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Developing and Sustaining a Graphic Scholarship Collection for Academic Libraries

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INTRODUCTION

Since being coined by Richard Kyle back in 1964, the term “graphic novels” has served to differentiate longer-form comic book narratives from regular monthly serials, but also to give comics a degree of recognition as something potentially more important. Not unlike “sequential art” as a descriptor for the comics artform itself, the idea of graphic novels seems intended to elevate the work above its roots. This has led to some controversy, with recognized authors such as Alan Moore (Kavanagh, 2013) and Neil Gaiman (Weldon, 2016) eschewing the term as unneeded and overly commercial. Jeff Smith, creator of *Bone*, said of *graphic novels*: “It’s trying too hard” (Rogers, 2010).

This problem gets further muddled when one looks at the most recent trends in original graphic novels to recount stories from history and memoirs, or to explain complex ideas of science and philosophy, or to tell any story that’s not strictly fiction. The term “nonfiction graphic novels” is an oxymoron at best, and “graphic nonfiction” feels like a description of some particularly gruesome real-world event.

The Schusterman Library at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa (OU-Tulsa) wrestled with these ideas when naming the collection it founded in 2021. Consisting primarily of nonfiction comics and built to enhance the library’s mission to serve a diverse student body, this new collection would quickly resonate with the OU-Tulsa community, but it needed a name that inspired users to pay attention, browse the shelves, and borrow the books.

With that in mind, the Schusterman Library launched their Graphic Scholarship Collection. This paper will examine the history behind this collection, the selection and acquisition of materials, the organization and classification of the books, how the collection enhances the service mission of the library, and future directions for this fledgling effort.

BACKGROUND

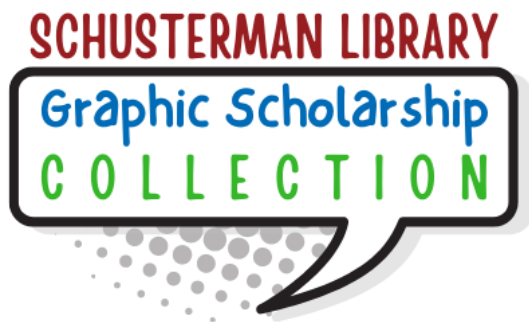
In the summer of 2020, the director of the Schusterman Library, Stewart Brower, conducted a brief non-credit-bearing workshop series titled “The History and Language of Comics.” Hosted on the Google Classroom platform, enrollment in the workshops was open to any student in a Library and Information Sciences (LIS) program. The workshops were designed as a trial run for Brower to get student feedback before proposing a semester-long elective to the University of Oklahoma School of Library and Information Studies (OU SLIS). The proposed elective would focus on three major areas of understanding: The syntax and critical language of sequential art, the history of comics in the United States, and the roles of libraries and librarians. The proposed elective was accepted into the OU SLIS program for Spring 2021 and taught as an online course for 3 credit hours. The

course shows promise to continue as a part of the rotating LIS electives, as it was accepted and taught a second time for Spring 2023.

In preparing for the course, Brower, who had read and collected comics since the 1970s, was surprised to discover the breadth of nonfiction materials now in comics form. This led to informal discussions in the Fall of 2020 with Toni Hoberecht, Technical Services Librarian, who suggested we begin by surveying potential titles for purchase and work up a starting budget. Both Brower and Hoberecht were familiar with graphic medicine as a subject area, and a bibliography of titles was readily available through GraphicMedicine.org.¹ Later, a bibliography of “non-fiction graphic novels” on the books review site Goodreads.com helped with identifying non-medical titles.² No standard library selection tool or core bibliography was identified. A tentative budget of \$2000 was set and acquisition of titles began in earnest in January 2021.

Among the earliest acquisitions was *The Murder of Emmett Till* by Karlos Hill (2021). Hill is an associate professor and chair of the Clara Luper Department of African and African-American Studies in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Oklahoma. A premier work of graphic history written by an expert scholar from our home institution managed to both demonstrate the validity of the new collection while simultaneously setting the bar rather high.

Figure 1. Schusterman Library Graphic Scholarship Collection logo, from Emrys Moreau.



