

Library Systems Landscape • Floating Collections

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COLLECTION MANAGEMENT

TO FLOAT OR NOT TO FLOAT

Inside Nashville PL's examination
of the method's performance
By Noel Rutherford

Most libraries that adopt floating collections expect circulation to rise because collections will be better distributed to meet patron demand. Yet how many have analyzed whether collections perform better after implementing floating than they did before materials were relocated?

The Nashville Public Library (NPL) undertook an experiment in floating with optimism. Did the results pay off? Here is how it all began.

Floating the idea

After attending an American Library Association (ALA) Floating Collections workshop in 2009, I and many other librarians came away fired up about floating and its potential benefits for both our staff and customers. Many libraries had begun floating their collections as a way to decrease transit time and refresh collections without the need to purchase additional material. The intent behind floating—that local interests should drive what's in the particular library's collection—was appealing, and any-

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Fiction saw a seven percent decline in circulation after floating

thing that made us more efficient had to be worth trying.

Our director agreed, so we started a small pilot, floating DVDs and music CDs among several of our branches, excluding the Main Library. A year later, we added Playaways and large-type materials. Other than a little grumbling from staff regarding inadequate shelf space, everyone seemed fairly happy with the new procedure and workload. In response to those concerns, we beefed up weeding, allocated more space for AV material, and told branch staff to let the collection development department know when they felt their materials needed redistribution.

The following year our director retired, and it would be another 12 months before the new director arrived and noticed that we hadn't expanded floating beyond this first small attempt. So, in December 2012, we turned on floating for all materials, excluding those in the Main Library and in one of our smallest yet highest turnover branches.

Before we took this next decisive step, we analyzed some possible ramifications and adjusted our holds queue to help mitigate the collection imbalances for libraries we deter-

mined would be either inundated with material or depleted of it. For example, branches with more material coming in than going out became higher on the holds pick list than those with fewer items coming in than going out. In addition to realigning our holds queue, we also heavily weeded all of our collections and developed a redistribution circulation procedure to assist in correcting “pooling” of material. Then floating was set to go live.

Analysis needed

The library became busy with other projects, and more time passed than intended before we had a chance to analyze whether floating was successful. Anecdotal feedback from customers was almost nonexistent, and branch staff comments were slanted toward the workload of redistributing excess cop-

lation from one branch to another. That report and several other collectionHQ analysis tools (including the collection use summary, which analyzes supply against demand, and the popular author summary) resulted in the floating performance study.

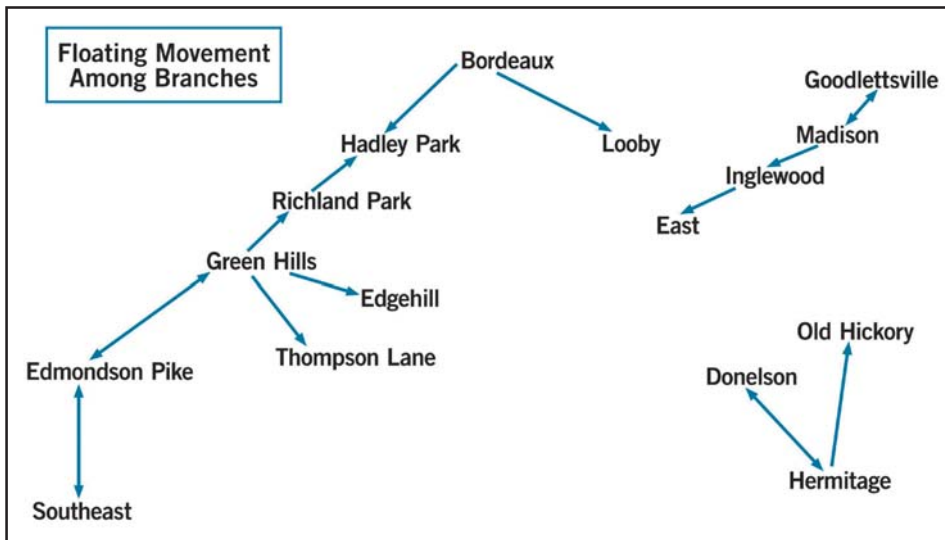
Eighteen NPL branches in the system participated in the study, with the Main and the two smallest locations excluded. The findings show that Nashville’s collections have generally not performed better with floating and that the process left branch collections unbalanced and understocked to meet demand for popular genres and subjects.

Floating findings

We found that fiction saw a seven percent decline in circulation of material after relocation, with only four branches out of the 18 showing improved performance. All of these facilities

were located in the suburban area of the county with the highest income and education levels and had customers most likely to place holds. Particularly notable, within the fiction category large-type material showed a 56 percent drop in circulation after relocation, with only two branches showing any gains in performance. Both of these branches had, at the beginning of the study, the smallest large-print collection in proportion to their population of users over age 60.

Floating also led to a five percent decline in the number of top adult fiction authors represented at branches. The number of locations showing a decline



A SEA CHANGE This diagram illustrates how materials washed up unevenly at certain NPL branches

ies that had pooled at their locations. Floating did lower the amount of material going through our delivery service by 22 percent, but it wasn’t enough to eliminate a route given the large geographic area covered by our drivers.

In 2013, while in Chicago for ALA’s annual conference, I asked my fellow collection development managers whether anyone had done an analysis of floating beyond these informal responses. I was disheartened to discover that the results from their research was limited to the occasional reduction of delivery routes, patron surveys, and systemwide circulation.

