

# “The bane of a music librarian’s existence”: why and how music libraries rebind spiral- and comb-bound scores

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SEMLA ANNUAL MEETING IN OXFORD, MS

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# Spiral bindings

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# Comb bindings

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# 2008 MLA Preservation of Scores and Sheet Music Guidelines



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## Comb and Spiral Bindings



### Description

Spiral bindings involve perforating the spine of the item, usually a large thin score, with small round holes and winding through these a spiral of metal, usually covered in plastic.

Comb bindings involve perforating the text block with fewer but wider rectangular holes, through which a plastic comb is inserted using a relatively small and inexpensive machine, which also cuts the holes.

Comb and spiral bindings are the bane of a music librarian's existence. Some libraries will refuse to order materials if they know they will arrive comb bound. However, there are options for dealing with them. For an individual's private use in performance this is not a bad bind. It will lie open very flat, and the pages turn quietly.

The two problems for libraries are the fact that the spiral must be significantly wider than the thickness of the text block, making the bound item hard to shelve, especially if there are many of them together, and the perforation of the pages, which are likely to wear along the spiral and fall out under heavy use. Comb bindings do lie flat, but page turns are noisy, the pages wear even more rapidly than with spiral binds, and the plastic combs degrade and become fragile after 15–20 years. Comb bindings offer very little positive value, but are in common use by self-publishing composers because they are cheap and

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### Solutions

- In nearly all cases the best long-term option is to remove the comb or spiral, cut off the holes, and rebind the score, now a collection of unbound pages, by another means. The problem that often arises, however, and the reason for some libraries' refusal to purchase comb-bound materials, is that if the holes are cut off and the amount of interior margin left may be too small to allow for a more durable bind. This is particularly the case for thicker scores. Although a double fan bind can be applied with as little as  $\frac{1}{4}$ " gutter margin and produce a result that could be read like a book (held partially open and moved back and forth to see first one side of the opening and then the other), it will likely not be readable when open "flat" on a music stand and will invite damage by people trying to photocopy pages on a flat platen. In all too many cases, the holes actually cut into the score itself.
- For scores thin enough to pamphlet bind (up to 20 sheets), one option is to guard the pages together down the center without cutting off the holes by gluing the spine edges, holes and all, to strips of paper or Tyvek. (Note that the glue must be brushed onto the sheets themselves, not the center strips, because of the holes.) Full directions are found in the page on [guarding](#).
- For thicker scores with inadequate margin, the one remaining option is to photocopy the entire score onto larger paper (or onto the same size paper with the text reduced to 90%) with a gutter large enough to adhesive bind. Note that this does not violate copyright as long as the original is destroyed, since the publisher cannot supply a bindable copy.

Alice Carli, formats

Last updated: March 16, 2008, at 03:24 PM EDT

# Literature Review

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Dorothy Lawton, “Binding Problems in Music: Methods and Costs,” *Notes* 5 (November 1937): 24–28.

# Literature Review

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Dorothy Lawton, “Binding Problems in Music: Methods and Costs,” *Notes* 5 (November 1937): 24–28.

Why bind scores at all?

- Preserve scores better than boxes or cases
- Pretty and colorful, makes people want to check them out (in 1937, at least)

Problem with library binding: scores may not lay flat

Spiral binding experimental at the time—solved problem of scores laying flat

# Literature Review – 2

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Ted Honea, “Conservation and preservation,” in *Modern Music Librarianship: Essays in honor of Ruth Watanabe*, ed. Alfred Mann (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1989): 143–55.

Edie Tibbits, “Binding Conventions for music materials,” *Library Resources and Technical Services (LRTS)* 40, no. 1 (January 1996): 33–40.

Alice Carli, *Binding and Care of Printed Music*, Music Library Association Basic Manual Series, no. 2 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

# Literature Review – 3

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Problems with spiral and comb bindings in published sources:

- Light-weight covers and lack of stable spine = floppy on shelf = permanent bending
- Lack of sewing or glue = loose sheets
- Tangle with each other on shelves
- Combs and spirals deteriorate over time (20–40 years)
- Noisy page turns

Honea: “Highly unsuited for library circulation purposes and...not even very satisfying for personal use”(p.147).

