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The Print Book Purging Predicament: Qualitative Techniques for a Balanced Collection

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Abstract

At previous Charleston Conference meetings, there was much discussion about how to massively and efficiently weed collections across disciplines using quantitative criteria. The presenters recently published an article in *Collection Management* entitled “Weeding with Wisdom: Tuning Deselection of Print Monographs in Book-Reliant Disciplines” in which they argue for the importance of retaining some print materials in areas such as history and literature where scholars are dependent on older, lesser-used materials for their research and teaching. Presenters offered suggestions and invited discussion on ways to improve the deselection process through the use of qualitative techniques for weeding book-reliant disciplines in an attempt to maximize the quality of a monograph collection.

Introduction

The presenters began by describing a major issue facing attendees of the conference and academic libraries today, namely, the rising trend among academic libraries to find new relevancy by reconsidering traditional collection services and use of space and by reallocating areas that housed open stacks in the past to create areas for new service functions such as makerspaces, new technologies, expanded seating, and, as advocated by the conference’s featured white paper, temporary thematic displays of books from remote storage. The presenters shared surveys that reveal most academic libraries are already massively deselectioning print books to reclaim shelf space “to offer other forms of collaborative space” or have made reclamation of stacks space a priority (Mullarkey, 2016). They noted that the trend to heavily weed academic libraries has been a topic of sessions in recent years at the Charleston Conference with such titles as “Speed Weed: How We Weeded More Than 70,000 Items in Three Months” (2011), “Less Is More” (2013), and “How We Decreased Our Collection by 40%” (2016). This year, in fact, the crown jewel of the conference was a white paper from Arizona State University written under the direction of their university librarian, Jim O’Donnell, being promoted with a plenary, a Lively Lunch session, and a link from the main Charleston Conference website entitled, “What Books? Where? . . . The Future of the Academic Library Print Collection: A Space for Engagement,” which advocates for “the removal of large swaths of print books . . . in favor of remotely stored physical copies or digital versions”

(<https://www.against-the-grain.com/2017/10/the-future-of-the-academic-library-print-collection-a-space-for-engagement/>). In their zeal to reinvent their function and building facilities for the digital age, the presenters argued, many academic librarians have forgotten their perennial purpose—to support the curriculum and research needs of the faculty and students, which includes the need for ready access to print books in book-reliant disciplines.

The presenters summarized their extensive literature review on monographic research methods of humanities scholars and on the history of print book deselection in academic libraries, which was published recently in *Collection Management* entitled “Weeding with Wisdom: Tuning Deselection of Print Monographs in Book-Reliant Disciplines” (McAllister & Scherlen, 2017). The presenters discovered that many academic libraries are employing quantitative weeding criteria across disciplines in the interest of speed and presumed “fairness,” but in fact may be overlooking the research needs of scholars in the humanities and humanities-like areas of the social sciences for ready access to low-circulation print books. The presenters briefly reviewed their findings on how academic libraries are moving away from traditional criteria for weeding books (removal of duplicates, superseded editions, etc.) to the notion that most print books should be transferred to off-site storage if available, or deaccessioned if storage is unavailable, so that academic libraries can find new purpose as a center for new technologies, spaces, and services.

Research and Case Study

Humanities faculty and researchers in the humanistic social science disciplines are the most outspoken groups when libraries decide to mass weed print collections. Many librarians mistakenly believe this is simply an emotional attachment that must be handled through better public relations or achieving faculty “buy-in” (Agee, 2017; Lynd, 2015; Metz & Gray, 2005; Young, 2009). While public relations are important for any library project, the presenters’ research has shown that the concerns expressed by faculty during such projects are thoughtful and reasonable (McAllister & Scherlen, 2017). During the main stacks weeding project at their mid-sized academic library, the presenters discovered that many low-use print monographs are still both relevant and needed by humanities scholars.

The presenters gave a short overview of the book deselection project at Appalachian State University Libraries that began with a goal of removing 90,000 books to make space for a larger writing center, a makerspace, more seating, and additional areas focused on technology and special collections. The sole criteria used to initiate the list of items for potential removal was no circulation within the past 20 years for any book added to the catalog before 1995. The initial project created concerns among faculty in the humanities, many of whom objected to the project. The library worked to rebuild trust by incorporating faculty into the process, offering an online list for faculty to provide feedback on retention of book titles slated for potential deletion. Before the list was made available to the faculty, librarians removed obvious items such as collected works by major authors. The faculty had two months to review the list. Two hundred and fifteen faculty comments were provided from the initial review through a website survey, and the presenters gathered additional qualitative data via e-mail, conversations, and informal interviews with faculty. The presenters shared a few of the comments with the Charleston Conference audience:

- I think the library needs to take into account how different disciplines use books. For historians, oftentimes the older a book is, the more important it becomes as a primary source. It should be remembered too that just because a book has not been regularly checked out doesn’t mean that it is worthy of being discarded. Nor can the past records of how often the book has been checked

out determine its future importance. Most importantly, the library must work with the faculty closely in conserving and improving these most valuable resources.

