Libraries in a Bind: Practical Solutions and Human Responses to a Weeding Mandate

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Libraries in a Bind: Practical Solutions and Human Responses to a Weeding Mandate

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Abstract

Many university libraries are currently engaged in major weeding projects as they reduce their print book collections to make room for new space configurations to accommodate emerging library trends such as makerspaces and transitioning toward a predominately e-book collection. To address such a deselection project effectively requires both practical solutions and tact in dealing with faculty who seriously value their collections of print books. Librarians from two universities will share practical approaches to managing a large weeding project and for dealing diplomatically with book users affected. Representatives for deselection project services will also offer insights into their logistic support for handling weeding projects. Ample time will be provided for discussion where collection librarians can candidly discuss both the practical problems and user concerns faced when sandwiched between the demands of a major weeding project and the needs of faculty and students in book-reliant disciplines.

Introduction

The panel was introduced to the audience by Kathy Marks, the strategic sales director at Better World Books. Approximately 25 attendees participated in the session. Many participants had questions about communication and marketing of large weeding projects. The presenters created a weeding checklist that was distributed during the session. The checklist included information on preliminary planning for seeking feedback involved with a weeding project. The checklist also offered guidance with outlining workflow processes (see Appendix 1).

The Humanities and Social Sciences Academic Library Perspective

Alex McAllister, humanities librarian, and Allan Scherlen, social sciences librarian, both from Appalachian State University, presented an alternative perspective to some conventional notions of weeding presented in the library

literature. Liaison humanities and social sciences librarians work closely with faculty and students: teaching classes, conducting research consultations, and ordering materials for these areas, which affords them a perspective different from library administrators and others in the library who may be viewing a large weeding project with a different, albeit, broader perspective.

McAllister and Scherlen noted a lack of discussion at other Charleston Conference sessions on diplomacy in weeding academic library book collections, especially in regard to working with faculty members who differ in their needs for and use of books in their research, such as differences in book use by scholars in the humanities versus in the sciences. Consensus among librarians, as revealed in conference discussions and library literature on weeding, shows that many academic librarians are comfortable relying upon egalitarian, use-based rubrics for weeding across the entire library collection without concern for

treating the more monographic-reliant disciplines differently. For example, another session at the same 2015 Charleston Conference argued for weeding based on quantitative evaluation measures to determine the “life cycle” of books. The presenter at that 2015 session argued that, ideally, every book should have an end date attached to the book’s record when it is acquired to let future librarians know when to weed that book from the collection.

The presenters suggested that weeding in academic libraries is fraught with challenges different from other kinds of libraries. Weeding humanities and social sciences areas of an academic library must be approached differently from other subject areas of the library. They discussed how some disciplines, especially in the humanities, may use more books than other disciplines, and may need older, unused books to mine as part of their research method.

One article that was discussed by ASU librarians sparked a lively discussion about working with humanities faculty members during a major deselection project. David Woolwine’s *Collection Development in the Humanities and Social Sciences in a Transitional Age: Deaccession of Print Items* (2014) offers a contrasting opinion to today’s trend toward adopting one-size-fits-all, use-based criteria for removing print books. More complex, discipline-specific criteria is needed for some disciplines, Woolwine would argue, that allows some lesser-used books to be retained. Woolwine constructs a thesis based on works by Andrew Abbott and others, which argues that humanities researchers use monograph materials more and in different ways than researchers in other disciplines, such as in the sciences. Because humanities scholars look at a library book collection as “a laboratory,” they use books in ways that can be described as a kind of research method made possible in part by the exploration of the stacks. This includes the discovery of unknowns in the collection to reveal “holes” in prior research, which “can be determined only by reading.” Humanities scholars, the article argues, use contemporary methods of online searching, but also approach research through methods such as “grazing” and following passages and citations

among books in a collection. Thus, print books in the humanities and humanities-like areas of the social sciences are arguably less susceptible to obsolescence. Interestingly, a review of news about resistance to big weeding projects in academic libraries reveals that protest generally comes from faculty and students in the humanities. (For links to Woolwine, news articles, and other materials related to weeding, see OCLC’s “Weeding and De-selection Bibliography” at <https://www.oclc.org/sustainable-collections/bibliography.en.html>).

The subject-specific approach to weeding was a major stimulant for discussion during the session. One questioner asked why materials that have not circulated in more than 10 or more years should be retained. A 2002 study by Jennifer Thompson was referenced (again from Woolwine) that found the median citation age for book citations in 19th century American and British literature to be 14 years, with most books showing a peak age range for citations between 6 to 10 years, followed by a lesser peak between 11 to 15 years. One audience member concluded that part of the discussion by noting the importance of regarding lists of books that have not circulated over a number of years only as a “review list” and not as the final discard list. In addition to reasons already discussed, some audience members expressed concern that interlibrary loan may be adversely affected by the large number of libraries removing much of their paper holdings.

The panel members asked the audience members if their library was planning, or currently going through, a major weeding project. Of the approximately 30 people in the room, almost all raised their hands. When the audience was asked if they were weeding to make space for more books or room for new services, many responded that their projects were driven by new and expanding services rather than growth. Many of the librarians appeared to be affiliated with institutions that have the option of sending weeded print books to an off-site storage facility.

A Solution?

McAllister and Scherlen were asked if there were some general conclusions they discovered from

the process. The panelists summarized their findings into three principles:

1. A realization that consultation and communication are vital to the process.
2. Learning to adjust during the process even if that means changing course or modifying plans.
3. Having mutual respect among librarians and the user community, and to not take any of the reactions personally.

Christina Mayberry, the collection development coordinator at California State University Northridge, presented information on a major weeding project that took place at CSU. She fielded a number of questions on the logistics and

approach to determining criteria for materials that are to be deselected. Because CSU Northridge uses Better World Books, she was able to provide information about the benefits of working with a sustainable company that provides support to libraries conducting deselection projects.

Kathy Marks, the strategic sales director at Better World Books, informed attendees about the benefits of working with Better World Books.

Carla Caforio, the library relocation specialist for William B. Meyer highlighted the benefits of using William B. Meyer services to lessen expenses required for weeding projects.

Appendix 1: Weeding Checklist

Stage 1: Preliminary Planning and Feedback

1. **Purpose**
Outline purpose for the weeding project (e.g., book areas taken by new services, shelves at capacity, etc.)
2. **Scope & Criteria**
Outline which areas of collections to weed and criteria to be used as well as track weeded volume
3. **Sustainability**
Research sustainable disposal options for items to be removed
4. **Budget**
Determine and outline all areas where costs could be incurred
5. **Timeline**
Set preliminary timeline for the project
6. **Preliminary Outreach**
Notify key constituents/stakeholders of general purpose and plans for project and invite feedback (especially from faculty)
7. **Preliminary Feedback**
Incorporate feedback from stakeholders and modify basic plans accordingly (adjusting general plans for scope and focus as well as workflow and disposal accordingly)

Stage 2: Research and Outline Workflow Process

1. **Timeline**
Revised timeline
2. **Personnel**
Personnel involved in listing, evaluating, physically removing, deaccessioning, and disposing
3. **Vetting Process**
Vetting items for removal (lists for bibliographers, lists for faculty, cart flow, etc.)

4. Deaccessioning Process

Taking items out of the library system

5. Disposal Plan

Book sale, vendor sale, recycling, or landfill

6. Temporary Staging

Consider location, length of time, volume, etc. of removed items

7. Execute & Monitor

Address record clean up, shift collections, track reporting, and incorporate key learnings into your library's collection development policy