

Academic Library Book Sales: Outreach, Community Service, and Budgetary Support

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Abstract

This paper examines the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society's (AAHS) biannual benefit used book sale, organized in collaboration with the Arizona State Museum (ASM) Library, as a model of community-centered fundraising in small, specialized academic libraries. Amid severe budget constraints, the library relies on this event to support its staffing and collection development. Beyond its financial impact, the sale fosters engagement among patrons, donors, and local scholars, thereby strengthening both academic and regional connections. By integrating fundraising, collection expansion, and community outreach, the event serves as a financial resource, community engagement program, and scholarly community-building activity. This study explores the logistics, benefits, and challenges of such a program, offering insights into how small, specialized academic libraries can creatively sustain their operations and enrich their communities despite severe financial limitations.

Keywords: academic libraries, development, fundraising, community partnerships, book sales

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Introduction

Academic libraries face ongoing financial pressures, often driven by the need to sustain operations, manage collection growth, and engage in outreach activities amid limited budgets. In response to these challenges, some libraries seek to foster meaningful connections with their surrounding communities while addressing critical operational needs.

The biannual book sales organized by the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society (AAHS) in partnership with the Arizona State Museum (ASM) Library presents a compelling case study of how a small, specialized academic library can balance financial support, community service, and operational challenges through a single program. This paper examines the AAHS book sale as a model of grassroots support, exploring its impact on the ASM Library's budget, its outreach and community-building benefits, and the logistical demands that come with organizing and executing the program.

Institutional Context and Funding Challenges

The Arizona State Museum, located at the University of Arizona (UA), is one of the oldest and largest anthropology museums in the Southwest, dedicated to preserving, researching, and interpreting the cultural heritage of the Indigenous peoples of the region. As a research and educational institution, it holds extensive collections of Southwestern American Indian artifacts, including pottery, textiles, and basketry, which are invaluable to scholars, students, and the public alike.

The museum's financial challenges have been exacerbated by the University of Arizona's broader budget crisis that emerged in late 2023. The UA faces a projected \$177 million annual shortfall – meaning a \$177 million deficit every year without intervention – and 70 days cash on hand for the end of fiscal year 2024 (Cuellar, 2024). This crisis resulted from decades-long budgeting practices, decentralized budget and operations models, lower-than-expected revenues, investment in strategic priorities, and increasing costs in athletics, as well as external factors including the COVID-19 pandemic and rising inflation (University of Arizona, n.d.). The university implemented immediate cost-cutting measures including introducing new purchasing policies and guidelines, deferring nonessential capital projects, instituting hiring and compensation freezes from December 2024 through June 2024, and delaying the FY 2025 Salary Increase Program (University of Arizona, n.d.). These university-wide constraints have compounded existing challenges at the Arizona State Museum.

Beyond budgetary challenges, the Arizona State Museum faces a critical infrastructure crisis. As of August 1, 2024, our 100-year-old North Building (our exhibits and public programs building) is closed for an indefinite number of years due to outdated and faulty electrical and plumbing systems, HVAC, fire alarms, smoke detectors, and sprinkler systems. There is currently no plan to reopen the building (Arizona State Museum, n.d.-c). In September 2024, the Arizona Board of Regents denied the school's request for \$50 million in system revenue bonds for the museum's upkeep (Cuellar, 2025).

The museum operates the largest and busiest state-run curation facility in the nation, growing by 1,000 cubic feet per year, and currently holding 38,000 cubic feet of material (Arizona State Museum, n.d.-a). This rapid growth strains existing storage capacity and creates urgent needs for expanded facilities. A high priority is an off-campus curation facility in Tucson. Collecting for more than a century, ASM is quickly running out of space to curate and facilitate research on archaeological collections recovered from state, county, and municipal lands in Arizona (Arizona State Museum, n.d.-b).

These broader crises have fundamentally altered the library's structure and operations. The library lost its Assistant Librarian position in 2020, and the Archivist position was combined with the Head Librarian position in the same year. The annual budget for acquisitions is restricted to \$2,000, which comes from interest from two small endowments, severely limiting traditional collection development. This budget supports both monograph purchases and the maintenance of print journal subscriptions, while electronic journal subscriptions are maintained by the main library at the university. The library's departmental budget relies heavily on external funding sources, with book sale proceeds constituting approximately 90% of the departmental budget outside of staffing and major expenses like the catalog that are not part of the departmental budget. These financial constraints have made it difficult to maintain adequate staffing levels, support research, and invest in necessary preservation technologies for extensive collections. The budgetary limitations also restrict the museum's ability to engage in new projects, upgrade facilities, and expand community engagement programs, making alternative funding sources like the AAHS book sale essential for basic operations.