# Literature Review – 4

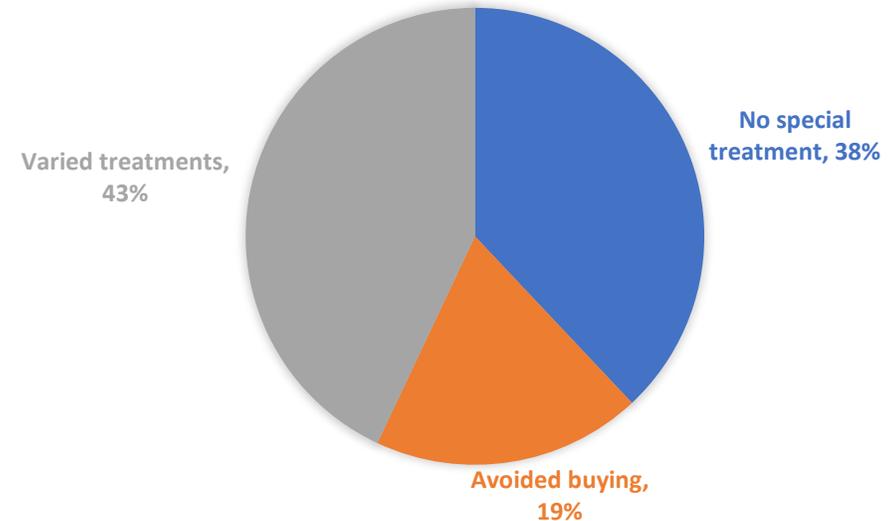
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Edie Tibbits, “Binding Conventions for music materials,” *Library Resources and Technical Services (LRTS)* 40, no. 1 (January 1996): 33–40.

Solutions for spiral and comb bindings:

- Reinforcing the covers
- Sending to bindery (if margins allow)
- Placing in a pamphlet binder or box
- Attach to the enclosure with tape (1)
- “Lacing” (1)

**BINDING SOLUTIONS, TIBBITS 1996  
(16 LIBRARIES)**



# Literature Review – 5

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Alice Carli, *Binding and Care of Printed Music*, Music Library Association Basic Manual Series, no. 2 (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2003).

Binding solutions for spiral and comb bindings:

- Cutting off the margins for a double-fan bind
- If margins are too small to cut, photocopying the whole score on larger paper and binding
- Smaller scores can be guarded without cutting off the perforations, then sewn into a pamphlet binder
- (from Jeffery Trimble) Making a pressboard cover which will go around the spine of the spiral, and then gluing the back cover of the score to one side of the pressboard cover
- (from William Minter) A variation on #4 in which the spiral is sewn into the binder hinge of the pressboard cover, and filler material is used inside the cover to make the finished score less wedged-shape

# Survey overview

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Sent to MLA-L

25 questions

Administered April 2–25, 2018

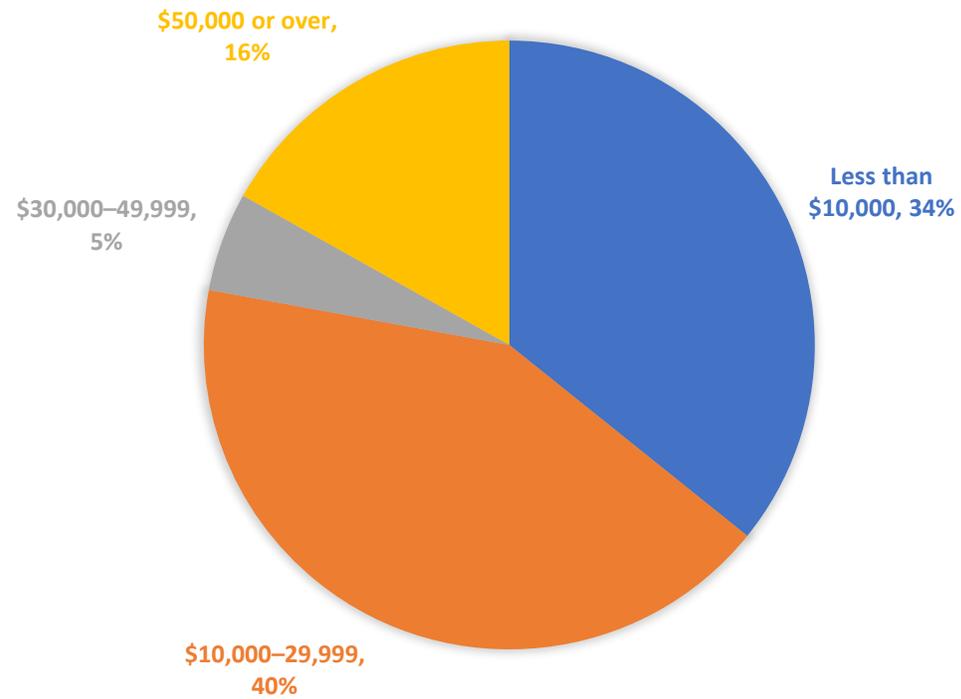
50 responses, institutions

16 minutes to complete (average)

