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# Staring Into the Whale's Mouth: Large-Scale Journal Deaccession at a Small University

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## Abstract

Large-scale journal deaccession is an all-consuming project requiring considerable planning and staff time. The Library team at Siena Heights University, a small, Catholic, liberal arts university in rural Southeast Michigan, recently completed such a project. Project is a keyword—a large project like this is not business as usual, and must be managed as a project with appropriate staff from throughout the organization. Further, journal deaccession on this scale is not simple—it involves a change in what libraries have always done. Staff need time to absorb the changes, and to understand all of the ramifications on their future work. Perspectives from both librarians and paraprofessional staff are essential for a multifaceted view of the organizational, historical, operational, and emotional concerns involved in a large-scale journal deaccession project. This paper outlines how one small institution's journal deaccession project was managed, from initial conception to getting it done, including which staff should be involved, steps necessary to complete the project, how to talk about the project internally and with stakeholders, potential pitfalls, and how to deal with problems as they arise.

## Siena Heights University —Background and History

Over the years Siena Heights University, a small, Catholic, liberal arts institution sponsored by the Adrian Dominican Sisters, has migrated from a religiously based women's educational institution to a comprehensive University offering multiple degrees and fields of study and hosting a significant population of athletes. The Library has been in a state of transition throughout, changing from a "fill the shelves" mindset to one of discretion in collection development.

Library staff began weeding the book collection several years ago, when the University started a football program and the institution envisioned an enrollment increase as the program attracted more students. The Library was asked to give up a floor of the stacks to help provide classroom space to accommodate the expected growth. Ultimately, staff weeded over 35,000 books from the general collection. When the decision was made to weed the collection, staff started with the general collection and then moved to specialty collections, using criteria that included

use, age, duplication, and fit with the current curriculum, making exceptions as appropriate.

## Siena Heights University's Journal Deaccession Project

As little as four years ago, the Library was focused on completing collections of bound journal titles. As budgets grew tighter, staff looked to cut subscriptions, which were still primarily in print, to keep pace with inflationary increases. Initially, the director made difficult decisions to cut content, but duplication occurred as the Library's electronic subscriptions grew. Combined with the directive to clear a floor, documenting this duplication cleared the way for this project to take shape. Using the Library's EBSCO A to Z tool, Library staff ran comparisons of the journal subscriptions to online holdings, taking note of embargos and verifying full-text access to articles in reliable databases. Periodical records in the Library's Horizon automation system were updated, including donation notes, retention periods, binding instructions, location information, and online subscription information. Some of this work was done in the stacks using iPads, but use of printed records allowed for both

extensive and informal notes. Data compiled and used to make decisions included who was using the title, use statistics, online database availability, relevance to curriculum, historical relevance, and relevance to the institution. Prior to this large project, staff weeded the bound periodicals three times and cut print journal subscriptions from 350 to about 175 titles. This review will continue in subsequent renewal periods. On the other side, online journal content continues to grow, far exceeding historical print offerings. The Library currently has access to over 45,000 titles online.

The Library team was familiar with the logistics of large-scale deaccession from their experience weeding the book collection previously. Like many libraries, staff chose Better World Books to recycle discarded books, taking advantage of free shipping and a share of the proceeds from any books sold. However, significant labor was still required—Library staff even enlisted the football team. The book deaccession project required gaylords and pallets for shipping books in volume and extensive trial and error and cooperation with maintenance to find the right gaylord fill level and pallet size to fit the Library's small elevator. The project required a floor jack on each level and a forklift to load the trucks.

All of this experience made the journal deaccession project less daunting at first. Although the timeframe was tighter with the journal project, the time-intensive process of collecting and using the data to determine cuts had been finished, and all that was left was finding a recycler. Better World Books does not take journals, and no company would pay us for the content. Initially, staff worked with the University's waste company, who had never expressed a concern with Library recycling previously. As the supply of containers for sending the recycling slowed to a trickle, University custodial staff investigated, only to find the waste company had decided not to take the journals because of the labor involved in separating the hard covers from the print blocks. After a number of phone calls and helpful advice from Library colleagues, the recycler used by the University of Michigan agreed to take on the

project at a cost of \$75 per pick-up. The recycling company provided the gaylords and the pallets for Library staff to load.

A cooperative relationship with the University's maintenance department was essential to the success of this project. The maintenance crew removed door frames so the gaylords could pass. Pick-ups were carefully orchestrated to ensure someone was available to drive the forklift when the truck arrived. The maintenance garage proved useful for storing the loaded gaylords until they could be picked up. Borrowed tools, gloves, tarps, and floor jacks made the work go smoothly.

### **Organizational Considerations**

It is essential to think about weeding on this scale as a project. Assemble a team—collections staff might lead it, but they need thoughtful and targeted input from everyone in the Library, particularly those who work in reference, ILL, and stacks management. All Library staff will need to be ambassadors for the project with students and faculty. Those involved in the labor will need support, and they will need time away from their usual work. This is an all-consuming project—it is mentally and physical tiring.

Think about the rationale for making this change to your collection, and how to communicate it in the library and outside. Use data about your collection to justify decisions, and talk with colleagues from other libraries who may be able to share similar experiences and help add credibility to the project. Often an exciting new initiative will precipitate a project like this, something that will bring library staff together to complete the project and create excitement for the campus community. But, this is not always true, and plans can change. Further, while libraries have always weeded, deaccession on this scale may be inconceivable for some library personnel. From their perspective, it simply is not what academic libraries do, despite evidence to the contrary. Project leaders must be given the time and space to think about the project and make peace with it. They will almost certainly be questioned throughout the project, and as the project progresses, decisions may need to be made quickly.

