
Meeting User Needs

Part II: Our Collection Responsibilities

A Position Paper for the Hamilton Public Library System

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Introduction

In the early Fall of 2001 the Hamilton Public Library Board endorsed a position paper entitled "Meeting User Needs." This paper outlined several trends in library and information services. It also established philosophic positions that the Hamilton Public Library is committed to pursue. The first "Meeting User Needs" paper concentrated on the changing educational and training needs of staff who work in public libraries. The paper had an immediate impact. It helped to increase our training budget and to create a new Education Policy for the Hamilton Public Library system.

This second "Meeting User Needs" paper deals with our collections. It outlines some of the more controversial issues that currently affect public library collection development and it presents position statements in response to these issues.

Public libraries are in the midst of enormous change, but this is not new. Many Canadian public libraries did not originally offer fiction material. Children's material was added decades after the formation of the original Hamilton Public Library system. Many of us can remember the enormous uproar that the introduction of mass-market paperbacks caused for public libraries. Mass-market paperbacks, with their limited shelf life, were felt to be antithetical to the preservation of the human record and, thus, a waste of taxpayer money. Many of us can also remember concerns that the introduction of copying machines would destroy bound books and allow people to create personal collections, thereby making public libraries irrelevant.

Past predictions that new formats and technologies would undermine the need for a public library system have proven groundless. Public libraries did respond and did offer paperbacks, children's books and copy machines. Such changes met with public approval. It is important for public libraries to respond, yet again, to changing public demands. This is a goal that can only be accomplished by ensuring that library staff and the public we serve agree on how our collection resources are best focused.

As an institution, the Hamilton Public Library has no formally approved philosophical approach to its collections. We do have aging collection guidelines and a limited collection development policy (due to be reviewed by the Board) as well as a "tiered" definition for the role of the branches. We also have Board recognition that the Hamilton Public Library owns a single collection that is housed in 25 physical locations. These policies and guidelines provide some direction as we start to develop an organizational response to collection dilemmas.

The Hamilton Public Library Board is charged with the responsibility to set direction and vision. The Board helps to define what the community expects from the collection of the library system. The Board, Administration, and all staff work under certain restrictions. Our budget for materials is fairly typical of most urban public libraries. We will never have enough funding and space to purchase everything in all formats. The Board is charged with the responsibility of setting collection priorities.

Our Central Library opened more than twenty years ago. At that time, the new building provided the library system with a relatively large amount of empty space. Our informal collection practices reflected a belief that space was not considered a major issue. Over the years, our space has filled and the collections have aged. It is time to question why we keep certain material and whether our space and budgets are best used to fulfill Board priorities. As a library system, we should be addressing collection issues on a regular

basis. Great Britain's Audit Commission recently produced a report on that country's public libraries and the auditors recommended that collection issues be regularly reviewed.¹

Many public libraries are now adopting "collection management" techniques. Collection management assumes that no single institution can acquire everything its users demand, and no single institution can "preserve" all of its holdings. Libraries cannot pretend to meet all library needs of all users equally well. Each library system must have areas of strength as well as areas that are met by reliance on other collections. The current Hamilton Public Library Board has highlighted several areas that it feels could be improved, including the collection needs of youth, seniors, new Canadians and established multicultural communities, and those with special needs.

Toronto Public Library recently estimated that flattened budgets and a weak Canadian dollar have created a 25% drop in library materials' purchasing power since the early nineties.² It is likely that a study of Hamilton Public Library would produce similar results. Hamilton Public Library has increased funding to its collections budget but it is unlikely that we can spend our way to meeting all the collection demands of Hamilton residents.

This document outlines and discusses some of the basic issues that must be addressed within our collection policies. The wording of position statements within this document is open for discussion when a formal collection policy is drafted. Ideally, all position statements (where applicable) should be relevant for both print and electronic collections.

Some basic position statements are:

1. The Hamilton Public Library endorses, supports and upholds the Canadian Library Association's Statement on Intellectual Freedom.³
2. The Hamilton Public Library's collections are an integrated whole, housed in many locations, relocated as required, and accessible to the public from any library service point.
3. The Hamilton Public Library's collections are developed and maintained for use by the public.
4. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that collection management processes (which include the acquisition, rotation, care and removal of materials) based on objective measures, are necessary to address the increasing gap between customer expectations and resource availability.
5. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that providing the right information is a crucial goal.
6. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that its collections will include a mixture of resources that are "owned" by the library systems as well as material that it can access through cooperative collection endeavors including reciprocal borrowing, interlibrary loan and electronic consortia.