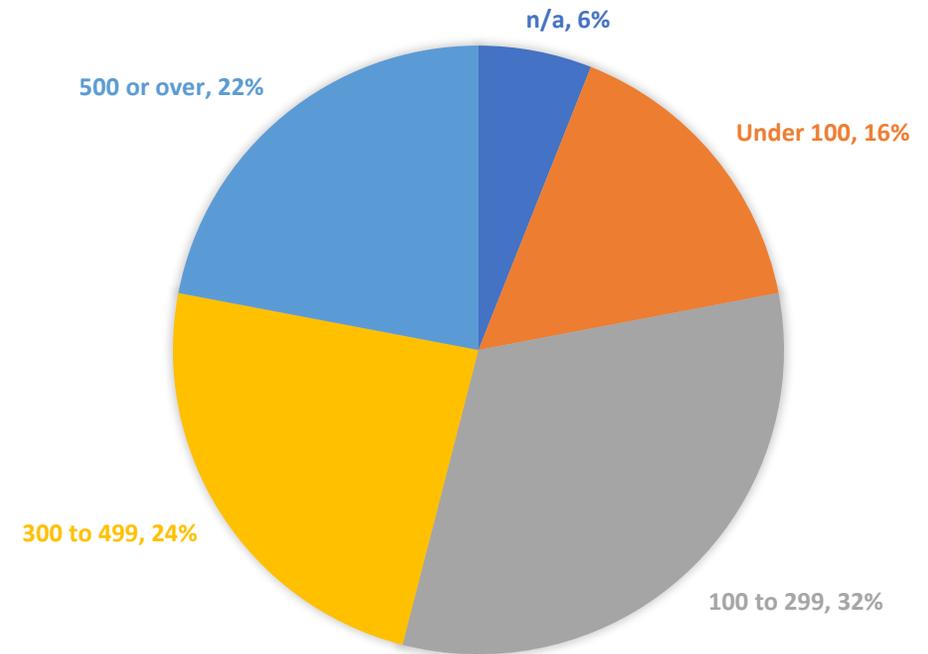
# Institutions surveyed

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## SCORE BUDGETS



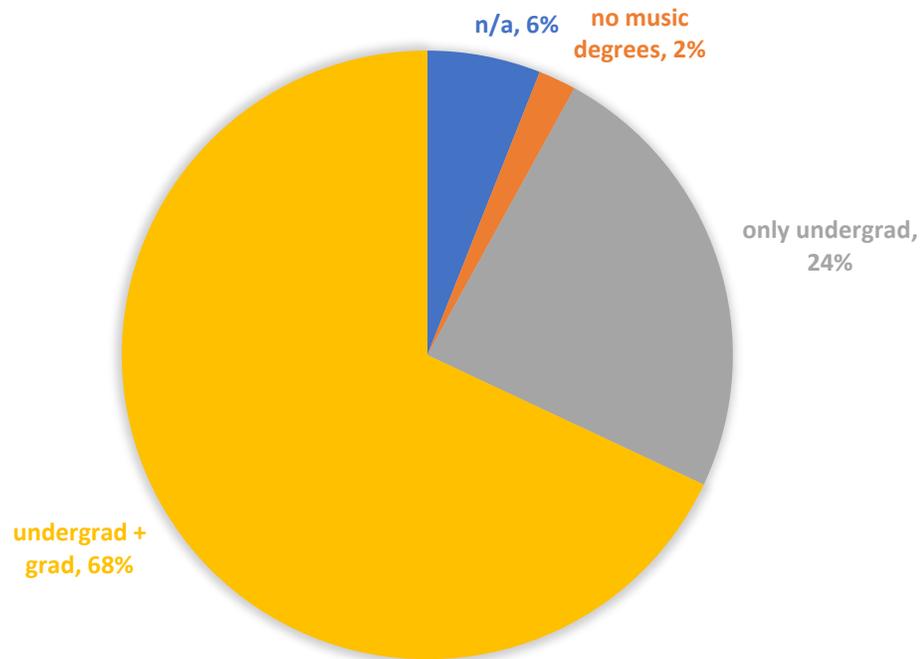
## NUMBER OF MUSIC MAJORS IN PROGRAM



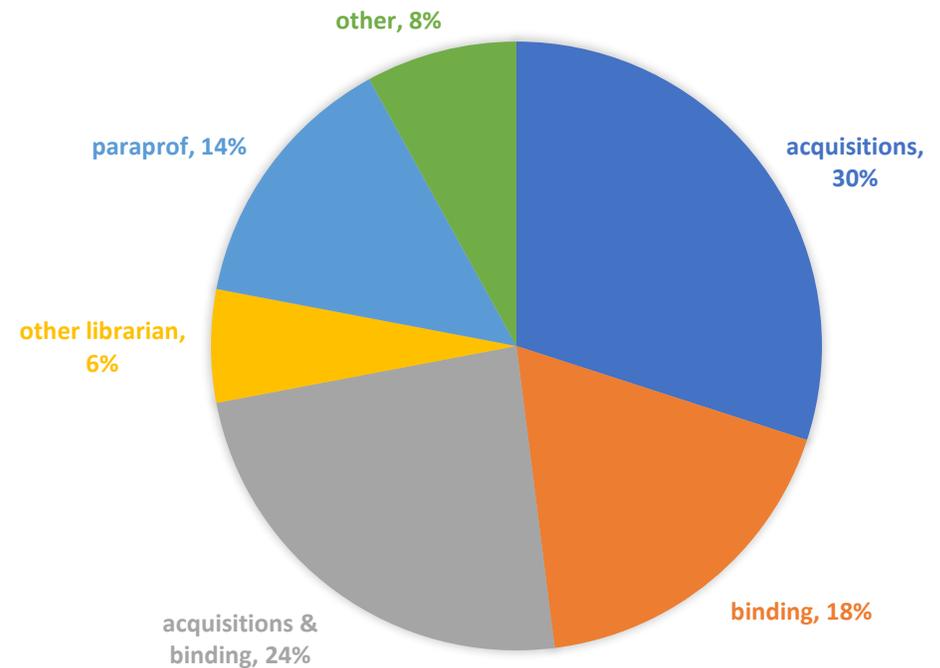
# Institutions surveyed (cont.)

