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Preserving the Past for the Future: Moving Toward Best Practices and Tools for Thoughtful Monographic Withdrawal

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Abstract

This paper presents significant findings from a 2015 survey of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and Oberlin Group Libraries to learn how institutions make decisions to withdraw or retain print monographs. The survey was part of a two-pronged national study led by preservation and conservation experts to better understand which kinds of data, policies, data sharing mechanisms, and other communication strategies libraries use and need to make informed decisions about monograph withdrawals in their collections. This study reviews how policies are (or aren't) developed, what kinds of data are (or aren't) used, and which stakeholders are (or aren't) consulted. Trends in institutions by type and size (public versus private, state institution versus college) are also investigated.

Introduction

Libraries are withdrawing journals, and increasingly, monographs, from their print collections to recover space for programmatic use and other reasons. At the same time, relatively little is known about the long-term impact of current withdrawal practices on the future quality of legacy print collections, particularly for monographs. In the library preservation community, practices for print retention and withdrawal have been a persistent topic of discussion in recent years.

To date, there are few publications that examine or recommend practices for evaluating monographs for retention or withdrawal. Jake Nadal and Annie Peterson's 2011 white paper "Scarce and Endangered Works: Using Network-level Holdings Data in Preservation Decision Making and Stewardship of the Printed Record" provides a general outline for monographic withdrawal practices based on number of copies held nationally.¹ However, Nadal and Peterson's work makes recommendations based only on number of copies, not on condition of those

copies remaining. Other recent projects have sought to derive data on the condition of commonly shared monographic titles, such as the UK-based 2006–2008 Identical Book Project (<http://www.bl.uk/aboutus/stratpolprog/collectio>ncare/publications/articles/2007/identicalbooksp.pdf), or the University of Virginia's current Book Traces Project (<http://www.booktraces.org/>).

Based on the available research, and the preservation community's continuing interest in the impact of withdrawal practices on print monograph preservation, a 2014 forum was hosted by the University of Pennsylvania's Van Pelt Library. As a result of the forum discussions, two research groups were formed. The first group was charged with assessing analytical approaches to determine paper quality in bound volumes. The second group was charged with assessing current withdrawal policies and practices for monographs, and the likely long-term impact on preservation.

This second group, which included preservation administrators from University of Illinois, University of Minnesota, University of Pennsylvania, Northwestern University, and Yale

¹ Nadal, J. & Peterson, A. (2011). Scarce and endangered works: Using network-level holdings data in preservation decision making and stewardship of the printed record. *Jacobnadal.com*. Retrieved from

<http://www.jacobnadal.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ScarceAndEndangeredWorksv7.pdf>

University, proposed a survey as a starting point. This resulting paper, presented at the 2015 Charleston Conference, summarizes preliminary findings of the survey. While further analysis of survey data and sample policy documents is needed, the authors draw some initial conclusions about current withdrawal policies and practices, and identify possible future directions.

Survey Methodology

An online survey was designed to gather information about policies and practices academic institutions currently use to make decisions about withdrawing print monographs from their collections. For the purposes of the survey, *policy* was defined as “any formal or informal written guidelines or other documentation, as well as unwritten practices, and may be inclusive of serials as well as monographs.” The survey addressed:

- The existence and extent of current policies for withdrawing print monographs, on both an item-level and project-level basis
- How policies are developed
- Who makes decisions about selecting print monographs for withdrawal
- Information currently used in selecting print monographs for withdrawal or retention
- Information that would be desirable for future decision-making

During the summer of 2015, the survey was distributed to the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) and Oberlin Library director listservs, as well as the SCELEC (Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium) and ALA new director listservs. After the initial data collection period had passed, any libraries with known preservation programs (largely ARL

member institutions) who had not responded were encouraged to respond through direct contact with their preservation administrators. (This may have caused a slightly higher response from preservation practitioners in the overall response rate, at 18% of the total responses.) Overall, the group received ninety-nine valid responses after removing multiple responses from a single institution.²

Data Analysis

The first section of the survey asked respondents to provide basic demographic information about their institution and their position, or role, within the institution. Overall, 60% of respondents were from ARL member libraries, 21% from Oberlin Group Institutions, and 18% were from “other” libraries.³ Libraries ranged in size from 31.6% with print collections of less than 500,000, to libraries holding over 8 million print volumes (see Figure 1) and showed a fairly even distribution of size over the range of the respondents. In terms of position, 39.4% of respondents identified as senior library administrators, 18.2% as preservation/conservation staff, 32.3% as collection management/development staff; 1% identified as subject specialists, and 9.1% responded “other.” (These respondents were largely technical services staff.)

