

Kate E. Weber. The Benefits and Drawbacks of Working with Floating Collections: The Perceptions of Public Librarians. A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S. degree. March, 2014. 69 pages. Advisor: Brian Sturm

This study describes an online survey on the subject of floating collections that was sent out to members of the PUBLIB and PUBYAC listservs. The survey, which collected both quantitative and qualitative data, was conducted in order to determine how public librarians perceive the benefits and drawbacks of working with floating collections.

The survey received 135 responses, 112 of which were complete. The respondents represented both adult services and children's librarians. The results indicate that while there are benefits to working with floating collections, not all libraries experience them to the same degree, and the drawbacks are significant. Problems with redistribution, collection knowledge, and the ability to serve all patrons well emerged as major difficulties. The perception put forth by the literature— that benefits are widespread and the drawbacks both temporary and easily overcome—is not supported by the results of the survey.

Headings:

- Collection development in public libraries

- Cooperative collection development in libraries

- Work environment

- Libraries & community

THE BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF WORKING WITH FLOATING
COLLECTIONS: THE PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC LIBRARIANS

by
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A Master's paper submitted to the faculty
of the School of Information and Library Science
of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Science in
Library Science.

Chapel Hill, North Carolina

March 2014

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Introduction:

As budgets become increasingly smaller, libraries are looking for ways to meet the needs of their patrons while contending with diminished resources. One solution that has become popular in recent years is floating collections: a system in which “materials ‘float’ freely among system libraries rather than being ‘owned’ by a specific location” (Cress, 2004, p. 48). Materials stay wherever they are returned instead of being shipped back to the “owning” library. Evidence suggests that floating collections can save the library money, staff time, and can reduce the wear and tear on materials. These are all worthwhile goals, particularly considering the economy at present. When items stay where they are checked in, there are fewer costs associated with shipping and transportation. Staff spend less time dealing with the process of sending materials back to their home location. Fewer trips between libraries mean that the materials are not handled as often, resulting in less damage.

In spite of these benefits, deciding to float one’s collection can be a controversial issue, because the way the system works flies in the face of everything librarians have been taught about collection development for the last hundred years. Collections are no longer local and permanent, and knowledge of the collection is not possible to the same degree. Librarians do not have control over the shape or contents of the collection; that is determined by what patrons request and check in. These are major changes, and the literature reveals that not all staff members are content with this radical departure from the status quo (Johal et al., 2012; Canty et al., 2012).

While the savings in money, time, and materials have been discussed in the literature, little examination has been made of how librarians who work with floating collections feel about the advantages and challenges presented by the system. Do they find that the altered workflow makes their jobs easier, or more difficult? How do they feel about working with a constantly changing collection? In other words, how do public librarians perceive the benefits and drawbacks of working with floating collections?

Literature Review:

Literature on Floating Collections:

Despite the fact that some libraries have been floating their collections for over two decades (Cress, 2004), there is not a lot of literature on the subject. A thorough search turned up only a handful of articles, none of them evidence-based research studies, and a single recently published book by a librarian. There is more literature on librarian satisfaction; this will be discussed below, as will the few articles relating to the connection between community needs and a library's collection. The gap in the literature is, therefore, more like a gaping hole, which is one of the reasons I have chosen to study floating collections and how librarians perceive them.

Of the literature that exists, the majority takes the form of case studies of various libraries that have recently—or relatively recently—implemented floating collections. These case studies offer similar yet varying reports of reasons for moving to a floating collection; benefits of the move; staff issues and challenges; and approaches to handling weeding, which is the biggest change in workflow.

Why float?

The first libraries to use floating collections were located in Canada and the Western U.S. Two major forerunners of the trend were the Fraser Valley Regional Library in Canada, which pioneered floating collections in the 1930s, and the Pikes Peak Library District in Colorado, which has been floating for over 20 years (Bartlett, 2014). Early floating collections were “a way to work around adverse weather conditions and mitigate miles of delivery routes that, in many cases, became impassable in winter” (Bartlett, 2014, p. 1). It wasn’t until 2004, with the publication of Cress’s article, that the broader library community became familiar with floating collections (Bartlett, 2014).

For libraries that have chosen to float in recent years, saving time, reducing costs, and improving accessibility of materials are the most frequently cited reasons for making the switch from traditional collections. The desire to regain staff time from the transit process and prevent repetitive stress injuries receives multiple mentions, as well. The Brown County Library in Wisconsin, the Edmonton Public Library in Canada, and the Sarasota County Library System in Florida all discuss these issues (Johal et al., 2012, Canty et al., 2012). Four different library systems in Ohio chose to float their collections because they not only wanted to reduce the transit time of materials, but they also wanted to give their patrons quicker access to materials (Johal et al., 2012). Similarly, the Edmonton Public Library reports that reducing transit time in order to better serve patrons was a consideration (Canty et al., 2012). Budget issues and the cost of deliveries also factor into many libraries’ decisions. The Sarasota County Library System in Florida switched to floating collections in 2007 primarily due to budgetary concerns (Johal et al., 2012). The libraries discussed in Cress’s (2004) article (Jefferson County

Public Library in Colorado, Hennepin County Library in Minnesota, Gwinnett County Public Library in Georgia) implemented floating collections to “help control delivery costs and increase the availability of materials” (p. 48). A consortium of six libraries in Montana, which began floating their collections in 2006, began to do so because of concerns over the frequency with which they were shipping materials back and forth (Glover & Langstaff, 2006). Other reasons include wanting to reduce wear and tear on items (Canty et al., 2012) and wanting to provide patrons with a refreshed collection (Johal et al., 2012).

Benefits:

According to Cress’s (2004) article, library managers at the Jefferson County Public Library in Colorado estimated that switching to floating collections “saved 20 hours per week per library of circulation staff time” and that the library system “was able to redeploy 160 hours per week of staff time to other activities” (p. 50). Worker’s compensation claims were reduced as well, implying that floating the collections did indeed help with the frequency of stress-related injuries. The Brown County Library also reports savings in staff time (Johal et al., 2012). Savings in time are more frequently discussed in terms of transit and the amount of time it takes for an item to reach a patron. The Vancouver Public Library in Canada, the Cuyahoga County Public Library in Ohio, the Sarasota County Library System, the Brown County Library, and the Edmonton Public Library mention reductions in transit time and in “the amount of time it takes to get new books to customers” (Canty et al., 2012, p. 68; Johal et al., 2012) as major benefits. Saving money is another benefit: the Cuyahoga County Public Library’s

materials budget “realized a savings of 10 to 15 percent by the end of 2010” after having floated most of their collection since 2009, and shipping costs went down due to fewer deliveries between libraries (Johal et al., 2012, p. 15). Several libraries mention fewer deliveries as a result of implementing floating collections. At the Vancouver Public Library, for instance, deliveries were reduced by 22 percent (Johal et al., 2012). The Sarasota County Library System managed to reduce the volume of items sent between libraries by almost half in the six months after they began floating their collection.

Patron satisfaction is another benefit. The Brown County Library and the Edmonton Public Library both attribute an increase in circulation to floating their collections (Johal et al., 2012; Canty et al., 2012), and three libraries discuss the refreshed nature of the collections and the resulting increase in browsing opportunities for patrons. Bartlett (2014), though not mentioning any specific libraries, asserts that having a floating collection “provides a mechanism for the ultimate democratization of the collection. As the patrons bring in what they prefer to read, watch, and listen to (as opposed to what librarians think they should want to read, watch, and listen to) the collections are shaped by the people who are using them,” thereby becoming more relevant to the patrons’ needs and wants (p. 90).

Staff concerns:

Even though these benefits seem substantial, the literature discusses the challenges faced by staff as they transition to this new system of collection development. Cress (2004) and Bartlett (2014) claim that library staff need not worry about losing the knowledge of their collections, and that the redistribution of materials across branches becomes “a normal and easily manageable part of collection maintenance” (Cress, 2004, p. 50; Bartlett, 2014), but the literature shows that librarians have concerns related to both of these issues. Some staff at the Vancouver Public Library felt that knowledge of their collection suffered as a result of switching to floating collections: “when information staff don’t know what is on their shelves they feel they cannot be as effective in readers’ advisory” (Johal et al., 2012, p. 14). Staff at the Cuyahoga County Public Library similarly worried about not being able to “walk to the shelf and have a book to hand to customers” (Johal et al., 2012, p. 15). Some librarians at the Edmonton Public Library found the switch difficult because they “perceived floating as a threat to the careful development of local collections” (Canty et al., p. 68).

The nature of floating collections means that materials will accumulate wherever patrons feel like dropping them off, which might not be at the same library from which the materials were checked out. This can lead to some libraries having an overabundance of materials, while others find themselves short of needed items. Bartlett (2014) acknowledges that in any given library system, there is “a constant rebalancing act in the 10 to 20 percent of the branches that are either ‘heavily hit’ or ‘have-nots’”—those that are overcrowded, or riddled with collection gaps (p. 7). Redistribution of materials across branches, she continues, “is frustrating and very time consuming for staff, an

unfortunate reality of floating that simply never goes away” (p. 7). She argues, however, that this challenge does not outweigh the benefits provided by floating, and that a readjustment of staffing at the affected branches should alleviate the problems (Bartlett, 2014).

