DEVELOPING A GRAPHIC SCHOLARSHIP COLLECTION:
Using Comics to Forge Connections

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INTRODUCTION

The Schusterman Library at the University of Oklahoma - Tulsa (OU-Tulsa) founded its Graphic Scholarship Collection in 2021 in an effort to use the multidisciplinary medium of comics to connect curriculum to human experiences. This paper will focus on the development and curation of an academic library collection of graphic scholarship monographs, with notes on how the very nature of comics-based materials welcomes diversity and inclusion. Collection development challenges will be highlighted, alongside selection, acquisition, cataloging and classification, shelving demands, format, and circulation. Several examples from the collection will be emphasized, to show the depth and quality of the work being collected. Additionally, the paper will address how this collection has opened up new and exciting relationships with the students and faculty, leading to improved educational outcomes and potential publication projects being led by the librarians.

STARTING THE COLLECTION

Before the Graphic Scholarship Collection was formally established, the OU-Tulsa community demonstrated an interest in comics and instruction. Stewart Brower, the director of the Schusterman Library, hosted a workshop series titled The History and Language of Comics in the summer of 2020 to gauge interest and gather feedback from Library and Information Studies (LIS) students. The non-credit-bearing workshop series later served as a successful element to Brower’s proposal to teach a new elective at the University of Oklahoma School of Library and Information Studies (OU SLIS): Comics and Graphic Novels in Libraries. The class was accepted and taught as part of the OU SLIS program in the spring of 2021 and spring of 2023 semesters, and centered on three main concepts: syntax and language of sequential art, comics history in the United States, and the complicated relationship with libraries.

Brower realized the extent of nonfiction comics while preparing for the class in the fall of 2020 and began discussions with Toni Hoberecht, Technical Services Librarian, to start acquiring titles. Hoberecht and Brower quickly identified the need for titles serving OU-Tulsa’s

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various health sciences programs and used *Essential Graphic Medicine: An Annotated Bibliography*¹ as an initial resource. The *Non-Fiction Comics and Graphic Novels* list on Goodreads² was later consulted for non-medical titles. By January 2021, the library began purchasing titles with purpose and a tentative budget of $2,000.

The collection consists primarily of nonfiction monographic comics and is curated to serve a diverse range of programs and students, so naming the collection became the first of many hurdles. The term “comics” brought a connotation of superhero-filled serialized publications that did not fit the collection’s unique mission. “Sequential art” was an accurate yet overly-technical description of the medium that was seen by some as pretentious³ and could be difficult to promote. “Graphic novels” was a more promising and mainstream term, although it would come with controversy. Authors have repeatedly shunned the term “graphic novel” and described it as “trying too hard”⁴ and “a marketing term”⁵ that damages the credibility of comics.⁶ Regardless of the term’s controversy, “graphic novel” was not a fitting description for a collection full of nonfiction and memoirs. The collection deserved a name that would reflect its role in the campus community, and inspiration struck from the Schuster Library’s mission statement: “We help students become scholars.”⁷ Thus, the Graphic Scholarship Collection was created.

**ACQUISITIONS AND SELECTION**

The collection gained momentum before the collection development policy was formally written, and titles were initially selected based on academic relevance and campus community interests. A formal Graphic Scholarship Collection development policy has since been written and added to the library’s general collection development policies and is as follows:

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.⁸

One of the first titles purchased, *The Murder of Emmett Till,*⁹ was written by Dr. Karlos K. Hill, a faculty member at the University of Oklahoma and an esteemed scholar. This work exemplified the goal of connecting the graphic novel format to scholarship, culture, and our own institution. Brower continued to host workshops throughout the spring and summer of 2021 which drew faculty interest, featured graphic medicine, and highlighted the new collection. Faculty members from Community Medicine, Architecture and Urban Design, and the Center for Studies in Democracy and Culture began to request consultations regarding visual literacy and instruction for their programs.

Alignment with academic degree programs at OU-Tulsa is strongly desired when titles are selected to add to the Graphic Scholarship Collection, although not always mandatory. Titles may support historical or cultural interest, or augment the campus’s Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives. One of the collection’s first memoir acquisitions, *Gender Queer,*¹⁰ became the number one most challenged book in 2021,¹¹ and serves multiple purposes in the collection. The graphic memoir describes a real-world experience that is relevant to medical students, sparks conversations about intellectual freedom and censorship for LIS students, and contributes to a broader cultural discussion for everyone.

