Against the Grain

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Curating Collective Collections-Learning from Collection Management Kerfuffles

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Curating Collective Collections — Learning from Collection Management Kerfuffles

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Weeding and transfer to storage are routine for librarians, but are grabbing headlines as the number and scale of collection management projects increase. Misunderstanding of and resistance to these projects generate imbroglios, brouhaha's (and a few firestorms!), creating a sub-genre of library lore: campus kerfuffles. What could go wrong with an academic library collection management project? Well, quite a lot, as the following sampling of stories demonstrates. This column recounts representative tales of woe, many with silver linings, and reflects on lessons learned.

Scholars and librarians are following the struggle of the **New York Public Library** with public intellectuals over plans to close branches, renovate the 42nd Street library, and ship 1,500,000 volumes to RECAP. Who can forget the spectacle of **Nicholson Baker** exposing the **San Francisco Public Library's** secret weeding project when moving into its new building in 1996? High-profile national cases are informative, but most stories play out locally.

Each local story in this genre is a thread in a national conversation about redefining the library of the 21st century. What can we learn from these tales about how to skillfully and constructively frame and conduct campus conversations about collection management?

Six Campus Kerfuffles

While those from whom I heard these tales were agreeable to having their institutions identified, I have cast these as *everyman* cautionary tales.

Case 1: Due Process is Not Rewarded!

A large college library in the Northeast: the administration mandates closing a branch and moving its collection to the main library. Librarians, responding to the dictate to reduce the collection footprint, initiated a process for faculty review of what to withdraw and what to retain. Faculty reacted immediately as outraged booklovers — some vociferously opposing any withdrawals whatsoever. While the job got done, the dust-up caused a nearly two-year delay in the merger process. Trust in the library management survived.

Case 2: Trusting Data and Students Alone: Oops!

A Midwestern college library undertook a weeding of "low-hanging fruit" in preparation for an upcoming renovation and Learning Commons. Using a data-driven approach, the library's weeding plan focused on materials that had not circulated at least once in 25 years. The process was implemented by student workers, with little staff oversight and no faculty input. Disaster struck when an expensive reprint set of Chinese literary works was recycled. The faculty member responsible for the acquisition decades earlier found out that the object of his research had been trashed. His dismay fueled a public relations debacle after a library student employee wrote a front-page article on the incident for the city newspaper as an internship project. The story was picked up by regional and national news media; camera crews descended and brought negative publicity to the college. The weeding program was halted, and the president called for a review of the "deaccessioning protocol." Staff were devastated, but the renovation was successfully accomplished.

Case 3: Blame the New CIO

A small university with recently-merged Library/IT operations was headed by a newly appointed CIO. Faculty outrage erupted in response to discovery of dumped bound journals. Some faculty conflated this "stealth" weeding, which had been underway for several years, with the recent unpopular Library/IT merger and blamed the CIO. Distrust mounted as faculty members railed against the IT "takeover" of the library. A faculty senate resolution called for the sacking of the CIO and the launch of a national search for a library director. The dean managed to defuse the crisis by appointing a task force on the future of the library, which engendered a long-overdue campus conversation about changes in libraries. The CIO survived, the library established a holistic communication program, and faculty support for the library was affirmed.

Case 4: A Witch's Tale: Weeding Gone Awry.

As an elite mid-Atlantic liberal arts college library prepared to re-open after renovation, materials temporarily stored off-site during the project were designated as either ready to return or subject to recycling. Strips of blue tape marked the spines of valuable journal

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runs on their way back to the stacks. Instead, the blue tape volumes ended up in dumpsters. The Library Director managed to recall one container, after an outside contractor noticed the error. But the damage was done. Another entire dumpster full of 19th-century journal runs was already lost to the recyclers. Faculty took up arms, rhetorically, calling the library director a "book-burner" and a "witch." The college provost, caught off-balance, did not stand firmly behind the library director. The library has since begun to rebuild faculty trust, and the lost sets are gradually being replaced at great cost on the o.p. market.

Case 5: Summer Gardening: Weeding or Whacking?

Summer brought two events in the life of a large West Coast academic library: well-publicized closure of several branch libraries and a barely publicized major weeding project. A campus administrator mandated that nearly all print periodicals be recycled. This was announced in a vague email posted at the end of spring semester. Once faculty registered the scale and the lack of nuance in executing these withdrawals, the project was halted, and some titles were saved. The fiasco resulted in serious erosion of faculty trust in the library and administration. A reinstated library committee quickly began to fashion collection management criteria, guidelines, and procedures. The institution is gradually working towards restoration of faculty trust in the administration of the library and putting the library back in charge of collection management.