In seeming contradiction to Bartlett’s assurances, almost all of the libraries discussed in the literature make mention of redistribution issues as major challenges that affect workflow. One library that was originally part of the consortium of six in Montana withdrew from the floating collections part because they were not getting enough new materials sent to their library for patrons to browse. Smaller libraries in that consortium reported problems dealing with the accumulation of materials (Glover & Langstaff, 2006). The Cuyahoga County Public Library (where Bartlett herself works) likewise reports the uneven distribution of materials as the biggest challenge, and mentions how “rebalancing” the collections has become part of their new workflow (Johal et al., 2012, p. 15). The Brown County Library found that while their downtown branch was often used for checking out materials, these materials would be returned to the suburban branches, resulting in too many items in the suburban branches and not enough downtown. They report that rebalancing the collection takes up staff time and means that materials do not get to the shelves as quickly as could be hoped for; some of the benefits as reported above, therefore, might be diminished by workflow issues caused by redistribution (Johal et al., 2012). Finally, the Edmonton Public Library adds a new dimension to the redistribution issues mentioned. Not only does the library’s article talk about unequal numbers of books ending up at various locations, but it also points out that this imbalance occurs across portions of the collection, providing the example of too

many mysteries accumulating at one particular branch due to patron reading habits (Canty et al., 2012, p. 68).

Satisfaction with floating collections:

Some of the literature addresses patron satisfaction with floating collections, but only one portion of one article talks about floating collections directly in terms of librarian satisfaction. When the Vancouver Public Library surveyed staff, 48% reported that they were satisfied with floating collections, and 25% said they were not satisfied, with the rest expressing neutrality or declining to comment (Johal et al., 2012, p. 14). Interestingly, a survey of patrons found that the majority were satisfied with the change, a finding echoed by Cress (2004), four libraries in Ohio from the Johal et al. (2012) article, and Canty et al. (2012). Despite this seeming disparity in satisfaction levels, almost all of the libraries discussed in the literature conclude that floating has by and large been a success, and that most staff are on board with the new system.

Literature on Librarian Satisfaction:

Job satisfaction has been defined by D'Elia (1979) as “a function of the interaction of the employee with his job environment,” the knowledge of which “provides an important diagnostic assessment of the health” of a particular organization (p. 283-284). As Hendricks and Buchanan (2013) state in their article on librarian satisfaction with virtual reference, however, while there are many articles about patron satisfaction, “the body of literature addressing librarian satisfaction is small” (p. 43). Much of the existing literature appears to focus on academic libraries; for example, Chwe (1978)

looked at reference librarians and cataloguers in academic settings and determined that there was a difference in certain aspects of job satisfaction between the two groups, while later research by Lynch and Verdin (1983, 1987) found that reference librarians in academic settings were more satisfied than other groups, and that job satisfaction increases with the number of years worked.

Nevertheless, there is sufficient literature dealing with other library settings. D'Elia (1979) studied librarians in many different work environments and discovered that one characteristic strongly related to librarian satisfaction was the ability of the librarian to make full use of his or her skills on the job. Similarly, Franklin's (1996) study of the satisfaction of law librarians found that "keeping a job interesting over time is critical to keeping a librarian satisfied in his or her job" (p. 361). Patillo, Moran, and Morgan (2009) explored levels of job autonomy—one of the indicators of satisfaction—in both public and academic libraries, and found that while there was no substantial difference between the library types with respect to autonomy in terms of job content, there were differences in levels of autonomy among job functions, with IT-related positions offering the most autonomy and jobs in "information services, education and research" areas the least.

The ideas of autonomy, challenging work, and being able to put one's skills to use are important for librarian satisfaction. A relatively recent *Library Journal* survey of job satisfaction suggests that being assigned "mundane tasks" that do not allow the librarian to exercise his or her abilities leads to dissatisfaction (Miller, 2011, p. 53). Keeping librarians engaged in the work they do—and not wasting their time with low-level tasks—seems to lead to increased satisfaction.

Overall, librarians are satisfied with the work they do: the Library Journal survey found that 70 percent of librarians were satisfied with their jobs (Miller, 2011, p. 52). Factors that negatively affect satisfaction include things such as pay, lack of good management, and budget issues. Miller goes on to say that the comments made by librarians in the survey “reveal profound distress over workload, with many [librarians] noting that they are scrambling just to keep up and see burnout ahead” (p. 52). Problems with workflow and budgets are two things that the literature on floating collections has shown can be alleviated by switching to that system of collection development. If implementing floating collections frees up staff time that otherwise might have been spent processing items for transport—a mundane task if there ever was one—then a librarian’s ability to engage in professional-level activities will increase.

One study in particular has some bearing on research into librarian perceptions of floating collections. Hendricks and Buchanan (2013) examined how satisfied reference librarians staffing the Oregon statewide virtual reference service were to determine how librarians felt about virtual reference. They found that the lack of visual cues from these virtual patrons contributed significantly to levels of dissatisfaction among reference librarians, and that more experienced librarians had lower levels of satisfaction (56). The move toward virtual reference presents a situation that is similar to the switch to floating collections: both involve the transformation of a traditional service into one that provides easier and quicker access to information at the expense of connections to patrons and communities.

Literature on the Connection between Community Needs and Library Collections:

As Carter and Bonk (1964) state, “The importance of knowing the community is, of course, undisputed. The library’s selection of books, its special services, its whole operation, is aimed at providing that specific community with what it needs and wants” (p. 140). Perhaps because it seems self-evident, there are not many studies that deal with the connection between a library’s collection and its community’s needs. Alpert (2006) points out that there is a tension between ensuring that one’s collection meets the many needs of a diverse patron base, and making sure that patrons have the quickest and easiest access possible to materials (92). Materials budgets are perennially an issue, which means that “careful and detailed community assessment is more important than ever in order to appropriately distribute resources for collection development” (Alpert, 2006, p. 93). However, there has been a move away from the careful selection of resources by individual libraries; centralized collection development, where decisions about which materials to purchase are made at the system level, is becoming more common. Alpert (2006) makes a very good point when stating that supporters of this sort of system neglect to acknowledge that there is “minimal input from those with the greatest knowledge of what materials a community wants in its library collection—the local branch librarians” (96).

Floating collections present this same issue, whether a centralized collection development system is in place or not. Floating collections render individual collection development decisions by branch libraries impossible; not only are librarians unable to develop a deep and thorough knowledge of their collections, but they also lack the ability to respond directly to the needs of their communities.

Responding to community needs through collection development can make all the difference to a library's relevance. Because every library serves a different population of patrons, "it is essential that librarians understand their communities as they work to build effective library collections" (Curley and Broderick, 1985, p. 10). Cruise (2013) details how the Natural Bridge Branch of the St. Louis County Library in Missouri went from being more or less identical to the other libraries in the system and thereby failing to connect with its low-income population, to directly addressing their needs and boosting circulation by 65 percent since 2006 (p. 33). One of the changes discussed was to the types of books that the librarians acquired. By focusing on urban fiction and bestsellers, the librarians were able to engage their patrons. As Cruise notes, "urban fiction titles fly off the shelves in the arms of those who have told staff that they hadn't read a book in years" (p. 31). Addressing a particular need in one's community that is not being met can have a dramatic impact on patrons. This study drives home the idea that every community in which a library is situated presents unique needs; none is identical to another. Floating collections, by their very nature, serve to distance librarians from the intimate process of selecting materials for a specific population.

Research Question:

By conducting this study, I have sought to answer the following questions: How do public librarians perceive the benefits and drawbacks of working with floating collections? Do they find that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, or vice versa?

Methodology:

Background:

In this study, I made use of both qualitative and quantitative methods to answer my research question. Both approaches offer different strengths and weaknesses, but used together, they can produce strong results. The quantitative approach deals with numeric data, and is generally accepted as being “rational, logical, planned and systematic,” which lends the results a particular credibility (Pierce, 2008, p. 42). The answers gained through quantitative analysis are specific, and can be used to “prove or disprove theory” (Greener, 2011, p. 55). Critics of quantitative research contend that numbers cannot accurately reflect the complexity of the real world, that simplifications result, and that the researcher is excessively detached from his or her subjects (Greener, 2011, p. 56). The qualitative approach, on the other hand, deals with narrative data of one sort or another, either verbal or written. It is considered to be “best suited to the study, understanding and explanation of the complexities of social and political life” and shows its strength in its ability to get at “the underlying values of individuals and groups” (Pierce, 2008, p. 45). The level of detail that qualitative research is able to capture allows the researcher to overcome the sort of distance that quantitative research necessarily entails. However, the approach has its weaknesses; it “lacks the intellectual and operational rigour [sic] of quantitative method” and is not immune from charges that the results are “largely anecdotal or exaggerated” (Pierce, 2008, p. 46).

Fortunately, researchers do not have to restrict themselves to using one method or the other in their studies. Surveys like the one used in this study lend themselves well to

the mixed methods approach, wherein the researcher makes use of both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the topic of inquiry than he or she would gain by using quantitative or qualitative methods alone (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009, p. 284). The analysis of survey data tends to be quantitative in nature, and this allows for needed specifics when discussing the data. Talking about frequencies and percentages paints a much clearer picture than using vague expressions such as “the majority,” “many,” or “almost none” (Murray, 2003, p. 44). However, without some qualitative aspects included, these percentages and other numbers can only address the collective population, rather than acknowledge the important differences between individual respondents (44). The use of both closed-ended questions—where the answers are provided—and open-ended questions—where the respondent must record an answer in his or her own words—allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods into survey research.

Data Collection:

This study utilized an online survey to determine how public librarians perceive the benefits and drawbacks of working with floating collections. The invitation and link to the survey, which was designed using Qualtrics, were sent out over two public library listservs: PUBLIB and PUBYAC. The first listserv is aimed at public librarians in general, and—according to the confirmation e-mail I received after posting my survey—currently has 10,563 members (OCLC Online Computer Library Center, personal communication, February 4, 2014). The second is specific to youth services librarians, and numbers nearly 6000 members (PUBYAC, n.d., History section, para. 6). In this

way I was able to collect responses from librarians who work in diverse geographical areas and who serve patrons of all ages. I chose to send my survey over these listservs rather than to specific libraries because it proved difficult to determine exactly how many library systems in the U.S. use floating collections, and because I wanted to offer my respondents as much anonymity as possible due to the sometimes controversial nature of the decision to implement floating collections.