Interest in the new collection grew somewhat quickly during the first year. A colorful graphic was designed in-house by librarian Emrys Moreau and used as signage (Figure 1). General interest workshops on graphic medicine and graphic scholarship were conducted in Spring 2021, and a second workshop series was held during the summer. Faculty members in programs as diverse as Community Medicine, Architecture and Urban Design, and the Center for Studies in Democracy

¹ <https://www.graphicmedicine.org/essentialgm/>

² https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/17254.Non_Fiction_Comics_and_Graphic_Novels

and Culture all showed interest in the work being done with the collection and requested either consultation in matters of visual literacy or workshops and classes for their programs. Circulation of graphic scholarship materials was generally strong, and within the first year, were the most-requested print items in the collection.

Collection use and circulation were off to a strong start, workshops and other programming were successful, and publicity surrounding our work was beginning to grow (Graham, 2022). However, the library team identified several key problems that do not have easy solutions.

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

ACQUISITIONS & SELECTION

Perhaps the root issue is one of being able to identify new graphic novels that are appropriate for the collection. Early discussions and investigations by the library team revealed no standard bibliography from which to draw, and so the approach to identifying books was somewhat haphazard. Initial selection was through firsthand knowledge, occasionally from GoodReads.com or GraphicMedicine.org, or recommendations from Amazon.com. Often one of the library team would simply happen across an appropriate graphic novel in a bookstore or on social media. Publisher catalogs and websites are often vague about things like intended audience, and so some graphic novels targeted at children or pre-teen/young adult readers were purchased. Without reliable publisher information, getting ahead of new graphic nonfiction titles before they are published is nearly impossible. One notable new resource is the Adult Comics & Graphic Novels Announcements feature by *Publishers Weekly*, which explicitly separates titles by audience and therefore helps us avoid accidentally purchasing more juvenile materials. This feature had its inaugural publication in a January 2023 issue of the journal and has already been useful in identifying upcoming titles. We hope that more resources like this will emerge, but for now it seems to be an outlier (Lemke, 2023).

After some trial and error, a provisional list of sources for graphic scholarship print monographs was developed. This list is not perfect; some sources offer mainly traditional comic books or YA graphic novels with only a few items that could be classified as “graphic scholarship,” so a lot of time is spent sifting through lists of items that do not qualify for our collection. However, if an item from one of those lists is identified as “graphic scholarship,” then we can search for other items by the same author or by the same publisher to see if other appropriate items can be found. Occasionally the books themselves will contain lists of graphic novels supplied by the publisher.

Award lists such as Wikipedia's *List of Award-Winning Graphic Novels* (2022) provide resources for graphic scholarship, although sources like these are infrequently updated. Social media and email listservs occasionally provide useful recommendations and discussions, but these sources cannot be relied on for a steady stream of relevant materials.

Given that we refer to a small list of sources periodically and search for publishers and authors when they seem promising, selection remains a time-intensive activity. We still rely on serendipitous recommendations from library staff and from library users who are interested in the mission of the Graphic Scholarship collection.

AGE APPROPRIATENESS

Without reliable catalog information for each book being acquired, the Schusterman Library inadvertently purchased several titles that were clearly intended for children or young adults. For the most part we have maintained these titles in the collection, as many are seminal or award-winning titles. Some of the young-adult titles were purchased consciously as their subject matter aligned with campus teaching and research interests, such as the Science Comics series from First Second Press, featuring titles like *Skyscrapers: The Heights of Engineering* and *The Digestive System: A Tour Through Your Guts*. We speculated that these titles could serve as entry points for casual readers who encountered the collection without having a specific interest in graphic scholarship. In addition, they might fit the needs of programs like Early Childhood Education.

RIGOR

Similarly, although many of the nonfiction titles are clearly intended as memoir, and not subject to the kind of rigor expected of scholarly communications, some graphic nonfiction is lightly researched, and takes greater liberty with the narrative than would be expected in any academic publication. Although the memoir is not a genre known for its methodological rigor, memoirs have been selected because they offer insight into lived experiences that may align with campus interests, since our campus hosts Schools of Medicine, Nursing, Public Health, and Allied Health. For example, several memoirs by doctors, nurses, and other health professionals, as well as of patients and family members of patients, are included in the collection. Memoirs, even those intended for a younger audience, can provide valuable insight from a patient perspective that benefits students in programs such as medicine and social work.

