

Stretch goals: Launching crowdfunded comics collections in academic libraries

Mara L. Thacker AND Jason Larsen

This article presents a case study reflecting on the first two years of collecting crowdfunded comics at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The case study demonstrates the significant resource investment required to start such a specialized collection, and that the project met its goal to diversify the comics collection by adding titles from BIPOC and LGBTQ+ creators.

More than a decade ago, *Publishers weekly* ran an article with the cheeky headline “Is Kickstarter the #2 Graphic Novel Publisher?”¹ Regardless of the truth of that back then or today, it is undeniable that crowdfunding sites like Kickstarter represent a large part of the comics publishing industry with one 2021 article noting that, “If Kickstarter were an indie publisher, it would have a market share of about 2.5%, which would place it in the lower ranks of the top 10 if Kickstarter were a commercial publisher.”² Despite their large market share in comics publishing, crowdfunded comics are noticeably absent from most library collections. This is problematic for many libraries that aim to create diverse and inclusive collections since crowdfunding allows niche and marginalized voices an opportunity to create and sell art outside of mainstream channels. The challenges and opportunities for libraries to collect crowdfunded comics, and the absence of crowdfunded comics in library collections, is documented in a study conducted by Matthew Murray and Mara Thacker in 2021.³

Murray and Thacker’s study was based on a survey that we distributed through various listservs and social media channels asking for librarians who collect comics to respond. The survey contained a total of 22 questions, though only the first seven questions were asked of all participants. Six of these questions were designed to identify the type of institution and the acquisitions processes of the participant’s library. The seventh question was whether the respondent’s library acquires comics through crowdfunding platforms which would generate a separate set of questions for those that acquire comics from crowdfunding platforms from those who do not.

The survey had a total of 53 responses representing 51 unique institutions. Of these 51 institutions, 46 institutions said they do not acquire comics through crowdfunding platforms and only five said that they do. Three institutions indicated they collected non-comics material—including literature, zines, and poetry—through crowdfunding sites. In pulling together different themes from those that collect crowdfunded materials and those that do not, Murray and Thacker identified common barriers as well as incentives for collecting crowdfunded comics. They then used these themes to develop a set of recommendations for libraries and professional organizations, as well as comics creators who use crowdfunding platforms to better facilitate the inclusion of crowdfunded comics (and other crowdfunded materials) in library collections. These recommendations became the starting point for the University of Illinois in developing a crowdfunded comics collection.

Overcoming logistical barriers

Like many institutions represented in the 2021 study, at the University of Illinois there were barriers to collecting crowdfunded comics that needed to be

1. Allen, Todd. “Is Kickstarter the #2 Graphic Novel Publisher?” Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/52925-is-kickstarter-the-2-graphic-novel-publisher.html>.

2. MacDonald, Heidi. “In a Huge Year for Comics, Kickstarter Explains More of Its Move to Blockchain.” Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.comicsbeat.com/in-a-huge-year-for-comics-kickstarter-explains-more-of-its-move-to-blockchain/>.

3. Murray, Matthew, and Mara Thacker. “What About Crowdfunded Comics?” in *Comic Books, Special Collections, and the Academic Library*, edited by Brian Flota and Kate Morris. Chicago: Association of College & Research Libraries, forthcoming.

addressed prior to backing our first campaign. Most of the barriers had to do with regulations for procurement and acquisitions — for example, the need to work with pre-approved vendors who have filled out the requisite paperwork, or the need for a predictable delivery date in order to disburse payment. These barriers were resolved after a conversation with the Director of Acquisitions who identified a vendor, Compact Disc Source, willing to back crowdfunding campaigns on our behalf and invoice us upon receipt of the items for a modest service fee.

Another logistical barrier to beginning a crowdfunded comic collection is the initial investment of time in operationalizing a unique collection initiative. To overcome this barrier, a graduate student worker with expertise in comics was hired with the expectation that they would devote significant project hours to helping launch this project. While the subject librarian was responsible for bigger picture decision making, scoping, and ultimately placing the orders, the graduate student assisted in executing the vision by developing processes, tracking tools, and then creating documentation for those while conducting the initial searches to identify which projects to back. Without the assistance of the graduate student, it would have been difficult to fit an entirely new initiative within existing workflows for the subject librarian.

We began the project knowing that there were likely to be challenges related to the need for original cataloging and tracking total expenditures since some campaigns may take a long time to deliver their promised products and still others may not achieve their funding goals. We planned to assess the program after a year to see if it would be sustainable in the long term, and to what extent investing in such a collection supports the library's strategic goals.

Setting parameters

The decision to begin our pilot project by focusing on Kickstarter was based on the immense popularity of the platform with comics creators — both new and established. We knew it would give us a variety of comics projects to choose from, though it came with the limitation of being primarily U.S.-based creators which is at odds with Illinois' emphasis on collecting international comics from the Global South. The idea was that if the first-year pilot program was a success, then we could identify other crowdfunding platforms that might have better representation from international creators or feature non-English titles.