The decision to approach my research question using a survey was more or less made for me by the geographical dispersion of my target population (public librarians who had experience working with floating collections) and the controversial nature of the topic, which led some local librarians I had initially approached about interviews to shy away from that possible avenue of research. Surveys, particularly online surveys, can offer a degree of anonymity to respondents, potentially allowing respondents to feel more comfortable about addressing contentious issues (Sue & Ritter, 2007, p. 5). The survey approach also allowed me to collect demographic information that could be used to analyze differences between subgroups; for instance, new librarians versus experienced, or youth services librarians versus other types.

Because I wanted to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, I designed my survey so that it had a mix of closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions have the benefit of being quickly answered by the respondent, which helps prevent people from quitting the survey prematurely, and lend themselves more easily to straightforward analysis (Greener, 2011, p. 43). They do not work as well for “measurements of sensitive or disapproved behavior,” a consideration for my topic of research, as I asked librarians to give me their honest opinions of how they think floating

collections work; for more sensitive areas, open-ended questions are better (Converse & Presser, 1986, p. 34). Open-ended questions are also best when the researcher wishes to avoid influencing the respondents' answers through his or her own ideas, and seeks to analyze the respondents' own words, which "might contain vital clues to the concepts and words [the respondents] believe are appropriate rather than imposing what the researcher thinks is relevant" (Greener, 2011, p. 42).

The survey consisted of twenty-nine questions total (see Appendix for a full list). It was divided into sections as followed: opening questions (seven questions), collection knowledge (four questions), patron needs (four questions), the reported benefits of floating collections (three questions), the challenges of floating collections (two questions), satisfaction with floating collections (four questions), and demographic details (five questions). Seven of the questions were open-ended, while the rest were closed-ended. The opening questions asked about the extent of the respondents' experience with floating collections, as well as how their libraries have implemented the system. The collection knowledge section asked about how floating collections have impacted readers' advisory activities. The patron needs section asked questions related to how well the respondents felt that their patrons were served by the floating collections system. The reported benefits section dealt with what benefits from the system respondents had experienced, while the challenges section asked librarians to rate and rank different problematic aspects of floating collections. The satisfaction section asked about satisfaction levels with floating collections. The demographics section posed questions that determined whether or not a respondent was an MSLS, what patron population they worked with directly, if any, and how long they have worked in libraries.

All responses were anonymous; no identifying information of any kind was collected about the respondents.

The survey was posted to the listservs on February 4th. It remained up for 21 days; I send out a reminder to participate on February 14th and closed the survey on February 25th. I received 135 responses, 112 of which were completed surveys. The current combined population of both listservs I estimated at around 16,000, although there is overlap between the listservs in terms of membership, so the actual population is lower. There was no way for me to determine what percentage of those members work with floating collections, as there exists no master list of libraries that have implemented floating collections and the staff that work there. Because of these limitations, the response rate to my survey was unknown.

Data Analysis:

By providing both closed-ended and open-ended questions in my survey, I was able to get back quantitative and qualitative data. Each type of data had to be handled differently in order to develop a complete understanding of the results. I used descriptive statistics to analyze the quantitative data from the closed-ended questions. Frequencies and percentages were derived from the data and displayed in tables and graphs to clarify my findings. The text of the open-ended questions was subjected to content analysis, defined by Holsti (1969) as “a multipurpose research method developed specifically for investigating any problem in which the content of communication serves as the basis of inference” (p. 2). Content analysis is frequently used as a means of analyzing open-ended survey questions (Holsti, 1969; Julien, 2008). While the emphasis can be

quantitative or qualitative, it is the qualitative means of using the method that I have concerned myself with in this study. Used qualitatively, content analysis is “interpretive, involving close reading of text” (Julien, 2008, p. 121). I developed thematic categories from the textual data, coded the data so that it fell into the categories, and proceeded to analyze the meanings behind the results.

Results:

The Benefits of Working with Floating Collections:

The results of my survey indicate that there are benefits associated with switching to the floating collections model. The respondents—67% of whom have worked with floating collections for three or more years, and most of whom work at libraries that float everything or almost everything—were asked to select from a list which reported benefits they had observed at their libraries. Their responses, displayed in figure 1, show that the benefits mentioned in the literature are present in various library systems.









#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Reduced delivery costs due to fewer deliveries of materials		72	65%
2	Savings to materials budget		41	37%
3	Faster transit times for materials so that books reach patrons more quickly		50	45%
4	Reduced wear and tear on items		19	17%
5	Saved staff time		45	41%
6	Reduced stress injuries among staff		4	4%
7	Refreshed collections		74	67%
8	Increase in circulation		27	25%

Figure 1. From question 16: “Which of these reported benefits have you observed or heard about at your library?” Total responses equal 110.

The two most frequently observed benefits were refreshed collections, which 67% of respondents indicated they had seen, and reduced delivery costs, which 65% had seen. Many respondents, although not the majority, also saw faster transit times for materials and saved staff time. Interestingly, only 37% of respondents specified savings to the materials budget as a benefit they had observed; in addition to reducing delivery costs, producing budget savings in the materials area is one of the major promoted benefits of changing from traditional to floating collections, so it is peculiar that fewer than half of the respondents reported having experienced this. Those respondents who noted an increase in circulation, a reduction in wear and tear on items, and a reduction in the number of stress-related injuries among staff were in the minority. Clearly libraries are experiencing benefits from floating collections, but not an overwhelming majority (at least of the libraries represented in this survey), and not in the same way.

The figure above does not tell the whole story, however. Three open-ended questions on the survey provide additional details about the benefits to working with floating collections. The first, question 17, asked respondents if they had observed any benefits that were not on the list in the previous question. This question received 23 responses, the lowest number for any of the open-ended questions, and 8 of those were some version of “no”—the respondents had either not seen any additional benefits, or had not seen any benefits at all. Nevertheless, those that did respond positively expanded upon the concept of refreshed and varied collections, and brought up the notion that patrons shape the collection to meet their needs and interests. “Our collection has been greatly refreshed by the floating collection,” one respondent said. “Also, my library is the smallest branch, so we have received materials that our budget would not have allowed us to purchase.” Similarly, another respondent stated, “In a larger county system, small libraries have the ability to have new items on their shelf.” Marveled another, “Books that would not have been ordered for a specific branch library show up there and actually circulate!” These responses provide evidence for the importance of refreshed collections.

The idea that smaller libraries in particular benefit from floating collections comes up in responses to other questions, as well. Question 23, which asked respondents what they liked best about working the floating collections, elicited the following response from one librarian: “Customers at smaller branches have a more equalized chance of seeing all the books purchased, not just the books purchased for their location.” A respondent from “a relatively small branch” explained, in partial answer to the question asking what respondents liked least about working with floating collections, that it is

“critical for us to keep our collection refreshed by the floating collection. I remember the old days as a patron when you felt like you’d read everything your small branch had to read.” This last quote helps to explain just why refreshed collections can be such a major benefit to a library’s patron population. When there is not enough money in the budget to afford sufficient new materials, floating presents a means of ensuring variety in the collection every single day.

A large portion of respondents to question 23, described above, also cited some version of “more variety” or “refreshed collections” as what they liked best. Out of 94 total responses to the question, 40 dealt with refreshed collections, and several mentioned savings to the budget as part of the benefit. One respondent wrote, “It feels like we are able to get the most benefit possible for our customers from each dollar in the materials budget and that we have more to offer (even if it will take a day or two to get here from another branch).” Another respondent summed up the general consensus by saying, “it’s like getting new material without affecting the budget at all.” Considering that only 37% of respondents cited savings to the materials budget as a benefit they had observed, it seems that some libraries perceive savings to the budget to be greater, or more important, than others.

Budgetary savings was not the only point emphasized with respect to variety and refreshed collections; some respondents felt that readers’ advisory became easier. Seven out of 54 respondents to question 10—an open-ended question asking them to explain why they felt that floating collections made readers’ advisory either more difficult or easier—asserted that access to a variety of materials improved readers’ advisory. Said one respondent,

I have a wider variety and larger number of titles to choose from when suggesting books. Also, if I do suggest a book and the copy(ies) we had on our shelf are checked out, the patron doesn't usually have to wait 3 weeks for that copy to be returned. We can just request another copy from a different branch.

Another respondent explained, "I feel more confident recommending a wider variety of titles as they are so easily brought in from other libraries." The respondent went on to talk about how she/he "can request titles to fill any perceived holes in the materials I have on hand," giving the example of a Doctor Who event for which the respondent drew in materials from branches that were not doing anything Doctor Who-themed. "Floating collections allow us to anticipate demand and meet the needs of our customers more efficiently," the respondent concluded.

Respondents to the question about additional benefits (question 17) also provided support for the idea that patrons can and do shape the collection to meet their needs. "Items my community wants/uses are more readily available at my branch," a respondent said. In a similar vein, another said that their collection "more accurately reflects the tastes and reading style of our adult patrons." Respondents to question 23 also remarked upon this particular benefit. According to one respondent, patrons are able to "participate in shaping the branches' collections because types of materials that they want tend to pool at their branch based on their requests and their returning them at their own branch." The system is "patron-driven," as another respondent to that question said, and materials "end up 'living' where they are most needed." One respondent gave an example: "One of the branches was a 'new materials' branch, which meant that we never had classics on the shelves, but patrons did want them. Once floating collections started, classics started showing up and getting shelved, which was a benefit to patrons." Another respondent explained the situation in a slightly different way by asserting that "we aren't hous[ing]

books that our patrons don't want or aren't interested [in]. We have more space for items they want." Other respondents echoed these sentiments, with one making the claim that having a floating collection "allows the community to define a collection to their tastes and interests more accurately than a collection development department could." This is a bold statement, but it does show that, at least for some libraries, patrons are able to use the system to their advantage to personalize the collection so that it "better reflects the interests of the neighborhoods served by branch[es]," as a respondent put it.