Respondents were then asked if the institution had an institutional policy governing monographic withdrawal practices. Of the 99 responses, 80.6% responded that they did, and were asked to continue on for further data collection; the remaining 19.4% responded that they did not, and exited the survey. There was no observed correlation between the presence of an institutional withdrawal policy and the size of the institution; small libraries were as likely to have a policy as large ones. Of those institutions that have a policy, only 60% of respondents replied that their policy is written.

² It is worth noting that for most instances where multiple responses were submitted from the same institution, responses to our survey questions did not agree even across different units of the same library.

³ “Other” responses were most often small liberal arts colleges.

Print Collection Size	
Less than 500,000 volumes	31.6%
500,000 - 1 million volumes	9.2%
1 - 3 million volumes	16.3%
3 - 5 million volumes	15.3%
5 - 8 million volumes	14.3%
8 or more million volumes	13.3%

Figure 1. Size of print collections.

Respondents were then asked how policies were developed and who helped to develop them. Over 85% of respondents replied that they developed their policy based on “discussions within the institution about local priorities and needs, comfort with risk, etc.” (see Figure 2). The overwhelming selection of this response over other options (such as adapting language from other institutional policies, discussing policies with

How did you develop the policy? (multiple selections possible)	
We adapted language from the documentation of one or more institutions	16.9%
It developed from discussions within the institution about local priorities and needs, comfort with risk, etc	85.7%
It developed from discussions with other institutions about state/regional/consortial priorities and needs, comfort with risk, etc	23.4%
It is somewhat arbitrary	19.5%
It was developed from a study. If selected, please cite study or other relevant information here:	6.5%

Figure 2. How was the policy developed?

other institutions about cooperative or consortial priorities, or basing decisions on a study) suggests that policy development is still largely an internally focused process. Of those involved in the development of a withdrawal policy, the most common responses were “senior library administration” (79.2%), “collections management” (83.1%), and subject specialists (80.5%). Preservation staff were consulted in 51.9% of the overall responses, but when filtered by the 68.7% of institutions who *have* a preservation program, 71.4% of those respondents included preservation in policy development. This high correlation may be biased, however, by the high percentage of preservation administrators who were solicited in the final stages of data collection. Faculty involvement in

the development of these practices was found to be quite low (only 29.9% of respondents saying that they were consulted in policy development, with smaller institutions markedly more likely to involve faculty than larger institutions).

Policies were known and shared in a variety of ways, both formal and informal. While posted written guidelines were quite popular (51.9% of respondents noted that they had their policy posted either internally or publically), many relied on other means to communicate withdrawal practices, including training sessions (14.3%), verbal communications (59.7%), and simple historical practice (51.9%).

The next section of the survey delved into what the respondent’s existing policies cover. When asked what their local policies encompass, policies most frequently covered duplicate print copies in the library (90.0% of all respondents) and withdrawal during preservation review (78.6%).

Withdrawal of duplicate holding across consortia was lower than expected in both ARL and Oberlin Group libraries (deemed most likely to be members of consortia) at 31.0% of ARL and 26.7% of Oberlin Group libraries. Similarly, policies encompassing

guidelines for mass withdrawal (defined for these purposes as a programmatic approach to non-duplication within an institution, consortium, or other collaborative environment) was also lower than anticipated (only 15.7% of the total responses (see Figure 3).

Since several of these policy scenarios were dependent upon the presence of electronic copies, the survey asked respondents which repositories or content providers are included in their considerations. Responses showed that ARL and Oberlin Groups libraries rely most frequently on electronic copies in the HathiTrust (68.8% and 87.5% respectively), though the smaller “other” libraries were most likely to rely on locally digitized content, or digital content owned by

Figure 3. Institutional withdrawal policy coverage.