Ronald Heifetz's (1994) book *Leadership without Easy Answers*, available in ebrary's Academic Complete collection and recommended by library leadership expert Maureen Sullivan, provides a leadership model for working through a significant change. Heifetz writes about the difference between adaptive and technical change. Technical change is relatively easy. If the light bulb is out, replace it. A leader is generally not needed for this job.

Adaptive change doesn't have a solution. In an adaptive change situation, leaders can't fix the problems, although those who look up to them will want them to due to the disequilibrium caused. In this type of change, those involved and impacted by the change need to learn. They need time and space to do this. Leaders need to ask the questions that help people understand and come to terms with their situation, create the space to let them explore, celebrate and mourn the milestones, and pace the work. On the surface, deaccession projects are simple: weed the collection. But when undertaken on a large scale, they challenge the very core of what libraries have always done, acquire and preserve the best material. A project like this bears careful thought. Even some fairly progressive library thinkers are troubled about these projects. Libraries are engaged in a process called organizational learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978). Those two words are seemingly at odds with each other—organization implies order, while learning is messy. The organization learns when the people in it learn and apply this knowledge to what they do, changing the organization as a result. Administrators and project leaders must make space for organizational learning to occur. This is essential to the well-being of the library team and increases the likelihood the changes will stick.

Large-scale deaccession projects also involve a long transition, before, during, and after the project. Mitchell and Bridges-Mitchell (2000) have written about leading in transition, outlining a process and describing the supports a transition leader may need. Understand this project will be difficult. All members of the team will get tired at some point. They'll be unable to go back, but they may not be ready to take the next step forward.

However, this transition time helps people come to terms with the situation in their own way. Don't be too quick to solve problems.

### **Preparing for a Project**

For those leaders just thinking about a project with no pressure to do it immediately, take the time to design it carefully. In an ideal world, the project will be orchestrated by the library. Talk with others in your institution to gauge the level of acceptance a project may have and what opportunities the project may help the institution realize. Many projects are happening—just like librarians, chief academic officers talk with one another and attend conferences. Take advantage of the opportunity to set a project in motion in a way that best benefits the library and those who rely on it. If you are tasked with this project by your administration before you are ready, think about how the project can benefit the library and the students and faculty it serves. Administration may have an overarching objective, but they are relying on their library team to make it work. Look for advantages and avoid victim mentality. Present the library as a partner and take ownership. Just saying no probably will not work. Get all the input you can early on, as once you've begun you must continue. This can make decision-making easier, but it doesn't mean the decisions themselves will be easy.

If the project must move forward before the library team has reached agreement, understand that being in opposition to other staff will cause great stress for those working on the project, particularly when their work is criticized. On the other side, for those who disagree with the project, watching it move ahead despite their best efforts to stop it will also cause great stress. All members of the team will need support. Think about how to make opportunities early on for everyone to be involved, even those who would rather not. Sometimes it is easier for staff to see how to contribute when the request is framed more specifically; for example, thinking about how the changes will affect ILL. Reflect and think about how to respond in pressure situations. When things don't go as planned, be honest and apologize if necessary. Mistakes will happen. Having many voices involved in the initial phases

will help you avoid the obvious ones . . . but even the best laid plans go awry.

## Lessons Learned

This final list includes tips from the Siena Heights Library team. Logistical and communication issues are unique to each library and institution, but these final thoughts are offered in hopes they will benefit others.

- THINK AHEAD!
- Think about the members of the library team, their personality and preferences, and how to empower them to make decisions.
- Include library staff from all areas in the planning process, especially reference, ILL, and stacks management. Talk to administration, students, and faculty.
- Broad involvement is necessary in the early stages. In the action phase, fewer voices involved will help the work progress smoothly.
- Take time to build trust across your organization so that those responsible for making decisions and carrying out the work can keep moving. Someone must have the final say when disagreements arise.
- Communicate, both inside and outside the library.
- Check for duplication between your print and online collections—Siena used EBSCO's A to Z tool. Collect and use data that will help staff make and justify decisions.
- Start with an accurate volume count and keep track of your removals for reporting and auditing purposes.
- Storage may be an option rather than permanent removal for volumes and shelving, whether on or off campus. If timeframe and staffing allow, exchange sites for periodicals may be an option.

- Find a recycler to work in bulk. Better World Books works well for books, but is not an option for journals.
- Give maintenance and custodial staff a heads up.
- Know your building inside and outside. Are door frames wide enough? Will you use an elevator?
- Gauge the project's scale. Will it take large gaylords on pallets or small boxes? A pick-up truck or a semi? A two-wheeled dolly, a pallet jack, or a forklift? A couple of people or a football team?
- Make sure you have sturdy book carts. They will be abused during this process. Cloth-sided bins worked well at Siena.
- Think about what to do with extra shelving. Is there time to donate them to another library? Is metal recycling an option?
- Be mindful of possible damage to floors. Siena's floors were dented, with several broken tiles once the shelves were removed. Sun and wax had changed the color of the surrounding tile.
- Be willing to make exceptions. If someone asks for discarded materials for their office, perhaps these materials should actually stay in the collection.

## Conclusion

Planning is essential for a successful large-scale journal weeding project, regardless of the time frame. If possible, take time to lay the groundwork and find partners before starting. Help others take ownership of the project. The library team will change as a result of this project—the work will eventually come to an end, but staff will be just getting started. Once they've completed something big, especially if it required a change in thinking, the library team will see opportunities everywhere, opportunities to continue to streamline or improve or think differently. Embrace it—a learning organization is an exciting place to be.

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