Case 6: Brouhaha Bonanza: A Big Wrong Makes it All Right

An **ARL** library struggling to balance a demand for student amenities with a burgeoning collection, decided to transfer several hundred thousand books to a distant commercial storage facility. This would reduce the browsable collections to only two of the five library floors. The campus community responded with a firestorm of protest. The brouhaha attracted national press attention and revealed internal political strains in the university. Humanists, who were particularly aggrieved as they rely heavily on browsable collections, resented the institution's greater support for scientific disciplines evident in well-equipped laboratories. Ultimately, this tempest turned the library plan in a productive direction. The university expanded central campus library space and constructed a high-density storage facility near campus with a million-volume capacity. The humanities collection remained browsable.

Lessons

These cautionary tales yield some common-sense lessons involving campus politics, education, communication, and project planning and implementation. Based on conversations with those who lived to tell these stories and my experience, these are the lessons learned.

Pay Attention to Details and Disciplinary Differences

Take special care in thinking through the details of every policy, procedure, and workflow. Anticipate possible failure factors and sources of machine and human error, and monitor these throughout the process. It is critical to clearly articulate, without using jargon, the criteria and process that will be used. Vet your plans with thoughtful faculty members, and be prepared to make adjustments based on what you learn. Consult with faculty about disciplinary differences in use of the literature; avoid cookie-cutter approaches to collection management. Plan carefully for disposition of withdrawn materials.

Mind the Politics, Perceptions, and Emotions

Lay the groundwork for implementation by working through formal academic governance processes. Brief the administration and faculty about the situation and outlook for collection management, the choices you face, and your process for campus outreach and education. Seek their counsel. Articulate the rationale for your approach to collection management, provide a vision of what it will look like when the work is done, and speak to how stake-holders will benefit (or not!). Again, explain the specific processes and guidelines you plan to use in collection management, and seek comment. Faculty and students need to be heard. Develop buy-in among the silent majority, but listen to everyone. Cultivate patience for pontification and the occasional irrational or purely emotional arguments. Be aware of campus perceptions of the library space situation, its plans for using space gained, collections strengths and weaknesses, etc., and address these in your planning.

Hone Your Outreach, Education, and Communication Plan

Librarians are paid to think constantly about how libraries are changing. Faculty and students are not, and they need help evolving their understanding of how publishing and libraries are changing and what it means for their library. It is easier to make a good "business case" for what you are planning to do than it is to make these projects "teachable moments." Engage your library and faculty colleagues in developing robust outreach and education programs that help faculty update their awareness of what is happening in the world of libraries and publishing. Conduct campus conversations up front, rather than waiting for them to happen in reaction to the project. Begin by making the case to your library colleagues, and work through the arguments and procedures in-house before taking them to external stake-holders.

Once your aims, process, and procedures are clear, develop a formal communication plan. Promulgate the rationale, processes, and criteria that will guide the project. Avoid jargon. Have a plan for quick response to questions and concerns. **Paul Metz** and **Caryl Gray**,[1] and **Bart Harloe**[2] have written very helpful pieces on public relations plans for weeding projects.

Frame the Conversation: This is a *Campus* Challenge

While the library is ultimately responsible for stewardship of the collections, it is deeply dependent on support from both faculty and administration. Librarians often make a mistake in shouldering the full burden of responsibility for decisions and actions that arise from larger institutional forces and that have institution-wide ramifications. The library's role is to frame the conversation and make clear recommendations. Outline the realities you face (e.g., economic, collection needs, and space situation), the choices you considered, and their costs and consequences. Explain why your recommendation is what is best for the campus.

When librarians make significant changes in how they are managing the community's collections without informing those affected, they are betraying a trust. When Provosts, Presidents, and/or Boards of Trustees put the library in an untenable situation by demanding specific collection management outcomes without providing the time or resources to do the job effectively, the library must make this institutional choice clear to the community. It is tricky, but rather than getting caught in faculty-administration cross-fire, the library can position itself as an honest broker in a difficult campus conversation: trying to do what is best for the university with the resources available.

Conclusions

Several other threads emerge in looking at these stories. None of the libraries in these tales were members of a shared print archiving program. Similarly, none of these libraries had a holistic collection management plan[3] articulating their overarching collection management strategy and the principles and guidelines to be used in implementing that strategy. Having a plan and being part of a shared print archive provide a rational framework for decision-making about our legacy collections in a time of transition, and a broader context for understanding specific projects.

Finally, many of these tales contain silver linings. Reasonable outcomes often resulted, such as improved library liaison, enhanced faculty support, building a campus storage facility, and increased understanding of library issues and trends. Perhaps these, or even better, outcomes might have been achieved without the accompanying angst and anger. On the other hand, conflict can be constructive, especially when skillfully managed. This is fundamentally a political and educational challenge. How do you transform the fervent commitment many stake-holders feel toward the book, and their deeply felt conceptions of the library, into support for the *actual needs* of *a 21st-century library*?

What do you think are the lessons learned from these stories and others like them? Are there bedrock professional principles and practices governing our obligations to involving and informing our communities as we manage their collections? What differences in transparency and campus engagement in collection management projects are warranted by size of institution, nature of the collection, and/or by campus culture? *Contribute your thoughts for a future column.*