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From Backlog to Workflow: American University's Approach for Handling Preservation Books and Missing Serials Issues

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American University Library had a backlog of several years' worth of damaged books as well as partial bindable units for serials. This presentation will outline how we decided to work through the backlog with the help of various units in the library. We divided the work load for the preservation books more evenly among the collection managers, set deadlines with consequences for decision making, and trained additional staff in the initial evaluation step using a newly created form. For the incomplete bindable units, we physically organized the backlog, developed a form for staff to use to locate the missing issues, updated Voyager to reflect the most current information, and negotiated an agreement with several consortium members to provide us with missing issues in exchange for our binding the issues. A result of this serials project was that the collection managers reviewed every problem journal that was being bound as well as binding decisions on every journal period.

Even though American University is dedicating more and more resources towards acquiring electronic books, there is still the pesky problem of how to maintain and preserve the current collection of print books. There were 554 books that needed preservation decisions and that had been languishing on the processing shelf for several years. A staff turnover in the processing department, a reorganization of the department and a determination to clear out these books was now a priority. The existing practice was to have the collection development librarian look at every single book and make a decision. This was overwhelming for the librarian and as a consequence, no decisions were made. He estimated that it took him 20 minutes per book to evaluate plus the only time he could dedicate to the books was between Thanksgiving and Christmas. We decided in the fall of 2010 that something had to change. Not only did we have the original group of books but damaged books were continually being rerouted to processing by the circulation desk and through an inventory project.

There were a wide variety of problems with the books and the current system of evaluation was too time consuming and onerous. The processing/serials staff brainstormed on how to make the process better and faster. The library was also having an inventory project done where books were pulled from the shelves for evaluation and the collection managers were making decisions on what to do with those books. (At American University, we have a collection development librarian along with subject specialists called collection managers). We decided to set up the same process for the damaged books. At the same time, another project was being started in the library which was to evaluate all the books marked as lost in the catalog. We needed a new process that would involve more librarians making decisions, that would get the books back to the shelves as soon as possible, that would take the pressure off one person being responsible for the evaluations, and a process that all parties would agree to follow.

We approached the head of reference first since she was the supervisor of the collection development librarian and presented our proposal to get her buy-in. We then presented our proposal to the collection managers and asked them to participate in the new process. We created a new form (the old form was not gathering the right information) and the acquisitions and serials/processing staff would do the prep work of filling out side A. The books would then be put on separate marked shelves, depending on call number. The collection managers would be responsible for their call number ranges and the decisions. The prep work involved looking at the condition of the book, checking circulation statistics and checking the catalog for American University and WRLC holdings and lastly, looking for replacement costs. The Collection Managers would then look at the book, the information provided on side A, and fill out side B with their recommendations of discard, replace or send to storage.

The key to making this process successful was to set deadlines and consequences for the Collection Managers. Every month, an email was sent to the CMT (Collection Management Team) email, giving the new deadline for decisions to be made. When we originally started this project, we thought we would have the default for no action to be KEEP. Once we realized how much work went into doing the prep work, we decided that the deadline for inaction would be DISCARD. We envisioned the collection managers deciding to not look at their books because we would keep them anyway and this was not what we wanted. So every month, the collection managers were given a deadline of a month in advance. Email sent Sept 1, deadline Oct 1. For the most part, they met their deadlines.

The result of this new process was we cleared out the original backlog of 554 books. A new process was in place that dealt with the influx of books from various projects as well as being routed from circulation as needed. We discovered that some Collection Managers were much more conservative than others in replacing books. Some Collection Managers did not evaluate their books at all. One particular Collection Manager had the bulk of the books because he has the widest range of areas so his deadline was often extended to give him more time. There has been a huge increase in ordering replacement books which has created new workflow problems for the acquisitions staff. A positive development was that more staff were trained to do the prep work for the books.

Once the collection managers started looking at their books, we decided that some tweaks could be made. It was decided that any book that was part of a multi-volume set would automatically be replaced or repaired. If there was a duplicate copy available, the best copy is kept. The serials specialist decided to take a pass through all the books slated for replacement to see if in fact any of them could be bound. Over 100 books were rerouted to processing for binding. Many books were withdrawn due to inaction by the Collection Managers but in some cases, the acquisitions librarian made the decision to keep some of those books. More training was given to those staff doing the prep work as there was confusion over the criteria used for determining whether a book could be bound. Moldy books

needed to be diverted instead of put back onto the shelves. It was preferable to have replacement costs reflect hardcover books. With all the replacement books being ordered from used book vendors, it was inevitable that we would need to return books that were not as described.

