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Approaching Clairvoyance: Notes Toward Selection for Off-Site Shelving

by Margaret K. Powell (Yale University Library)

Libraries of all types, particularly academic libraries, continue to experience serious space shortages, as they have for the past several decades. While library additions, and indeed entire new libraries, are still being constructed, hard economic truths and dreams of the digital collection have reduced our ability and our desire to construct traditional libraries at the same rate as the growth and addition of material demand. More and more, academic libraries are looking to storage facilities, even distant ones, to help solve their space problems. Many libraries have already taken this road, notably Princeton, the University of California, Harvard, and the University of Michigan. Many others are rapidly making plans to move in this direction (Cornell, Columbia, New York University, University of Pennsylvania, Yale). While the kind of facility varies — some may be built new for the purpose, others refashioned from an existing structure — and the access differs — some facilities allow for browsing and research in situ, others do not — the comparatively low cost of such shelving is a boon to institutions: construction and operating costs can be one-tenth or less of those for conventional on-campus buildings.

The move to such cost-effective facilities raises numerous collection management issues. Much has been written about weeding collections, but, as Wendy Louise ruefully remarks in her 1990 article, "Remote Shelving Comes of Age," "Like a distant and unpopular cousin, discussions of storage often seem relegated to behind-the-scenes conversations of worst case scenarios and compromised virtue." (p.93). Making decisions to move materials to off-campus shelving, it turns out, is not always the same as making decisions to discard materials. For one thing, the scale and scope of these decisions are much larger than the scale and scope of weeding projects, which can often be made a routine part of collection management. For another, transferring parts of collections to an off-site facility requires librarians and curators to face a whole range of high-visibility issues while debating the advantages and disadvantages of on-campus versus off-campus locations. I would like to talk briefly about some of these in the context of Yale's planning for its new Off-Campus High Efficiency Shelving Facility and from the perspective of the coordinator of selection for this new facility. I hope my remarks will serve as an introduction to the topic for others considering such a step and as a catalyst for discussion of the entire concept of off-campus extensions to traditional library shelving. (I wouldn't mind some answers to some of our own intractable problems, either.)

A little more than a year and a half ago now (in October 1996), in response to the findings of a 1994 space planning report, Yale's Working Group for an Off-Campus High Efficiency Shelving Facility issued its final report to the President and the Provost, recommending that the University build an off-site facility that would house 2 million volumes initially in a first module (this number has now risen to 3 million) and allow for additional modules to be added as (or before) needed. By relieving impossibly crowded conditions in the library stacks, this facility would allow the on-campus collections to become more browsable and more accessible; the building itself would "provide optimal environmental conditions for long term preservation of library materials" (Final Report), and the design would be based on the model of the Harvard Depository (that is, books would be shelved by size, not subject, and would be tracked by an inventory barcode system; browsing would not be possible). Because of several imminent renovations and restructuring projects, the new facility would open for operation on June 1, 1998 — less than two years from the date of the report — and would be ready to receive materials at the rate of between 250,000 and 500,000 volume-equivalents a year. The aim would be to reduce the on-campus collections by about 20%, and to maintain the resulting number (somewhere around 8-8.5 million volumes) at a steady rate, so that ongoing collection growth would be taken up by the off-campus facility. From a selector's point of view, there were other crucial recommendations: that no material be transferred to the new facility until appropriately represented in the online catalog; that the selection of appropriate material be the job of the librarians already carrying collection development and selection responsibilities; that the materials selected be the least-frequently used parts of the collection; that these materials "particularly benefit from the optimal environmental conditions and the high security provided at the facility," and that no material be recycled "pro fecto" except from consideration (Final Report). Furthermore, there should be campus-wide consultation and discussion about the new facility and what should go into it.

Over the course of the past year, we have made a great deal of progress (and, I should say, the opening date has slipped by only two months, to August 1998, so we are still running on an amazingly tight schedule): the site has been purchased, architects and consultants hired, task forces and working groups appointed, the faculty approached. Aside from these more general achievements, I'd like to discuss the issues raised by the task of implementing the deceptively simple question: What goes in? Who decides what goes in? How do we identify what goes in? And, not least, how are faculty consulted and brought into the decision-making process?