Time saved and the efficiency of the system featured in several (16) respondents' answers to the open-ended question about what they liked best about floating collections. "Efficiency—books aren't sitting in boxes waiting to go to another library," a respondent claimed as the best thing about floating collections; "Less checking in." Another pointed out that the system "saves staff time that would ordinarily be needed for packing a shipment." An added benefit of not requiring as many deliveries is that, as one respondent said, "items spend less time intransit [sic] and more time directly available to patrons." It is not only librarians' time that is being saved, this respondent implies, but patrons', as well, a thought echoed by three other respondents.

Several respondents (13) to question 23 said that there was nothing they liked best about floating collections. Even some of the positive remarks contained caveats, such as this answer:

It's a catch-22. What I like best is also what I dont [sic] like the most. I like that it can refresh collections at the branches but if you get one person who checks out many items on one subject or in one genre, then you end up with all these excess materials in that genre/on that subject. If the rest of your patrons have no interest in those materials, they just sit there taking up space.

The above answer touches on one of the major challenges presented by floating collections, which will be discussed in the section on drawbacks, below; it also reflects the divided mindset of the library community with respect to how satisfied librarians are with how floating collections work. To the question, “How satisfied are you, overall, with how floating collections work at your library?” (question 21), I received a surprisingly divided answer. While 46% of librarians said they were either “Very Satisfied” or “Satisfied” with floating collections, 40% said they were either “Very Dissatisfied” or “Dissatisfied.” The split is almost even.






#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Very Satisfied		23	21%
2	Satisfied		28	25%
3	Neutral		16	14%
4	Dissatisfied		34	30%
5	Very Dissatisfied		11	10%
	Total		112	100%

Figure 2. From question 21: “How satisfied are you, overall, with how floating collections work at your library?”

These figures are worse than the data from the Vancouver Public Library’s internal survey, which, as mentioned above in the literature review, found that 48% of staff were satisfied, and 25% were not, with the rest expressing neutrality. Given the positive views of refreshed collections and the savings in costs due to fewer deliveries and the ability to

stretch the materials budget, it is surprising that there is such a clear divide among respondents. Comparatively few feel neutral about floating collections.

The Drawbacks of Working with Floating Collections:

While there may be important benefits gained from switching to floating collections, there are also several major drawbacks to the model. The greatest, and most widely experienced, is the set of problems posed by redistributing materials among libraries in a system. Like most of the libraries mentioned in the literature review, the libraries represented by respondents to my survey struggle with imbalances of materials: some experience overcrowded shelves and cannot send books away fast enough; others have had their collections diminished to the point that patrons have complained.

Redistribution is not the only common issue, however. According to my results, weeding, conducting readers' advisory, getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion, knowing one's collection, and meeting patrons' needs with available materials can also prove challenging. The figures below illustrate the frequency and severity of these challenges.

#	Question	Very challenging	Challenging	Somewhat challenging	Not very challenging	Not challenging at all	Total Responses
1	Redistribution of materials	29%	27%	19%	18%	7%	111
2	Weeding	17%	21%	25%	27%	9%	110
3	Conducting readers' advisory	10%	21%	30%	30%	10%	111
4	Getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion	7%	21%	20%	37%	15%	111
5	General knowledge of your collection	14%	26%	27%	28%	5%	110
6	Meeting patrons' needs with available materials	19%	21%	31%	25%	5%	111

Figure 3. From question 19: “How challenging do you find each of the following aspects of working with floating collections?”







#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Weeding		11	10%
2	Redistribution of materials		45	40%
3	Conducting readers' advisory		4	4%
4	Getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion		8	7%
5	General knowledge of your collection		17	15%
6	Meeting patrons' needs with available materials		27	24%
	Total		112	100%

Figure 4. From question 20: “Which would you say is the single most challenging aspect of working with floating collections?”

To make the statistics relating to the level of challenge of each aspect easier to visualize, the following bar graph presents the percentages in colored sections:

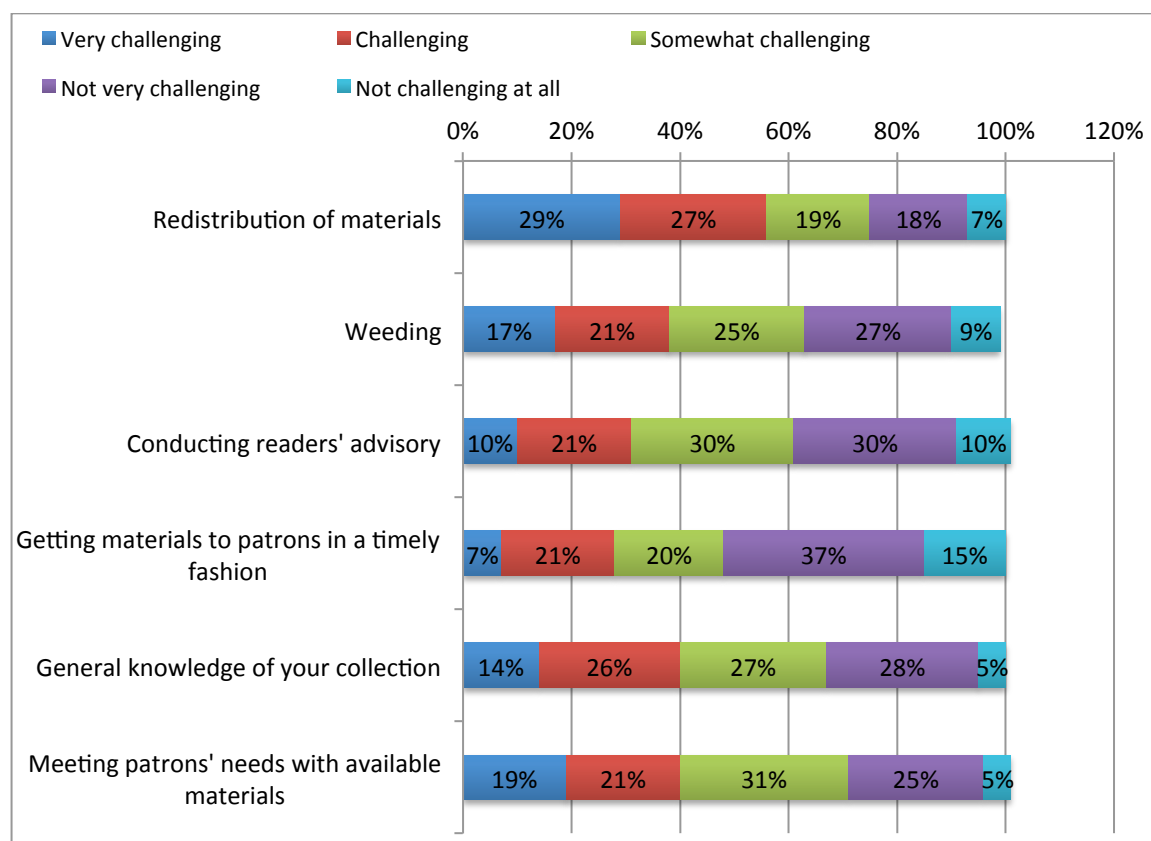


Figure 5. From question 19: “How challenging do you find each of the following aspects of working with floating collections?”

From these figures, it becomes clear that the majority of respondents find redistribution to be a major problem (if not the most important problem), followed by collection knowledge, meeting patrons’ needs with available materials, and weeding. Fewer respondents felt that conducting readers’ advisory or getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion were especially challenging, but over a quarter of respondents identified these as either “Very challenging” or “Challenging,” implying that some libraries struggle more with these issues than others.

Redistribution and related challenges:

Redistribution, cited by 40% of respondents as the single most challenging aspect of working with floating collections, is featured in the majority of answers to the open-ended question, “What do you like least [about working with floating collections]?” (question 24). Of the 96 responses, 54 had something to do with redistribution. When respondents got specific, they talked about imbalances in the collection due to the appearance of too much of one subject or author (17), gaps in the collection (11), dealing with duplicates of materials (10), and space issues related to overcrowding of materials (9).

One respondent described the basic problem of redistribution as “a drastic materials imbalance through out [sic] our system which reflects the disproportionate way in which certain locations circ more materials than others.” The respondent went on to explain, “Branches with high circulation, regardless of branch size, become flooded with materials...while branches with weaker circulation all but empty out.” Another respondent echoed this observation, saying, “If circ is highly uneven at different libraries, it becomes really hard to redistribute and you end up spending a lot of time redistributing materials. We had one branch with practically empty shelves and a really busy branch that didn’t have room for everything as circ was so high there.”

The word “constant” came up in reference to redistribution several times. What a particular respondent liked least is “the CONSTANT shuffling of items in order to keep shelves freed up, selections of materials balanced, duplicate materials weeded out,” a comment indicative of others that used the word (although not in caps; that was unique to this respondent). Respondents from libraries with empty shelves described “a flight of

items to other branches” and complained about not “seeing the holes in the collection in a timely manner.” Others, dealing with the problem of overcrowding, described “pooling of a certain author or subject” that led to manual redistribution, shelves that “get stuffed quickly because someone returns to your branch every book written about a topic,” and libraries having to redistribute materials “simply because they won’t fit on their shelves.” Curiously, respondents were not in agreement about whether smaller libraries struggle more with overcrowding or major gaps. “The smaller branches get over stocked fairly quickly and shelves get crowded,” one respondent observed, while another said that floating collections can be “a drawback for the smallest branches. The majority of the time patrons will have to request material. Collections do become unbalanced. Occasionally you will see branches fighting to get popular material for their branch.”