The last claim—that floating was a success because circulation had risen—was most troubling. To attribute increased circulation solely to floating without evaluating other factors (demographic/population shifts, digital media usage, customer service, other library initiatives, etc.) could lead to wrong conclusions.

I wanted to examine instead the performance of the items that were relocated and the quality of the collections impacted by floating. So I turned to collection analysis tool collectionHQ, which NPL had been using mostly for selection and system maintenance. As luck would have it, in late 2013, collectionHQ had just added a new floating performance report that I was excited to discover could help compare relocated material circu-

increased by 11 percent since the previous report in October 2013. Branches first or second in the holds priority list (holds are pulled from their locations before other locations) were more likely to see a larger decline than those third or fourth on the list.

Popular fiction was negatively impacted by floating. Even the four branches that saw improved circulation had shown declines in sustaining their most popular author collections at high enough levels to respond to demand.

Frequent pooling of titles at these busiest sites also resulted in the inadvisable removal of popular titles (even when no copies existed at other locations). Reports show that branches have weeded material based not on low circulation but on an excessive number of copies of the same title.

Nonfiction circulation was least directly impacted by floating. Items that moved to another location performed adequately but at a cost. Nonfiction collections became more inequitable, more underfilled, and stripped of entire subject areas.

Although there was a five percent increase in circulation of nonfiction material after relocation, most of the gains came from just four branches—the same four that saw improved circulation of fiction. Those with flat or declining circula-

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tion performance were mostly inner-city urban branches whose patrons do not place many holds.

There was a seven percent increase in understocked adult non-fiction collections, accompanied by a four percent decrease in overstocked collections. Juvenile non-fiction became 12 percent more understocked and 11 percent less overstocked.

Nonbook materials were the most negatively impacted by floating. Whether because of title duplication, separation of series titles, drop-off location, or loss, audiovisual material (audiobooks, DVDs, music CDs/albums) saw the largest decline (a whopping 43 percent) in circulation with floating. Every branch showed decreases, with the highest at inner-city urban locations. As an example, audiobook circulation declined 16 percent, with four locations showing gains (again, the same four that saw gains in other categories). Playaway borrowing declined by 29 percent and music by 26 percent—both saw increases only at a single branch.

Audiovisual material (audiobooks, DVDs, music CDs/albums) saw a 43 percent drop in circulation with floating



there were gaps in subject or author coverage. The quality of the collections suffered as a result.

In suburban systems without a central downtown library, floating may work fairly well in determining collection demand, especially if branches are geographically far apart

and similar in size, and if library users place holds consistently across all locations. However, urban systems should think twice before adopting floating.

Large systems with commuter routes to downtown, disadvantaged populations that place few holds, and branches of disparate size will be better served using an ILS-based or third-party vendor collection management system that relies on data to make these decisions rather than on the haphazard method of patron floating.

A million reasons

As a result of this report, we recommended that Nashville turn off floating, readjust the holds priority list based on size of collection to even out staff workload, increase the number of best seller copies purchased for the highest circulating branches, and increase the Lucky Day collection (nonholdable and nonrenewable best sellers with shortened circulation periods) at those locations.

We also recommended that the library increase the fre-

quency of its holds notification report from once to twice a day to lessen wait time for requested material from three days to two and that branch staff should be trained to run monthly collectionHQ transfer reports to move material where data has shown demand to be strongest or the collection weakest.

NPL discontinued floating all material in October 2014. It has been using collectionHQ transfer reports since February 2015 and implemented the other report recommendations shortly thereafter. Now, Lucky Day collections have helped increase circulation and turn occasional library users into more frequent ones. We are changing the perception that public libraries never have the most recent best sellers available for checkout and are drawing in more repeat customers.

Customer wait time for material on hold has been reduced one day by changing when holds are gathered by staff and by adjusting the priority list. CollectionHQ transfer report data has shown a marked improvement in performance for relocated items. Instead

of sitting on branch shelves for an average of ten months, material is placed at locations that are now averaging at least five checkouts per item per year.

Because we focused on relocating underperforming items that were needed at other branches rather than unnecessarily moving popular (holds driven) material, there has been a greater benefit to the system's overall circulation. NPL saw an additional one million items circulate in 2015 as a result. ■

TO ATTRIBUTE INCREASED CIRCULATION SOLELY TO FLOATING...COULD LEAD TO WRONG CONCLUSIONS.... EXAMINE INSTEAD THE PERFORMANCE OF THE ITEMS THAT WERE RELOCATED

Because, under floating, material dropped off at locations other than the one at which it was checked out remains at the receiving branch, branches along travel routes to and from major job and commercial centers around Nashville often became overwhelmed by items their customers did not request and that did not meet their needs. Only branches with limited floating collections and located away from major traffic routes did not see this pattern.

Floating is not for everyone

Floating a collection can distribute material to freshen a library's holdings, but its success in situating items where they will be best used by customers is reliant upon the borrowing habits of patrons (browsing vs. placing holds), library material drop-off sites, the degree of popularity of floated material, and the type of formats being floated.

In an urban system with a central downtown and a digital divide, floating disproportionately relocates popular, high-demand material out of locations whose patrons do not place holds and never returns this material to the original library for browsing. It also redistributes material based on factors outside of those implied by the original loan (such as convenience of a drop-off location) and places a heavy workload on library staff to adjust imbalances. While staff noticed when they had extra copies of titles, there was little collection management performed in areas in which

Large-type material showed a 56 percent drop in circulation after floating