What Goes In?

A. Infrequently Used Materials.

The selection criterion of infrequent use is one whose purpose is easy to grasp but whose precise definition (not to mention implementation) is difficult to agree upon. Obviously, to take full advantage of the low cost of off-campus shelving, a library should transfer only those materials that will not be needed, or will not be needed often; each retrieval and return cycle costs money and is potentially damaging to the book. Clairvoyance is the goal; the ability to predict future use of any given item.

If we could ensure that nothing transferred off campus would ever be called for again, in one sense our job would be well and truly done, in another, of course such lack of use might raise questions about our acquisition decisions! As anyone who has read the professional literature...

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ture on this topic knows, there are many studies out there offering formulae to predict future use from past use and recommending the implementation of these formulae to aid weeding or removal to storage. And, clearly, if a book has not been used in the last twenty years, it is not likely that it will be asked for in the next twenty. But it is not CERTAIN, and it is even less certain in a research library where faculty and students have an inconvenient habit of discovering through browsing hitherto untapped areas of inquiry and dragging those dusty books out into the light and using them.

And, even if one could with certainty predict future use from past use, what does use mean, and how is it measured? There are circulation data available from an online system (though far back does this system go?), and there is information retrievable from data-due stamps (again, far back would it need to go to be meaningful and where is the time to consult book after book for this information?), but these data do not measure in-house use. They tell us nothing about the faculty member who stands at a shelf of journals to check citations, for instance, or the student making photocopies. There have been various approaches taken to measuring in-building use (taking surveys, keeping reshelving records, checking for dust), but in an undertaking as large as Yale’s, these quickly became unwieldy. As Robert Hayes remarks in a 1981 article, there is a fundamental difference between use of the library as a place to get books that one wants to read and use of the library as a research tool. The former use can be measured by circulation; the latter, by nothing so simple.” (Hayes: p. 216)

B. Material that Would Most Benefit from an Optimal Preservation Environment

It only makes sense that a building whose environment is state of the art, the best in the country for books and other research materials, and whose security is tight, should contain things whose conditions and characteristics call out for such protection. At first glance this would suggest as prime candidates older materials, as well as fragile, rare, valuable, or controversial items. But what happens when this criterion, preservation in its largest sense, comes into conflict with the previous criterion-use? What about those 18th century books now housed in the general stacks and used steadily? How much wear and tear will trips to and from the repository cause to materials identified as fragile? How long before the cost of retrieving items cancels out the economic benefit of off-campus shelving? Was this shelf designed to provide? And what sort of special treatment (cleaning, boxing, repair) will this older, fragile, rare material require as it is transferred, and how much will it cost?

Just these sorts of questions have precipitated a long-needed conversation at Yale about the materials in our general collections that in many other libraries would be under lock and key and the watchful eye of special collections reading room attendants. Until now, we have often had no alternative for off-campus transfer.

The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library already pressed for space itself — and retaining it in the open stacks, vulnerable to the vicissitudes of time, weather, photocopy machines, razor blades and thieves. We are in the process of finding ways to identify and govern this material (familiarly designated “semi-rare”), and the off-campus shelving facility presents a fine opportunity to rethink the deposition of and service for these wonderfully problematic items.

C. Only Material Appropriately Represented in the Online Catalog

From the beginning the library has pledged to the Yale community that nothing will be transferred to the off-campus facility unless or until there is a suitable record for it in the online catalog. If we make parts of the collection physically inaccessible by shelving them offsite and in no call number order, then we have an obligation to replace the ability to browse actual shelves with the ability to browse virtual shelves, online. At present, Yale’s online catalog contains records for 30%-40% of the collections; the library has embarked on a long awaited project to convert most of the rest to its records (some 4 to 5 million) from paper to electronic form, using the more complete records in the official catalog — not shelf lists — as the source file. What this means for the process of identifying material for the off-campus facility cannot be underestimated, and my advice to anyone contemplating these two projects is very straightforward: FINISH (or mostly finish) RECON FIRST!