¹ <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/AC-REPORT.asp?CatID=ENGLISH^LG^SUBJECT^LG-CULT-LEIS^REPORTS-AND-DATA^AC-REPORT&ProdID=9D0A0DD1-3BF9-4c52-9112-67D520E7C0AB&prodType=AC-REPORT> OR Go to www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/ and use the search function to find the report entitled *Building Better Library Services*.

² Internal TPL reports

³ <http://www.cla.ca/about/intfreed.htm>

7. The Hamilton Public Library accepts a community responsibility for addressing “digital divide” and “equity of access” issues through its collections and services.

Asking the Public/Our Changing Demographics

A key-planning document for most public libraries continues to be *Buildings, Books and Bytes, Libraries and Communities in a Digital Age*.⁴ This 1996 study, which is commonly called the Benton report or study, clearly articulates how the general public perceives public libraries.

Peter Drucker states that organizations must pay close attention to their “non-customers” in order to ensure that trends don’t make them irrelevant. According to Drucker, department stores of the 1980s surveyed customers but paid little attention to the changing needs of non-customers and, as a result, missed an important shift in the way people shopped.⁵ If we wish to remain relevant, it is important that we do not miss the changing ways in which people meet their traditional library needs.

We need more information about public expectations. We need to ensure that the money we spend on collections is spent wisely and invested in meeting community needs. We can make certain assumptions based on existing studies and surveys, as well as user input, but we must ensure that the feedback we receive is constant and is relevant. The Hamilton Public Library is participating in the City of Hamilton Business Planning process, and this process also sets obligations to monitor public reaction to service.⁶

The Benton report states that people from ethnic minorities are more reluctant to use public libraries and often do not feel comfortable or when using library services.

We have little information on the demographics of the New City of Hamilton. The collection of this data will be a priority as we establish collection statements. This information must be used to build collections that meet the needs of potential users,. Feedback systems must be put in place to monitor the success, or failure, of these attempts.

The Hamilton Public Library accepts that changing demographics and the desire for public input lead to the following position statements:

8. The Hamilton Public Library believes that collection decisions must be shaped by needs of the public we serve as well as the needs of those in the community who do not currently use library services.
9. The Hamilton Public Library will develop and regularly apply feedback systems that provide the library with objective information on the needs of our users.
10. The Hamilton Public Library will develop and regularly apply feedback systems that provide the library with objective information on how and where Hamilton residents who do not use the Library are meeting their information needs.

⁴ www.benton.org/Library/Kellogg/buildings.html

⁵ Drucker, Peter. *Managing in the Next Society*. Truman Talley Books, St. Martin's Press, New York. 2002, p.55, 71.

⁶ A copy of the Hamilton Public Library’s Business Plan can be found on the library’s Intranet site. (hplnet/Key Reports)

Electronic/Print Resources

The writers of the Benton study state that the very term “library” elicits good feelings and positive sentiments, but they warn that these feelings verge on nostalgia. The writers particularly caution that young people tend to be satisfied with electronic information resources even when inaccurate and often do not believe that public libraries will be relevant in their future lives. Benton researchers tried to probe this result in a subsequent study (“The Future’s In The Balance” can be purchased through the Benton website) and amplified their warning.

In 2000, Market Probe, an Ontario polling company, was commissioned by the steering committee for Ontario’s public library strategic planning process, to do a similar survey. The results were equally conclusive.⁷ Young people tend to trust information found in electronic formats and frequently prefer to use it.

The 2001 British Audit Commission study of England public libraries sends an even stronger warning.⁸

The Benton and the Market Probe studies inevitably launch discussions about the relevance of their findings. Those who argue they are not relevant suggest that these same young people will come back to public libraries once they have children and once they move toward recreational reading. This may be partially true, but it is probable that many young adults will continue to seek the answers to a wide-ranging variety of factual questions through the use of electronic information resources. They have more options than their predecessors.

U.S. scholar Robert Putnam states that participation in many social activities is “Intracohort”, that one particular generation or group will, throughout their years, tend to behave in the same fashion toward some activities.⁹ The ways in which people use public libraries fits the profile of an intracohort activity. In greater numbers than their elders, today’s young people will turn to the Internet when they want to travel, make major purchases, check stock quotes, or seek research assistance for their children’s school work. It is probably safe to assume that each decade will bring us new users that even more firmly accept electronic resources.