Related to redistribution is the issue of weeding, which 14 respondents cited as what they liked least about working with floating collections, and 38% of respondents found either “Very challenging” or “Challenging.” Redistribution creates the need for weeding, but weeding presents its own challenges. Some respondents complained about too much weeding, others about not enough, and others remarked on how time-consuming the process was. The most thorough description of the problems associated with weeding came from one respondent who outright called weeding “a nightmare.” The respondent elaborated:

Not knowing whether you’re tossing a book that is in much better condition than other copies in the system’s holdings, not knowing whether other branches may need the volume in the series that you’re about to weed (and not having the time to check it out but having to investigate anyway), and not knowing if the low circ stats actually reflect the popularity of the item (had it been sent to the right audience in the first place)... sheesh, the stress!!!

Other respondents echoed the uncertainty about the status of items. Not being aware of what condition materials at other branches are in “makes weeding less precise.” In addition, when items disappear, either through loss or weeding, “they are not always replaced,” with the implication being that they ought to be. Another respondent stated, “I don't know what is in other locations and other locations have weeded books that I happily would have accepted and would have been checked out at [my] location.” Two respondents, in contrast, felt that not enough weeding was occurring. One put it this way: “Not enough librarians want to weed so they pass old, grubby stuff around the system instead of discarding it because they can't bring themselves to delete stuff.” Weeding, these comments suggest, becomes a process fraught with difficulty when one is responsible for every library's books rather than just one's own library's collection.

One drawback that did not make it into the questions on challenging aspects of floating collections, but that did show up in the open-ended question about what respondents liked least about the model, is time spent on the new workflow created by implementing floating collections. Time saved was considered a benefit in the literature; the results displayed in figure 1 indicate that this benefit may not be as widespread as the literature suggests. Results from both the open-ended “What do you like least” question and an earlier closed-ended question about time spent on non-professional tasks dispute the idea that floating collections save library staff members' time.



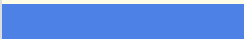
#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Yes, less time is now spent on non-professional tasks		26	23%
2	No, more time is now spent on non-professional tasks		29	26%
3	No, there has been no change		58	51%
	Total		113	100%

Figure 6. From question 18: “Do you feel that having floating collections at your library has resulted in less time spent on non-professional tasks (tasks that volunteers or pages could do) by you and other staff members?”

In figure 1, only 41% of respondents reported experiencing saved staff time, whereas 74% of respondents to the question in figure 6 answered that either there is more time spent on non-professional activities, or the same amount of time as before floating collections were implemented. Only 23% of respondents reported less time being spent on non-professional tasks. The responses to the open-ended question about what respondents like least about working with floating collections (question 24) support the idea that time is not necessarily saved. Fifteen of the 96 respondents wrote about issues relating to time and workflow. One respondent complained about having to spend “2-3 weeks out of every month floating items back to their original branch once they have sat on our shelves for 6 months.” This had become a “huge, time-consuming issue.” Another wrote: “While delivery work loads have been drastically reduced, the actual work has simply shifted to other parts of the system. Key branches now spend most of their time trying to shift their collection to fit in all the new material or sending overstock

back to locations which can take it. In short,” the respondent concluded, having a floating collection “has been a zero net gain in terms of work efficiency.” Yet another respondent pointed out that attempting to maintain a balanced collection by requesting materials from other branches “results in a new task.” A fourth respondent observed that the activities involved in redistribution shifted work “from circ staff to librarians.” While two respondents mentioned weeding as a task that took up a lot of time, most of the comments bearing on staff time relate to redistribution, that necessary evil of floating collections. The time-consuming nature of redistribution is likely one of the reasons why it ranked first in the list of most challenging aspects.

Meeting patrons’ needs:

Although one of the benefits mentioned was the idea that patrons shape the collections at their libraries to best meet their needs and interests, many respondents do not appear to have experienced this. Forty percent of respondents said, in the question about challenges (question 19) illustrated by figures 4 and 5, that meeting patrons’ needs with available materials was a challenge, and 24% of respondents chose this issue as the single most challenging part of working with floating collections. Moreover, respondents are divided as to whether or not their collections reflect the needs of their patrons on any given day, and are evenly split on the subject of whether or not all of their patrons are well served by floating collections, as shown in figures 7 and 8 below.



#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Yes		66	57%
2	No		49	43%
	Total		115	100%

Figure 7. From question 13: “Do you feel that the collection on any given day accurately reflects the needs of your patrons?”



#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Yes		58	50%
2	No		58	50%
	Total		116	100%

Figure 8. From question 14: “Do you feel that all portions of your patron population are well served by floating collections?”

While a majority of respondents did agree that their library’s collection on any given day reflects the needs of their patrons, 43%—a sizable minority—felt the opposite was true. More interesting still is the perfectly even split between those who feel that all of their patrons are well served by floating collections, and those who disagree. In an open-ended follow-up question, respondents were able to articulate specifically which portions of their patron population they felt were not well served. Fifty-four respondents chose to answer the follow-up question. Of those respondents, 12 felt that children and/or teens were not well served, 11 felt that patrons who were looking for materials that were not among their libraries’ most popular subject areas or genres were at a disadvantage, 8 cited patrons looking for specific materials, 7 mentioned patrons who did not understand how to place holds or were not comfortable with the process, and 6 brought up vulnerable populations such as the elderly, minorities, and low-income

patrons. Additionally, several responses to the open-ended question regarding what librarians liked least about working with floating collections (question 24) pertain to how well patrons are served.

The common theme among comments by respondents who discussed children and/or teens was the idea that these young patrons do not want to wait for their materials to be sent over from somewhere else. One respondent felt that all of her/his patrons were poorly served by floating collections, but singled out children, because “they don’t want to request items from somewhere else-they want it now!” Another observed that young people “want the book they want ‘now’ and if it’s not here they leave with nothing.” A third respondent stated, “Kids are usually the most disappointed.”

Relatedly, three of the 12 respondents who mentioned young people specifically discussed students and the problems they have with floating collections. Students often need materials “right away,” one respondent said, and “cannot wait for the book to come in from another branch.” Homework assignments, and annual projects in particular, came up in another respondent’s remarks. “Often the books that were on the shelf last year have gone to other libraries,” the respondent explained. Similarly, one of the respondents to the question of what librarians liked least stated, “Non-fiction floating is the worst, especially in the juvenile collection as we cannot tailor it to meet curriculum demands.”

Those patrons looking for less popular items or specific materials received many mentions. The problem faced by those seeking less popular items seems to be that those materials have floated away to other libraries, leaving gaps in the collection. One respondent described the problem this way: “We have quite a bit of best seller books and

urban fiction, but someone who wants to browse the shelves for more ‘literary’ fiction would have trouble finding titles.” Another stated that patrons “looking for materials other than Large Print or Biographies” are not well served, while a different respondent cited those “who like less popular collections: Westerns, Spiritual, poetry.” Patrons seeking specific materials appear to run into the same problem of gaps in the collection. One respondent drew a distinction between “those who want (and expect) a specific title vs. browsers who happily take whatever looks interesting.” Another respondent said that patrons “who come in for subject matter, in particular” were not well served: “Seems we rarely have anything they want on the shelf and we must order things for them.” Patrons seeking non-fiction were the subject of another respondent’s answer, echoing the complaints of those who talked about students. “Often everything on a particular subject is ordered to another branch for a patron and then returned there,” the respondent said, “and suddenly we have NOTHING on dog breeds, volcanoes, civil war etc.” In the open-ended question that asked about what librarians liked least (question 24), 15 respondents addressed the issue of not having materials on hand to give to patrons who requested them. “I really don’t like the fact that materials aren’t available to patrons when they need them,” a respondent said, voicing the same opinion as many others. Redistribution woes affect patrons as well as librarians, it would appear.

Vulnerable populations, among them those who are not tech-savvy, received multiple mentions. One respondent outright stated that “minorities” were not well served, while another mentioned “English as a second language patrons” who were not able to get DVDs in their native language because those materials were no longer at the library. A respondent who used to work at a branch “in an urban location serving an

overwhelmingly lower-class population,” noted that at that library, “the collection was not as diverse as the more affluent or middle-class communities where I work now.” Another was more succinct and answered, “The poorer communities,” with the clarification, “people who are less able to request books (due to lack of technology or education).” One respondent from an earlier open-ended question on the subject of benefits (question 17), when describing how African American fiction does not circulate at her particular branch but would probably circulate at the branches with more African American patrons, made the point that patrons at those branches do not place holds frequently, and so are not experiencing collections that are refreshed or necessarily relevant to their needs.

Both older patrons and teens were also cited by respondents as populations that do not regularly place holds. Older patrons “are not used to using electronic resources” and have to stick with whatever is on the shelves at the time of their visit, a respondent asserted. With teenagers, the issue was less about technology and more about understanding the process: “Those teens...who aren’t comfortable with requesting items- they may want to read something, but if they have to make an effort to get it, they’re not interested,” another respondent said, identifying the group she/he felt was least well served by floating collections.

In addition to other comments about “those that do not know how to request items from other branches using the computer,” there were remarks about patrons who wanted to use the library in the traditional way. Some patrons “may come in every day to read a particular book and if that book has floated to a different branch these patrons no longer feel as if they have access to it.” Another respondent described a similar situation:

We are a downtown branch and have a fairly large population who spend the day in the library but do not check out items and do not like to place holds even if they have valid cards. They like to find certain books just where they last saw them.

Two other respondents brought up patrons “who lack transportation,” presumably to other branches where relevant materials are located, and who presumably do not know how to or want to place holds. From all of these responses, it seems that the holds process—the heart of floating collections, without which the system cannot operate—presents burdens to certain subgroups of the population. It does not, in the opinion of some librarians, function equally well for all patrons.

