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Collection development for graphic novels in academic libraries: results of a national survey

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Abstract

A survey on collection development for graphic novels was sent to 632 collection development librarians and also placed on the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services listserv. Once 200 responses had been received analysis of results began. Findings indicate that while all libraries reported possessing at least some graphic novels and most reported having what they would call a “graphic novel collection,” the medium is still quite uncommon when compared to existing library collections, comprising less than 1% of all books in academic libraries. Further, while it was found that most libraries are currently collecting graphic novels, collection development policies for graphic novels are not the norm. Survey respondents were also asked to detail the current perceptions of graphic novels among the librarians in their institutions. Overall, the results detail an area of collection development in a state of change as graphic novels become more common in both university curricula and in academic library collections.

Introduction

While a number of practice-based articles exist detailing the development of graphic novel collections, surveys of collection development in academic libraries are much scarcer. Wagner (2010) surveyed ARL academic libraries to determine holdings of a list of 176 notable graphic novels that included Harvey and Eisner Award winners and a “101 best graphic novels” list. There are also some bibliographies of graphic novels for use in collection development (Irwin, 2014; Golomb, 2012). Additionally, there are articles discussing connecting the presence of graphic novels in the curriculum (Downey, 2009; Finley, 2015). The heavy majority of articles, however, are the practice-based, “we built a collection, here’s our story” articles. While these are great guidance tools for librarians, there currently exists no nationwide survey of graphic novels in academic libraries. We do not know how many libraries possess graphic novel collections, we do not know how many are actively building these collections and we do not know *how* those collections are being built. Given that the universal sentiment seems to be that graphic novels are increasingly finding a home in university curricula and in academic libraries, some real numbers will be useful to the conversation.

For the purposes of this article, the term “graphic novel” and “trade paperback” will be used interchangeably. While not strictly the same, they’re sufficiently similar in format from a collection development standpoint, though they do present different challenges. A graphic novel is, according to the strictest definition, a standalone book. A trade paperback is bound collection of what were released as individual comic book issues in an ongoing series. Think Alison Bechdel’s memoir *Fun Home* as opposed to *Season of Mists*, the fourth collection in Neil Gaiman’s *Sandman*. There exists more the possibility of more granular research here, comparing collection development between the two, but as this study simply seeks to determine the yes/no existence of collections and development policies along with some qualitative input from librarians on those matters, the two are used interchangeably.

Literature review

A number of researchers have noted the increasing inclusion of graphic novels in college courses and in university library collections (Blevens & Muyumba, 2015;). Matz (2004), notes that academic libraries in the 20th century tended to ignore the medium due to both a perception of them as less-than-serious literature and the difficulty of choosing from the large amount of published works when starting a collection. Ten years later, Pagnucci and Romagnoli (2014), wrote of the disconnect between the popularity of comic titles and their prevalence in university courses, writing that “for all the excitement comic books and comic book based ideas have generated in popular culture, there still remains skepticism about the scholarly value of studying comic books and graphic novels (p. 9). A survey of the literature does reveal the adoption of the medium in college courses, even if most of them seem to be concerned with teacher education, art education and teaching basic literacy, rather than being assigned as reading in literature courses.

Still, adoption in college courses will elicit a response from curriculum libraries, which are increasingly working integrate graphic novels into their collections. As Glenn Mauchika and Gail Boldt (2010) write, “There is little argument that comics, cartoons and graphic novels are being seriously collected by librarians as legitimate scholarly sources. Once considered nothing more than low-brow entertainment primarily for children, comics have developed significantly” (p. 511). Aside from their inclusion in college reading lists alongside more traditional materials, instructors are taking advantage of the uniqueness of the medium to achieve different educational outcomes including: teaching ESL students (Chun, 2009; Cimermanova, 2014), teaching visual literacy (Marrall, 2016; Schwartz, 2002) or in art education (Williams, 2008).

Affleck, (2006) is an early article to describe building a graphic novel collection in an academic library, working with a serials librarian, the English department and the art department. Affleck recommends focusing on graphic novels or trade paperbacks instead of individual comic issues, due to a number of factors including durability, length, and ease of collection development. A year later, Haines (2007), went into detail with another collection development article, and offered a number of recommendations including gathering supporters, the importance of defining scope of collection and finding librarians who are interested in graphic novels. Slater and Kardos (2017) looked at collection development in a single university library and offer experiential wisdom concerning outreach, including forging a relationship with the university comic book club.