History and Structure of the AAHS Book Sale

Begun in 1992 as a way to supplement the ASM Library's meager acquisitions fund, the biannual book sales have operated successfully for over three decades. What started as a modest effort to enhance limited purchasing power has evolved into an essential lifeline for library operations. The AAHS, founded in 1916 and affiliated with the Arizona State Museum, serves as the organizing body. The AAHS mission is to foster the growth and sharing of knowledge of the diverse communities in the U.S. Southwest and Northern Mexico over time.

Over the more than 30 years since its inception, the book sale has grown from a supplementary funding source to the primary means of supporting the library's operations. As university budget constraints have intensified and traditional funding sources have diminished, the sale's importance has increased exponentially. Today, the proceeds constitute approximately 90% of the library's departmental budget outside of staffing and major institutional expenses, demonstrating how a community-driven initiative designed to augment modest resources has become fundamental to the library's growth.

The book sale operates through a systematic process that maximizes both financial returns and collection development opportunities. AAHS accepts book donations from the public, receiving approximately 330 cartons annually. The library retains any titles desired for the permanent collection before pricing begins. AAHS volunteers then research and price titles, sorting volumes by topic including General Anthropology, North American Anthropology, Non-North American Anthropology, Southwest Anthropology, South American Anthropology, Fiction, and miscellaneous categories. Books are then boxed and stored until the biannual sales.

Figure 1

Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society Benefit Book Sale Setup Using Traditional Tables



The fall sale takes place in October in the museum lobby over two days, Friday and Saturday, providing an indoor event in a controlled environment (see Figure 1). The spring sale occurs in March on the historic berms (front lawn) of the ASM over Saturday and Sunday, coinciding with the Tucson Festival of Books, one of the largest book festivals in the country (Tucson Festival of Books, n.d.). Saturday of the spring sale also coincides with ASM's Friends of the Collections sale. The financial structure demonstrates the sale's critical importance to library operations. AAHS donates 90% of book sale proceeds to the library while retaining 10% for the organization's operations. Additionally, AAHS raises revenue for the organization through sales of hats and T-shirts during the events. Each sale generates between \$3,000 and \$7,000 for the ASM Library, with annual contributions between \$6,000 and \$11,000. These proceeds constitute the vast majority of the library's departmental budget outside of staffing and

major institutional expenses. Funds primarily cover student employee costs, enabling 15 public hours per week, while additional funds support collection development, software and technology needs, book repair, binding, and collection maintenance. The proportion of the library budget spent on archival supplies and archival processing costs is also increasing.

The book sale's impact on collection development can be measured through specific data points that demonstrate its significance. Approximately 100 titles are added to the permanent collection yearly, with only 12 titles purchased through conventional acquisition methods annually. This means that 88 titles, or 88% of annual additions, are acquired through the book sale donation process. The donation-based system extends the effective purchasing power significantly beyond the limited acquisitions budget.

These metrics illustrate how the book sale fundamentally transforms the library's collection development capacity, enabling growth that would be impossible within traditional budgetary constraints.

Community Impact and Collection Development

The AAHS book sale extends beyond financial benefits to become a cherished community resource, providing a unique platform for connection and shared memory. The book sale also provides essential community services that address specific needs within the anthropological community. The specialized nature of the collection attracts donors who value having their materials reach appropriate audiences rather than general resale markets. The emotional dimension proves particularly significant for donors facing life transitions. Grieving family members find comfort knowing that scholarly collections will reach interested readers rather than being dispersed through commercial channels. This service aspect creates lasting community relationships that extend beyond individual transactions.

The AAHS book sale functions as more than a marketplace – it serves as a collective act of service that brings genuine joy to the close-knit Arizona anthropology community. Donors find meaning in ensuring their books reach a specialized audience of students, researchers, and enthusiasts, particularly when downsizing or grieving loved ones. Patrons often spend hours immersed in the diverse selection, leaving with stacks of discoveries that frequently contain intimate traces of the past: inscriptions from former mentors or colleagues, bookmarks, receipts, or handwritten notes that strengthen the shared intellectual heritage binding the community. This experience of

uncovering both rare texts and personal connections fosters camaraderie among local anthropologists, students, faculty, and general readers, creating a day of teamwork and meaningful connection that extends far beyond the simple exchange of books.