D. Who Decides What Goes In?

In most cases, the bibliographers, curators, and other selectors have responsibility for selecting material for shelving and for defining the shape of the on-campus collections. They know the faculty, they know the needs and patterns of scholarship in their fields, and they know their collections. In other cases, the responsibility for selecting materials to be transferred offsite may be lodged elsewhere. At Harvard, for example, there is one librarian (not a bibliographer) who does the selection from the Widener Library stacks. He has had long experience with the library system and the academic curriculum, is a self-confessed "stack rat," loves and understands books, and maintains regular conversations with the faculty. At Yale, on the other hand, the principle of distributing responsibility among all the selectors has been in place from the start, but we have had to work to make sure that no part of the collection was orphaned — left without a selector — and, conversely, that no part of the collection would have several claimants. We have called this process, "earning up the baby." Decisions are particularly problematic for some pieces of the general collection, especially older scientific and technology materials (science selectors are concerned mainly with new materials in their branch and department libraries, the history selectors are already overburdened) and area studies materials (the selectors select from their regions and often in a foreign script from the Western language material comes in through the good offices of the other selectors) — it was unclear how to divide the responsibilities. Finally, against the spectre of a case-by-case discussion for several million volumes, we have decided to adhere pretty strictly to a subject division, regardless of imprint date or language, urging consultation whenever necessary.

Once we had divided up the universe so that each and every book theoretically had a selector attached to it, we affirmed the exceedingly discipline-specific nature of the actual selection decisions. The correct material to transfer is one discipline will not be so in another. A chemist’s research patterns are quite different from a historian’s, and those again different from a political scientist’s or a literary scholar’s. It became clear that each selector, in consultation with his or her relevant faculty, would need to develop individual sets of criteria for selection, based on the curriculum, trends in scholarship, research interest of our faculty, and other information gathered from user community.

How is the Material Identified?

Depending on one’s philosophical stance, there are perhaps two ideal ways to identify material for off-campus shelving. One is to go into the stacks, pushing a book truck and armed with years of institutional and scholarly and bibliographic experience, and simply pull what “should” go. This approach is used at Harvard’s Widener Library, and certainly does justice to the complexities of the collection and the people (present and yet to be using them). The other, more expedient way is to check out entire categories of material by call number or format, and declare that they shall all be transferred. The University of Kansas implemented such an approach, transferring only older or dead serials, and at Emory the decision was made to move long runs of ceased journals from the A and Z Library of Congress classes. This second method may be simplistic but it is blessedly easy to execute and to communicate. Reality in Yale’s case lies somewhere in between. We are precluded from the latter model ( wholesale relegation of classes by materials) by our first principles—nothing shall be exempt, no discipline shall bear a disproportionate burden—and by the decision to tackle recon using the official catalog, not the shelf list, for reasons of completeness and evenness of treatment. Because records will be converted by main entry alphabetical order, not by call number order, and because we can transfer no books until their records show up in the online catalog, identifying an entire class of material for transfer is not possible until recon is finished. We are restricted from the former (one stack crawl) by limits of selector time and again, by the incomplete state of our online catalog (how do we know what is online and thus ripe for transfer when we’re rolling book trucks through the stacks?). In a smaller, fully-
I have gone on at such length about the problem of identifying materials for transfer to show, first, that for large, older, heterogeneous collections no one method may be sufficient and, second, that planning the process can reveal unforeseen conflicts resulting from the collision of unrelated policy decisions (e.g., the decision to convert the paper records and the decision to build—and fill—an off-campus shelving facility in a much tighter timeframe than that of the conversion project).

Supposing we resolve the many complexities I've tried to describe. What would be selected? Here are some possible categories:

- Parts of the collections that are already non-browsable, with mediated access (e.g., manuscripts and archival materials);
- Duplicates;
- Certain blocks of homogeneous materials (e.g., auction catalogs);
- Older (i.e., pre-1800 or 1820) books that could be retrieved for use in a supervised reading room;
- Materials available alternatively in microform at Yale;
- Journals available to Yale users in full-text electronic versions;
- Indexed journals;
- Dead journals;
- Pamphlets (for preservation reasons).

How are faculty consulted?