Given that the presence of graphic novels in academic libraries is now seemingly commonplace, the lack of a national, large-scale survey looking at collection development for graphic novels is a deficiency in the literature. This study relates the results of a survey of over 600 state university academic libraries regarding their graphic novel collections and collection development policies. This is the first such survey, though a number of studies have examined collection development and graphic novels from different perspectives. Masuchika and Boldt (2010) surveyed 44 academic libraries regarding collection of Japanese manga. Toren 2010, advises selection of graphic novels for both leisure reading and academic purposes, a view shared by O’English, Matthews and Lindsay (2006), which also offers a number of other practical recommendations for promoting the medium.

Methods:

A 16-question survey was sent individually to 630 collection development librarians at state university campuses. Emails for these individuals were manually collected. The survey was sent out three times, both by sending emails to all collected librarians and by posting to the ALCTS listserv,

until 201 responses were received, a response rate of 31.9 percent. The following three research questions form the overall guiding aims of this study:

R1: How prevalent are graphic novel collections in academic libraries?

R2. How common are collection development policies for graphic novels in academic libraries?

R3. What is the perception of graphic novels in academic libraries?

Results:

The first three survey questions related to institution-type, enrollment and monograph collection size. The hope was for enough responses to undertake some statistically significant granular analysis comparing schools of different sizes and degree-granting levels. This was only partially successful due to the total response number of 200. Some comparative analysis was possible, however, as will be explained in the discussion section.

The first survey question asked the respondent to describe their institution, with the choices being 2-year community college, bachelor's degree-granting university, master's degree-granting university and PhD-granting university, and received 200 responses. Of these, 80 (40%) were from PhD-granting institutions, 73 (36.5%) from master's-level institutions, 39 (19.5%) from bachelor's level and just eight (4%) from community colleges.

The second question sought the FTE at each institution. Half of all respondents were at institutions either with enrollment of 1,000-4,999 or 5,000-9,999 students. The full breakdown of FTE responses is shown in Figure 1.

What is the FTE enrollment at your institution?

200 responses

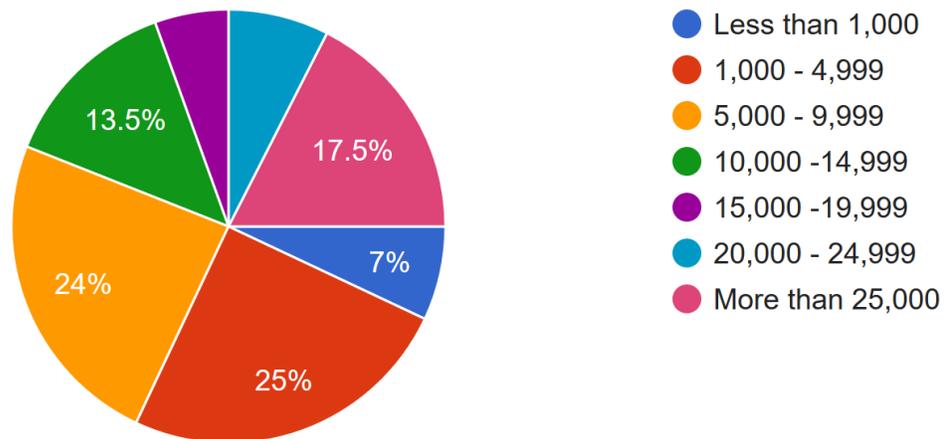


Figure 1: FTE of responding schools.

The responses to question three: What is the size of the print monograph collection at your library, were similarly diverse, as shown in Figure 2.

What is the size of the print monograph collection at your library?

197 responses

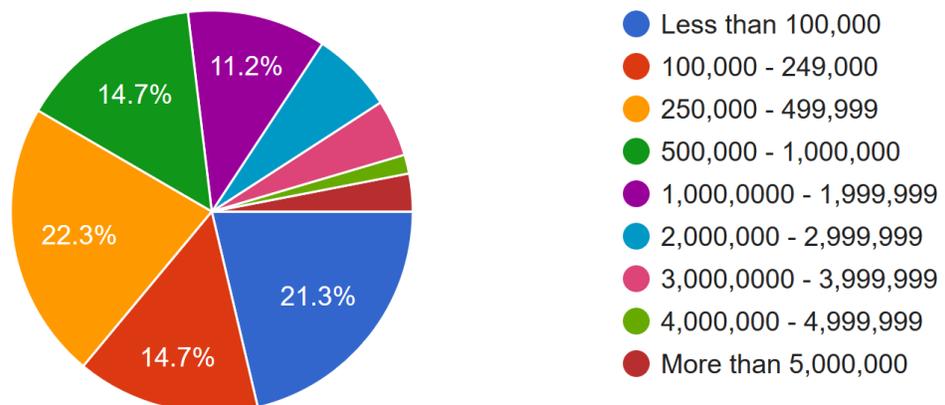


Figure 2: print monograph collection numbers of respondents.