To date:

- Replace: 853
- Discard: 226
- Repair: 254 (109 boxed)
- Withdrawn with no CM evaluation: 116 (all science/math and business)
- No work, return to shelf as is: 7

The majority of the replaces were from two collection managers (out of six). The percentage will go down since the new step of automatically rebinding those that can, will reduce the number of titles being replaced. One Collection Manager has decided that wear and tear is normal, and we should just let the books be returned to the shelves somewhat damaged. Overall, we have been very happy with the new process although it has created new workflow issues in acquisitions and cataloging with the replacement books.

Incomplete Bindable Units (IBUs) were another long-term problem at American University. They are the orphans of the serials world, and the questions surrounding them are important: Do we bind incomplete and risk misleading some student on a deadline about our holdings, causing him to fail the one class he needs to graduate? Or do we set them aside until that magical day when the missing issues suddenly appear, effectively rendering them invisible to all but the most dogged researchers until that day?

At AU, they languished in a pile labeled simply "problems"—and in a number of other piles, not all so succinctly labeled. By autumn of 2010, the bottom of that problem pile went back as far as 2006, as did the contents of the Triangle Room, an eponymously-shaped room which had tended to become the repository for serials problems that would be resolved "someday".

We strategized about the problem of those incomplete units. What had caused such a build-up? How

could we prevent that in the future? What were the obstacles we had to work around? Given the extent of the backlog, what was the best way to break up the work while maintaining our sanity? How, in short, to make order out of chaos?

The volume and physical disorder were key problems. In 2008, we moved all our bound periodicals except for visual arts off-site, and switched to open stacks for recent issues. At the same time that we switched to open stacks for periodicals downstairs, the periodicals staff was moved upstairs. The stacks' proximity to our Reserves department meant that shelf maintenance and supervision got dumped in the lap of Reserves staff, whose regular work load and heavy public contact meant their attention was usually elsewhere, and when the stacks look as though no one is watching or cares, things will wander or get damaged more often. Last year, for example, monitors found four students holed up on the third floor with scissors and a pile of periodicals, cutting out pictures for a fraternity prank.

We have since added a label to each issue at check-in, declaring it to be a preservation copy. The new labels have not eliminated theft and damage, of course. But, through discussion and collaboration, Reserves agreed to weed titles we do not bind, and now also provides updated shelf labeling and general tidying.

Several years of that benign neglect combined with a bindery assistant who was not prone to "big picture" thinking, and gave us a pile that was Sisyphean in size and nature. The most perplexing items lived in the aforementioned problem pile near our bindery assistant's cubicle: serial items that were almost monographic in nature, or whose enumeration didn't fit the usual pattern, or whose titles had abruptly changed. The contents of the Triangle Room were somewhat more easily defined—rubber-banded IBUs with scrawled sticky notes listed missing issues, and carts of issues deemed to be duplicates at check-in—but each category was divided between several locations, and the "alphabetical" order was akin to that of a picture book room in a public library.

Getting these piles in order would allow us both to clean out the existing problems and—this is key—

move forward without simply repeating the past. Until we were physically organized in a way that made sense and allowed for forward movement from step to step, we would just be relocating piles without resolving the problems contained therein. In other words, we needed a workflow *before* the new workflow.

The Triangle Room became our focus. If we could create an organized work and storage space, then we had a chance. Using the time-honored method of "slash and burn," we removed cart after cart to reorganize in the safety of our cubicles. Sorted categories were kept on these carts in the Triangle Room as the shelves were cleared, which kept the old piles separated from the new while clearing shelves to hold the new piles in the end. Now the IBUs are lying on the shelves in alphabetical piles, and the room contains little else. We tried standing rubber-banded units upright like books to make reading spines easier, but soon discovered removing a single unit was like playing dominos.

Weeding the "Duplicate Cart"—that repository for doubles that we theoretically hung onto as back-ups until a unit was bound—was far less daunting. It went as far back in time as the problem pile, but as duplicates were checked against Voyager and our consortium holdings, the vast majority of these issues were found to be already bound. As with the IBUs themselves, small stacks of "I'll weed this later" had become piles too big to contemplate, and it was clear regular maintenance would need to be part of any long-term, effective workflow. The obscure problem pile required greater attention, but was still manageable when approached one issue at a time—and again, left us with the conviction that regular maintenance would be necessary in the future.