Public Libraries face “digital divide” and “equity of access” issues. Increasingly, information that is vital to the lives of our citizens, from access to government information and services to school support and access to information for daily living, is only available through free Internet or commercial electronic resources. The library has a responsibility to provide access to these resources and to assist the public as they try to navigate through the growing amount of electronic material that is available to them. It is time for Hamilton Public Library to embrace electronic formats as an even more integral part of their collection and to promote their use.

The Hamilton Public Library will address this issue through the following position statements.

⁷ <http://www.strategicplan2000.com/SurveyReport.pdf>.

⁸ <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/AC-REPORT.asp?CatID=ENGLISH^LG^SUBJECT^LG-CULT-LEIS^REPORTS-AND-DATA^AC-REPORT&ProdID=9D0A0DD1-3BF9-4c52-9112-67D520E7C0AB&prodType=AC-REPORT> OR Go to www.audit-commission.gov.uk/reports/ and use the search function to find the report entitled *Building Better Library Services*.

⁹ Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2000. pp. 33 - 34

11. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that there is a growing demand for additional electronic services.
12. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that there is a growing demand that the electronic services it provides must be accessible both within libraries and through remote access.
13. The Hamilton Public Library believes that the format in which collections are provided is important to the public and we must respond to changing format demands.

Students and Public Libraries

The Hamilton Public Library, like many public libraries, has a policy which states that we are not a primary, front-line information provider for students engaged in formal education. We expect schools to provide formal educational resources for their students. The Hamilton Public Library tries to assist by providing material for unique projects and papers. In reality, this division of responsibilities does not work. Significant portions of our resources help to support students in formal education but there is no consistency in these services since there is little policy justification.

The American Library Association has a survey instrument that allows local public libraries to ask constituents what services, taken from a list, they expect their local public library to provide. Inevitably, the public cites support for formal education as one of the top roles for any public library system.

There is a disconnect between the roles that public libraries seem willing to accept and the roles that the public seem anxious for them to provide.

The decline of many school libraries, coupled with a public belief that “the Internet” can fill this gap, creates an issue for public libraries. If we allow students to turn to “the Internet” as their primary resource tool, we run the risk of helping to create a growing group of young people who will continue, as adults, to accept inaccurate but easily obtained “information” as acceptable and will marginalize library services.

Public libraries must offer relevant services to students engaged in formal education. The wording of our traditional “support role” statement must be reviewed. Some U.S. states and Canadian provinces are addressing a part of this problem by forming multi-type library consortia that purchase licenses for electronic resources. Resources that students learn to use when they are in school continue to be the resources they can use once they graduate. Public libraries participate in such consortia both to stretch licensing funds and to help create young users who grow up with successful public library experiences. The Hamilton Public Library accepts a concept of school support that, for this institution, addresses these issues through the following position statements.

14. The Hamilton Public Library will review its policies regarding support for formal education and will revise these policies in an attempt to meet the expectations of students, short of providing “textbooks” to students.
15. The Hamilton Public Library will examine curricula-related needs, appropriate to different educational levels, including adult learners and define the extent to which the collection will support these needs.

16. The Hamilton Public Library will make every attempt to partner with educational organizations (such as the School Boards) in an attempt to assist them as they meet student needs.
17. The Hamilton Public Library will participate in licensing and purchasing consortia of electronic products whenever it is appropriate.

Acquisition of Material

The current collection development policy for the Hamilton Public Library cites the Central Library as a resource library, but we have little common understanding of what the term "resource" means. Does the term carry an expectation that the Library's collections are equally deep in all areas of human knowledge?

The reality is to marginalize library services and that the Hamilton Public Library is no different from any library system. It cannot maintain extensive collections in all areas of knowledge but must find some balance between collection depth and collection use. The parameters that define our balancing act are not explicitly stated.

S.R. Ranganathan published his famous "five laws of library science" in 1931. They are

- 1) Books are for use.
- 2) Every reader his/her book.
- 3) Every book its reader.
- 4) Save the time of the reader.
- 5) The library is a growing organism.

There is guidance in Ranganathan's five laws.

The Hamilton Public Library accepts a concept of acquisition that, for this institution, addresses this issue through the following position statements:

18. The Hamilton Public Library acquires material that will be used by the public.
19. The Hamilton Public Library will proactively seek materials to add to its collections in anticipation of public needs.
20. The depth of the library's collections is primarily determined by the demand for material, although material on all broad areas of human knowledge will be acquired.
21. The Hamilton Public Library recognizes that the collections may vary for different disciplines (science, social sciences and humanities) and that the format of materials collected and the retention strategies will differ.
22. The Hamilton Public Library is a place that promotes, through its collections, the use of accurate and reliable information that will assist people with their daily lives.