ALIGNMENT WITH CAMPUS INTERESTS

Not all graphic nonfiction in the Schusterman Library collection necessarily aligns with a specific degree program, although such alignment is desirable. Many are of general historical interest, and a number of titles support Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts on campus. Incidentally, one of the library's earlier memoir purchases, *Gender Queer*, became the most challenged book in the United States in 2021, due to its LGBTQIA+ themes.³ With the rise of book bans and challenges in the last few years, particularly for titles related to race, gender, and sexuality, we could see another increase in scholarly research surrounding censorship. This is especially true in the field of librarianship, which has a long history of championing intellectual freedom, as well as other fields and disciplines (Alter, 2022).

This is just one example of the many titles that can serve campus and community interests, even while lacking academic rigor or age appropriateness. Materials aimed at a younger audience or with younger characters can still be relevant in higher education, particularly when those materials discuss larger themes in our society such as censorship, diversity, discrimination, and mental health.

SHELVING LIMITATIONS

A standard twelve-foot long, double-sided shelving unit was chosen to hold the collection (Figure 2). Located in a well-trafficked area on the first floor, the unit includes steel cantilever periodical shelves. Periodical shelving is flat with a wide lip at the bottom, allowing narrow-width materials to face outward, rather than being shelved like standard books. We conjectured that having the graphic novel covers facing outward would improve browsability and help show off the collection best (Figure 3). Each shelf is three feet long, and the range has 48 shelves total, giving 144 feet of display area initially. This would prove inadequate as the collection grew beyond the first six months of purchases.

³ <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/frequentlychallengedbooks/top10/archive#2021>

Figure 2. The Graphic Scholarship Collection's shelving unit.



Figure 3. Close-up of the Graphic Scholarship Collection's shelves.



The shelving unit is attractive and practical, but limits the collection in a few key ways. Although having the books face outward makes them more visible and easier to browse, some of these graphic novels are thicker than average, and the lip of the shelf cannot accommodate them. The top range of shelves is too tall to be practical for use, so 24 linear feet of display is unusable. However, these upper shelves may be repurposed for signage.

Most problematic, though, is that the growth of the collection rapidly outpaced the periodical display shelves' capacity. Some of these shelves have been replaced with standard flat bookshelves to allow for the additional titles. This combination of shelving is a short-term solution to capacity issues but has created additional challenges for staff when shelf-reading or trying to quickly view call numbers.

ORGANIZATION OF THE COLLECTION

None of the staff involved in managing the new collection had previous experience in graphic novels, graphic nonfiction, or comics. Although we knew that there were special considerations for managing these types of items, our priority was to get the collection cataloged, classified, and made available for users as soon as possible.

Titles were purchased, catalogued, and classified according to Library of Congress (LC) monograph standards, with the understanding that this was just an initial cataloging attempt that was bound to be incomplete and possibly incorrect; our interest at that moment was getting the books on the shelves.

Classification introduced unforeseen challenges, however. At this time, Zane Ratcliffe was the Library Technician who conducted this work and operated from long-standing LC rules, following best practices for classifying monographs. LC classification of graphic novels typically places all such works under a single classification span, PN6700-6790, under the broader heading of “Comic books, strips, etc.” with only children’s titles being classified separately.⁴ This classification assigns all graphic novels together by their format, rather than by topic or subject matter.

Often when graphic novels are shelved according to this classification, the collection orientation will be imprecise, and will make the collection challenging to browse. Some of the graphic medicine titles followed National Library of Medicine (NLM) classification, making them more aligned with their general subject areas, but topic areas such as history, psychology, political science, economics, etc. were not primarily considered when classifying the graphic novels. We had overlooked the possibility of using LC genre/form term subdivisions, which would have given us the opportunity to assign more appropriate subject headings, and had not anticipated that the clustering of material classifications would lead to difficulties as the collection grew.

After the collection had grown significantly, our interest began to center on the findability of the materials in the library’s catalog and on the shelves. In Spring of 2022, a reorganization project was led by Bethie Seay, Assistant Technical Services Librarian. The original range of call numbers, PN6700-6790, would be

⁴ <https://www.loc.gov/aba/cyac/graphicnovels.html>

helpful if the titles were shelved together with traditional monographs in a larger collection so that users could easily locate the graphic nonfiction section. However, the separate physical shelving of the Graphic Scholarship collection would benefit more from titles being arranged by subject. Seay evaluated every title in the collection to determine whether or not its call number reflected its discipline. The majority of the collection was given new call numbers by using a combination of LC and NLM classification. The initial reorganization project was finished by the Summer, but this classification issue will be an ongoing effort. Documentation, including a local classification guide, was created to ensure consistency as new materials are continuously added.

