articles, databases, websites, and other forms of media when appropriate.

The not-so-secret goals of the "Alert Collector" are to advocate for collection development and model its best practices. Exceptional columns are those that illustrate the myriad aspects of building a collection and the important and expansive work of selectors. Sometimes columns, such as Andrew Walsh's "Learning Spanish Today: A Research Guide," remind us that the borders of our collections are not bound by what can be bought and easily cataloged.[2] Changes in language learning afforded Walsh a particularly rich opportunity to make this point. His column mixes traditional print resources with free podcasts, social websites, and free email courses. He also includes smaller paid subscription services and textbooks. While at first glance such resources might be dismissed as problematic or even unsuitable for a collection, Walsh reminds us that valuable resources can be included in a collection even when they are not for sale. With the growing flexibility and widening scope of library catalogs and websites, such resources can be added through specially designed bibliographic records or the creation or augmentation of research guides. Both of these approaches create opportunities for public service librarians and technical services librarians to collaborate—another aim of the "Alert Collector." Beyond his smart mix of resources, Walsh's work highlights two other aspects we value in every column: transferability and multiplicity. While Walsh focused on Spanish language learning, his approach works for many other languages. Librarians needing to enhance their French or Chinese collections can easily follow his guidance and seek out the same types of materials, often from the same sources. Walsh also designed his column to serve the needs of various users, including college students, high school students, and lifelong learners. As such, his column is useful to academic, public, and school librarians alike, all of whom read *RUSQ*.

We regularly seek submissions for this column on a variety of topics from a variety of readers. (One of our editors got her start by perfecting a pathfinder originally created for a collection development course in graduate school.) Good topics for the "Alert Collector" column are simultaneously very specific and widely applicable. They can be timely, like Janet T. O'Keefe's "How to Buy for the Children of the Night: Building a Collection on Vampire Myths," published at the height of the popularity of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.[3] They can also be perennial, such as a column about art or politics with descriptions of how the topic (and the materials that support it) has evolved relative to the time of publication. Multi-authored columns that unite subject specialists and experts with librarians mine the collective wisdom that is essential in creating excellent collections.

We encourage your submissions for this column and believe the interests, challenges, and learning you experience are applicable and useful to your peers. Your descriptions of strategies and solutions can help others in modifying their own collections. As numerous studies have shown, materials are still an important part of the library brand, and for many library users, materials *are* our brand.[4] It is essential for the future of libraries that we develop collections in a thoughtful, focused fashion that keeps the needs of our user communities in mind. The "Alert Collector" is a tool that supports librarians of all kinds in this essential effort.

References

1. Deborah Barreau, "Information Systems and Collection Development in Public Libraries," *Library Collections, Acquisitions & Technical Services* 25, no. 3 (2001): 263–79.
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3. Janet T. O'Keefe, "How to Buy for the Children of the Night: Building a Collection on Vampire Myths," Reference & User Services Quarterly 40, no. 1 (2000): 16–23.
4. Kathryn Zickuhr, Lee Rainie, and Kristen Purcell, *Library Services in the Digital Age* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2013), http://libraries.pewinternet.org/files/legacy-pdf/PIP_Library%20services_Report.pdf.