Graphic novels are not typically subject to the same rigor as traditional scholarly communications, but the collection often selects nonfiction titles containing light research as well as several titles that display rigorous scholarship such as *Kent State: Four Dead in Ohio*¹² by Derf Backderf. The book illustrates a piece of history, with Backderf using print archives, oral histories, and personal interviews to create a well-researched account in comic format, stating that his “claim to fame is footnotes.”¹³ Memoirs are also frequently selected for the collec-
tion, despite a usual lack of academic rigor, because of their insight on the experiences of patients, families, and health professionals. The OU-Tulsa campus hosts Schools of Social Work, Medicine, Allied Health, Nursing, and Public Health that greatly benefit from these perspectives. Graphic memoirs can offer a unique way for students to form connections by helping health professionals better understand their patients.

There has been difficulty identifying resources for title selection, and several juvenile titles were mistakenly purchased due to unreliable or vague catalog information. Many of these titles have won awards and have remained in the collection, and several young-adult titles have been intentionally purchased due to their alignment with campus interests. COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology and Welcome to Nursing HELLo: A Graphic Memoir are two such titles, and may appeal to more casual readers while still connecting to the medical degree programs on campus. Titles that are intended for younger readers or that lack academic rigor can still serve the collection’s mission to connect with the university community, especially when those titles discuss broader societal topics like diversity, intellectual freedom, and mental health.

The Schusterman Library now has a preliminary set of resources for selecting Graphic Scholarship titles, although several resources consist mainly of young adult titles and traditional comic books, so selection continues to be time-intensive. Useful resources include Wikipedia’s List of Award-Winning Graphic Novels, the Penn State Press Graphic Medicine Series, and the Oxford University Press Academic History Series. A notable addition to the resource list is the Publishers Weekly Comics & Graphic Novels Announcements, which began in the spring of 2023 and sorts titles by genre and audience. This feature greatly improves the library’s ability to identify appropriate titles, but the organization and breadth of the feature appears to be a singularity and titles continue to be discovered serendipitously.

Acquisition and selection decisions have traditionally been made based on curriculum and user requests. Brower, the chief curator, has added this collection’s development to the Technical Services Librarian’s duties. The Technical Services Librarian, currently Hoberecht, is therefore responsible for locating new titles and allowed to decide on purchases independently. This freedom has the potential for chaos but is being handled in a usual technical services fashion by being codified, classified, and carefully documented.

**CATALOGING**

When the collection was young, titles were initially cataloged with the goal of getting them on the shelves as quickly as possible. The Schusterman Library primarily uses copy-cataloging for every collection, which saves time but relies on decisions made by outside catalogers. Zane Ratcliffe, Library Technician at the time, performed cataloging and classification work for the new collection that focused on rapid availability to the users. Ratcliffe followed best practices for classifying monographs and while some medicine-related titles were already assigned National Library of Medicine (NLM) call numbers, many catalog records contained call numbers using Library of Congress (LC) classification. This classification scheme typically places adult graphic novels under a broad heading of “Comic books, strips, etc.” that uses the PN6700-6790 span of call numbers. This method enabled the collection to grow quickly and gain momentum, but later revealed itself to be problematic as the collection became disorganized.

Interest later shifted from short turnaround times to better findability. Students were unable to connect with the collection if they couldn't navigate it or access the materials. The original range of LC call number would have benefitted the collection if it were shelved among other materials, as the graphic novels would then be clustered together, but this clustering was rendered unnecessary by shelving the Graphic Scholarship collection in a separate location. Bethie Seay, Assistant Technical Services Librarian, led a reorganization project in the spring of 2022 to reclassify titles by discipline. Each title in the collection was evaluated by Seay and assigned a new call number, if needed, using the LC and NLM schemes. The project was completed by the summer of 2022, resulting in a majority of the collection getting new call numbers. Seay created documentation and a local classification guide to maintain consistent organization going forward.

