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Facilitating the Serendipitous Discovery of Information: Planning and Weeding the Fine Art Collection

Abstract

As many academic libraries face shrinking space, weeding collections has become a necessity. At Western Carolina University plans for a library renovation provided the opportunity to do a library-wide weeding project of the print collection. This article explains the collaborative undertaking of the arts liaison and the collection development librarian in weeding the fine art print collection. Included are some best practices for weeding an academic library, the importance of creating a collection that is smaller but well utilized by undergraduate students, and a description of the weeding process.

Keywords

Weeding, deselection, collection management, collection maintenance, art collection, collaboration

Introduction

Hunter Library, completed in 1953, is the main library at Western Carolina University (WCU), a state university located in the heart of North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains. As a public comprehensive university, WCU is part of a statewide system of universities and college campuses. As of fall 2013, WCU has a total enrollment of 10,106 students. The library contains approximately 800,000 print and electronic volumes and provides access to more than 45,000 journals through print subscriptions and electronic databases. Since the focus at WCU is teaching, the priority in building the collection is given to the undergraduate curricula, followed by the graduate curricula.

Collection development at WCU is done by both the subject liaisons and the Collection Development Librarian (CDL). At Hunter Library, the liaison model has been implemented for over ten years. With this model, a librarian is assigned to specific disciplines and is responsible for instruction, outreach, and collection development for programs in those disciplines. Each liaison is knowledgeable about resources, formats, curricular requirements, and trends in the assigned disciplines. This knowledge assists the liaison in selecting, and deselecting, material to create a collection that both contains high-quality material and supports the institutional programs. While the role of the liaisons focuses on developing a collection for specific subjects, the primary function of the CDL is to oversee the whole collection, and to provide leadership and guidance in coordinating the direction and balance of the library collections. Liaisons and the CDL collaborate to ascertain that funds and resources meet the information and research needs of students and faculty.

In 2011 Hunter Library began to plan for a phased renovation. The architectural firm selected for the renovation suggested the installation of compact shelving on the ground floor, the former site of WCU's football field and where the bulk of the print collection is located. The space gained will be converted into study space for students. Though the library is in the enviable position of not hurting for space, it made sense to the librarians to weed the collection before moving thousands of books. After analysis of the various collections, usage, and projected needs, the library determined that it would be necessary to reduce the print collection by approximately seventeen percent. Since a comprehensive weeding process had not been done in over ten years, the faculty and staff faced the daunting task of not only deselecting items, but also finding a location for the discarded books and changing the information in the catalog. Because each discipline uses books in a different way, it was decided that the liaisons would collaborate with

the CDL and begin systematic weeding of their subject areas. One of the subject areas that was the most complex was the collection of art material.

This article reports the efforts of the Visual and Performing Arts Liaison (VPAL), now at another institution, and the CDL in weeding the art collection. The project was conducted and concluded in 2013. The first section will highlight best weeding practices in general. The second section will focus on general practices used in Hunter Library's weeding project. The third section will explain the process of weeding the art collection. It is the hope of the authors that the article provides an overview of the weeding process, reports on issues related specifically to an art collection of print material, and gives practical tips on how to go about it.

Selecting best weeding practices for your collection

Despite novelist Nicholson Baker's diatribe against weeding at the San Francisco Public Library (Baker, 1996), most trained librarians understand the necessity of culling collections. However, the deselection process must be planned carefully and strategically to avoid "...a weeding project gone horribly wrong" (Stephens, 2013) as seen in the unfortunate case of the Urbana (IL) Free Library, in which the executive director's only criterion to remove books was to select those that were more than ten years old. When approaching any weeding project, a good collection development policy will provide broad guidelines and will support the decisions made by the librarians. If questions arise, librarians can point to established criteria that support the mission of the library.

When covering deselection of library materials, even the most basic collection development course will list a number of common-sense criteria that should be considered when withdrawing materials. In an academic library, publication date is almost never the first criterion considered because some books continue to support the curriculum no matter their age.

Inevitably, relevance to the curriculum will be at the top of such a list of criteria in an academic library. At Hunter Library, this is evident in our mission statement: “Hunter Library provides intellectual content ... for the learning, teaching, and research activities of the University’s students, faculty, and staff” (Hunter Library, 2013). The intention of having a collection that meets the teaching and learning goals of the institution is echoed in the library’s most recent strategic plan. However, additional factors should be considered in deselection.

Circulation of an item can be telling. If a book has been sitting on the shelf for over ten years and has never been circulated, it is probably a good candidate to be weeded. Care should be taken, though, not to discard classic works or authors. Number of circulations – or lack thereof – is closely related to the timeliness, or date of publication. Theory and practice of primary education has certainly changed over the years. The same is true in nuclear and particle physics. But a monograph on ancient philosophy is more likely to remain relevant for a longer time, as is a tome on the illumination of fifteenth century manuscripts. In the case of Hunter Library, we also considered whether or not a title was designated as “core” by *Resources for College Libraries*.