Occasionally, a sense of cyclical history emerges, with some books appearing multiple times throughout the sales' 32-year history. Volunteers mark prices in pencil on the inner cover, and it's not unusual to find these marks as traces of the book's journey through previous sales. This subtle evidence of circulation among familiar hands and minds adds an enduring layer to the sales' impact. Each year, the AAHS book sale reaffirms its role as a cultural touchstone for Arizona's anthropology community, bringing joy, connection, and a shared commitment to the field's growth and preservation.

The community-driven model enables collection development that reflects actual research interests and usage patterns. When specific titles are identified as valuable as donations are processed, they are added directly to the permanent collection. This approach ensures relevance while managing costs, as the selection process is informed by community donations rather than speculative purchasing. Every year, the sale receives a range of contributions from foundational texts to obscure, out-of-print works that contribute to a well-rounded collection reflecting diverse perspectives and subjects. Through this community-driven model, the AAHS book sale enhances access to knowledge and strengthens the library's role as a cultural and educational hub.

The timing of the book sale's establishment in 1992 has proven particularly fortuitous given the ongoing generational transition within Arizona's archaeological community. The University of Arizona School of Anthropology achieved national prominence in the 1970s under the leadership of influential figures such as Emil Haury, Raymond Thompson, and William Longacre, who helped establish Arizona as a major center for Southwestern archaeology and the development of processual archaeological theory (School of Anthropology, University of Arizona, n.d.). Notably, Haury, Thompson, and Longacre themselves donated their personal books and archives to ASM and AAHS, establishing a precedent for the scholarly community that continues today. Many archaeologists trained during this pivotal period, are now entering retirement, and are following the example set by their mentors in downsizing their personal libraries and seeking appropriate repositories for their scholarly collections. These donations often include rare field reports, out-of-print monographs, and specialized publications that would be difficult or impossible to acquire through traditional purchasing channels, making the book sale an invaluable mechanism for

preserving the intellectual heritage of Arizona's archaeological community while supporting the library's collection development goals.

Toll on the Body

We calculated that, on average, the AAHS accepts roughly 330 cartons of books in any given year. All books are brought to the museum where they are temporarily stored in the basement and then cycled through a chest freezer as part of our integrated pest management protocols. Then the books are stored in various storage locations awaiting students or staff to check relevant titles in the catalog for possible inclusion in the permanent collection. Then AAHS volunteers come to price the books in the library staff area, place them back in cartons where they go back into various storage areas (usually the basement) until the biannual benefit sale. This cycle represents approximately 18 separate lifts for each carton of donated books. At 330 donated cartons per year, that amounts to 5,940 lifts (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Data for the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society Benefit Book Sale



Note. Includes individual box lifts for each donation and a breakdown of the data for the year 2022 including quantity of cartons donated and cumulative lifts.

To reduce the strain on staff, heavy-duty baker's racks (see Figure 3) were purchased so that priced books could be placed directly onto shelves, which could then be rolled into storage and, on sale day, easily rolled out to the museum lobby or outside for the sale held during the Tucson Festival of Books. After testing the baker's racks, it was found that their capacity was a bit too large, resulting in excessive weight. As a solution, rolling bookshelves were purchased, which have proven highly effective. The bookshelves are also covered on top, offering protection in case of precipitation during outdoor sales. Both the baker's racks and rolling bookshelves have significantly reduced the time needed to set up the sales in the morning and to store the books afterward.

Figure 3

Image of the Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society Benefit Book Sale in the Lobby of the Arizona State Museum.



Note. Image shows the use of rolling bakers' racks to display books, 2022.

Literature Review

The following section looks at previous research related to academic library book sales, library fundraising, community outreach, and book sales in general with specific looks at cost-benefit analysis, collaboration, international perspectives, and marketing and engagement.

The article "Library Book Sales: A Cost-Benefit Analysis" by Audrey Fenner (2005) critically examines the assumption that library book sales generate a net profit for institutions. Through a detailed cost-benefit analysis, Fenner challenges this perception, highlighting various hidden costs involved in organizing and executing these sales. The

analysis covers different types of book sales, including annual, ongoing, and online sales, concluding that they are generally not cost-effective.

Fenner begins by discussing the main purposes of library book sales, which are typically aimed at managing collections by disposing of unwanted materials while also attempting to raise funds. Additionally, some argue that book sales offer public relations benefits for the library. However, Fenner points out that the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of these sales are often compromised. One of the key arguments in the article is the presence of numerous hidden costs associated with organizing book sales. These include the time and labor required from library staff to sort, store, prepare, and oversee the sales. Fenner emphasizes that these costs are often overlooked, but they can significantly reduce the profitability of book sales.