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TYPES OF MUSIC DEGREES OFFERED



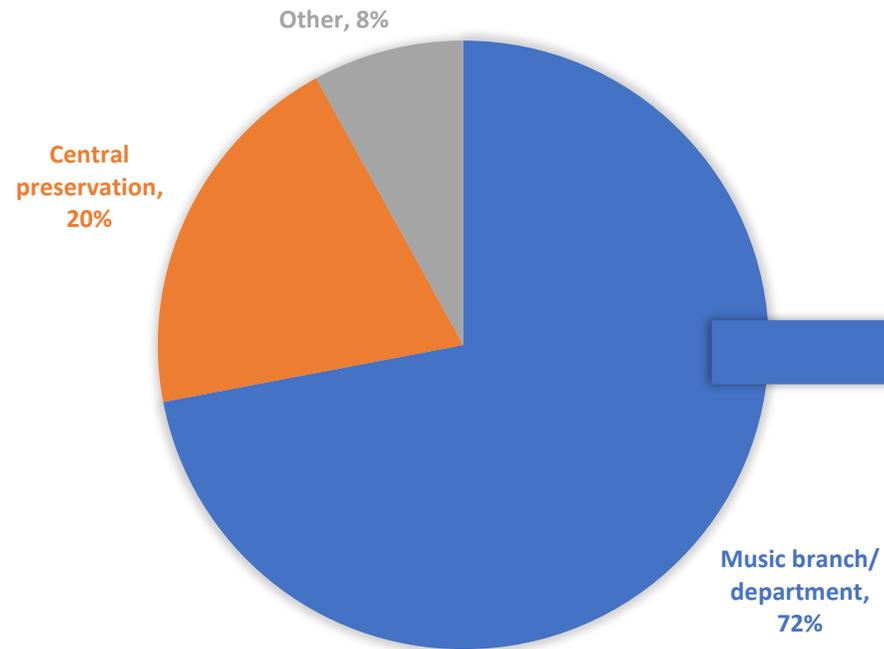
SURVEYED LIBRARIAN ROLE



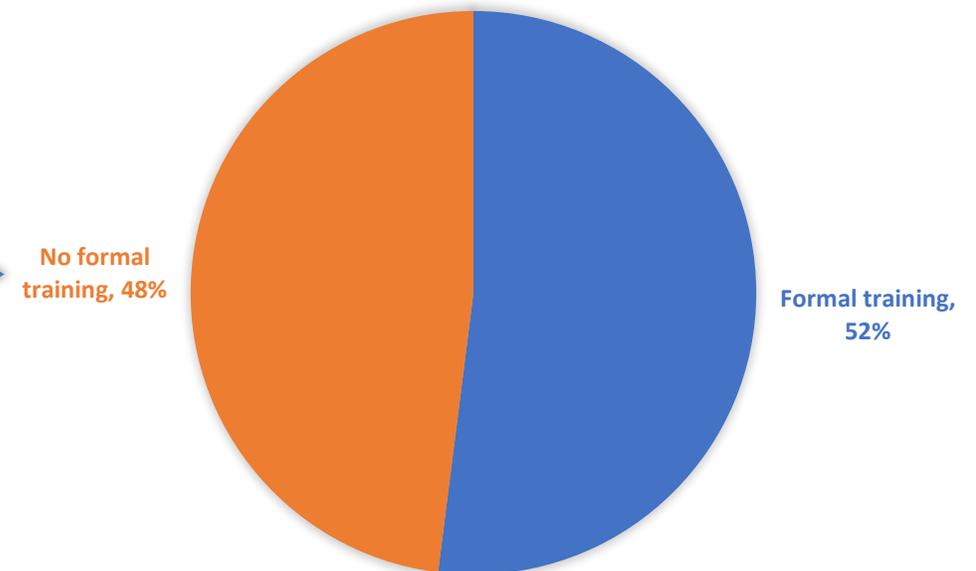
# Binding overview

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WHERE SCORE BINDING TAKES PLACE