With 2,825 comics projects launched on Kickstarter in 2021, one early priority was setting up parameters for which projects to fund.⁴ Given that the unique opportunity in acquiring crowdfunded comics lies in acquiring works from marginalized and niche creators, and that the library's strategic plan emphasizes diversity and inclusion, we decided to focus on projects featuring BIPOC and LGTBQ creators. We also decided to leave some leeway for funding projects relating to horror, sport, or diaspora/migration since these are existing strengths in the comics collection.

Having set the parameters, we began a weekly check of new Kickstarter comics projects. Projects aligning with the scope of the collection are entered into a tracking sheet for the subject librarian to review. In the beginning, this work was incredibly time consuming. The initial review of available projects included a large body of work, and there were also some discussions about how to tweak the tracking sheet for the most efficient review. After a few iterations, the tracking sheet evolved to include a first column labeled "Wish to Acquire" with drop down choices of "Yes", "No", or "Maybe" with a default answer of "Unreviewed" to help the subject selector identify where to pick up in making selections. Other columns include:

- Week of
- Link
- Project title
- Keywords
- Notable items
- Probability of being funded
- Recommended pledge tier
- Cost of pledge tier
- Contents of tier selected
- Add-on contents

4. Salkowitz, Rob. "Embroiled In Crypto Controversy, Kickstarter Touts Huge Year for Comics Projects." Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2021/12/14/embroiled-in-crypto-controversy-kickstarter-touts-huge-year-for-comics-projects/?sh=182e12ff7cae>

- Previously backed creator
- Rational for tier selection
- Estimated delivery date
- Campaign end date
- Days remaining in campaign

These data points were selected to expedite evaluation by the subject selector, and also to be used for later assessment and tracking. After a few months of settling into the new routine, the established pattern became for the subject librarian to submit orders to the vendor on a monthly basis with some additional orders off-cycle if a selected project had a short turnaround time for funding. The “Days remaining in campaign” data point displays as a heat map was particularly useful for identifying projects that needed immediate attention.

Assessment and tracking mechanisms

After one year of backing crowdfunded comics campaigns, as we began receiving items and adding them to the catalog, we turned our attention to tracking and assessment. We wanted to see how many of the projects we had backed were successfully funded, how many of the successfully funded projects had fulfilled their campaigns, and how much time had passed since the expected fulfillment date for those that hadn’t fulfilled their campaigns. We wanted to get a sense of whether the total annual expenditures were aligning with our initial expectations and assess whether this pilot program would be sustainable as a permanent feature of our comics and graphic novel collection.

In order to track this data, we developed a new spreadsheet that ported much of the data over from the order spreadsheet and added four new columns:

- Project fulfilled?
- Days past expected fulfillment date
- campaign status
- Comics at the library?

We did realize early into the using the receivables tracking spreadsheet that the necessity to create original catalog records for the majority of the items received was causing a lag between receiving the items and being able to find them in the catalog. In other words, there were likely items that would appear unfulfilled based on a catalog search, but which we had actually received. While that has some impact on the accuracy of the receivable tracking spreadsheet, we were unable to identify a reasonable workaround so we accept that there may be some inaccuracies.

Year one data

Having implemented a receivable tracking spreadsheet, we assessed the first-year data to determine the extent to which the project was achieving our goals of acquiring unique and diverse comics titles emphasizing BIPOC and LGBTQ creators. We also wanted to see what proportion of projects we had backed had been successful campaigns, and what proportion of successful projects had met their delivery goals and added to the library catalog. For the 2021-2022 academic year, we backed 123 Kickstarter campaigns. Of these 123 projects, only 7 of the campaigns didn’t succeed in reaching their funding goals. Looking at the self-reported demographics of the creators for the 116 projects that were successfully funded we acquired comics from:

- 30 Black Creators
- 24 LGBTQ+ Creators
- 19 Studio or collective group Creators
- 13 AAPI or Asian Creators
- 10 Women Creators
- 8 White/European Male Creators
- 4 Latina/Latino Creators
- 3 Indigenous Creators
- 2 Indian Creators
- 1 Chinese Creator

- 1 Dominican Creator
- 1 Mexican Creator

Of these 116 successfully funded projects, 92 have fulfilled their campaigns and claim to have delivered items. There is a discrepancy between the total number of holdings we should have received and what is available in the catalog because each of these items requires original cataloging, requiring substantial time and staff support to complete. Helpfully, each item received via a Kickstarter campaign contains a note in the catalog record indicating its provenance. At the time of writing, 59 individual comics holdings are available through the Illinois catalog.

