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Extreme Makeover: How We Decreased Our Collection by 40% and Simultaneously Increased It by 50% in 10 Months

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Abstract

The Brennan Library at Lasell College had not conducted a systematic weeding in over 20 years. With space in demand and an increase in online courses, desperate times called for drastic measures. Over a 10-month period, the library withdrew 40% of its tangible collections. Simultaneously, the staff's focus shifted to promoting e-resources and adopting the EBSCO EDS discovery layer. Using a weighted collection development allocation formula, the librarians overhauled the materials budget and designed a departmental liaison program. After calculating the holdings of new e-book and streaming video packages, the library's collection increased by 50% despite the massive deaccessioning. This paper describes how a small academic library with limited funds and staffing made major changes leading to positive perceptions and avoiding imposing threats. The Brennan Library added seating, zoned areas, and in-demand e-resources for a growing distance-learner population. By changing the collection development emphasis from just-in-case to just-in-time, the library now provides access to more items than ever before. The Brennan Library's example illustrates that an access over ownership model of acquisitions can give similar libraries improved return on investment and positive improvements for stakeholders, provided that significant changes are communicated in a strategic manner emphasizing benefits for the user community.

Background

Del Hornbuckle began as the Director of the Brennan Library at Lasell College in June 2015. She brought with her a vision that came from years of working with a results-oriented, high-energy team, tying work to a larger strategy whether in the library or coming from the larger institution. She envisioned transforming the Brennan Library into a 21st century facility anchored by four distinct themes:

- Hybridity of services: Merging both traditional and 21st century services, including flexible spaces, embedded technologies, academic partnerships allowing the library to integrate services, and developing a highly skilled library staff to meet the needs of students learning in 21st-century classroom.
- Developing a culture of tying everyday work to strategy: Daily work, projects, and initiatives tied to the larger college's priorities and strategic goals.

- Building and supporting high-impact practices: Services aligned with the college's practices and initiatives to achieve student success.
- Fostering a culture of assessment and accountability: Services and resources connected to data points that can be reflected in the college's institutional analysis work.

The new director looked critically at how the library was positioned within the academic community and made key observations. The library had no long-term strategic plan with specific goals and outcomes, nor any record of strategic planning surrounding collection development work. Staff did not engage in annual weeding, and none recalled ever conducting a collection-wide inventory. She noted that despite ongoing spending, the physical collection had been neglected and included outdated material not suitable for the classroom. The collection did not reflect the diversity of thinking and the breadth of cultural perspectives now available, or the wealth of

contemporary writers of fiction and nonfiction. Many items on the shelves warranted transfer to the college archives. Material in academic disciplines did not necessarily reflect core material. Hornbuckle observed a shortage of electronic resources and a lack of overall management of materials in electronic format. Furthermore, the library staff represented years of experience and expertise but did not have the institutional support for ongoing high-level professional development allowing them the resources and continuing education to tackle many of these challenges.

The director viewed weeding as the first priority, believing that the visible collection represents what the library says about itself and the larger institution. Overhauling the collection served as a deliberate, strategic move and statement about how the library would present itself in coming years.

Lasell, a small college in Newton, MA, has approximately 2,200 students, including a small and growing graduate program. The Brennan Library has only nine staff members (7.1 full-time equivalent). The Access Services department determined that seating was at 95% capacity during peak times, and for many years, students asked for more group work space as well as quiet study space. A construction project happening on campus displaced many faculty and staff, and the library faced pressure to accommodate the college's need for temporary classroom, office, and meeting space. The librarians aimed to open more space according to their informed priorities and data, rather than risking other departments dictating the future of the library's layout and organization.

21st Century Library Project, Phase 1: The Extreme Makeover

In July 2015, only one month after Hornbuckle had started as Director, Lydia Sampson, Head of Technical Services at the time, launched an ambitious plan to weed the tangible collections by an estimated 30 to 50%. The reference and print periodicals sections stood out as targets for deaccessioning, as electronic databases duplicate many of these resources. Throughout all Brennan Library's collections, many books were outdated, obsolete, or no longer relevant based on the college's current programs and curricula.