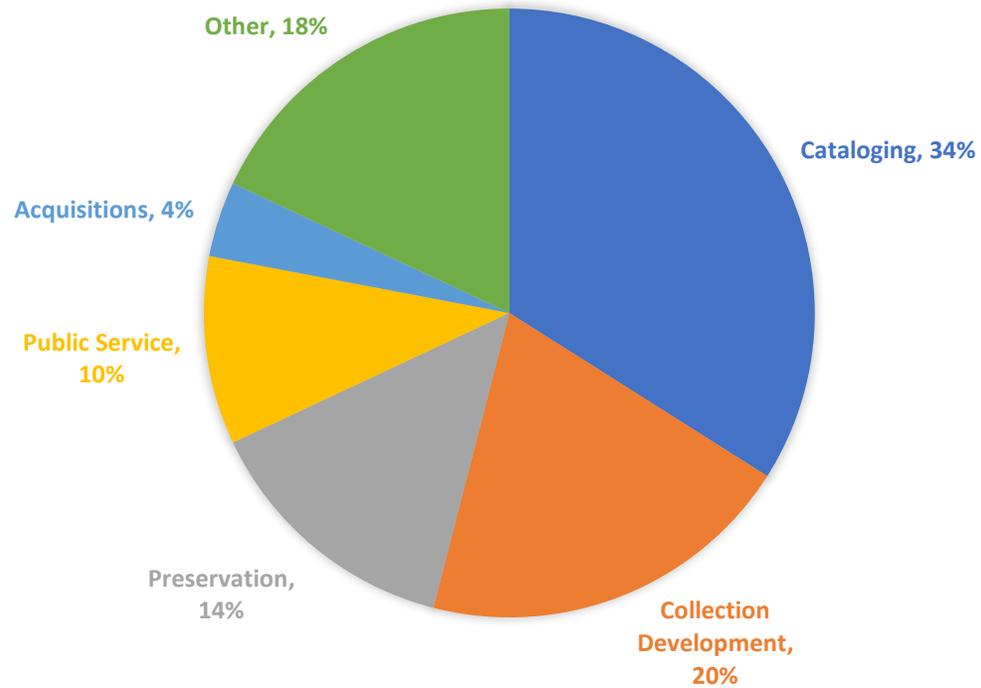
PRESERVATION TRAINING IN BRANCH MUSIC LIBRARIES (OF 33)



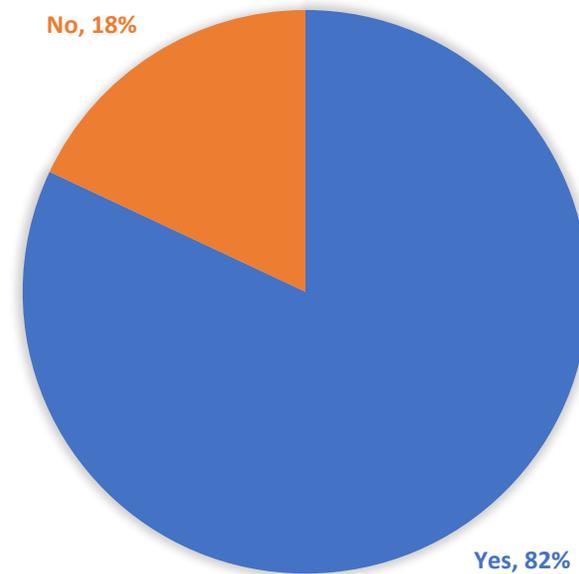
# Binding overview (cont.)

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WHO MAKES DECISIONS ABOUT BINDING?



BINDING DECISION WITH MUSIC BACKGROUND?



# Spiral-bound scores problems, ranked

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1. Pages tear out of bindings with heavy use (66% #1 or #2)
2. Floppiness (68% #1 or #2)
3. Deterioration of spiral
4. Entanglement on shelves
5. Spiral falling out
6. Can't put in pockets

Others: Noisy page turns, flimsy covers, difficulty labeling, security strip placement