The next step was creating a workflow for IBUs going forward. We designed a workflow and a form, trying to see them through the singular lens of our very literal bindery assistant, who would ideally assume responsibility for the IBU workflow in the future. The form is a step-by-step process, and if the form is filled out completely, then the system is fool-proof. The top part covers the title, binding unit, missing issue or issues, and whether they never arrived or were lost. The next portion concerns availability: Is it available at EBSCO? At any of our

consortium schools? Or do we need to buy it through USBE? The final section is our paper trail: Was a note added to Voyager saying the issue is missing (and where we will ask for a replacement)? Has the issue been added to our spreadsheet? The completed form is taped to the rubber-banded IBU, and filed alphabetically in the Triangle Room.

Regularity is what makes this system work. When journals are pulled weekly for binding, IBUs are flagged and ideally worked on the same week. It is much less daunting to look at five IBUs from one week than 5 years' worth.

We've been evaluating our replacement sources and method as we go. The Missing Copy Bank at EBSCO is our first stop, which is quick and easy—but rarely bears fruit as what we want always seems to be either too old or not old enough. There is always the option of buying individual issues directly from either EBSCO or even from the publishers, but we're trying to keep this process streamlined, so that is being held in reserve for now. USBE is pricy in quantity—our first request of 432 titles yielded 86 from USBE at the price of \$10 per issue. However, much to our surprise what USBE sent were the older titles—2006, 2007, and 2008—leaving us the option of trying again later, when more recent issues might have wandered in.

What we thought would be our best bet turned out to be not so rich in material goods, but full of other useful things. American University belongs to a consortium of 8 schools, the Washington Research Library Consortium, or WRLC. WRLC schools share a storage facility, which has a one-copy policy, including for bound serials. AU binds far more serials than any of the other schools, and we are much quicker to send them to become the "copy of record" at WRLC's high-density storage facility, where they can be scanned for researchers throughout the consortium in a mere 48 hours. At a meeting of WRLC acquisitions librarians this fall, we obtained the commitment of four of those schools to provide us with issues we need, as long as we then send the completed, bound volume to storage for easy, theft-proof use by all.

However, our first round of consortium requests, in which we divided a list of roughly 170 missing issues

evenly among the schools who had those titles, only yielded 23 issues. Several schools, however, had already bound the volumes containing those issues (a fact not always apparent from our shared catalogue), and they sent the bound volumes to storage, eliminating our need to further attempt to complete our own volumes. As with the USBE list, we can solicit from the schools again for this batch, as more than one school would carry the same title. More importantly, this will feed into eventual discussions about shared resources and perhaps even coordinated purchasing of serials among Consortium schools down the road.

Spreadsheets are a vital tool in keeping this project organized. Each distinct list of issues contains worksheets and details for the original missing issues:

- Who we could ask for them
- Who we have asked and when
- Which issues are the priorities (older issues where only one other school has them)
- Who ultimately sends us the issue

Notes are also added in Voyager Acquisitions check-in or receipt history to indicate missing issues to circulation and ILL staff. Received issues that have gone missing are visible as such to end users as well, which hopefully will reinforce the message that if you want serials to be there when you need them, you cannot be part of the theft and damage problem.

The easy half of the equation is receiving the requested missing issues. Notes are removed from Voyager, entries on the missing issues spreadsheet are cut and pasted onto the appropriate received issues worksheet depending on the source, and the newly completed volume is sent to the bindery. Some volumes will never make it to that end point, and we are slowly learning to accept the occasional incomplete and bind it as such. We're also setting guidelines for incomplete binding based on the binding habits of our fellow consortium schools and on a cautious reliance on perpetual access.

One happy by-product of both the IBU project and the Preservation project was a closer relationship with our Collection Manager Team (CMT). As with the Preservation project, this was facilitated by setting deadlines, stating consequences and upholding

those consequences. Neither project would have succeeded to this extent without the CMT's input and support, especially as one project seemed always to lead to another. Considering IBUs was linked to a review of serials whose delivery was a perpetual problem. We also asked the CMT to reconsider decisions on what we bind, especially as some of those decisions greatly preceded the arrival of our current team. From there, one collection manager even undertook a wholesale review of all the periodicals within his call numbers, cancelling 147 of them! In the end, we reduced our binding of periodicals by 20%.

Out of the original 439 missing issues, 266 are still missing, 1 came from EBSCO's Missing Copy Bank,

87 came from USBE, and 73 were sent either to us or directly to storage by WLRC schools. In this day of bankrupt small serials publishers and the constant clamoring for more electronic resources, this might seem like a lot of work for decreasing returns. And hey, we like the instant gratification of an electronic article as much as the next person. Reports of the death of print continue to be at least somewhat exaggerated, however, and we have an obligation to preserve access to the past as well as gallop ahead with the future. If that means tracking down a single 2007 print issue so that one student can complete his paper and graduate on time, then we're happy to play our part.