The recent distribution of *Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using RDA and MARC 21* by the American Library Association's Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table (2022) has also had an impact on our cataloging practices. The document was heavily consulted to identify the Graphic Scholarship collection's bibliographic shortcomings. Our records were particularly inconsistent in subject description and the way that series were cataloged. After reviewing the document, we were able to develop documentation for our own best practices for cataloging the collection and then create plans to improve our catalog's records.

Figure 4. Search result in Primo displaying an individual issue of a series.



Figure 5. Search result in Primo displaying a multi-part series.



Series arrangement was one of the more complicated cataloging decisions to make, as we could either create individual bibliographic records for each part of a series or create a multi-volume monographic bibliographic record for an entire series with each part being a separate item. The former would allow for richer descriptions of contributors to individual parts. The latter would provide more streamlined discovery results in the online catalog. After much deliberation, we chose a hybrid method: any series that we own multiple parts of will be cataloged as a serial record, while any lone issue of a series would be cataloged on its own. This combination prioritizes user-friendliness in the catalog as well as detailed descriptions for contributors. When the library only owns one part of a series, it is

usually due to the local relevance of the contributors to that specific issue. Figure 4 shows an example of a search result for an individual issue, and Figure 5 shows a serial that includes multiple items within our catalog.⁵

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT POLICY

A collection development policy for the collection was written well after the collection was already established:

Graphic Scholarship Collection: This collection consists of comics, graphic novels, and heavily illustrated monographs where comics/sequential art techniques are applied. Also included are scholarly communications (monographs, journals) that contribute to comics scholarship, particularly in the areas of graphic medicine, graphic science, graphic social science, graphic history, or any graphic scholarship that contributes to any of the disciplines represented at OU-Tulsa. This collection also includes other comics or non-comics materials that support the aims and objectives of the Graphic Scholarship project, including zines with a connection of any kind to Graphic Scholarship.⁶

The policy became part of the Schusterman Library's general collection development policy which can be found on the library's website.

The library began acquiring items under this policy starting in early 2020 and the collection now contains over 300 items. The total value of these items as of June 2023 was \$7,272.94, based on the original purchase price of the items, with an average purchase price of \$21.91. 124 items were purchased in 2020-2021, for an average purchase price of \$19.96, and a total purchase price of \$2,474.63, 94 items in 2021-2022 for an average purchase price of \$23.44, and a total purchase price of \$2,203.70, and 114 items in 2022-2023, for an average purchase price of \$22.76, and total purchase price of \$2,594.61 (Table 1).

⁵ https://ou-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo-explore/search?vid=OUTULSA&lang=en_US

⁶ <https://library.tulsa.ou.edu/collection-development-policy>

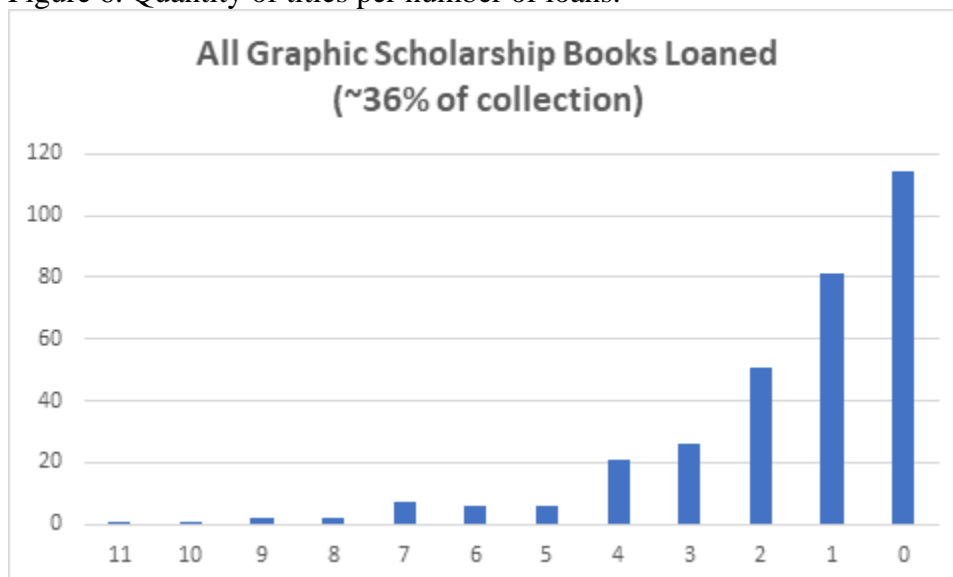
Table 1. Purchase prices of the Graphic Scholarship Collection.