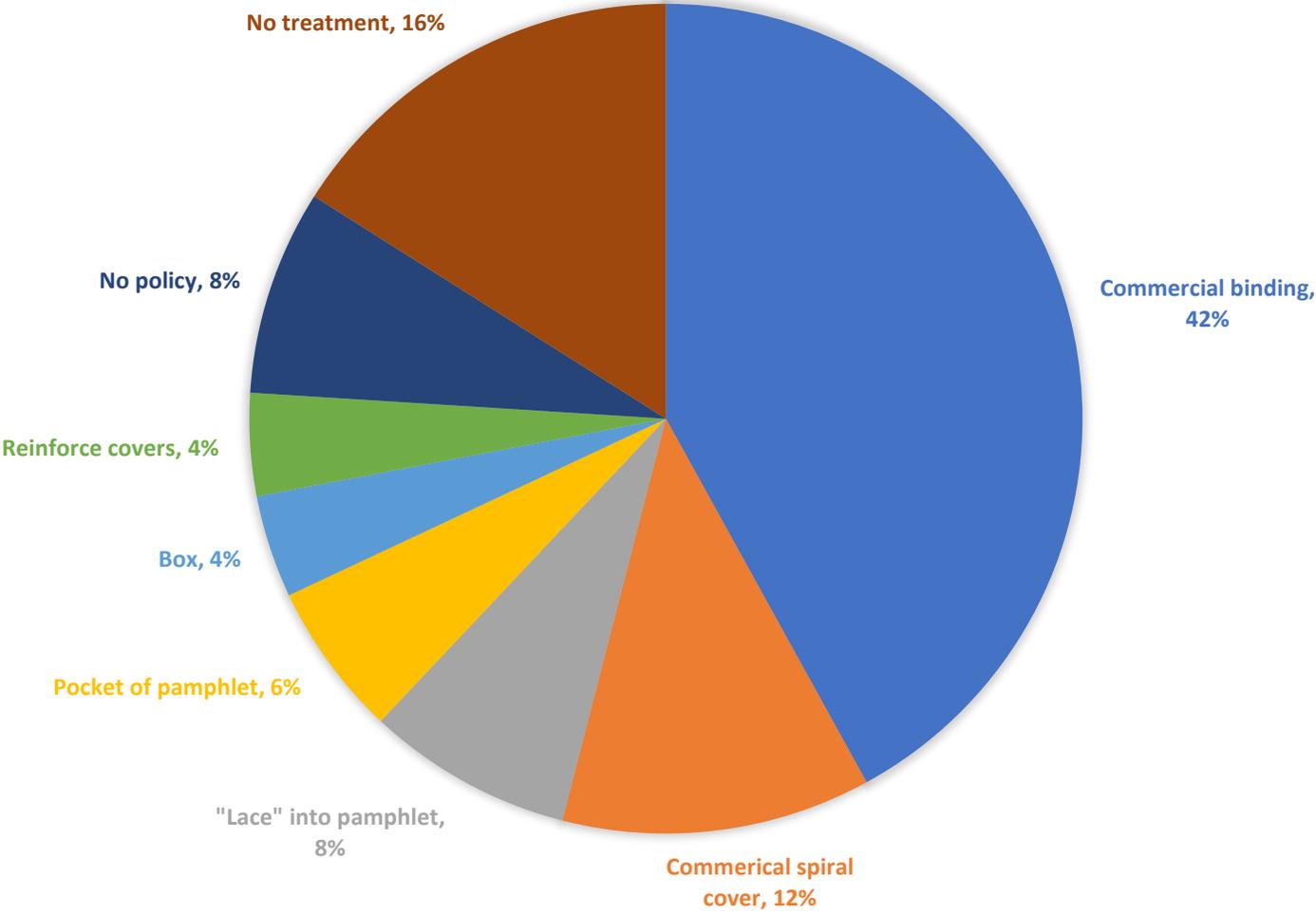
# Comb-bound scores problems, ranked

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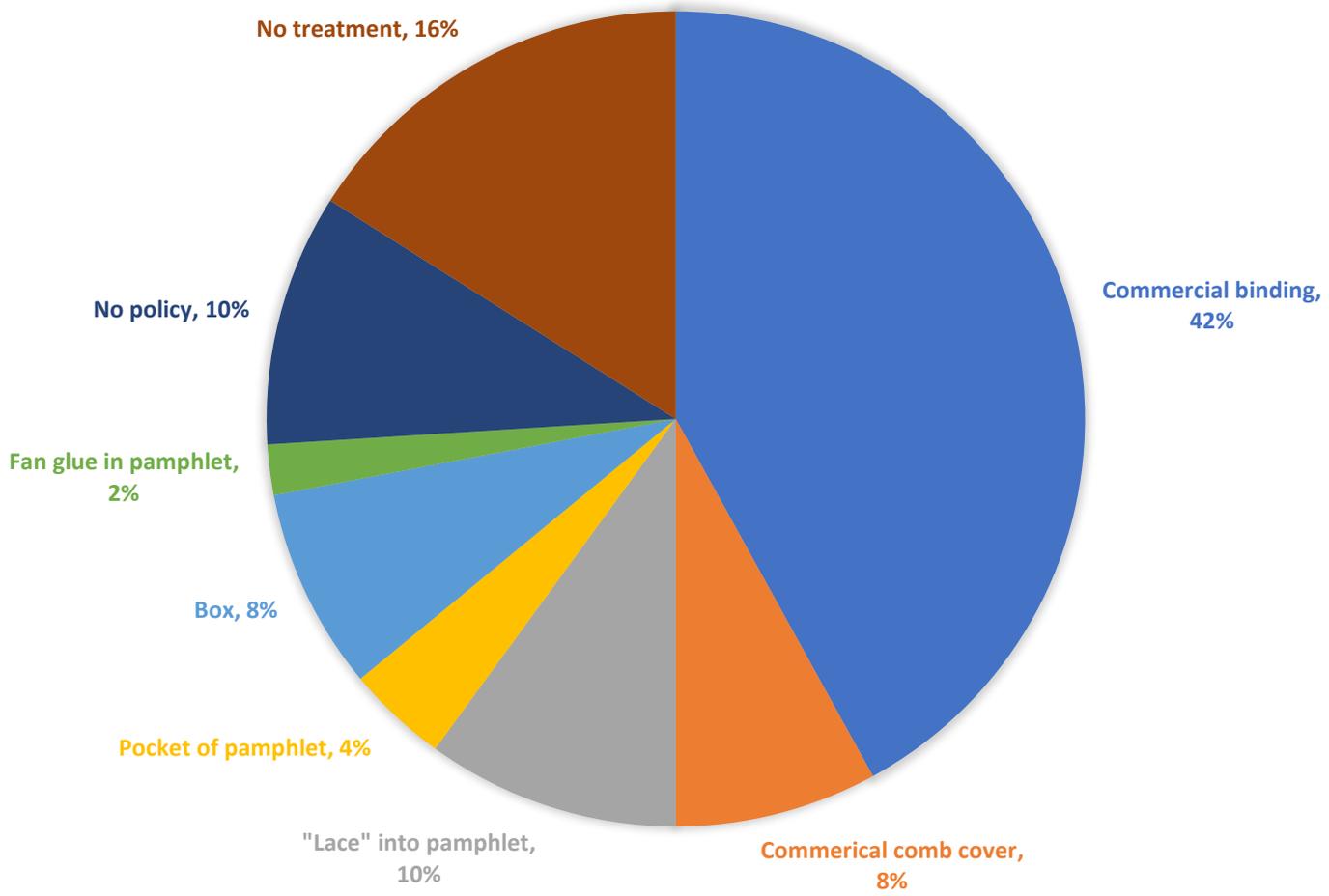
1. Pages tear out of bindings with heavy use (66% #1 or #2)
2. Floppiness (50% #1 or #2)
3. Deterioration of comb