- Classics in the field and, in some cases, primary source materials. I have submitted multiple lists and strongly urge the library to retain these books—in an annex, if necessary. They are of considerable intellectual and financial value to our campus.
- The books on this list are CRUCIAL. I cited most of them within the last two years. PLEASE do not discard these titles.

The information obtained by the presenters revealed a clear need for awareness by librarians about the book research methods of scholars in the humanities and similar disciplines.

Quantitative, across-disciplines weeding criteria, the presenters argued, is not a fair approach when weeding books in book-reliant disciplines. Just as science disciplines rely on their primary media, electronic journal articles, to successfully navigate and communicate their research areas, humanities researchers rely on monographs and even older print books that constitute a kind of laboratory in which they conduct their research. The presenters shared studies that show that citations in articles by scholars in history are often more than ten years old and that humanities scholars in some areas cite mostly books. With so much information on the book research methods of humanities scholars as well as the well-articulated responses by humanities scholars to weeding projects, the presenters learned that humanities faculty must be included in the weeding process and that special consideration must be made when culling their low-circulating print resources in the library. They proposed a discipline-differentiated model of weeding in which book-reliant disciplines are treated with qualitative criteria that considers retention of some low-circulating print items (McAllister & Scherlen, 2016).

Techniques In Weeding Book-Reliant Disciplines

The presenters learned the hard way through trial and error from their library’s weeding project, coupled with outside reading, that academic libraries can set up a multistep procedure for evaluating older, low-circulating books in the humanities.

Though the procedures will vary among library projects depending on the size, type, and focus of institutions, the presenters shared their five-step process that involves university faculty at various stages of deselection.

Step 1

In the first step, a list was created composed of books purchased before 1995 with no circulation over the past 20 years. The presenters agree that 20 years was an arbitrary time bracket, but said it was used as a starting place with the goal of identifying a set of books to be considered for removal. Before this list was shared with faculty, however, subject librarians removed any obvious materials that should be saved such as major authors' minor works, minor authors' major works, uncirculated volumes from sets of complete works, important primary sources, and so on.

Step 2

In the second step, the refined list was shared with faculty in the disciplines being reviewed. Faculty should be given adequate time to examine the list and mark for retention any books they wish the library to retain. Librarians should also keep in mind that many faculty who do interdisciplinary work may need to review books in disciplines other than their home department.

Step 3

In the third phase, the librarians, with the assistance of students and staff, conducted further research on the remaining list using tools such as *Resources for College Libraries*, WorldCat, and even Wikipedia to identify important works that were missed earlier in the process. Spreadsheets were used by workers to note details about titles and authors for the subject librarians to consider in determining further action on the remaining list of books.

Step 4

In step 4, faculty members were invited to examine the outgoing carts of books in their areas for a final decision on whether a book should be kept in the collection or removed. The options for books after removal included being sent to faculty members' department or to the university's sustainability office, which in turn managed further dispersal of

them such as sending some to Better World Books, selling others to the community, and recycling the remainder. The option of off-site remote storage, so often assumed by many authors of articles on academic library weeding, was not an option for the presenters' institution.

Step 5

The last step recommended by the presenters is to keep an institutional record of the discipline-differentiated weeding criteria for future projects. This can be as basic as codifying each discipline's procedure in the collection development policy or as detailed as entering a note in the catalog system for each book explaining the reason for retention. The level of detail for such records depends on the size of the project, available time and personnel, and needs of the institution.

Conclusion and Discussion

The presentation took place in a small room that could accommodate only about 40 people, but the room was full with a number of last-minute arrivals having to stand in the back. The participation by audience members was positive with many expressing that the session was relevant to their present situation, that their libraries were either undergoing a major weeding project or planning to do so. Some attendees voiced concern that promoters of massive weeding, such as the authors of the conference-featured Arizona State white paper, assume off-site storage is a given option, which smaller libraries simply do not have available to them. There was also concern expressed by attendees that their shrinking book collections may not be easily supplemented by interlibrary loan in the future if so many academic libraries (78% according to a ProQuest survey) are also in the process of removing much of their print collections. One science librarian mentioned that some science scholars need older books as well, especially those studying the history of their discipline. The session concluded with attendees calling for a broader discussion at future conferences and in the academic library community about the value of retaining open stacks and ready access to older books by those faculty and students who need them.

Slides presented at the 2017 Charleston Conference are available at <http://sched.co/CHpp>

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