Future Tense -- Doing What's Obvious: Library Space and the Fat Smoker

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Future Tense — Doing What’s Obvious: Library Space and the Fat Smoker

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As a lifelong fan of disturbing ironies, I have to stop and savor this one. Fortunately, the opportunities to do so are legion. R2’s work takes us to dozens of libraries each year, and it is rare that we encounter a building that does not suffer some form of this malady. While it can be encouraging to see every seat filled, every workstation claimed, and every couch devoted to napping, there is often an accompanying sense of unmet demand and missed opportunity. The whirr of the espresso grinder echoes through deserted aisles in print Reference. Students seeking a carrel get lost in the empty Government Documents rows. Up on the fourth floor, the small rooms on the periphery of the jammed and silent stacks are reserved for faculty and library staff, and remain locked lest a student project group invade. Meanwhile, in the administrative suite, plans to expand the Information Commons or incorporate the Writing Center are tacked to the wall, as a capital campaign or a foray to the Provost to seek funding for expansion gets underway. There just isn’t enough space for everything and everyone.

Perhaps we can agree on four assumptions at the outset of this argument:

1. New or expanded library space will be harder to come by, at least in the near future.
2. Print collections and users are competing for the same space.
3. It is preferable to reduce onsite collections rather than limit the number of users.
4. Coordinated regional offsite collections could handle all low-use materials.

Clearly, local circumstances may vary and require some modification of these premises, but the trends and realities they reflect seem pervasive.

In our previous two ATG articles on managing print monographs collections, we described first the need for immediate action (“Weeding: The Time Is Now,” ATG v.20#4 September 2008), and then one possible solution (“The Disapproval Plan: Rules-Based Weeding and Storage Decisions,” ATG v.20#6 December 2008-January 2009). Our research into these areas points to another common and disturbing irony: more than 40% of the material filling these encroaching shelves has never been used, and is unlikely to ever be used. Not only are library users being crowded out by reading material, they are being crowded out by unwanted reading material!

As our new hero Stanley J. Slote, author of Weeding Library Collections: Library Weed-
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Future Tense
from page 75

As in art, limitations often spawn creativity. The fact that money and space are tight in many libraries, while regrettable in some respects, offers us the chance to re-examine our priorities and change our behavior. The first step toward fitness is right in front of us. All we have to do is take it.

Rumors
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And the Call for Papers for the 2009 Charleston Conference is now up online! Turn in your proposal at http://www.katina.info/conference/callforpapers.php. See details this issue p.8 as well.

And speaking of Conferences, the incredibly resourceful Rosann Bazirjian (Dean of University Libraries, UNC-Greensboro) <rvbazirj@uncg.edu> — long time principle coordinator of the Charleston Conference — is organizing a conference with Wake Forest University — Inspiration, Innovation, Celebration: An Entrepreneurial Conference for Librarians. It is June 3-4, 2009. See more details this issue, p.21.

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Conference offsite storage has allowed us to ignore or at

tion quality: bigger is better. Relatively cheap

another vestigial grip on our perceptions of collec

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nargination is moved offsite, and it is critical that the

the core collection should be considered for weeding. And, as a corollary of the above
rule: All books in the noncore collection are

candidates for weeding and probably should

be needed.

In most libraries, the core collection con- 

sists of only six out of every ten monographs

currently housed in the building. That means that 40%, repeat 40%, can and probably should

be weeded or stored elsewhere. While this ap-

lication of Slotle’s rule may sound harsh, we

suggest this is an obvious and necessary course

for most libraries. Removing the “noncore”

monographs would have no effect whatsoever

on user service. On the contrary, such straight-

forward action would dramatically improve

service in ways that users actually value.

Furthermore, it would do so at a fraction of the

cost of a building addition or construction of

a new facility. A decision to “right-size” print

monographs collections would immediately

release 40% of the space currently occupied by

stocks to other uses.

This represents an immense opportunity to

convert a seriously underutilized resource to

one that yields substantial value to library

patrons. Combined with already-occurring

reductions in bound journals and print refer-

cence works that duplicate electronic content,

and potential reductions in Government Docu-

ments, most libraries could remove half of their

shelving and claim that rediscovered land in the

name of users — at minimal cost and without

negatively affecting access to desired content.