Figure 4. If the policy includes withdrawal of print monograph copies when an electronic copy is available, which repositories/content providers are included?

their own institution (100%). In aggregate, 74% of respondents rely on the HathiTrust and 68% rely on local digital copies (see Figure 4).

In the last question regarding withdrawal policy coverage, respondents were asked to identify

which factor(s) they considered when deciding whether to retain or withdraw a monographic title.

Unfortunately, the survey structure did not allow respondents to choose factors for different scenarios for withdrawing monographs (for example, individual item withdrawal versus large withdrawal projects). However, the responses still showed that libraries use a wide variety of factors, and in some instances almost any factor may be of value. The most commonly utilized factor for consideration appears to be physical damage, then embrittlement, provenance or other factors that render a copy unique, and input from collection development guidelines or staff (see Figure 5).

Finally, the survey asked respondents to consider what research or guideline development might be useful in the future as they withdraw print monographs from their collections. Overwhelmingly, when asked what element is *not currently* in their policies or procedures, but would be incorporated if easily accessible, almost 90% of respondents replied that “commitment to preserve at another institution” is the most desired element not currently available to them that would influence decisions. “Condition at another institution” fell

significantly shorter in preference (just under 40% of overall responses responding that it would be helpful), and the development of a test to easily inform expected usable lifespan of a book (perhaps replacing the ubiquitous double-fold test

Figure 5. Current considerations for retention or withdrawal of individual items.

used to indicate current levels of embrittlement) was selected by only 25.8%. While “other” responses varied, “holdings at other libraries” was considered by some to be useful but not easily accessible at present (just under 5% of responses).

Survey respondents were also asked to provide relevant policy documents, which are currently being analyzed by the survey group.

Summary of Findings

While further analysis of the collected data is necessary, several trends and needs are already evident. Many libraries are operating without a guiding document that outlines when and how they withdraw monographs, and even those who have a policy frequently note that it is now out of date and in need of revision. In most cases, the development of such policies is an internal process that does not take into account external factors that may influence a decision to withdraw or retain a title, or the need for communication within and outside the institution. Policies often do not address consortial preservation considerations; the number of copies of a title

available at the state, regional, or national level; or the condition of duplicate copies within the institution. And, more practically, many institutions have neither the necessary resources nor the infrastructure to implement such considerations on a practical level, even if they are included in a policy.

While the survey data indicates that many policies do not currently address shared or consortial print preservation, it also suggests strong interest in leveraging existing shared preservation infrastructure. Respondents indicated significant reliance on the HathiTrust Digital Library in making withdrawal decisions. In June 2015, the HathiTrust Board of Governors endorsed the final report of the Print Monograph Archive Planning Task Force, signifying a commitment to establishing a dispersed print repository.⁴ Current recommendations include multiple overlapping retention commitments and building a dispersed collection that will “grow based on informed criteria such as optimal numbers of copies, geographical distribution, protection of scarce and unique titles, ongoing digitization, validation for existence and condition, and the movement into

⁴ HathiTrust Board of Governors Steering Committee. (2015). *Summary and response to HathiTrust print monograph archives planning task force final report*.

Retrieved from <https://www.hathitrust.org/files/sharedprintreport.pdf>

the repository of items not in the collections of Archive Holders or not yet digitized” (HathiTrust, p. 11). The survey indicates that some institutions are already committing to retain monographs on behalf of the academic library community, albeit on a much smaller scale; 19.1% overall, and 27.5% of responding ARL libraries replied that they currently serve as recipients for materials withdrawn from other libraries.

The survey results also indicated a broad desire for infrastructure to share information about

institutional commitments to retain or preserve monographic holdings. While guidelines for indicating condition information and preservation commitments exist in the *Preservation & Digitization Actions: Terminology for MARC 21 Field 583*, few institutions currently utilize these guidelines. The potential for broader use of the *MARC 21 583* field, or alternative mechanisms for sharing condition information and institutional retention commitments for monographs, is a possible topic of future study for the group.