4. Comb falling out
5. Shelving problems because of size of comb
6. Can't put in pockets

Others: Noisy page turns, small margins, difficultly labeling, security strip placement

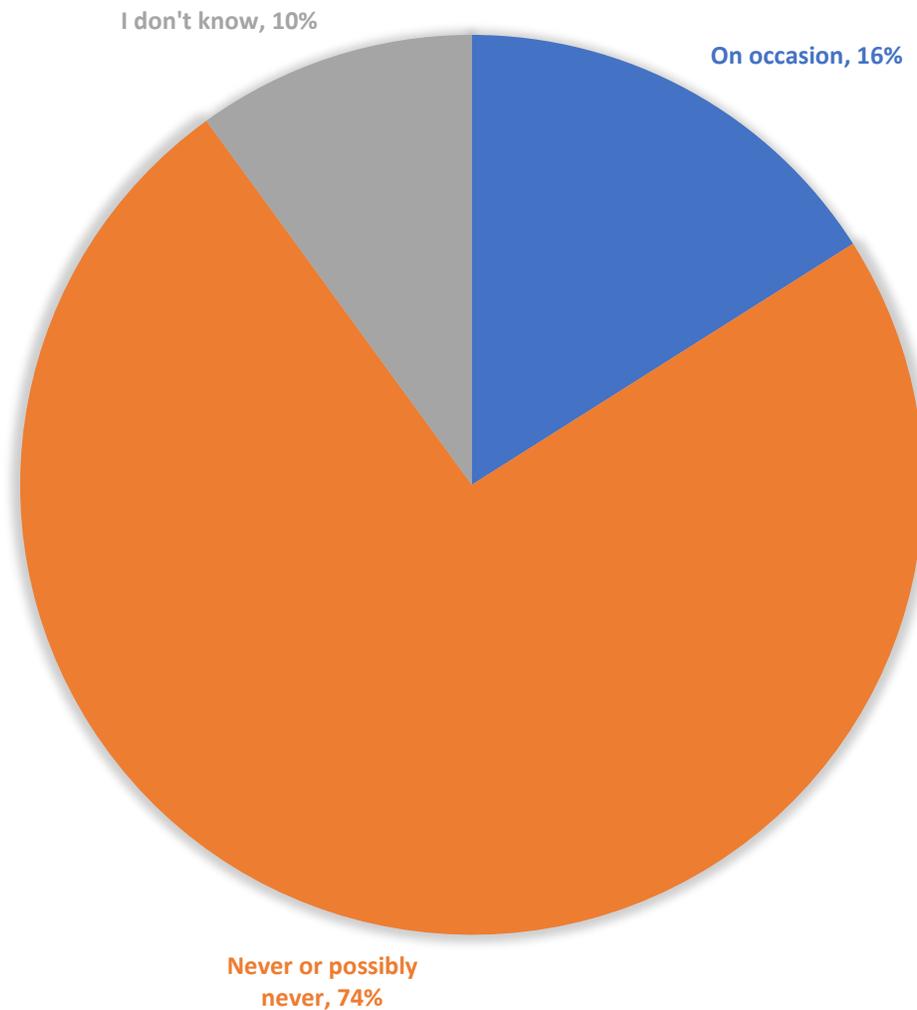
# Binding solutions for spiral-bound scores