Year	Number of Items	Average Purchase Price (USD)	Total Purchase Price (USD)
2020-2021	124	\$19.96	\$2,474.63
2021-2022	94	\$23.44	\$2,203.70
2022-2023	114	\$22.76	\$2,594.61
Total	332	\$21.91	\$7,272.94

CIRCULATION

Items in the graphic scholarship collection have circulated at about the same rate as other monographs in the library. As of December 2022, about 108 items, or 36%, of the individual items in the collection have been checked out at least once. For our library on our small campus, these are acceptable circulations trends. Figure 6 shows a breakdown of the number of times graphic scholarship items have circulated.

Figure 6. Quantity of titles per number of loans.

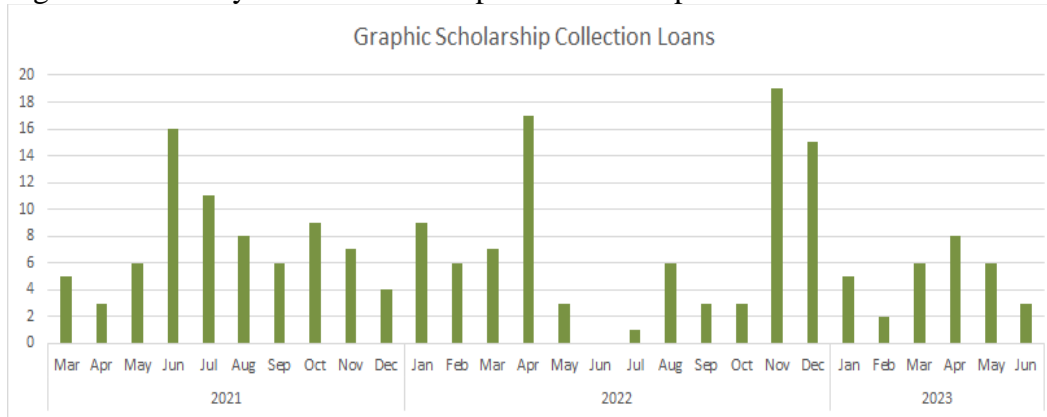


A few very popular books (*Maus*, *Gender Queer*, *Persepolis*) have been checked out at least seven times. These are all titles that have been in the news for one reason or another and have high general visibility.

Figure 7 shows loans from the Graphic Scholarship collection over time. There have been 194 loans from the collection as of July 2023; this does not include in-house loans, where items have been reshelfed after use but not checked out. In

the collection's inaugural year, 2021, there were 75 loans, and 89 loans in 2022. Loans are slightly down for 2023 at only 30, but the library anticipates an increase when the fall semester (and targeted marketing of our collections) begins.

Figure 7. Loans by month of the Graphic Scholarship Collection.



DISCUSSION AND OUTCOMES

The campus community has been very receptive to the collection and the idea of “Graphic Scholarship” thus far. This acceptance has allowed the collection to grow and evolve into more than a physical collection of titles. The initiative has given the library an opportunity to position itself as a place for exploring the arts on a campus with no other arts programming. By using the collection as a scaffold, the library can build programming and strengthen connections through a medium that would be otherwise absent.

Some of this programming has included library workshops, both online via Zoom and in-person, and course-directed programming. One campus elective from the School of Community Medicine focuses on the arts. This *Arts & Medicine* course meets every fall semester and now includes a graphic medicine component, co-instructed by the library team. Students explore the comics collection firsthand and then receive a lecture on graphic scholarship, including hands-on drawing exercises from Lynda Barry’s *Making Comics* (2019). Additional library workshops have focused on the nature of sequential art and graphic storytelling, comics studies and criticism, and specific works of graphic scholarship. Over 100 faculty, staff, and students have engaged with these workshops to date.

