

## Against the Grain

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# Collection Management Matters--A Requiem for the Reference Collection

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# Collection Management Matters — A Requiem for the Reference Collection

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For the most part, I have single handedly embarked on the weeding of our collection, since the librarians show no interest in this and the faculty cannot be compelled to do it unless there is urgent accreditation issue at stake. The process has been going on for the past five years and I hope to reach the end before I retire. I had completed the Ns and started on the first row of Ps, when an errand took me to the reference collection and I noticed some dusty ancient of days' bibliographies in the Z section. The bibliographies had not increased much since 1997, when I took over collection development, because they were never requested. Unable to resist the temptation, I started adding obsolete titles to my cart and pretty soon I was off and running on a full-court press reference weeding project.

At first, I thought I would get through quickly by just stealthily pulling off the most egregious volumes, but there were many more than I estimated. My presence in the reference area became more obvious, so I decided to inform the Reference staff about my project in their area. I thought one or two of them, who I knew to be folks that loathed tossing things out, might put up of fuss, but no, they cheered me on and wished me well! The Head of Reference said most of the stuff could go because the students very seldom used it and another reference librarian said she hardly ever pointed anybody to the Reference Collection.



I could not help but think back to my training in library school in the late seventies and how I spent semesters in classes that taught how to select the correct reference book: "Reference and Information for the Social Sciences," "Reference and Information for the Humanities," etc. Nowadays, there are so many reference eBooks from **Gale, Oxford, Cambridge** and other publishers, as well as online providers such as **Credo**, that students need not stir from their carrels to find what they need.

Although I had noticed that the department had dramatically downsized its "Ready Reference" collection, the lack of use came as quite a surprise to me because over the years, I had updated and built up the reference collection. Many expensive multi-volume sets had been purchased, which I soon discovered were not getting enough use to merit their high price tags. Newer editions of titles had been added, but they appeared to be as useless as the older editions.

With the approval of the reference librarians, I decided to take a more serious look at the collection and weed with a heavier hand.

After I finished going through the collection for the first round, I went through the entire collection a second time. In addition to the superseded editions problem and books in poor condition, I found duplicate editions, which could be sent to our other campus.

I also found books that had no business being in reference and should have been cataloged for circulation. One major discovery was books that had been overlooked in our most recent inventory, including the entire oversize atlas collection!

There was quite a number of books that were more than ten years old. These were pulled to see if newer editions were available. Many of them were not in print, so we went to Amazon to see if there were newer titles in the subject area that could replace them. Other books were still in print after fifteen or more than twenty years. Some titles were in questionable condition, but the cost of replacing them with one in mint condition was not a viable option.

In addition to updating the collection and getting rid of shelf-sitters, damaged and obsolete books, another objective of weeding the reference section was to create more floor space for student use. At the same time that I was combing through the reference section, the Head of Cataloging was weeding Eric

microfiche in the adjacent Microforms area. After the reference books are shifted and the microfiche cabinets removed, we should be able to claim more floor space in that area. This will provide us with expansion of our computer pods or a small area designated for Makerspace projects. The shifting of the Reference collection will also make it more accessible to the disabled, because now we can bring books down from the very top and the bottom.

One obvious question that arose is how much of the print reference collection needs replacing? I have told the librarians that unless they specifically request a title, I am done with expensive multi-volume sets. Our online maps database did not get much usage, so I am replacing a limited quantity of oversize general atlases. Last year I had asked the Senior Library Assistant in Acquisitions to go through the Reference Section to pull superseded editions of standing orders, but when I got more hands on, I realized that several standing order titles have information that can be found in our databases.

There is no doubt that the importance of the print Reference Collection is on a decline. In addition to the availability of titles in electronic format, the spaces that house the collection are needed to provide computer or technology access for the students. The downsizing of print book budgets, which parallels with the increases in electronic resources budget, often means that libraries cannot afford to spend money on expensive multi-volume sets that receive little use or annuals, and other reference works that do not have relevance for their current patrons. The demand for increased functionality of libraries, within their same square footage, has meant that we have to scrutinize our space allocation to maximize our services. Some libraries are shelving the circulating and the reference books together to gain more floor space for new services. The Reference Section as we use to know it is passing into library history. They will continue to be downsized and discarded, as libraries continue to transform to meet the challenges of providing meaningful and viable services to their stakeholders and communities. 🌳

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studies. The issue, however, is whether these literary studies, whether journal articles or monographs, have enough research or commercial appeal to be published in traditional outlets. Self-publishing and open access publishing offer alternative outlets though these works may not count for much for faculty in the quest for tenure, promotion, and merit raises.

To return to our medieval peasants, they may have believed in angels and miracles on faith, but they had much more direct evidence of their immediate environment than we do. We today are the people of faith, especially in science and technology, and must trust that our experts are giving us an accurate view of the world and the universe since we can't directly test much of what they have to say. 🌳