Staff time spent on these activities represents an opportunity cost, as employees are diverted from their regular duties to focus on the sale. Fenner supports her argument with examples from libraries such as the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and Missouri Western State College, where book sales were found to result in a net loss when accounting for the time and effort required. The article also considers additional costs beyond staff time, such as storage, equipment rental, and security measures. Fenner points out that these indirect costs are often underestimated but can outweigh the financial benefits of book sales. As a result, the author questions the overall value of these fundraising efforts.

Many of the downsides of book sales, especially the toll on the body and use of staff time, do resonate with the case study at ASM. However, the ASM Library experience presents a contrasting case where traditional cost-benefit calculations may not fully capture the value proposition. While Fenner's analysis applies to many institutional contexts, the ASM model demonstrates how critical funding dependencies and ASM's highly relevant collection development can alter the cost-benefit equation.

The article "A Cooperative Medical Library/Public Library Book Sale: New Avenue for Marketing the Academic Health Sciences Library" by Maureen S. Battistella describes a collaborative effort between the Lister Hill Library (LHL) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham and the Birmingham Public Library (BPL) to conduct a joint book sale (Battistella 1985). Due to limited storage and an upcoming book sale eight months away, LHL proposed a cooperative sale with BPL. The collaboration offered benefits such as expanded storage capacity provided by BPL, increased community visibility, and access to a broader audience, including both the health sciences community and general public. The partnership was mutually advantageous, with LHL contributing materials and volunteers while BPL handled logistics and venue.

The joint effort also led to positive internal effects at LHL, encouraging teamwork among departments and fostering better relations between the library staff and the medical center community. Despite challenges in pricing, revenue allocation, and disposal of unsold materials, the sale was successful in increasing awareness of LHL within the medical center and the broader community, making it a visible and positive marketing initiative. Both libraries gained from the cooperation, and LHL expressed interest in continuing the partnership for future sales. The ASM-AAHS partnership similarly leverages organizational strengths while distributing operational burdens.

The essay "Waiting for Death at Library Sales" by Susan Holahan (2013) captures the author's reflections on attending library book sales, particularly in Connecticut. Holahan provides a vivid description of the experience, depicting the anticipation and frenzy that ensues when the sales begin. The author explores how these sales have become a form of community ritual, drawing in diverse groups of readers, sellers, and volunteers. The essay contrasts the joys of finding hidden literary treasures with the commercialized aspects of the event, such as professional sellers who use scanners to identify valuable books for resale. Holahan reflects on the cultural shift they have witnessed over two decades of attending these sales, where books are increasingly treated as commodities rather than objects of intellectual or sentimental value.

At the AAHS sales at ASM, there have been times when book sellers come and buy in bulk, leaving conflicting feelings over the higher sales as opposed to community members benefiting from the selections.

Holahan (2013) describes the physical toll these sales take on both buyers and volunteers and how they reflect larger societal changes, including the decline of independent bookstores and the growing commodification of books through online resale markets. The essay is filled with personal anecdotes that illustrate the changing nature of these events, including moments of camaraderie among readers, clashes with aggressive sellers, and the nostalgia for a time when books were revered. Holahan also addresses her own evolving relationship with library sales, acknowledging both the joy and frustration they bring. In the end, the author suggests that, while they may feel increasingly out of place in this new landscape, the allure of books and the sense of community they provide still draw them to these sales, even as the sales evolve into something they no longer fully recognize.

During the spring book sales at ASM that coincide with the Tucson Festival of Books, the general atmosphere of celebrating authors and literacy is palpable and there is joy in liberating books from the library and browsing them *plein air*.

In the article "Advocacy, Public Relations, and Sales Promotion as Correlates of Effective Patronage of Library and Information Science" by Mandela N. David (2022) explores how academic libraries can enhance their visibility and patronage by employing marketing strategies such as advocacy, public relations, and sales promotions. While this article is slightly off topic, it relates to the idea that the AAHS book sale also functions as an outreach event. With libraries facing challenges like limited funding and increasing user expectations, the article highlights the need for libraries to adopt promotional techniques that create awareness, attract users, and build long-term relationships. David emphasizes that marketing is no longer just about selling products but includes promoting services and fostering user loyalty. The author advocates for using tools like consumer and trade promotions, social media, public relations campaigns, and advocacy efforts to reinforce the library's mission and encourage repeat patronage. The article suggests that by effectively promoting their services and building strong public relations, libraries can improve their relevance, increase usage, and establish a positive reputation within their communities.

