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Collection Management Matters — The Politics of Weeding

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Among historically black colleges and universities, **Tennessee State University** holds the distinction of having several Olympic track gold medalists, like **Wilma Rudolph** and **Ralph Boston**, and outstanding football players like **Ed “Too Tall” Jones**, and NFL stars like **Joe Gilliam, Jr.** and **Richard Dent**. We also have famous alumni like **Oprah Winfrey**, gospel music legend **Dr. Bobby Jones**, and actor **Moses Gunn**, who is one of the founders of the **Negro Ensemble Company** as well as scientists like **Jesse E. Russell** and **Dr. Levi Watkins**, inventor of the Automatic Implantable Defibrillator (AID).

In 1976 the library made the decision to create a Special Collections Department that would house and preserve the accomplishments of some of its illustrious graduates, and the publications of its faculty, as well as African American history in Nashville and Tennessee. The department also keeps records on the history of the university, including yearbooks and traditional celebrations, such as Homecoming. Along the way, the decision was made to send all books written by and about African American authors to Special Collections. Founded in 1912 as **Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial Normal School**, the university has some genuinely rare titles written by and about Black Americans. In the 1970s, the Acquisitions Librarian decided that when new African American Studies purchases were made, one copy would go to the Circulation or Reference, and one copy would go to Special Collections. The thinking was that if the Circulation copy was unavailable, the patron would still have access to a copy of the book.

As time went on, the publishing of books by and about African Americans became more abundant, while the number of degree programs offered by the university continued to grow. About eight years ago, the book budget got to the point where it could no longer support the purchase of two copies of each title, so the one copy that was bought went to Special Collections, where it did not circulate. The department is not open Monday-Friday after 4:45 PM and is closed during weekends. This meant that the researchers in African American History and Africana Studies had very limited access to the materials. The former department head for Africana Studies use to complain about this to anyone who could hear him, whenever he got the chance. Moreover, in 1997 the Special Collections Librarian decided to let the Head of Cataloging determine what would be sent to the department. Cataloging sent most of the books about African Americans to Special Collections

and the space began to burgeon with the books by and about African Americans in all genres, including children’s books and light fiction. This situation made it increasingly difficult to house actual archival materials in the area. Those resources went into rooms that were originally meant for quiet study spaces and were sometimes stored on book carts.

The problem reached a turning point one day when I was the ranking librarian in the building and a student insisted he wanted to browse the collection and the Special Collection Librarian took the position that Archival and Special Collections areas did not have resources that permitted browsing. Her position was not stated in the Collection Development Policy or posted in anywhere in the Special Collections area at the time, but her point of view prevailed. The confrontation between the Department Head and the student was unpleasant and I thought unfair.



While it may be true that Archival and Special Collections areas are not for browsing, from the Collection Management point of view, I felt that the majority of books on her shelves could not be considered archival material or rare books. The Head of Special Collections subsequently agreed with me on that point and she also felt that she was running out of room to house more books. After much back-and-forth between Collection Management, Special Collections, the Assistant Director for Public Services, and the Library Dean, it was decided that the non-Special Collection books would be transferred into Circulation and Reference or other more appropriate areas or withdrawn from the collection. The Systems Librarian ran a report that showed this might involve over 5,000 books.

Fortunately the Head of Special Collections and I were on the same page about transferring the books, however, when I called a meeting to map out a procedure, we discovered to our dismay that our colleagues in Circulation and Reference did not share our enthusiasm. A sizable portion of the books to be transferred were in African American History, which meant that the E section, which was already tight, would have to be shifted. Of course, we could not just shift the Es, because the Ds and Fs would have to be shifted as well. The Circulation Supervisor argued that there wasn’t enough room to shift and accommodate the transfer of books from Special Collections. This was not quite accurate, because I had weeded the A-D, four or five years ago, so Circulation, which is not understaffed, just needed to shift backwards. She also thought that if we took the books out of Circulation, they might get lost or stolen and

be too costly to replace. The Head of Reference desired to have the status quo. He wanted us to leave the books where they were, until we weeded not only the first floor, but also the third floor which held the other half of the collection. I would like to say that the meeting ended on a congenial note with all hearts in agreement, but that did not happen.

After a week or so of fuming, I latched on to something the Head of Reference had said in the meeting. He said that library needed to be weeded and nobody had objected. If I removed books from the E and F section, wasn’t that weeding? If Special Collections pulled the books that did not reflect her Collection Policy, wasn’t that weeding? I decided to remove the word “transfer” from my description of the project and relabeled it a “weeding project.”

To test the waters, I decided to do what I called “stealth weeding” of the E section. I would wander out and return with my arms full of books, which I would load on a cart. I told the Special Collections Librarian I was going to proceed with the weeding project until somebody told me to stop. The Head of Cataloging said she would process whatever we brought her. Soon I got emboldened enough to take a cart out to the section and started weeding in earnest. Library staff entered and exited the building from our floor and nobody said anything about the carts of Special Collections books, so the project picked up steam and started going full force.

We began the “Special Collections Weeding Project” by working with the Systems Librarian’s report on the items assigned to the Special Collections location. We decided that books by and about African Americans in Tennessee, books by and about famous alumni, books written by past and present faculty members and alumni, and any publication about the university would be remain in Special Collections. In addition, we would also keep autographed copies of books donated by celebrities and lecturers who visited the campus. These titles were the most demanded by patrons who visited the department.

