Preservation Strategies for Small and Public Libraries — by Brian J. Baird

Preservation of small and public library collections is often a difficult challenge due to the constant obstacles of limited funding, insufficient staffing, and lack of expertise. Librarianship is about managing resources, and at the end of the day, after the library is staffed, materials acquired, processed and placed on the shelves, and the light bill paid, little funding is left for preservation or much else. For this reason the preservation strategies presented here are designed to reduce immediate and long-term costs and strengthen the library’s collection development goals.

The first step in beginning a preservation program is to clearly document the preservation needs of the collection. A proper analysis involves establishing use patterns for the materials in the library, thoroughly evaluating the collection development plan and identifying the preservation resources readily available. The answers to preservation related questions and application of these strategies is different for each library and will result in a strong preservation plan for acquiring, processing and circulating the library collection.

USE PATTERNS

Before a strategy can be developed for preserving a collection it is important to determine what materials get used, how they are used, and who the primary users are. These questions can be answered through carefully conducted surveys. There are excellent publications that explain how to conduct various surveys to obtain specific kinds of information — whether it be usage patterns, conditions of the collections, or patron information needs. Many service bureaus and consultants throughout the country will contract to conduct library surveys.

Surveys are important, but librarians should also learn to apply their rich experience to determine the preservation needs of their collections. Careful, long-term, documented observation about collection use, damage to materials and types of materials in the collections can be invaluable in determining the preservation needs of a library.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

It is ineffective to try to determine the preservation needs outside the context of a library’s collection development plan. Data gathered to determine the preservation needs of a collection is also very useful in evaluating a collection development plan. For example, the kind of physical format that receives the most use and the subject areas most heavily trafficked identify which collections need preservation care, but this information will also help guide the collection development efforts to strengthen those areas.

Preservation must work hand-in-hand with collection development in order to be effective. Preservation funds will always be a limited resource so they must be used on those parts of the collections that are most important to library patrons.

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**Preservation Resources Available**
After the needs of the collection are determined, it is important to evaluate the preservation resources available. Some libraries have staff who are well trained in performing book repair techniques. Other libraries have favorable contracts or agreements with their local library binder. By clearly understanding the preservation needs of the collections and the resources available that can be assigned to the problems, a library can develop strategies to optimize preservation efforts.

**Strategies for Preserving Public and Small Library Collections**

Strategies for preserving library collections must be employed in every step of a library's planning efforts. The preservation needs must be considered for all aspects of library materials' existence from selecting, to processing, to circulating, to storing. Knowing how a title will be used will help determine what kind of binding style to buy. How often a book gets used will determine what kind of repair or rebinding it should receive when it is damaged.

**Preservation Strategies for Book Selection**

There are many preservation related questions to ask during the book selection process. For example, many titles can be purchased simultaneously in either publisher hard-cover, publisher paperback, or in specially prepared bindings designed to hold up to library use. When the option is available, is it better to buy a few hard-cover copies of a title or is it better to buy several paperback copies which are less expensive? Multiple paperback copies will result in more access to a title, but they do not last as long as hard-cover books, and hard-cover bindings do not last as long as library bindings. If a title does not circulate very often, dollars spent on sturdier bindings is not money well spent. For this reason it is important for a library to know its collections' use patterns.

**Shelf Preparation Strategies**

Shelf preparation activities are the most important and cost effective preservation efforts a small library can make. The following techniques greatly extend the life of books at a minimum of staff effort and cost. These activities can all easily be performed by volunteers or vested to a technical processing service bureau.

**Book Training:**
Every child used to be taught in elementary school how to train a book, but now it seems to be a lost practice. Training a book is a way of evenly breaking in the spine of a book. This ensures that books open well and greatly reduces the chance of the spine cracking. Training is performed by placing a book on a table holding the text block vertically with the front and back covers laying on the table at 90 degree angles from the text block. Beginning at the front of the book, peel the first 10-20 pages of the book away from the text block toward the front cover applying gentle pressure along the inner margin or gutter. Next, do the same thing with the last 10-20 pages of the book. Continue this process 10-20 pages at a time, working towards the center of the book from both the front and back applying gentle pressure on the inner margin of the volume.

Book training is especially vital on adhesive bound volumes which are much more likely to crack if not properly trained. Proof of the importance can be seen in any library's paperback novel collection. Some books are used gently the first several times they are read and, as a result, become well trained. These volumes rarely develop split spines. The stress is so evenly distributed across the spine that they eventually develop a concave shape. By contrast, notice paperbacks that do not have this curved shape and you will find one or more spots where the spine is broken.

**Dust Jacket Protectors:**

After book training, dust jacket protectors are the best use of preservation resources. Dust jacket protectors provide several important functions. First, they protect the dust jackets for use by patrons in selecting a title. As a general rule, dust jacket flaps are the only source of information about the author of the book, and are the only place where a summary of the book can be found.