In addition to classification, the collection has also faced broader cataloging challenges such as incomplete subject description and series arrangement. The American Library Association's Graphic Novels and Comics Round Table’s recently distributed document, *Best Practices for Cataloging Comics and Graphic Novels Using*
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RDA and MARC 21 was consulted to develop an extensive guide for local best practices. Hoberecht and Seay had detailed discussions about how to catalog series in the predominantly-monographic collection while focusing on user needs and search habits. These discussions brought other cataloging concerns to light and led to better cataloging documentation for other Schusterman Library collections. In spite of the occasional growing pains, the Graphic Scholarship Collection has resulted in more consistent metadata practices for the entire library as well as future plans to enhance subject description.

SHELVING AND DISPLAY

As mentioned previously, the Graphic Scholarship Collection is shelved separately from the other collections on its own unit (fig. 1). The unit is double-sided, twelve feet long, and uses 48 cantilever periodical shelves, each measuring three feet long to initially provide a total display area of 144 feet. This method faces the books outward to display their covers instead of their spines, thus lending an extra visual element to the collection and offering better browsability. However, the collection outgrew this shelving method after just six months. Several shelves had to be replaced with standard flat shelves to accommodate more titles being purchased (fig. 2). The shelving unit’s capacity is also limited in that the top row of shelves is too tall for accessible use, rendering 24 linear feet unsuitable for storing items. This space will likely be used for signage in the future as graphics have been well-received in the past. Emrys Moreau, a Reference and Instruction Librarian at the Schusterman Library, designed a logo (fig. 3) for the collection during its infancy to further improve the collection’s visibility and circulation.
CIRCULATION

The collection’s first year saw more requests for items than any other print collection in the library. Approximately 36% of items in the collection have been borrowed at least once, as of December 2022, which is an encouraging number for this small campus’s library. Figure 4 shows how many titles have been checked out and the number of loans. Several books, such as *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* and *Persepolis*, have higher circulation rates likely due to their attention in the news.
OUTCOMES

The Graphic Scholarship Collection was well-received by the campus community, which has allowed the initiative to grow and forge connections as more than just a collection of materials. The library has established programming and workshops that feature the collection, including a graphic medicine module for an Arts & Medicine elective from the School of Community Medicine. This module is co-instructed by the library to teach students how the collection uses sequential art for storytelling and research, provides a window into lived experiences that can inform students’ understandings of their patients, and includes exercises from Making Comics by Lynda Barry.24 Brower’s OU SLIS elective is also closely linked to the collection, allowing LIS students to connect with an interdisciplinary medium that enhances their knowledge of communication and scholarship. The collection works to build up the credibility of comics, and contains a growing subcollection of text monographs about comics that looks at the field through a critical lens and discusses its relationship with societal issues.

CONCLUSIONS

This new collection has had numerous impacts on the library and campus community, including local practices, community engagement, and future projects. The nature of the materials and rapid pace of expansion tested the technical services department, but encouraged the solidification of local metadata practices as a whole. The reorganization project, led by Seay, served as a catalyst for local best practices documentation and expanded the department’s cataloging skills. During the reorganization project, the collection began including zines and other works created by university community members. This created an additional challenge as the library had to catalog, organize, and store another new format of material.

The library plans to build a Graphic Scholarship Studio to help encourage community members to learn more about comics and develop their own works. The studio will include a drafting table with traditional art supplies and a digital workstation with a drawing tablet and software. The first educational comic endeavor is already underway, and the Networks of the National Library of Medicine has awarded funding for a “Professor Paws Project” comic publication that aims to promote awareness of the value of service animals.25

The library hopes that the positive reception and continuing projects will raise institutional awareness of the initiative, which gained some publicity when Sooner Magazine published a feature on Brower and the collection.26 The best outcome would have the collection secure new permanent funding and recognized as a “Center” by the University of Oklahoma. In the meantime, the Graphic Scholarship Collection has already allowed the Schusterman Library to establish itself as a hub for the arts on a campus devoid of other art programming. The collection is generating new interest in reading, using a novel form of scholarly communication to educate students, sparking creativity, and is ultimately considered a huge success.

NOTES

5. Weldon, “We Don’t Need It Anymore.”