The short answer here is, early and often, otherwise there will be ill will and suspicion; otherwise it will seem that the librarians are conspiring to send “their” books away; otherwise the whole process will appear mysterious and threatening. Several of my colleagues across the country sent cautionary messages:

- From the University of Minnesota: “What I have learned is that we do much better when we let our faculty know as far in advance as possible of our plans” and from the University of Missouri: “One piece of advice that I offer—be sure to involve your faculty.

It takes longer but you will have fewer unhappy people if they are involved in the review process.”

Beyond the public relations angle, of course, we need faculty help to determine what makes up the in-campus collections and what can be transferred offsite. Their knowledge and expertise are invaluable. From the very beginning, faculty have been involved in Yale’s off-campus shelving initiative: they served on the Working Group that recommended building a facility; they serve on the Advisory Committee on Library Policy, and they continue to be consulted and asked for help as selectors begin to draw up profiles of their on- and off-campus collections. There are several points to make here, and an anecdote to relate.

A. Rhetoric. When talking about select...
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ing for off-campus shelving, we all fall into the trap of negative rhetoric, referring to "sending some books off" (as if to their deaths), "saving" or "keeping" others, "putting the burden" on some parts of the collections, and so on. Perhaps the most extreme example of this is the language used in some library literature: "stock control," "dead stock," "block regulation," "final extraction," (J.A. Uraghurt and N.C. Uraghurt).

And certainly the spin put on this process in the recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* articles is no exception: "In the new model of the research library, unused books are out, computers are in," and "Universities see off-campus warehouses as the best way to house bulging collections." (CHE, Oct 17, 1997, p. A27) This, it seems to me, is a good example of how not to talk about this issue! While it is true that for users the ideal library would probably have all its physical holdings immediately accessible, on open shelves for consultation and retrieval, an off-campus facility can offer very real benefits, and the faculty need to hear about them: on-campus collections that are more coherent and better suited for browsing.

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than more suppliers, in order to cut down on bureaucracy. They may well prefer to deal with a few agents than a myriad of publishers.

Services such as BIDS in the UK and UnCover in the US which can link database searches to document delivery can avoid agents in the chain (they can avoid libraries, too), unless the agent owns the document delivery service. Certainly such electronic services can give libraries the information they need about periodical use and justification for cancellation of paper copies.

With the activity of libraries and publishers changing, there is bound to be a knock-on effect on agents.

Isn't that a crummy characteristic?!

The question is, can agents continue to administer information and hold it together when libraries and publishers seem to be moving ahead in the information game? Agents are service and labor intensive. Can their only advantage be to pit one company's sales force against another? Agents report that they have increasing success in consolidation work, checking-in and processing periodicals for libraries? But for how long will this reversion to their original role where they actually used to handle the supply in a physical way, give them enough income as libraries switch to the electronic paradigm?

In library supply of periodicals there used to be five big agents and now there are four. Those unlucky libraries who had to reallocate their supply away from ailing firms may have questioned what they were doing using agents anyway. Was it preferable to go for the company which took over the ailing firm or was it better to consider an unknown quantity in the form of a different agent? What would persuade them to change allegiance? Surely only some value-added service upon which they could rely? Should they bother to send their CD-ROM and electronic purchases to agents when the publishers are literally knocking at their doors and the licenses for these products have to be handled anyway by the leasing parties? What can agents offer that can tempt librarians, beyond their current service?

A salesmen has got to dream,...it comes with the territory!

What then can agents do to avoid their own death? They have to dream up some role for themselves which will not leave them spilling out of the supply sandwich. They have to look at what is bugging their customers and how they can plug the gap. Some of the areas they can look at might include those topics which when two or three librarians are gathered together they tend to discuss. Topics like copyright clearance, myriad licensing agreements for networking databases, facilities management of IT, telecoms and archiving of electronic material exercise the time and patience of librarians and they could use some expert help in these areas. Of course, it is not up to librarians to provide a role for agents but they are not likely to want to use moribund organizations for supply. If that were our task in this paper, we would be asking for jobs with periodical agents. However, the work of librarians and publishers and agents is changing rapidly. If periodical agents do not change, the salesman's title may share his epitaph with periodical agents — He never knew who he was....

Endnotes


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