During the first round of weeding, I went through the list and highlighted duplicates, including books that we had both in print and electronic format and children’s books. Most of the biographies of famous African Americans like **Harriet Tubman**, **W.E.B. DuBois**, and **Martin Luther King, Jr.** were in the Special Collections Department, so I flagged some of them for Circulation. Literary criticisms on authors like **Toni Morrison**, **Alice Walker**, and **James Baldwin**, which were never meant to go to Special Collections, were made available for the students to check out. When

continued on page 80

I finished with the list, I gave it to the Special Collections Librarian for review and she turned those books and others she thought should be transferred downward on the shelves, so that they would be easy to identify. The Senior Library Assistant in Collection Management agreed to remove the books from the shelves, but before she took them to cataloging, she verified them against the list created by the Systems Librarian. Although the area had been inventoried about three years ago, there were still items on the shelves that did not appear on the pull list.

As we got further along in the project, the Head of Special Collections became a woman possessed. She could not weed enough books! After the first round, she requested that I come up to the area for an evaluation. We did a walk-through of every shelf, and agreed on additional titles that were more aptly suited for other areas of the library. We did a second and third round where we weeded the science, photography, literature, performing arts, religion, sociology, psychology, business, criminal justice, and political science books.

When the dust settled, and there were many, many dusty books on those shelves, we had actually transferred 3,900 books, which went to Circulation, Reference, the Youth Collection, and the library on our **Avon Williams Campus**. Since I had made the effort to weed the E, F, and G sections before the transferred books started coming out of Cataloging, the Circulation Supervisor and the Stack Supervisor said nothing to me about not having space to shelve them. The Special Collections Librarian was able to bring some of her most popularly requested items out of the storage rooms and on to the shelves in her area.

This project was not successful just because we changed the semantics. All of the concerns of the stakeholders were taken into consideration and systematically addressed. Since this is my seventeenth year at the library, I think I have a pretty good feel for the motives and attitudes of the personalities involved, as well as a history of how past library projects had been facilitated. At bottom, everyone knew that there was a problem that needed to be fixed in the best interests of the students, but agreeing on a way forward was the sticking point. Some people were more passive than others, but they were willing to do the work. Looking at the political atmosphere of the library, I decided that having meeting after meeting to try to get everyone on the same page was not a viable option, because the passive enablers were not going to be at the table and those who were at the table, were not going to speak up. In Collection Management, where you have to deal with so many different personalities, it's important not just to have the ability to assess your collection, but also the politics of your work environment and how you can operate within it to move your agenda forward for better service for your patrons and more effective usage of the collection. 🌱

Analyze This: Altmetrics and Your Collection — Statistics & Collection Development

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When there were only print journals, managing your collection was much simpler; you knew what you subscribed to, who checked it out, and who requested new journals. When journals moved online, the world became more complicated. Often, the journals were part of databases and the databases came from several vendors who all had their own way — or no way — of reporting usage to you. In 2002, an initiative known as **COUNTER (Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources)** formed to standardize library usage statistics. Librarians, publishers, and intermediaries cooperated with this initiative and created standard ways of reporting usage. Now, over ten years later, **COUNTER** statistics are still a good tool to assist librarians in managing their collections.

Citation counts are another set of statistics important to research and researchers, and hence by extension librarians making collection decisions. In the 1960s, publishers and others developed a methodology that determined the impact of research based upon article citation counts. From this approach came many statistics, the most popular being **Thomson's Journal Impact Factor or JIF**. There are many complaints about statistics based upon citations, including self-citation and superfluous citations. However, the biggest problem in using JIF and others is that in today's research landscape they are lagging indicators.

The world keeps changing. Over a decade ago, the great shift from print to online had been going on for some years and everyone was getting comfortable managing and purchasing online content. Now, there are other new great shifts happening. Some of these are technical — cloud computing and smartphone apps. Some of these are social and cultural — mandates for open data and open access publishing. And some of these are both, such as the rise of social media. You used to figure out what was significant in the world by reading newspaper headlines or listening to the top stories on the six o'clock news. Now, it is Twitter Trends. A similar acceleration is going on in scholarly communication. When we went from print to online journals it was like going from train travel to air travel. With cloud computing, smartphones, open data, social media and all of the other new ways of interoperating, we have gone from air travel to space travel.

In this accelerated age, it is still important to understand how your institution uses your collection, and **COUNTER** statistics are still good for this. However, now it is also important to understand how the world uses your institution's research. Citation-based statistics are not the way to determine this. According to **Brody and Harnad (2005)**, it takes five years for a paper in physics to receive half of the cited-by references that the article will ever acquire. If you want to keep pace with your researchers, you cannot make collection decisions based on five-year old information.

With so much interaction between scientists and researchers, you do not want your library left behind wondering what is happening.

Alternative metrics, also known as altmetrics, is a new and modern way to assess research impact that takes into account all of the ways individuals interact with research apart from citation counts. Full altmetrics looks at research artifacts beyond articles and tracks things like presentation slides, datasets, videos, books and book chapters, and figures, to name a few. Then, full altmetrics tracks many metrics about these artifacts including downloads, views, bookmarks, tweets, book holdings, ILL requests, and more. It is by looking at all of this data that you start to get an accurate picture of research impact and an understanding of what the researchers at your institution need.

Looking at alternative metrics can help your collection. By knowing in which journals your faculty publishes, you can ensure that you subscribe to these journals. Not only will your faculty be appreciative of this, but also your students will have access to research that is important to your institution. In addition, you will have a better understanding of the usage and other categories of metrics about your resources beyond your own institution's **COUNTER** statistics.

The Changing Nature of Collection Development

According to an **ARL Issue Brief**:

Twentieth-century research library collections were defined by local holdings, hailed as distinctive and vast. Twenty-first-century research library collections demand multiple strategies

continued on page 81