The consideration of the physical condition of books should be obvious. If a book is covered in dust or, worse, in mold, it should be discarded without question or delay. Other physical considerations include: worn out or ragged books; poorly bound books; books with brittle pages; books that have been extensively marked by patrons; and so on (Larson, 2012; Muthu, 2013; Tobia, 2002).

As noted earlier, the print collection at Hunter Library had not been reviewed and thinned in over ten years. The project gave librarians the opportunity to align the collection with current curricular needs. While materials have been selected to support new courses and programs at the

university, there has not been a recent corresponding effort to deselect materials for courses and programs that ceased or changed in scope. The process would also help us to identify gaps that inevitably occur as librarians come and go and as resources change. Making the collection more up to date, vibrant, and appealing will help increase circulation and the investigation of existing resources.

Developing and maintaining a collection for the fine arts

At WCU, the School of Art & Design (SoAD) has one of the highest enrollments. On average, about 1,200 students each semester take art courses for general education requirements. Among them, there are about 300 undergraduate and graduate students in the fine arts. The teaching faculty consists of twenty-two instructors. Degrees offered at WCU include an M.F.A., Art Minor and B.F.A degree with emphasis on Graphic Design and Studio. The arts curriculum at WCU is developed to provide the broadest exposure to the arts. During the first years, students tend to use text-based resources as they fulfill requirements in art history, theory, and methodology, while in the final year the focus is on practicing and producing art. Developing and maintaining a library collection that meets the needs of both faculty and students is one of the major responsibilities of the liaison.

Developing the art collection

The SoAD faculty at WCU routinely submit book requests to the liaison. These requests constitute the basis for the development of the art collection. From these suggestions, the liaison evaluates the collection and defines gaps or needs for current material to support the teaching and learning needs. Some of the tools used by the liaison in further developing the art collection are:

- ChoiceReviews.online is the online version of *CHOICE: Current Reviews for Academic Libraries*. It reviews current resources in many subject areas and the database is updated monthly. A profile can be created and monthly updates can be received via e-mail.
- *Resources for Colleges Libraries* contains lists of core titles for architecture, design, and interior design.
- *The Humanities: A Selective Guide to Information Sources* includes a chapter on the visual arts that describes a varied list of resources including but not limited to handbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopedias.
- *Art Documentation* and *Art Libraries Journal* provide reviews of resources for both the fine arts and art history. Setting up an RSS alert is an easy way to receive updates.
- *WorldCat* can be used to conduct a comparative analysis of holdings.

Having a collection that mimics other comparable institutions puts the faculty at ease, allows for better consideration during accreditation, and demonstrates lacunae and strengths in the collection. For example, when using WorldCat to compare print books published between 2000 and 2013 on the subject of modern art in the twentieth century, it was revealed that Hunter Library has a more than adequate print collection (Table 1).

<i>Institution</i>	<i># of print books</i>
Institution 1	47
Institution 2	51
Institution 3	90
Hunter Library	135

Table 1: Comparison of print books among Hunter Library and three peer institutions.

Further comparison between Hunter Library and Institution 3 indicates that of the ninety titles, twenty-nine were available in Hunter Library and of the remaining sixty-one, thirty-one were available through the ABC Express Service, a free document delivery service operated by the libraries of UNC-Asheville, Appalachian State University, and Western Carolina University.

In terms of anticipating possible resource needs, both the liaison and Collection Development Librarian are aware of changes in the curriculum. At WCU, all new courses and programs, substantial changes in courses, or deletion of courses require a library consultation form to be completed by the appropriate liaison and the CDL. Having this information is critical for the liaison to plan strategically with the CDL in the allocation of funds and with the art faculty in making decisions about increasing the collection in specific areas.

Meeting the needs of the artist

Students in the fine arts have diverse needs when it comes to print resources. In addition to traditional resources such as artist monographs, catalogue *raisonnés*, and exhibition catalogs, students seek out handbooks about materials, techniques and surfaces, inspirational material, safety, careers, and funding. To be adept artists, students need to understand that research is imperative because the field of art is not static but changes and adapts to new ideas, methods, and techniques (Zanin-Yost and Tapley, 2008). As noted by Edward Teague, art students seek information that either stimulates visual images or helps them outline the parameters of a project (1987), while faculty use the library for ideas and inspiration (Littrell cited in Hemmig). There is widespread agreement that both students' and faculty's preferred method of finding a resource is browsing (Pacey, 1982; Day and McDowell, 1985; Stam, 1995; Frank, 1999; Reed and Tanner, 2001). Personal observations from the liaison confirm this. For about a year during library instruction, the liaison asked students, "Why did you choose this book?", and the most common answer was that the book had a nice cover. In general, books with old, dusty, and broken spines were not considered. How a book looks and feels is one of the considerations to keep in mind when weeding the fine art collection since it is evident that student- artists tend to select books with visually appealing covers.

Artists are like scientists: they experiment and conduct practice-based research. However, unlike scientists, they do not have a precise methodology because the process is spontaneous (Sullivan, 2005; Carabine, 2013). Instead of looking for pre-defined information, artists create information because their process is “fluid, inter-relational, dynamic, and creative.” (Cowan, 2004). As such, they need to have access to a wide range of resources not only in the arts, but in many other subjects such as technology, astronomy, geology, biology, history, and engineering, to name a few.