Research from developing countries provides relevant parallels to resource-constrained academic libraries. In "Gifts in University Library Resource Development in the Information Age," M. B. Edem (2010) examines the role of gifts and donations in supplementing library collections at Nigerian universities, particularly the University of Calabar. The study underscores how Nigerian university libraries, like many in developing countries, face ongoing challenges due to limited funding and inadequate infrastructure for digital resources, which limits their ability to maintain up-to-date and comprehensive collections. This issue is compounded by broader economic constraints and inconsistent internet connectivity, which, while allowing for global access to digital materials, remains unreliable in many areas of Nigeria. Consequently, print donations play a critical role in collection development, contrasting with library systems in more economically developed countries, where digital resources are increasingly accessible and commonly prioritized.

The article "Funding for Collection Development Activities at Chancellor College Library, University of Malawi" by Aubrey Chaputula and Benzies Y. Boadi (2020) reinforces the findings that collection development via print donations is more common outside of major academic libraries in the United States. This study investigates the funding landscape for collection development at Chancellor College Library at the University of Malawi, assessing the effects of limited financial support on its collection growth and maintenance. Using a case study approach supported by financial reports and acquisition statistics, the authors find that funding for the library's collection development has been insufficient, resulting in heavy reliance on donations and

exchanges. The data shows that, across a 10-year span (1998-2008), only a small fraction of the total university budget was allocated to library materials, far below the recommended 6%. This funding shortfall led to a marked dependency on donated print materials, which constituted nearly 80% of book acquisitions and 68% of journal acquisitions during the period. The authors highlight that this dependence, while somewhat beneficial, often failed to align with the specific information needs of users, as donations rarely match a library's collection development priorities. To address these issues, the authors suggest increased budget advocacy within university administration, the introduction of a library fee for students, and the strategic solicitation of relevant book and journal donations. These measures aim to create a sustainable funding stream that aligns acquisitions with user needs, reducing the current reliance on external donations for collection growth.

These studies reveal that donation-dependent collection development, while presenting challenges in maintaining balanced subject coverage, can be essential for libraries operating under severe budget constraints. The ASM Library's experience aligns with these international examples, though within a different economic context. The ASM Library is unique in the value we place on collecting print in stark contrast to many libraries that collect e-resources nearly exclusively while weeding print as discretely as possible.

Recommendations for Implementation

Libraries considering similar programs should evaluate several key factors, particularly the size and specialization of their operations. Community characteristics matter significantly, as specialized academic communities with shared interests provide optimal donor and patron bases for small, specialized libraries. Adequate storage capacity is essential for receiving, processing, and storing donations. Established community organizations can provide essential volunteer labor, while investment in appropriate equipment reduces long-term operational costs.

Book sales offer several positive factors including reliable annual income streams independent of grant cycles, community engagement and relationship building, collection development opportunities beyond budget constraints, and volunteer involvement that strengthens institutional connections. However, small, specialized academic libraries must also address significant challenges including substantial staff time requirements, physical demands of processing large donation volumes, storage space limitations, and quality control in donation management.

The ASM model demonstrates viability when book sale income constitutes a significant portion of operational budgets in small, specialized libraries. Larger academic libraries with adequate alternative funding may find the cost-benefit equation less favorable, while those facing severe budget constraints may discover essential support through community-based sales.

Conclusion

The Arizona Archaeological and Historical Society book sale represents a successful model of community-centered academic library support that addresses multiple institutional needs simultaneously. The program fundamentally transforms the library's collection development capacity, enabling the addition of relevant and unique titles through the donation-based system compared with limited purchases through conventional methods with the otherwise smaller acquisitions budget.

The quantitative impact is clear: 88% of annual collection additions result from the book sale process, while traditional purchasing accounts for only a handful of titles yearly. This dramatic enhancement of collection development capabilities demonstrates how community partnerships can overcome severe budgetary limitations.

Beyond financial support, the program creates meaningful community connections while providing essential services to donors and patrons. The specialized focus attracts appropriate audiences and ensures donated materials reach interested users rather than general commercial markets.

However, successful implementation requires careful consideration of operational demands, including significant staff time commitments and physical processing requirements. Libraries evaluating similar programs must assess their institutional capacity for managing large-scale community donations while maintaining service quality.

The ASM Library experience suggests that community-based book sales can provide essential support for small, specialized academic libraries facing severe budget constraints, particularly when traditional funding sources are inadequate for unrestricted funding for varied operational needs and expenses. The model offers a sustainable approach to library funding that strengthens community relationships while supporting institutional missions.

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