Second, dust jacket protectors guard the covers of the books from abrasions and damage. Books that do not have dust jacket protectors will regularly develop cover damage on the spine because patrons and library staff often remove volumes from the shelf by pulling on the head cap or hooking their fingers in the hollow of the spine. A plastic dust jacket protector supports the spine and prevents damage.

A word of caution: Only use dust jacket protectors that do not permanently adhere to either the dust jacket or the book. Over time the protectors wear out and must be replaced. If the protector is glued or heavily taped to either the dust jacket or the book cover, it will make replacing the protector difficult or impossible. Make certain that the plastic used in the dust jacket protector contains no vinyl which will yellow, shrink and become brittle.
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Paperback Cover Stiffeners:
Several different products exist for stiffening and protecting paperback covers. Some of these products work very well, while others are detrimental to the volume. It does not require a very thick material to effectively stiffen and protect a paperback cover. If a too-stiff material is used it will literally tear the paperback cover off the text block!

Choose a material that contains no vinyl, is flexible and uses a pure acrylic adhesive. Contact paper designed for lining kitchen cabinets and drawers is readily available in the local supermarket or hobby store but is not a viable material for stiffening paperbacks. It will yellow, shrink and eventually peel away from the cover, leaving a sticky mess.

Though effective, paperback stiffening can be dangerous. Unlike dust jacket protectors, this process is not reversible and involves applying a very sticky adhesive to the volume. The adhesive can ooze, or the stiffening material can separate from the paperback cover—especially if a treated volume gets too near a heat source like direct sunlight or a heating vent. This can result in a sticky mess which attracts dirt and leaves a residue on everything the book touches. To reduce the risk both of oozing adhesives and of the stiffener peeling away from the cover, wrap the stiffening material around the edge of the cover adhering it to the inside of the paperback at the top, bottom, and front edges.

**COMMERCIAL BINDING**
Commercial binding is an under-utilized preservation strategy in most public and small libraries. Many do not have the volume necessary to entice binders to offer them reduced prices or optimum service. This can be overcome by contracting binding services through cooperative regional ventures. These cooperative efforts can be sponsored through state libraries, local library systems, or by committees made up of participating libraries.

Another reason commercial binding is often not fully utilized is that it requires a cash layout. Though the initial funding allocation is often difficult to obtain, once a staff position is added to a library the expense of that position’s salary and benefits is generally calculated as an overhead expense rather than as discretionary money. Thus it becomes natural to view that staff member’s time as free. This often results in many libraries wasting resources on repairing materials in-house where the end result is an item far weaker and less usable than a commercially bound volume. Even worse, the in-house repair will often cost many times the price of a commercial binding because of less tangible overhead expenses.

Finally, many libraries resist sending materials for commercial binding because they do not like the utilitarian aesthetics of buckram-covered commercial bindings. Many new options are available at most commercial binderies for producing more aesthetically pleasing covers than the traditional buckram. Visit with the commercial bindery to find out what they offer. Most librarians will be surprised at the options available to them.

Commercial binding is not the answer for every damaged volume. Sometimes it is more cost effective to simply replace the volume. One thing to remember is that after a volume has been properly commercially bound it is unlikely that it will ever require another preservation treatment.

**IN-HOUSE BOOK REPAIR**
In general, in-house book repair is one of the least effective and most inefficient forms of preservation, and yet it continues to be very popular. Book repair workshops continue to be one of the most sought after training activities requested by small libraries. Book repair can serve an extremely important role in a library’s overall preservation program, but only if repair staff are properly trained and properly equipped to perform repairs correctly and efficiently.

Unfortunately, proper book repair training can be expensive and difficult to obtain. There are many one or two day workshops that are offered throughout the country, but these courses generally do not provide the skills needed to evaluate damaged materials and diagnose the proper treatment in the context of the library’s overall preservation and collection development goals.

If a library has a commitment to establish a book repair program, it is important to get repair staff properly trained in how to perform various book repair treatments, how to select the appropriate repair technique to use for a damaged item and when it is best not to repair an item in-house. A vital part of this training will be learning to evaluate the cost effectiveness of the treatments performed and other options available. Even at minimum wage, it does not take long before the time and materials spent on performing a book repair cost more than having the title rebound or replaced. Some strong advantages to a library having a good in-house repair program are: making repairs on a rush basis quickly returning items to circulation; allowing items with minor damage to be repaired to prevent further more
serious damage from occurring; and providing greater flexibility in treatment options available to preserve materials.

CONCLUSION

The most important component of an effective small library preservation program is common sense. Sound planning involves critically evaluating the collections and practices of the library to determine what should be changed to help preserve and increase access to information. After an overall preservation plan is in place, a library can use this contextual understanding to develop specific preservation strategies. These strategies can guide the library in seeking the specific training or expertise needed to further preservation and collection development goals.

When preservation efforts are firmly grounded on the foundation of the library’s overall collection development policy, administrators can be confident that preservation training will be properly received and applied by staff who understand preservation in the context of their library’s overall goals.

Works Cited


Footnotes


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