Question four asked respondents if their library currently possessed what they would call a graphic novel collection. Exactly what might constitute a collection as opposed to simply having some graphic novels *in* the larger collection is not rigidly defined, so this response was subject to the librarian's interpretation of the word. The majority of respondents, 132 (66.3%), indicated their libraries had what they would call a graphic novel collection, while 47 (23.6%), responded negatively. Twenty "other" responses mostly indicated that the library was in the process of developing a collection, that they had books in the collection but not enough to call it a "collection" in and of itself, that it was included in the popular reading collection or that, being dispersed throughout the regular circulating collection, they did not consider it a separate collection.

A follow up question for those responding "yes" inquired about the size of the collection [Figure 3]. Of the responses, 60.7% indicated their library possessed fewer than 500 graphic novels, 16% responded between 500 and 999 and 11% 1,500-1,999. Only eight respondents indicated collections greater than 2,500 graphic novels. Given that 63.3% of respondents reported a monograph collection of over 250,000 (including responses of collections in the millions) it can be said that graphic novels are still a small portion of university library collections, comprising less than 1% of present academic library collections.

A follow-up question for those responding "no" to question four yielded varied responses. The question asked, "If your library does not have what you would call a graphic novel collection, do you have any graphic novels at all? If so, what is the approximate number?" Of the 59 responses, 21 indicated possessing less than 100 graphic novels. Seven responded between 100-500. Two responded 950 and 1,412, respectively. An interesting follow-up question for those libraries possessing hundreds of graphic novels but not considering those numbers to constitute a collection would be why, though that would likely result in a semantic discussion of the definition of the word. In any case, At least several dozen respondents did not consider graphic novels to be a separate collection if they were scattered around with the regular circulating collection.

Three quarters of libraries responded that they were currently collecting graphic novels. The same percentage indicated their libraries did not have a collection development policy for graphic novels, while 44 % indicated they had a single individual primarily responsible for selecting graphic novels for purchase. This indicates that strategic collection development for graphic novels may not be the norm. Of those libraries reporting that they did have a single individual responsible for graphic novels, the heavy majority (80%) indicated it was either the head of collection development or an individual who volunteered.

The study also sought to understand what strategies were employed for graphic novel collections. The responses indicated use of a diverse set of tools including reviews (79.6%), recommended reading lists (74%), web-based acquisition tools (31.5%), collection development librarian expertise (62%) and consultations with faculty members (65.5%). The most commonly cited reasons for acquisition were inclusion in a course (74%) and for pleasure reading (72%), followed by donations (42%) and supporting a curriculum library (40.4%)

The survey also asked about how the graphic novels were cataloged. Such information could shed light on how graphic novels are considered by librarians. Nearly half of all respondents, 97, placed their graphic novels in the regular circulating collection, while 50 (26%) automatically placed them into a separate popular browsing collection. The other 24% responded that they employed varying

degrees of both while only one respondent reported keeping their graphic novels in an entirely separate collection. The survey also found that while every respondent reported possessing print graphic novels and trade paperbacks, 25.8% reported possessing eBooks while just 10.8% possessed individual issues of comic books.

The second to last question asked if the respondents themselves regularly read graphic novels, with 60% responding yes and 40% no. This was included to provide possible context depending on the last question, "In your own words, how would you describe the perception of graphic novels among the librarians at your institution?" It is a consistent theme in the literature that opinions on graphic novels vary in academia, meeting with some skepticism in higher education. O'English, Matthews and Lindsay (2006) note that "teaching faculty in higher education are increasingly using graphic novels in the classroom as well as studying them as academic fodder in their own right. Nevertheless, many faculty members retain antiquated notions of graphic novels based on their own past exposure to comic books in their youth, or are unaware of them at all, resulting in doubts over whether the medium truly qualifies as 'literature'" (p. 178). Downey (2009) writes that "Published research about graphic novel collections in academic libraries has been limited to investigating the genre as either recreational reading for busy college students or as part of the cultural and historical record. There is still resistance to the genre in some circles; combining text and images is considered fine for children's books, but children are expected to "grow out of it" and start reading "real books" (P. 181).

The responses to the final question reveal a variety of views of graphic novels in academia, ranging from embracing the medium as literature to dismissing it as popular browsing. Three responses made a note of one librarian in particular who seemed to have a particular fondness for Batman, all using the words "really into." Most of the responses seemed to fall in the middle, such as, "I would say they're coming around? Some still make snide comments about them, but one of our librarians conducted a survey of inclusion in university courses and found that quite a few books were currently in reading lists. That seemed to make a few people come around." Another librarian wrote, "most don't read graphic novels but are happy to have them because the students want them. also, illustration is a major here so they are needed for curriculum purposes. The librarians support the collection." The theme of appreciating graphic novels for the demand and a circulation boost, at least, was echoed in a few responses, with another writing, "It's the typical some think it's all pleasure reading that academic libraries should not be including in purchasing but most believe they are important and vital to not only the mental health of students for pleasure reading but has an impact in the classroom."