Weeding the fine arts collection

Weeding a fine art print collection requires a delicate balance between old and new; text and visual; and local and global information to provide students and faculty with the resources and inspiration they need. Setting parameters that conform to the general guidelines set by the collection development policy is a must (Dubicki, 2008; Osburn, 2006). However, other considerations should be kept in mind:

- *Images.* The catalog record will not disclose the quality of the images in a book. Therefore, a physical examination should be made.
- *Censorship.* The fine arts collection is probably one that is often prone to issues related to controversial content. When deciding what to remove, the librarian must be careful that this is not done from personal views (McMenemy, 2008).
- *Supplemental material.* Since fine art books are not subject to routine weeding as in other subjects (such as medicine), the librarian should regularly check to ensure that any supplemental material is still available and supported by the library. Multimedia materials (e.g. CDs) are an example of supplemental materials sometimes found in art books.

In addition to the above concerns, there was a sense that the visual arts collection in Hunter Library was not being fully utilized due to the locations of the library and the art building; they are on opposite sides of the campus. While this is not something we can change, we believe that a smaller but more focused collection will be more appealing to the student-artists and will help to highlight the best things that we have. A more selective collection will also encourage better incorporation into the curriculum by the arts faculty.

Our Process

The arts print collection in Hunter Library consisted of 17,898 volumes in the following areas N (visual arts) 5,763, NA (architecture) 2,126, NB (Sculpture) 918, NC (Drawing/Design) 1,247, ND (Painting) 4,355, NE (print Media) 597, NK (Decorative Arts) 2,160, and NX (arts in general)732. Photography resources (TRs) were not included in this data because that section was weeded prior to this project. Also, materials covering Native American Art (Es) and Art Education (Ls) were not included because it was decided to weed these sections at a later time. In deciding what to deselect from the print general collection it was first necessary to conduct an overview of the curriculum. During the past two years some courses in SoAD changed scope, some were eliminated, and some were combined. It helped that the VPAL was a member of the SoAD Curriculum Committee and thus was able to provide much insight on what the school was planning for the future.

The initial phase of the weeding project began by creating a list of the holdings in the above call number ranges. The list given to the VPAL included bibliographic and circulation data to help her make a preliminary decision. The data included: title, author, call number, volume number, copy number, publication date, edition, last check-in date, total checkouts, total renewals, date the item record was created (to indicate when it was added to the collection,

publication date notwithstanding), and the record number in the system. A column was added in the spreadsheet for the librarian to mark an item as either K (for keep) or W (for withdraw).

The CDL then used the Bowker Book Analysis System (BBAS) to create lists that matched the library system-produced lists by call number range as closely as possible. BBAS allows a library to compare its collection against *Resources for College Libraries*. This resource is often used to build collections, but in this instance we used it to ensure that we did not withdraw volumes that were considered core in the visual arts. The VPAL then used WorldCat to create a third list to make a comparison of print materials in peer institutions.

Using all of the various criteria discussed in the section on best weeding practices (while also maintaining the flexibility to consider exceptions), the visual arts librarian reviewed small ranges by call numbers and determined which volumes should be withdrawn. Her primary criteria were relevance to the current curriculum, number of circulations, and a comparison to related holdings in peer institutions, as well as the additional criteria above. Decisions were marked on the master spreadsheet and the circulation staff withdrew the volumes marked for discard. By conducting a review of the holdings in small sections, technical services staff were not overwhelmed by the number of items to store and to delete from the catalog.

By the end of the year the print art collection was reduced from 17,898 volumes to 16,501. This resulted in a smaller collection. Even though at first students and faculty found it difficult to control their emotions over many empty shelves, they soon began to realize that the smaller size included higher quality material, and allowed for a better selection of the material by either browsing or searching the catalog.

Conclusion

A book collection that is outdated, in poor physical condition, and not used does not support the teaching and learning mission of an institution. When books are not weeded, they take up space that can be used for other purposes, such as study space or expansion of services. A weeding project should be a collaborative process among the liaison librarians, collection development librarian, technical services and circulation staff, and the faculty. Following a collection development policy is important because it will prevent potential issues during the process and after the books are discarded. By keeping everybody abreast of what is going on, time and resources are used more efficiently.

Information about best weeding practices abounds, and these guidelines can be applied, with modifications, to the fine arts. Weeding books in a fine art collection takes knowledge of the subject, awareness that faculty and students need different types of materials, and most of all time for planning. In weeding an art collection, it is important to remember that faculty and students use the resources for both research and inspiration. A book about the color green, with only pictures that show different textures, forms and objects, can be a source of learning and teaching.

As the authors discovered, having a large collection does not mean that students and faculty will use a variety of books. On the contrary, from talking to the students and circulation statistics, it seems that the same books tend to be used over and over. This could be because students prefer to use books with appealing covers, or that they exchange information about resources they used. A large but poorly used collection has little meaning if it is not utilized. The opportunity to weed the art collection resulted in a smaller, focused collection that allows more easily for the serendipitous discovery of all resources.

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