Collection knowledge:

As shown in figures 3 and 5, 40% of respondents felt that knowledge of one’s collection was either “Very challenging” or “Challenging,” while 30% felt that way about conducting readers’ advisory, an activity closely linked to collection knowledge. Additional questions asked about the impact of floating collections on the ease of conducting readers’ advisory (questions 9 and 10), and about the frequency with which librarians were able to hand patrons materials that they had specifically requested (question 11). Figures 9 and 10, below, show the responses.

#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Easier		7	6%
2	More difficult		51	43%
3	No change		49	41%
4	Not applicable (don't do readers' advisory)		12	10%
	Total		119	100%

Figure 9. From question 9: “In your opinion, do you feel that working with floating collections at your library makes readers’ advisory:”

#	Options		Number of responses	%
1	Almost every time		4	3%
2	Most of the time		28	24%
3	Some of the time		69	59%
4	Little of the time		13	11%
5	None of the time		2	2%
	Total		116	100%

Figure 10. From question 11: “Over the last three days, when a patron has come up to you and requested a specific book, how often have you been able to locate that book in your library?”

As can be seen from figure 9, respondents are once again divided almost evenly as to whether floating collections render readers’ advisory more difficult, or have no impact on the activity. Figure 10 illustrates the problem of giving patrons what they ask for, when they ask for it: the majority of respondents reported only being able to produce the requested materials “Some of the time” over a three day period. When the collection

is constantly in flux, knowing where materials are, and what is on the shelf at any given time, becomes difficult.

Although the majority of respondents, as indicated by figures 3 and 5, do not appear to view these areas of collection knowledge as major problems, those respondents in the minority (and it is not a small minority, either) feel very strongly about the impact floating collections can have upon the ability of librarians to know their collections and thereby assist their patrons. Of the 96 respondents to the question about what librarians liked least about floating collections, 9 cited issues related to collection knowledge. Said one respondent, “I miss having a collection that I really KNOW well, especially for readers advisory.” Another respondent described the problem in these terms:

We can’t keep track of what is in our branch; when a patron comes for something generally it is not at our branch. (Sometimes it is—surprise!) We no longer know our collections, and we don’t own our collections (psychologically taking ownership makes it easier to build it, tweak it, weed it, and so forth[]).

Although most do not put it in these words, a feeling of loss of control permeates the comments related to collection knowledge. The responses given to the open-ended question asking why respondents found readers’ advisory to be more difficult or easier, if they had selected those choices in the question illustrated by figure 9, similarly express this sentiment. Of the 54 responses, only 7 made the claim that readers’ advisory was easier; the rest mostly focused on the problems of materials not being available for patrons, and not knowing what was on the shelf.

Given the way floating collections work, it is not surprising that materials would not always be available at particular libraries for patrons who want to check them out, but this lack of a stable collection can thwart librarians in their efforts to conduct readers’ advisory. One respondent said, “I can think of dozens of books that will fit a patron’s

needs, only to find out that...they are at another branch.” Most of the time, the respondent continued, “a patron I’m doing RA for wants a book right then and I hate giving them the 10th book I’ve thought of when the first three are much better simply because our branch doesn’t own it’s [sic] own specific copy.” Another complained about the fact that “once you have sold the reader on that book, you have to tell them that it isn’t checked in and that they will have to wait a few days to have it sent here.” Similarly, another expressed frustration because “the book you think is just right for a patron often is not there.” Yes, another acknowledged, materials can be put on hold, “but often with RA the patron wants something to take home with them.” One respondent brought up the particular issue of children and waiting for holds: “When you talk to the children about a book you think they will enjoy reading and then it is not on the shelf but sits at another branch it’s a let down. You may have another book in a series but not the one you talked about.” Children do not seem to be the only ones let down when desired materials are absent.

The responses that address the problem of never knowing what will be on the shelves at any given time express something more than frustration. There is a sense of not only loss of control, but loss of identity. As one respondent explained, “With a non-floating collection, you learn which authors and books your library has, and usually have a sense of if they are currently circulating a lot (popular) or sitting on the shelf.” With floating collections, on the other hand, “I never know what is on the shelf to recommend.” Another observed that “librarians are [the] link to collections for patrons—‘knowing’ a collection is more difficult if it is elusive.” Two respondents focused on how knowing a collection leads to good readers’ advisory, and how not being able to

know the collection presents problems: “In non-floating collections you know what is in the collection so you can develop a few ‘go-to’ titles for different genres. In a floating collection this is much harder.” The best articulation of a loss of control and identity, however, comes from a respondent whose library floats only audiovisual materials:

I had spent a lot of time and energy, and budget money, to develop one of the better collections [of audiobooks] in our system. Patrons traveled across the country to browse our collection (even though the items were available for request through the catalog) because of its content and our commitment to making it consistently better. That all changed when the float began.

Responses like this one suggest that for some librarians, floating collections may present a challenge not only to their daily activities, but also to how they see themselves as professionals.

Demographic Influences:

Over half of the respondents to the survey (58%) identified themselves as working primarily with children (infants to age 18, for the purposes of this survey). Their responses to the survey questions did not vary significantly from the responses of those who identified themselves as working primarily with adult patrons (42%). Respondents who work with children were slightly more likely to view conducting readers’ advisory as a challenge; 36% of them selected either “Very challenging” or “Challenging” to describe the activity in question 19, versus 27% for respondents who work primarily with adults. Respondents who work with children were the only ones to identify conducting readers’ advisory as the most challenging aspect of floating collections (4 out of 57 did so). Their levels of satisfaction with floating collections were nearly identical to those of respondents who work with adults, as shown in figure 11 below.

#	Options	Respondents who work with adults	Respondents who work with children
1	Very Satisfied	21%	18%
2	Satisfied	26%	25%
3	Neutral	10%	19%
4	Dissatisfied	29%	30%
5	Very Dissatisfied	14%	9%
	Total	42	57

Figure 11. From question 21: “How satisfied are you, overall, with how floating collections work at your library?”

Interestingly, whether or not a respondent held an MSLS or related degree had little impact on her/his responses. Only 20 respondents identified themselves as not having an advanced degree, so the population is small. Still, responses by paraprofessionals (or degree-less librarians) to the open-ended questions often echoed those of degree-holders, to the extent that it was impossible to distinguish between the two groups when the responses were mixed and unlabeled. Levels of satisfaction across the two groups were similar, with more paraprofessionals expressing neutrality rather than dissatisfaction.

#	Options	Degree-holder	No degree
1	Very Satisfied	21%	20%
2	Satisfied	25%	25%
3	Neutral	11%	30%
4	Dissatisfied	32%	25%
5	Very Dissatisfied	12%	0%
	Total	92	20

Figure 12. From question 21: “How satisfied are you, overall, with how floating collections work at your library?”

Oddly enough, 75% of the paraprofessional respondents felt that the collection at their library did not reflect the needs of their patrons, but this was the only question in which responses varied across the groups to this extent.

#	Options	Degree-holder	No degree
1	Yes	48	15
2	No	44	4
	Total	92	19

Figure 13. From question 13: “Do you feel that the collection on any given day accurately reflects the needs of your patrons?”

The number of years respondents had worked with floating collections did affect certain responses. Ninety-seven percent of respondents had worked with traditional collections before, so almost all of them had a point of comparison.

#	Options	Less than 1 year	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	More than 10 years
1	Yes	6	16	31	9	4
2	No	1	16	13	16	3
	Total	7	32	44	25	7

Figure 14. From question 13: “Do you feel that the collection on any given day accurately reflects the needs of your patrons?”

#	Options	Less than 1 year	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	More than 10 years
1	Yes	6	13	28	8	3
2	No	1	19	16	18	4
	Total	7	32	44	26	7

Figure 15. From question 14: “Do you feel that all portions of your patron population are well served by floating collections?”

Figures 14 and 15 show an interesting trend: respondents new to floating seem to be the most optimistic, while those who have experienced a year or two of the system are more

divided; opinions improve among those who have worked with floating collections for 3-5 years, but—this is quite interesting—appear to reverse in the 6-10 year range, and end up divided once more among those who have worked with floating collections for over a decade. This trend continues, to some extent, in the question about levels of satisfaction with floating collections, depicted in figure 16, below. The majority of respondents who have worked with floating collections less than a year are satisfied (58%), with only 29% dissatisfied; those with 1-2 years of experience are more dissatisfied than satisfied (46% dissatisfied, 40% satisfied), although clearly divided. Those with 3-5 years of experience are once again more likely to be satisfied (55% satisfied versus 26% dissatisfied); while those with 6-10 years of experience show that same peculiar reversal, with only 31% satisfied and 58% dissatisfied. The majority of those with the most experience, interestingly, are satisfied (57%), with 43% expressing dissatisfaction.

#	Options	Less than 1 year	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	More than 10 years
1	Very Satisfied	29%	7%	31%	12%	43%
2	Satisfied	29%	33%	24%	19%	14%
3	Neutral	14%	13%	19%	12%	0%
4	Dissatisfied	29%	43%	19%	35%	29%
5	Very Dissatisfied	0%	3%	7%	23%	14%
	Total	7	30	42	26	7

Figure 16. From question 21: “How satisfied are you, overall, with how floating collections work at your library?”

With respect to the challenges presented by floating collections, shown in figure 17, the majority of respondents in all year ranges except the 6-10 one found redistribution to be the greatest challenge; 7 of the 25 respondents who had worked with floating

collections for 6-10 years chose redistribution, while 9 chose meeting patrons' needs with available materials as the most challenging aspect.

#	Options	Less than 1 year	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	More than 10 years
1	Weeding	1	4	6	0	0
2	Redistribution of materials	1	12	21	7	4
3	Conducting readers' advisory	1	2	1	0	0
4	Getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion	0	2	2	3	1
5	General knowledge of your collection	2	3	5	6	1
6	Meeting patrons' needs with available materials	2	8	7	9	1
	Total	7	31	42	25	7

Figure 17. From the question, "Which would you say is the single most challenging aspect of working with floating collections?"

