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Books Do Furnish a Room

by **Ann Okerson** (Advisor on Electronic Resources Strategy, Center for Research Libraries) <aokerson@gmail.com>

“Books do furnish a room” was the nickname of an **Anthony Powell** character named Lindsay Bagshaw and provided the title for one of the novels of **Powell’s** *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Many of us would agree with that lovely sentiment, and there are great universities who take the maxim seriously. For example, **Princeton** has had a student center rotunda filled with donated books — one distinguished scholar contributed his set of the flagship journal of a learned society of which he had been president. Georgetown houses rarely summoned old periodicals in a gorgeous space used mainly for formal university events.

But there are those, including **Rebecca Shuman** in a recent article in *Slate*, who would make that sentiment an axiom of library design. There must be books, she argues, not just so people can read them, but because books induce a reflective and contemplative spirit not otherwise easily achieved. The Linonia and Brothers Room in **Sterling Library** at **Yale** has proved that for many decades now, offering a choice collection of important books and great old green overstuffed chairs and sofas, whose springs, as you sit on them, still resonate with the brilliant minds and gentle snores of earlier Yalies who studied and reposed there. For all that, the space is not nearly as heavily used as spaces with library computers or spaces that have comfortable and well-wired seating areas, with most-heavily used books and study materials in proximity.

The fact is that a collection of codex books is both a beautiful and useful thing. What books should be in such a collection and how

they should best be, as we say nowadays, “discoverable,” are important questions that librarians everywhere are addressing. But it is also true that not every book a library owns needs to be in a traditional open-stack collection. Librarians know that better than anyone, and we have been building off-site repositories for decades now. These repositories work amazingly well. They are less beautiful and inspiring than most reading rooms or vast echoing corridors of open stack shelving at the heart of a campus, no question, but they often prove as or more useful and effective, to say nothing of more economical, than adding lots of those echoing corridors of open stack shelving that fewer users much visit these days or foregoing other necessary spaces.

Making decisions about what remains within arm’s reach and what waits obediently for an automated system to retrieve it in 24 hours more or less is a serious business. Librarians’ good professional judgment, good communication, and immense respect for faculty and student concerns all play a part. Mistakes can get made, no question, and they should be promptly fixed.

Blurred generalities, on the other hand, help no one. In the case of the recent *Slate* article, the complaint was raised about moving 40%

of a small college’s collection offsite — i.e., about 170,000 volumes. That college’s library has access for its students and faculty to the full collections of two other peer colleges within 50 miles and to millions of volumes in all of the state’s libraries, available for rapid delivery by courier. Gaining access to these millions of items might well be more valuable to the

college’s community than putting 170,000 lower-use items off campus. The library also provides access to countless numbers of information resources (journals, books, data, government publications, videos, and so on) in electronic and other formats.

On the basis of much evidence, this college is being very well served indeed by its library; and where there’s controversy over what is undoubtedly a complex decision, it’s a matter for that community to thrash out, not for less-informed outsiders to make the object of soap-boxing. The *Slate* article engages in hyperbole and emotion, with far too little understanding of what makes a library a library nor of the tough space trade-offs that need to be made today at our colleges and universities. 🍇



A Case for the Use of Collection Analysis Tools in Deselection

by **Cris Ferguson** (Director of Technical Services, 222 Waterfield Library, Murray State University, Murray, KY 42071; Phone: 270-809-5607) <cferguson13@murraystate.edu>

A library considers a myriad of factors when undertaking a monographic deselection project. The need for space, institutional priorities, and the obsolescence of materials all play a role in determining what and how much to remove from the collection. Whether items are being withdrawn or simply stored in an off-site facility, the criteria factoring into the decision as to whether to keep a particular item could include circulation and in-library use data; reviews and authoritative title lists; availability of the title in eBook archives like the **HathiTrust**; how widely (or scarcely) the title is held at other libraries; and the availability of the item through interlibrary loan or possibly a shared print archive.

Given that much of this information is freely available, it is not surprising many

libraries opt to gather the data for deselection projects on their own, pulling circulation data from their OPACs, searching WorldCat for holdings in other libraries, examining reviews, and investigating online availability for titles under consideration for weeding. However, compiling data from these disparate sources into a single interface and generating functional reports requires a significant investment of time and manpower. I would argue that this manual investigation is often inadequate and the cost in terms of the staff time required is simply too high.

A rules-based approach to weeding utilizing a collection analysis tool offers a practical alternative to this time consuming investigation and title-by-title analysis. Collection analysis tools bring together several

data points under one umbrella, streamlining the data gathering and simplifying the analysis process, providing tangible benefits for a library. Establishing rules-based weeding criteria alleviates the subjectivity of the collection analysis and speeds up the deselection process. Overall, this approach is more time efficient, expedites overlap and gap analysis within the collection, and facilitates batch processing both of records and materials.

Some examples of collection analysis tools available, both commercial and open source, include **OCLC’s** WorldShare Collection Evaluation (formerly known as WorldCat Collection Analysis), **Sustainable Collection Services**, **Bowker’s** Book Analysis System, **Intota** Assessment, **GIST**

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