It’s an obvious choice. So… what are we

waiting for?

There are practical reasons. One problem is

that good tools don’t exist, at least until the “disapproval plan” previously described has

been built. Another is that volume count retains

its popularity. It’s an obvious choice. So…

So, then, what is the “right size”? The shade of

Niecodson Baker hangs over the proceedings.

Faculty members and library staff themselves

often have strong attachments to the collections

they’ve built title-by-title, and in some cases

would rather retire than dismantle portions of

their life’s work. Emotion as much as reason

governs the whole enterprise. It seems easier

to shoehorn another book onto the shelf, move

a few more titles offsite, and simply limp along

unchanged. And in most libraries that is the

state of the art.

Eventually, though, if the organization

wants to live, motivation either develops or is

imposed. Again from David Maister: “We all

know the main thing that works: a major crisis! If revenues drop off sharply, it’s amazing how

quickly businesses can act to deal with known

inefficiencies and bad habits they could have
tackled years ago.”

Well, academic libraries have now been

presented with a major crisis, and in many

meeting rooms at ALA in Denver we heard the

comment: “Let’s not waste a good crisis.” This

one is especially good, arriving as it does on top

of a decade of continuous changes in content
delivery, user expectations, and increasing

competition. R2 suggests that we use this mo-

ment to tackle at least one known inefficiency

and bad habit: libraries are wasting a large

portion of their most valuable space, a resource

that is expensive and in short supply.

To return again to Maister: “Real strategy

lies not in figuring out what to do, but in de-

vising ways to ensure that […] we actually do

more of what everybody knows they should
do.” So let’s conclude by thinking about

strategies for transforming our libraries from

fat smokers into reasonably healthy individu-

als. David Maister posits three elements for

making a serious change.

1. It’s about a permanent change in life-

style. Transformation is not a one-time event; it

must become a way of life. In a library context,

this might mean that onsite print collections

must shrink by 50%, and then remain at that

level or lower. We need to lose the weight, but

then we need to keep it off. To achieve and

maintain sustainable collections, the library

must incorporate new activities into its routine

operations. This means that the print collection

must be regarded as dynamic. For every item

that is added to the collection each year, another

item must be withdrawn — based on usage.

De-selection must become as routine as selec-

tion. Weeding is not a special event; rather it is

an integral part of the lifecycle management of

content. The goal is no longer to build a larger

collection; the goal is to assure that content

most likely to be used is onsite, and that space

for users continues to take precedence over

inert content. And a number of libraries in

any given region would rely on a shared offsite

facility to house little-used material.

2. You must change the scorecards. At

present, the scorecards still favor high volume

counts, although this is changing. ARL has

moved to materials budget as a more relevant

indicator of access. We suggest that use (of col-

lections, of space) must become a more central

metric, and that it be monitored consistently.

Onsite print collections should be measured like an inventory, with prime shelf space res-

erved for titles with high “turns.” Offsite stor-

age should be managed like a warehouse, with

fill rates and fulfillment time benchmarked and

measured. User satisfaction with “the library as

place” might have its own scorecard, much as

it now does in LIBQUAL+ surveys. Libraries

might focus on eliminating user turnaways at

peak hours, or devise other metrics that high-

light the satisfaction level of users.

3. Leadership: Get Serious, or Get Out

of the Way. It is vital that the Library’s senior

leadership remain focused on achieving a

higher return on the institution’s investment in

space. Leaders need to describe why additional

space is needed, how it will be used, and how

it supports the teaching and learning mission of

the university. They need to make the case

internally and externally that these changes will

not affect user service. They need to educate

all constituencies; champion and defend this

leadership, high-yield activity. Selectors are

likely to get push-back from faculty as mater-

ial is moved offsite, and it is critical that the

administration articulate, support, and actively

sell its decisions and actions, and insist that the

library staff stick to the plan. There is much to

be gained here, but nothing will happen without

committed leadership.

As in art, limitations often spawn creativ-

ty. The fact that money and space are tight

in many libraries, while regrettable in some

respects, offers us the chance to re-examine

our priorities and change our behavior. The

first step toward fitness is right in front of us.

All we have to do is take it.