Conclusion:

The common perception of floating collections, as described in the literature review, is that the benefits are self-evident and the challenges mere nuisances that will sort themselves out in a relatively short period. Most of the libraries mentioned in the

literature review declare that floating was a success, with the majority of staff members supportive of the new system. Both Cress (2004) and Bartlett (2014) claim that staff members' fears of losing the intimate knowledge of their collections are unfounded, and that redistribution will quickly become a normal, easily managed part of the workflow. Says Bartlett (2014): "Once it is up and running, if communication is thorough and ongoing, floating has little impact on day-to-day staff morale" (p. 48). The data collected in my survey contradict this common perception on all counts.

This study set out to explore the following questions: How do librarians perceive the benefits and drawbacks to working with floating collections? Do they feel that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks, or vice versa? Because of the nature of my sample and its relatively small number, it is not possible to make sweeping, generalizable statements about how the majority of librarians who work with floating collections feel. However, the data make clear that while there are certain benefits to working with floating collections, those benefits may not be as widely realized as the literature suggests; moreover, the many drawbacks associated with floating collections appear to have negative consequences for both librarians and certain types of patrons. The majority of respondents to my survey do not seem to feel that the benefits of working with floating collections outweigh the drawbacks.

Benefits: How Widespread Are They?

Of the 110 respondents who answered the question about what benefits they had seen at their libraries (question 16, illustrated in figure 1), 65% and 67% respectively had experienced reduced delivery costs and refreshed collections. The rest of the benefits

were experienced by much lower percentages of respondents. One of the main reasons that libraries switch to floating collections is to reduce the strain on the budget, yet only 37% of respondents said they had observed or heard about savings to the materials budget. Saved staff time, another benefit touted by the sources in the literature review, was only cited by 41% of respondents.

Several respondents commented on the subject of refreshed collections, describing how their patrons had access to so much more material thanks to floating collections. Even when materials were not immediately available at the library, the ability to have them floated over inspired enthusiasm in some. One respondent gushed,

I just LOVE being able to say: well, we don't have it on the shelf today, but I can have it for you in a few days. Our patrons who aren't familiar with the system feel like they are getting special treatment. Our patrons who are familiar use it like old pros to great advantage. A floating collection means [n]ever having to say NO to a patron (okay, once in a while we say no, but very rarely).

The benefit of refreshed collections is widespread, and for libraries with patrons who are comfortable with placing holds and understand the system, it can work quite well.

Bartlett (2014) states that in the floating collections model, “patrons make their selections as they check out materials and then *return* the choices they have made, thus giving their librarians precious information about their ‘buying’ habits, needs, and preferences” (p. 6, her emphasis). Indeed, some respondents appeared to have observed this. A few respondents brought up the notion that patrons, through placing holds and returning books, shape the collections at their libraries to better suit their needs. One respondent, when describing why floating collections make readers’ advisory easier, said, “Floating collections reflect a community’s interests and needs; therefore, it is easier to recommend and then FIND that recommended book on the shelf.” These respondents

were, however, in the minority. Part of the reason for this may be that Bartlett (2014) describes how floating collections *ideally* function, rather than how they actually function. The entire point in unmooring collections from their traditional locations is that patrons can return materials to whichever library in the system they please; there is no guarantee that the materials will be returned to the same library from which they were checked out. In fact, judging from the numerous comments on the subject of redistribution, the opposite seems to occur more often than not. The materials that show up at one's library reflect the needs and wants of various people throughout the system—not necessarily of the people living directly in that library's community. It is unclear to what extent patrons truly are able to shape the collections at their local libraries.

The Intractable Problem of Redistribution:

Despite Cress's (2004) and Bartlett's (2014) assurances that redistribution is not hugely problematic for most libraries, 40% of respondents selected it as the most challenging aspect of working with floating collections, and a majority of the 96 respondents who elaborated on what they liked least about working with floating collections cited redistribution issues. The idea that redistribution becomes easier with time does not receive support from my findings, either. The majority of those who had worked with floating collections for 3-5 years found redistribution to be the most challenging aspect, as did several respondents in the 6-10 and over 10 year ranges. Redistribution also seems to be the major reason why only 23% of respondents agreed that less time was spent on non-professional activities thanks to floating collections. Said one respondent, speaking for many, "I know the theory was that we would save on

shipment hours by not sending things back to a ‘home branch,’ but instead it just takes more librarian time to constantly monitor the areas of the collection that float.”

Bartlett (2014) remarks that “rebalancing issues can easily dominate the conversation, drowning out the ‘no-drama’ branches where floating is a nonissue” (p. 4). These “no-drama” branches appear to be in the minority, however. The branches for which floating collections work well “tend to be in the middle of the bell curve: medium-sized, with a medium level of circulation, and in a moderately busy area—not on a major commuter route or hidden away in a quiet bedroom community” (Bartlett, 2014, p. 4). How many libraries meet this ideal? The responses I received pertaining to redistribution described over and over again how difficult it is to deal with shelves either glutted or gutted; while some of those respondents might happen to work at one of the 10-20% of branches in any given library system that, according to Bartlett (2014), must deal with constant redistribution issues, it does not seem likely that they all do.

As one respondent pointed out, and several others echoed, “items don’t automatically route themselves to the most appropriate location.” When materials get redistributed, there is no way, short of cooperation among libraries (which might not happen if the system uses a centralized collection development process), to ensure that excess materials get sent to branches where they will be most relevant to the patron population. Another respondent commented, “The best way to get a wide variety of materials and create that ‘something for everyone’ is for skill[ed] selection people to assign things to a branch.” Bartlett (2014) explains that if there happen to be “certain subject areas that are getting asked for repeatedly (GED test guides in certain branches leap to mind), collection development librarians can arrange for regular shipments of

those types of items to those branches,” describing just the sort of “skilled selection people” that the respondent mentioned (p. 86). Yet this does not appear to occur in practice.

Weeding, complicated by redistribution, becomes more time-consuming and fraught with uncertainty, responses suggest. Bartlett (2014) describes how weeding in a floating collections system differs: “Instead of making decisions for one branch and one community, staff members doing weeding are making decisions for all” (82). This is, responses suggest, the entire problem. When no one is in charge of weeding, and keeping track of materials and their conditions is difficult, staff either become hesitant to weed, worrying that they might remove materials that would be needed at another branch, or weed excessively, removing materials that really would have met the needs of patrons at a different branch where, perhaps, fewer holds were placed. Bartlett (2014) claims that the floating nature of the collection will make it obvious which materials are low-circulating and therefore candidates for weeding, but this brings to mind the comment made by one respondent about how African American fiction, sent to her/his branch as part of a regular delivery schedule of seemingly random materials, did not circulate due to the fact that the patrons at the branch where it would likely be popular did not regularly place holds. Floating and the circulation it promotes do not tell the whole story with respect to whether or not materials should be weeded.

Are All Patrons Well Served by Floating Collections?

A respondent who identified herself/himself as a “younger librarian” who has only worked with floating collections said, “When I use the library as a patron I don’t

browse, I place holds from a computer or other digital device. I don't expect stuff to be at the branch I am currently visiting, and I rarely place holds from inside a branch anyway." If all patrons were as computer-savvy and as comfortable with the floating collections system as this respondent, then Bartlett's (2014) assertion that "a floating collection engages with *all* of the patrons, and it reflects back very quickly what patrons want, like, and need" (p. 91, her emphasis) would be absolutely true. The results to my survey, however, suggest that the reality may be rather different. Exactly half of respondents felt that there were portions of their patron populations that were not well served by floating collections. Those who chose to elaborate cited children, the elderly, low-income patrons, and minorities, along with patrons who do not understand how holds work or choose not to place them, as populations poorly served by the floating collections model. "The concern is that in branches where patrons cannot or choose not to place holds, a disproportionately low amount of floating will occur. Surprisingly, this actually does not come to pass," claims Bartlett (2014, p. 51). Does it not? Materials may leave the low-holds-placing branches due to requests by patrons at other branches, and materials may flow back due to returns by patrons from other parts of the area, but if the majority of patrons at a branch do not place holds, there is a limited chance for the collection at that branch to even remotely reflect their needs. Those patrons get the benefit of neither patron-driven "collection development," nor traditional collection development.

Relatedly, what of those patrons whose first language is not English? Only a single respondent mentioned this population as being poorly served, but if native speakers have difficulty navigating the holds process, one can only imagine how hard it

must be to do so without a firm grasp of the English language. There is much less of a burden placed on the English language learner when all that he or she has to do is select materials from a well-chosen collection, take them to the circulation desk, hand over a card, and wait for the person at the desk to scan the materials.

Children, the elderly, low-income patrons, and minorities are groups for whom the public library is vitally important. If floating collections cannot serve these groups as well as they can the affluent and tech-savvy, then that becomes more than just a drawback of working with floating collections—it becomes a substantial argument in favor of traditional collections.

“We are no longer familiar with our collections”:

While most respondents may not have seen the difficulty of knowing one’s collection as a challenge on the same level as redistribution, a significant minority found it to be very problematic. Bartlett (2014) acknowledges that “one of the biggest losses for staff members is the comfort of knowing precisely what is in their collection day to day” (p. 50). The comments from respondents—such as the one forming the heading of this section—bear this observation out. Yet Bartlett (2014) also makes the claim that this concern about no longer knowing the collection “dissolves immediately after floating’s implementation, for two reasons”: first, that lower circulating collections (nonfiction and children’s collections are her examples) will only change gradually, and second, that librarians will rarely have to place holds on “items held at bigger branches or the main library” because “they are finding those items on their shelves and handing them directly to patrons” (p. 22). The data from my survey show that librarians do not simply get over

the loss of stable, carefully maintained collections. Thirty respondents (out of 110), their experience with floating collections ranging from 3 to over 10 years, cited collection knowledge as either “Very challenging” or “Challenging” in the question on levels of challenge presented by certain aspects of floating collections. Put another way, over 25% of respondents, all of whom have worked with floating collections for several years, still experience the loss of their collection knowledge as a serious issue.