Many of the responses focused on a generational divide, such as this response: "A lack of graphic novels is the least of our problems. We have older librarians who still believe in sending damaged books from the 1940's to be rebound." Another wrote, "I'm working to get them greater acceptance. There's a marked age divide. Older librarians don't seem to think they're anything but children's literature."

The perception of graphic novels as children's literature was mentioned a few times, though often to say that this perception was gradually fading. One wrote in response, "I think they're generally positively received. They recognize the cultural and academic impact graphic novels have had. Once they're educated about them, those who were formerly resistant realize that they aren't just "kids' books." Another wrote that showcasing graphic novels with a more serious focus has been effective in changing views, writing, "I think it's getting better. Since more serious subjects, like racial inequity, are being discussed, graphic novels/comics are being seen as real sources, not just things kids read."

Only a few mentioned working with faculty to develop graphic novels as part of a curriculum collection, and even some those mentioned the circulation angle, such as saying the librarians, "don't seem to mind them as part of the bestsellers collection, but there also isn't a heightened interest except in the case of curriculum support." A few did state the value graphic novels to the curriculum and as literature, such as this simple response: "Essential to support curriculum and important literary artistic works." On the whole, though, the overall impression gained from the comments is that graphic novels are valuable pleasure reading, and a welcome boost to circulation. Even one of the responses which detailed active programming focused on the "pleasure reading" aspect:

"They are a popular format for pleasure reading among librarians as well as faculty and students. Some have a more serious interest in comics and graphic novels as teaching or research materials. We have an active comics studies reading group housed in the library, as well as number of online resources devoted to comics and graphic novels: a blog, libguide, social media accounts, and schedule of programming related to comics."

Discussion

Graphic novels remain a very small part of academic library collections. Based on the responses received regarding collection sizes, graphic novels comprise less than 1% of academic library collections. This lags behind national sales ratios. For example, in 2018, US book publisher revenue was an estimated \$25.82 billion (Library Journal). That same year, comic and graphic novels generated approximately \$1.09 billion, or a little over 4% of all book sales. While the popularity of comics is certainly recognized by librarians who noted the welcome boost to circulation and popularity among students, many respondents noted that the overall perception was that the medium is still one for popular browsing. Several librarians responded that this perception is gradually shifting, however, thanks to increased use by faculty members in courses and exposure to titles with more adult content.

Strategic development of graphic novel collections does not appear to be the norm. While 191/201 responses reported possessing at least some graphic novels, and 75% reported that they were actively acquiring graphic novels, only 25% reported having written a collection development policy for them, although 44% reported having a single librarian primarily responsible for that collection. It would appear that collection development is then driven by a combination of factors including course inclusion, recommended reading lists and reviews, but without an overall plan to guide that development. It is rare that graphic novels are given space as a separate collection, with only one respondent doing so. The rest either distributed them according to subject in the regular circulating collection (more common) or placed them into popular browsing (less common), while many others employed a combination of the two.

Conclusion and suggestions for further research

What we see then, is collection development that largely embodies the idea that graphic novels are slowly gaining acceptance in universities while still facing the problem of perception as “less serious” or “pleasure reading.” Libraries are collecting graphic novels in response to faculty assignment in courses but also due to the boost in circulation from high student demand. As libraries are always keen to increase foot traffic and circulation numbers, this will remain an attractive option. If graphic novels are going to gain further acceptance among academic librarians it will likely happen as a result not only of increased inclusion in college courses but also thanks to proactive work by existing allies within libraries. Collection development due to the assigning of a text in a course is merely reactive. As more librarians are exposed to more literary titles within graphic narrative art, collection development may become more proactive.

It is suggested that more qualitative research be undertaken regarding librarians’ opinions on graphic novels as literature. The open-ended question in the survey raised interesting questions regarding generational divides, perception of graphic novels as popular reading or as serious literature. Several comments noted how these perceptions seemed to be shifting, and all of them noted they were shifting toward becoming more accepting of graphic novels in the academic library. A more detailed survey or a series of qualitative focus groups could further shed light on this evolving issue in academic librarianship. Valuable scholarship could also be conducted for collection development by actually examining existing policies and by looking at existing collections. This survey only sought to determine whether policies existed and what the sizes of collections were. Much more detailed analysis awaits researchers, such as whether the option of purchasing a standalone graphic novel, as opposed to the greater expense of a series of trade paperbacks, affects collection development decisions.

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