23. The Hamilton Public Library provides material in formats that people use, that are cost effective to provide, and that allow material on time-sensitive topics to be highlighted easily and to be kept up-to-date.
24. The library's collections will contain access to a variety of viewpoints on controversial topics.
25. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that a reliable criterion for predicting future use of an item is immediate past use.
26. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that it should play an active role in making people aware of its collections so that people may choose to use or not to use these collections based on knowledge that material is available.

Stewardship and Currency

In a recent book on values for librarianship¹⁰, Michael Gorman talks about 'Stewardship'. He writes that "we should do everything that we can to preserve significant recorded knowledge and information in such a manner that it is available not just to the next generation, or even to the next few generations, but for the indefinite future. The key word in the foregoing sentence is significant."¹¹

Hamilton Public Library will have to define its role in the preservation of significant printed works in a fashion that saves such material for "the indefinite future." Gorman suggests that librarians frequently shy away from any discussion of "significance" for fear of making judgments that bring accusations of censorship. He comments, as well, on our collective professional fear that we may remove something that a future researcher might want.

Gorman's concept of stewardship contains no reference to a potential conflict with another traditional role of public libraries. In comparison with academic libraries, public libraries face a higher expectation that the information they provide will be timely, accurate and relevant. Academic libraries often assume that users can draw a distinction between preserved and current information. For example, an academic library may wish to retain older gardening books so that future researchers can see the level of pesticides that were once recommended while a public library may wish to ensure that patrons do not use pesticide concentrations that are dangerous or illegal. Our users must receive service that directs them toward information relevant to their daily lives.

When determining which items are to be retained in long-term storage, several factors need to be considered including the cost of storing and handling the materials, the possibilities of storing the information in an alternative format, and the availability of the information in other sources or libraries. In addition, care must be taken to ensure that dated facts cannot be confused with accurate and current information.

Selection and de-selection are two components of the same process. The criteria used to choose material are the same that are used to discard it. As much emphasis, or more, must be placed on de-selection as on selection to maintain appropriate and relevant collections.

The Hamilton Public Library accepts a concept of collection stewardship that, for this institution, addresses these issues through the following position statements.

¹⁰ Gorman, Michael, *Our Enduring Values, Librarianship in the 21st Century*. American Library Association, Chicago and London, 2000.

¹¹ *Ibid*, page 61.

27. The Hamilton Public Library will collect and preserve comprehensive print and non-print material about Hamilton as well as material produced by Hamilton residents on the assumption that such material is, and will be, of significance to those in our community both now and into the future.
28. The Hamilton Public Library will ensure that where there is a demand for timeless materials (e.g. classics) that these items will be replaced with newer editions as they age.
29. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that de-selection is required to renew the collections, to reduce handling and storage costs, and to facilitate costs.
30. Material that is retained for long-term storage must have a projected future audience that is sufficient to justify the cost of retention.
31. Material that is retained for long-term storage will be stored only after all alternatives for providing this information is explored, and it is determined that keeping the item in its present format is justified.

Conclusion

The Hamilton Public Library must continue to provide good collections and service. We must meet our mandate with less purchasing power for a wider range of available materials in a greater variety of formats.

We can only be successful if our resources, staff and the funds we spend on collections, work toward a common, institutional understanding of the roles, priorities, and customer needs our collections are intended to fill.

The Hamilton Public Library will develop a comprehensive Collection Development Policy. This process has begun. This position paper sets out some of the intrinsic beliefs that our institution, as a starting point, accepts in principle. As our Collection Development Policy is developed, each of the position statements in this document may be challenged and potentially changed. In time, our Collection Development Policy will grow to include a definition of the scope and intensity of the collections. It will address issues of access and will provide a system of collection management based on objective measures.

Position Statements

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6. The Hamilton Public Library accepts that its collections will include a mixture of resources that are "owned" by the library systems as well as material that it can access through cooperative collection endeavors including reciprocal borrowing, interlibrary loan and electronic consortia.
7. The Hamilton Public Library accepts a community responsibility for addressing "digital divide" and "equity of access" issues through its collections and services.
8. The Hamilton Public Library believes that collection decisions must be shaped by opinions of the public we serve as well as the opinions of those in the community who do not currently use library services.
9. The Hamilton Public Library will develop and regularly apply feedback systems that provide the library with objective information on the needs of our users.
10. The Hamilton Public Library will develop and regularly apply feedback systems that provide the library with objective information on how and where Hamilton residents who do not use the Library are meeting their information needs.
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30. Material that is retained for long-term storage must have a projected future audience that is sufficient to justify the cost of retention.
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