Over the course of 10 months, staff and student workers weeded 27,452 items with no extra staff hired or funds allocated for the project. Due to their fondness for books and a fear of faculty backlash for eliminating them, the librarians developed solid justifications for weeding decisions. They discarded 1,000 VHS tapes, a format no longer supported by the college's Information Technology (IT) department, and other obsolete formats and materials with content that was outdated. It made sense to weed materials that were in poor condition, and those students perceived as "old dusty books," some of which could be replaced by newer editions.

Most significantly, the Brennan Library eliminated potentially offensive items. In the midst of a campus climate emphasizing inclusivity, acceptance of alternative points of view, and tolerance toward the variety of cultures represented in the student body, the library could not condone the retention of materials representing antiquated perspectives. In response to questions about the importance of keeping such items for historical perspective, library staff felt prepared to point patrons to contemporary works that include historical overviews of topics such as race, gender, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues. Out of respect for all patrons, the library staff hoped that no individual would view the presence of a book in the stacks as a microaggression or psychological trigger.

During 10 months, staff reviewed all holdings, generating dozens of reports looking at the age and circulation of materials. When entering the stacks to pull items from lists, the director afforded the librarians the authority to remove additional titles as well, trusting their judgement regarding whether they warranted deaccessioning. The library withdrew 40% of tangible materials, allowing the Plant Operations department to dismantle approximately 20 ranges of shelving. This opened valuable real estate for more and different types of seating, brought in more natural light, and made the stacks more pleasant for browsing, as they were full of newer, more relevant materials instead of old dusty books. Without a budget to purchase new furniture, library staff worked with plant operations to identify surplus furniture from other departments to add tables, chairs, and sofas where appropriate.

During the same year, the Brennan Library began using a weighted collection development allocation formula, modeled from a workshop led by Jeff Bailey and Linda Creibaum of Arkansas State University (Bailey & Creibaum, 2015). Lydia Sampson fed library and institutional data on enrollment, circulation, courses taught, graduation rates, and other factors into a formula in order to divide the materials budget among academic programs in an appropriate, equitable manner. Along with this change, Sampson designed an academic liaison program. This allowed library liaisons to meet with department stakeholders and share “investment portfolios” to inform purchase decisions. The format neutral allocations would give academic departments and librarians transparent leeway to spread funds among majors, minors, and new programs. Format neutrality recognizes that some programs require more print resources, while others depend more heavily on e-resources.

Librarians did not face difficult decisions about sacrificing materials in order to increase space, because during this 10-month period, the footprint of the physical collections decreased by 40%, but overall holdings actually increased by 50%. After completing a thorough count of existing e-resources, many of which were underutilized, and adding additional digital collections, the quantity of materials accessible via the Brennan Library doubled. The librarians never experienced a need to announce a drastic slashing of the library’s collections because as soon as the weeding project ended, they were prepared to announce how much the collections had actually grown.

The collection development philosophy shifted to just-in-time rather than just-in-case. Instead of embracing the 80/20 rule, assuming that 80% of a library’s activity comes from 20% of its material, while 80% of items sit on shelves unused (Trueswell, 1969), the staff now focuses on access over ownership. This mimics a larger societal trend. While individuals once collected VHS tapes, DVDs, cassettes, music CDs, or print books, they may now subscribe to Netflix, Hulu, and Spotify, and read books on a Nook or Kindle. In the library’s context, Kanopy now provides patrons with access to over 26,000 streaming videos, and Overdrive offers thousands of additional audiobooks and e-books. Lasell patrons also have access to discipline specific e-book collections and Gale Virtual Reference Library titles that replace many print reference sets.

Adopting EBSCO EDS added a discovery layer to aid with the navigation of the array of resources available in many different formats.

Vendor Partnership

A quality partnership with EBSCO played a significant role in executing the extreme makeover of the Brennan Library’s online presence. Amy Thurlow had worked with Lasell for over a decade and led the charge when the library staff decided to adopt a discovery layer. She identified several areas with which EBSCO and Lasell could partner to make improvements. The library provided access to content on various vendor platforms, causing difficulties for users navigating sites with differing designs and functionality, as well as for reference librarians attempting to teach multiple interfaces. In the library office, managing too many invoices, vendor contracts, and licenses proved frustrating and time consuming. Without an electronic resources librarian on board yet, the staff managing accounts lacked an easy method for organizing contracts and tracking annual hosting fees.