On the other hand, of the 116 successfully funded projects there are 24 projects that have not updated to indicate that they have fulfilled their campaigns. At least 5 of these have been revealed to be due to a glitch Kickstarter has in funding. According to our vendor, occasionally Kickstarter will show an account as having backed a campaign but decline to charge the card associated with the account, therefore nullifying the backing of the project. Fortunately, we are not charged for items until they are received so it hasn't been at a financial cost to Illinois or to our vendor, but it is a frustrating situation.

Year two

During the summer at the University of Illinois there is a period designated to give staff time to close out the fiscal year and roll over the new funds. While some exceptions can be made, especially when there is a faculty or student request for an item, largely speaking acquisitions are put on pause during this time. For routine collection development, this isn't a problem, but for crowdfunded materials which have a short window of availability, it is a challenge. We did pause our crowdfunded collecting during the summer and likely missed a few interesting titles as a result, but we are still on track to match the first year's numbers of total projects backed.

With three months left in the current fiscal cycle, we have backed more than 75 Kickstarter campaigns, as well as a handful of titles via another crowdfunding site, BackerKit, as well as directly through the Iron Circus Comics website. Iron Circus Comics moved away from working with Kickstarter in 2022 following Kickstarter's announcement that they would be implementing blockchain technology.⁵

Of the 75 projects funded, 72 of the campaigns were successful and 20 have already fulfilled their campaigns. The demographics represented in the successfully funded projects include:

- 14 LGBTQ+ Creators
- 11 Black Creators
- 12 Studio or collective group Creators
- 10 Women Creators
- 10 White/European Male Creators
- 8 AAPI or Asian Creators
- 3 Latina/Latino Creators
- 2 Indigenous Creators
- 1 Chinese Creator
- 1 Mexican Creator

As we continue into the academic year, we are working towards fewer instances of backing unsuccessful projects and continue to refine our strategy in this regard. At this stage, we primarily back projects that are already funded or close to funding. For projects that are not close to funded but we are otherwise interested in, we wait until closer to the end of the campaign to make our decision. In a few instances, this has resulted in missed opportunities to fund a campaign because of the short turnaround time, but overall, this is a better strategy.

Lessons learned and next steps

Collecting crowdfunded comics has been proven possible despite policies and regulations requiring negotiating a workaround. Furthermore, there is evidence

5. Salkowitz, Rob. "Why Comics' Top Crowdfunder Is Leaving Kickstarter for Her New 'Poorcraft' Project." Accessed March 5, 2023. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robsalkowitz/2022/02/07/why-comics-top-crowdfunder-is-leaving-kickstarter-for-her-latest-project/?sh=75b3418859cb>

that this initiative has resulted in adding unique titles that further the library's goals of building diverse and inclusive collections. That said, it hasn't been a smooth road and there are ongoing challenges and lessons to be learned from our experiences.

One challenge is that the space itself is constantly evolving. With some creators like Iron Circus leaving Kickstarter and new sites like Zoop popping up, it can be hard to follow which sites should be added to the rotation for tracking. The time commitment to tracking Kickstarter alone is significant, so figuring out how to incorporate new sites is a challenge. Still, given that Kickstarter primarily offers projects based out of the United States, it is a worthwhile endeavor to seek out alternative crowdfunding sites for additional international content alone.

In addition to challenges associated with acquisitions, the first years of the project have shown that the impact on technical services due to the need for original cataloging records is also significant. While cataloging backlogs can happen in many different areas, due to the unique ways these items are ordered and tracked, it can also cause challenges in assessment and receivable tracking.

Perhaps the thorniest lingering issue we haven't reconciled yet is what to do with all the digital rewards and PDFs we are receiving. These digital rewards are often included as bonus content in the reward tiers for print materials. Sometimes the content is identical to the print rewards, but occasionally other unique items may be included as well. Because the items are in copyright and may be picked up by a traditional comics publisher, we cannot distribute these items to our users. Yet we have paid for them and from a preservation standpoint they have value as those comics which get lost, stolen, or damaged may be irreplaceable if not otherwise picked up by a mainstream vendor. At this stage, the librarian is keeping them grouped together under a folder in her email application, but as a long-term solution, it's not ideal. In the future, figuring out how to handle digital rewards will be a priority.

Conclusion

Beginning a crowdfunded comic collection took a significant investment of time, money, and staffing. Since much of the time commitment was frontloaded into developing then refining workflows and creating accompanying documentation, we hope that by sharing our experience and process, it will be more attainable for other libraries aiming to diversify their comics collections. In the future, if more libraries are able to commit to including crowdfunded comics in their collections, we hope that will become part of evolving conversations around collective collecting and collaboration between these libraries to build a strong national collection.

Mara L. Thacker
*Associate Professor, South Asian Studies &
Global Popular Culture Librarian*
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
1408 W. Gregory Dr.
Urbana, IL 61801
USA
Email: mthacker@illinois.edu

Jason Larsen
Independent Academic Comic Librarian
1408 W. Gregory Dr.
Urbana, IL 61801
USA
Email: jasonlarsen622@gmail.com