In addition to time spent on programming, staff have also dedicated considerable hours to cataloging and processing the Graphic Scholarship materials. At the collection’s inception, over 175 items were copy-cataloged in a short amount of time, and staff hours were devoted to shifting and creating a physical space for the collection, copy-cataloging and processing each item, and getting items on the

shelf. Additional items were then ordered and received in smaller amounts, and time spent copy-cataloging and processing waned, until the decision was made to reclassify and reorganize the collection. The reclassification project alone consumed an estimated 72 hours of work. Those hours included analyzing the titles for subject matter, identifying the new call numbers, editing local bibliographic records, and changing spine labels. Time is also spent on shelf maintenance whenever the collection outgrows a section of front-facing shelves and requires more flat shelving. The additional time spent on receiving and copy-cataloging new titles has become negligible, except for the occasional need for original cataloging of a unique title. Like any other endeavor, the collection has impacted staff time and will inevitably continue to do so.

Acquisition issues were challenging at first; in our library most selections are based strictly on curricular needs and direct requests from faculty and students. Selection for the graphic scholarship collection occurs in consultation with the library director, who is the chief curator of the collection. However, the director has made clear that the technical services librarian is also responsible for discovering new sources of appropriate material, and making purchasing decisions independently. Having what amounts to a free hand in selection feels like a recipe for chaos, but in true technical librarian style, that chaos is beginning to be codified and classified.

The challenges that came with cataloging the collection have had positive results on library processes. The unique bibliographic needs served as a catalyst to solidify and document local best practices for metadata for all collections. Prior to the graphic scholarship cataloging projects, there was little written policy regarding local practices for MARC records. This created a risk of inaccuracy and inconsistency during staffing changes as institutional knowledge could be easily lost. Documentation has since been created to explain best practices for cataloging and classifying the Graphic Scholarship collection, which has then inspired more documentation for other collections in the library. The next step for the bibliographic side of the collection is to perform catalog enhancements following these newly minted best practices.

CONCLUSIONS

The success of the Graphic Scholarship Collection at the OU-Tulsa Schusterman Library has been very organic and has come about due in very large part to the passionate support of the library team. Going forward, it is hoped that this collection and the programming around it will begin to take on more structure and gain some recognition on an institutional level.

The library's catalog and documentation have already become more structured as a result of this new endeavor. The Technical Services team faced the

challenge of reorganizing and cataloging this new collection to fit in amongst our existing system and came out the other side with more concrete policies that benefit our catalog and users. Cataloging Graphic Scholarship items will be an ongoing endeavor as the collection continues to grow, but there have already been marked improvements to subject description, contributor acknowledgement, series tracing, and other consistencies that improve users' abilities to access the collection.

Building on the success of the "Arts & Medicine" class component, additional course offerings will be actively sought out with faculty in programs like Education, Social Work, and Human Relations, while informal workshops will continue to be offered. To support these efforts, the library will build a comics art studio equipped with an analog drafting table and art supplies, and a digital comics creation workstation with drawing tablet and appropriate software. This studio will give faculty, researchers, staff, and students an environment to learn more about the comics production process and to develop new comics of their own.

Some fledgling efforts in this direction have already begun. A recent express outreach award from the Networks of the National Library of Medicine is funding the publication of a comic for the *Professor Paws Project*, a public awareness effort focused on educating people on the value of service animals.⁷ The intention is to publish a standard "floppy" comic to be freely distributed at workshops and health fairs within the next year. At the time of this writing, the script has been completed and an artist is being sought for the project. Other researchers on campus have shown interest in producing similar comics in the future.

With the push toward producing new educational comics, the library team hopes to gain recognition and elevate institutional awareness of the program. Being recognized by the University of Oklahoma as a "Center" and receiving new permanent funding would be the best outcome. The collection's vision and goals can be found on the library website.⁸

What is clear is that even on a campus with no arts or humanities faculty or programs, the Schusterman Library has developed a collection that generates new interest in reading, educates students, demonstrates new potential routes for scholarly communications, and inspires creativity among our campus population. For now, it is clearly a success.

⁷ <https://www.ou.edu/tulsa/professorpaws>

⁸ <https://library.tulsa.ou.edu/index.php/graphic-scholarship>

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