# Binding solutions for comb-bound scores



“Does your library photocopy an entire spiral- or comb-bound score onto larger paper to provide a gutter large enough to be commercially bound?”



# What problems should binding solutions solve?

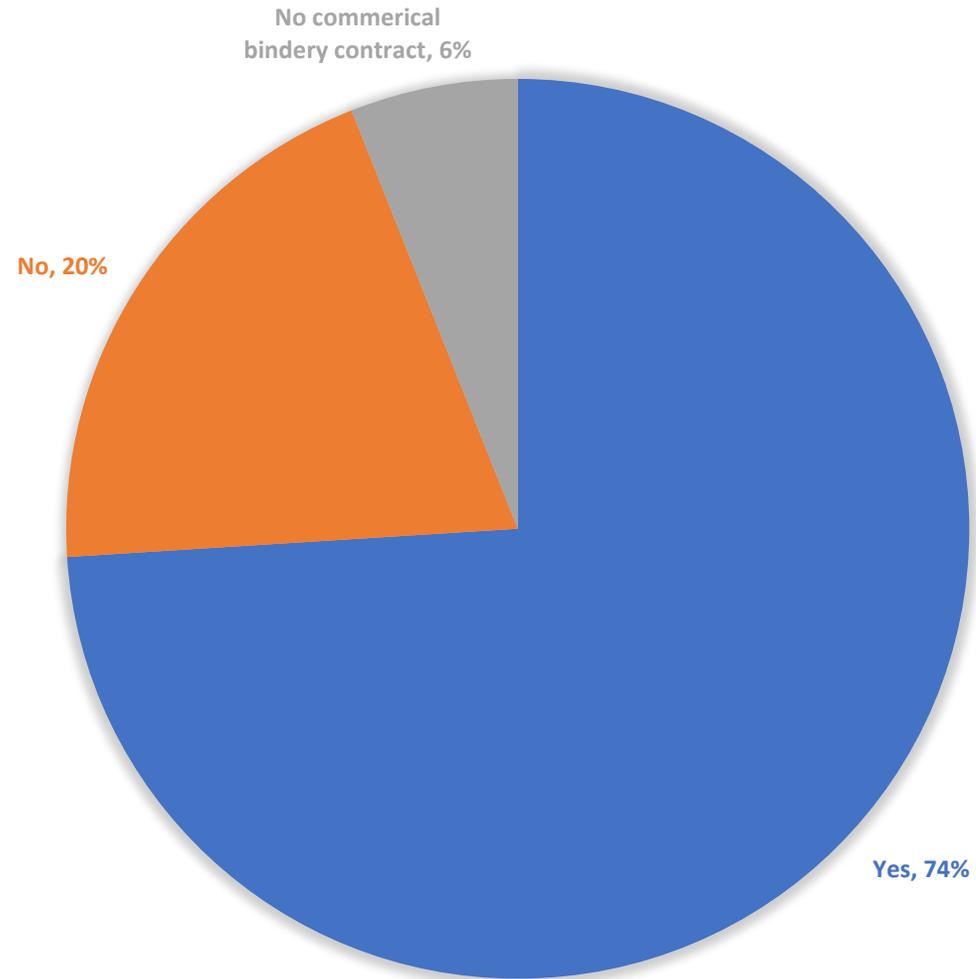
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1. Pages tear out of bindings with heavy use
2. Floppiness
3. Deterioration of spiral

## Bonus:

- Spiral or comb falling out
- Getting tangled on shelves

“In the past ten years, has your institution put in place policies to try and decrease the amount of money spent at commercial binderies?”





# Attach to sturdy cover – Archival Products spiral book binder

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Source:

<https://archival.com/spiral-bookbinder.html>

I am not endorsed nor do I receive any compensation from Archival Products

# Emory solution – tacketing (or “lacing”?)

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# Further research

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How do alternative bindings hold up over time?

What do students prefer to use?

How to lobby publishers to stop using spiral and comb bindings or use better materials?

# Questions?

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Send to Peter Shirts, [pshirts@emory.edu](mailto:pshirts@emory.edu)

Thanks to Julie Newton (Emory University) and Kyle Clark (University of Michigan), whose questions inspired this survey and answers helped design a new solution (at least for us).