Bartlett’s (2014) claim that librarians are more often able to hand requested items to patrons rather than have to send away for them is likewise contradicted by my findings on the subject of readers’ advisory. The main complaint from those who considered readers’ advisory to be more difficult due to floating collections is that the materials they want to recommend are often not available at their branches. Few respondents believed readers’ advisory to be easier, and none voiced Bartlett’s (2014) reasoning for why readers’ advisory ought to become easier when the collection floats:

Rather than reading the books that are getting starred reviews and then pressing them onto their readers, readers’ advisory librarians can ‘read the float’ and design a user experience that gives the readers more of what they want, not more of what librarians think they should want (p. 104).

The few respondents who considered readers’ advisory to be easier cited the greater variety of materials available to recommend, not the peculiar notion that only now, with the advent of floating, could they recommend titles patrons actually want to read. The difficulties described by respondents who found readers’ advisory to be problematic in a floating collections system do not involve choosing the right book for the patron; lack of collection knowledge surely makes these choices harder, but the focus of most comments was on the frustration presented by not having the books on hand to give to patrons.

Floating collections, by their very nature, strip away collection development duties from most librarians who work with them. Some view this as a good thing; Bartlett's (2014) arguments in favor of floating collections maintain that patrons are better served when librarians get out of the way and stop giving them "what librarians think they should want" (p. 104). But the entire point of librarianship is to come to know the information needs and wants of one's patrons, and to meet those needs and wants in the best and most thorough way possible. This is not the early 1900s; librarians do not view themselves as responsible for the moral edification of patrons, and collections are crafted with other considerations in mind than the "literary quality" of materials. When collections are decoupled from the communities they are supposed to serve, the very nature of the librarian's job changes. Librarians still must get to know their communities in order to decide what services and programs to offer, but part of the library's services—the collection—has been removed from their consideration or control. The intimate knowledge branch librarians have about the communities they serve cannot be used directly on the collection when that collection is scattered across a system. Librarians are supposed to be the "link to collections for patrons," as one respondent put it, helping them navigate the massive amount of information stored in any library, and working to ensure that the information stored there is relevant to the community. The sense of the loss of control over one's collection that runs through so many of the responses, and the underlying questions this loss brings up about professional identity, likely result from the perceived severing of that "link."

If most librarians no longer exert very much influence over their collections, and can only place holds in order to bring in materials patrons want that are not present in the

current collection, a question arises: what is the role of the professional librarian in the floating collections model? What then distinguishes the librarian from the bookstore employee, whose job it is to ring up merchandise and offer to order any books that the customer has not been able to find on the shelves? Floating collections may offer substantial benefits for some library systems, and may meet the needs of some patrons quite well. But only 46% of respondents to my survey expressed satisfaction with how floating collections worked at their libraries, a rather dismal number for a system whose advocates promise such widespread benefits. Regardless of the generalizability of my survey, staff buy-in is clearly a problem at many libraries. Might this have something to do with the radical changes that the floating collections model makes to the nature of the branch librarian's job? Even new librarians are taught in library school about the importance of developing collections for specific communities. This is, in fact, presented as a central tenet of librarianship.

Judging from the recent literature and the number of library systems that have made the decision to float over the past decade, floating collections will not be going away anytime soon. The challenges to professional identity that the model poses will not vanish overnight, although it does seem likely that as more new librarians, who perhaps lack experience with traditional collections, begin working in systems that float, staff buy-in will become less of a problem. If a survey like this one is sent out in ten or fifteen years, the results may well look very different. One hopes that by then, the problems of redistribution will be solved, and librarians will have figured out a way to ensure that no part of the patron population is poorly served by the floating collections model.

Areas for Future Research:

This study suggests many areas for future research. Its limitations with respect to the population surveyed invite a larger-scale, random sample approach that can yield generalizable statistical data. In addition, it would be interesting to find out what differences exist between librarians who express satisfaction with floating collections, and those who express dissatisfaction. Do their job duties differ? Are their libraries implementing floating collections in different ways? Does the close-to-even split between those satisfied and those dissatisfied persist with a larger sample size?

D'Elia (1979) describes one of the main predictors of librarians' satisfaction with their jobs as their ability to make full use of their professional skills. Does working with floating collections impact how satisfied librarians are with their jobs? Librarians need to be engaged in the work they do, not bogged down by mundane tasks; heavy workloads can lead to burnout (Miller, 2011). Are librarians who work with floating collections any more prone to burnout than librarians who work with traditional collections? Are they less prone to it?

Although it is harder to get at patron opinions, it would be useful to know if patrons at libraries that float feel that their library's collection meets their needs. Is it true across different library systems that patrons' needs and wants shape the collection? To what extent are patrons aware that the collections float, and how easy is it for them to place holds? Do minorities, the elderly, low-income patrons, English language learners, and children have a harder time with the holds process, as this survey suggests? If so, what can be done to improve their experiences? Moreover, if collections do represent

patron interests and needs at certain libraries, what kind of balance is reflected in the materials—namely the nonfiction? Are both sides of controversial issues, or political hot topics, represented? Or has patron interest shaped the collection to favor one side?

Small libraries came up in various responses, sometimes as examples of how floating collections have changed things for the better, and sometimes as examples of how floating has made both patrons' and librarians' lives more difficult. Do smaller branches tend to benefit from floating collections, or suffer?

Finally, several respondents brought up the problem of redistributing materials across branches without heed to where the materials would most benefit the patrons. Is it possible to create a system of “smart” redistribution that does not rely solely upon the knowledge of a small centralized collection development staff? Could the ILS somehow flag certain types of items as being most appropriate for one branch or another, thereby directing the redistribution in a more thoughtful way? Such a system would, if nothing else, allow librarians a little more control over what ends up in their branches, and could help ensure that branches with low rates of hold placements still get the materials their patrons need and want.

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Appendix: Survey Questions

1. How long has your library used floating collections?

Less than one year

1-2 years

3-5 years

6-10 years

More than 10 years

Don't know

2. Did you work in this library system before floating collections were implemented?

Yes

No

3. Have you worked with traditional collections (non-floating, where the materials belong to a specific library) before?

Yes

No

4. How many years have you worked with floating collections?

Less than one year

1-2 years

3-5 years

6-10 years

More than 10 years

5. What part(s) of the collection does your library float?

--Open-ended response--

6. Is your library part of a larger system?

Yes

No

7. If yes, does your library system have a centralized collection development process?

Yes

No

Don't know

8. **In the last three weeks**, how many books do you estimate you have read for the purpose of familiarizing yourself with what is available to your patrons?

--Open-ended response--

9. In your experience, do you feel that floating collections at your library make readers' advisory:

Easier

More difficult

No change

Not Applicable (don't do readers' advisory)

10. If you answered "easier" or "more difficult," could you briefly explain why you feel this way?

--Open-ended response--

11. **Over the last three days**, when a patron has approached you and requested a specific book, how often have you been able to locate that book in your library and hand it to the patron?

Almost every time

Most of the time

Some of the time

Little of the time

None of the time

12. Have your patrons expressed satisfaction with the fact that your library uses floating collections?

Yes

No

Not Applicable (they haven't noticed the change)

Don't know

13. Do you feel that the collection on any given day accurately reflects the needs of the majority of your patrons?

Yes

No

14. Do you feel that all portions of your patron population are well served by floating collections?

Yes

No

15. If no, what types of patrons do you feel are not well served?

--Open-ended response--

16. Various benefits to switching to floating collections have been reported by public libraries. Which of these reported benefits have you observed or heard about at your own library? Please check all that apply.

- Reduced delivery costs due to fewer deliveries of materials
- Savings to materials budget
- Faster transit times for materials so that books reach patrons more quickly
- Reduced wear and tear on items
- Saved staff time
- Reduced stress injuries among staff
- Refreshed collections
- Increase in circulation

17. Have you noticed any benefits not listed here? Please describe:

--Open-ended response--

18. Do you feel that having floating collections at your library has resulted in less time spent on non-professional tasks (tasks that volunteers or pages could do) for you and other staff members?

Yes, less time is now spent on non-professional tasks

No, more time is now spent on non-professional tasks

No, there has been no change

19. How challenging do you find each of the following aspects of working with floating collections? For each of the aspects, check one box.

	Very challenging	Challenging	Somewhat challenging	Not very challenging	Not challenging at all
Redistribution of materials					
Weeding					
Conducting readers' advisory					
Getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion					
General knowledge of your collection					
Meeting patrons' needs with available materials					

20. Which would you say is the **single most challenging** part of working with floating collections?

- Weeding
- Redistribution of materials
- Conducting readers' advisory
- Getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion
- General knowledge of your collection
- Meeting patrons' needs with available materials

21. How satisfied are you, overall, with how floating collections work **at your library**?

Completely satisfied

Mostly satisfied

Neutral

Dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

22. How satisfied do you feel that **most staff members at your library** are with how floating collections work there?

Completely satisfied

Mostly satisfied

Neutral

Dissatisfied

Very dissatisfied

23. What do you like best about working with floating collections?

--Open-ended response--

24. What do you like least?

--Open-ended response--

25. Do you work directly with the public?

Yes

No

26. If yes, do you work primarily with adult patrons, or children (infants to age 18)?

Adults

Children

27. If you primarily work with children, which age group do you most often work with?

Infants

Toddlers

School-aged children

Teens

I work with all groups equally

28. Do you hold a master's degree in library science or related field?

Yes

No

29. How many years have you worked in libraries?

0-3 years

4-7 years

8-12 years

More than 12 years