Thurlow identified areas in which the EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) may help streamline searching and improve Lasell patrons’ experience. During an introductory meeting with Del Hornbuckle, she learned the director’s primary goals. Del expressed the desire to create a modern library with an appropriate user interface for 2016. She aimed to reduce user confusion and behind the scenes to reduce expenses and simplify workflow. EDS showed potential for providing a common look and interface, bundling products in a way that would result in improved return on investment, and offering streamlined workflow for the library’s staff in tasks ranging from teaching information literacy, to paying bills. The discovery layer appeared able to improve patrons’ experience by reducing the number of steps needed to arrive at full text content.

In the next visit to Lasell, Thurlow and a EBSCO library solutions engineer demonstrated EDS to the library staff, highlighting its potential to improve user experience. The additional EBSCO representative addressed technologically advanced implementation details and, along with Thurlow, answered questions and concerns from reference staff. Subsequent conversations between EBSCO and Lasell’s IT department clarified how IT and EBSCO could support the implementation and launch of the new product.

Ready to move forward, Lasell designated Lydia Sampson as the main contact for the Brennan Library, and she began working with a discovery solutions coordinator (DSC) who served as project manager on EBSCO's end for setting up EDS. Sampson put the DSC in touch with Lasell's Internet department to acquire appropriate branding, logos, and color schemes. The DSC walked Sampson through the completion of a lengthy profile to create the basic interface for Lasell's EDS and populate it with holdings and subscription information. This step allowed the Brennan Library to drop its paid subscription to the link resolver product it was using, since EDS had Full Text Finder built in. Given this data, the EBSCO team put in place appropriate full text linking. They created standalone widgets for searching LibGuides, Kanopy, and OverDrive separately. Questions remained about how to integrate the library's catalog into the product, so that step remained on hold.

Next, the DSC turned Lasell's account over to an assigned support representative for fine tuning EDS implementation. Armed with EBSCO's quality assurance checklist, Sampson conducted test searches and communicated frequently with support reporting glitches and suggesting changes. Sampson provided Thurlow with an extensive list of e-books purchased from a variety of vendors on an array of platforms. Thurlow identified titles eligible for switching to the EBSCO platform, a desirable outcome in order to have maximum content available with a unified interface and reduce annual hosting costs paid to vendors.

Toward the end of the implementation phase, Sampson identified products not available in the EDS Holdings Management system, and EBSCO worked to integrate those if possible. Kanopy streaming video, for example, did not show up in the EDS list of vendors, and even though Lasell's EDS setup included a side widget for it, Sampson wondered whether Kanopy would provide its holdings data to EBSCO, allowing users to search its catalog directly from the EDS portal. Representatives from EBSCO and Kanopy communicated and made this integration happen.

Fortunately, the Library's adoption of EDS coincided with Lasell College's transition to a new content management system for its website, and during weekly meetings with the college's website staff, Sampson revamped the library's website featuring

LaserSearch prominently. The cleaner, more modern interface provides a single search box, eliminating user doubt as to where to conduct a search. The EDS portal exposes patrons to content they would not have known Lasell had if they were searching siloes of resources as with the previous design. Additionally, EDS's inclusion of open source databases adds thousands of additional resources to Lasell's existing collections.

When Lasell first mounted EDS, named "LaserSearch" on the Brennan Library website, it did not integrate the library's catalog. Instead, a button below LaserSearch pointed users to the catalog to search separately. Eventually, EBSCO worked with the Minuteman Library Network, of which Lasell is a member using a shared online public catalog, and Innovative Interfaces Inc. to secure Lasell's holdings data and load it into EDS. The Brennan Library eventually (after the installation and initial set up of EDS), hired an electronic resources librarian, and Sampson handed over management and quality assurance for EDS to the new hire.

Conclusions

Over a short time period, the Brennan Library at Lasell College drastically improved its physical and virtual presence, in spite of its small staff and lack of extra funding or employees for a major project. Hornbuckle's leadership allowed lofty visions to come to fruition by prioritizing major changes and empowering the Head of Technical Services to act. To allow for the time that went into the massive weeding and space reallocation as well as the implementation of a discovery layer, other tasks took a back seat. Hornbuckle and Sampson agreed that the library would put the bulk of acquisitions and cataloging tasks on hold for the year. Technical services continued to purchase and catalog what was absolutely necessary, but during the 2016 fiscal year, acquisitions decreased by 40%, and cataloging activity decreased by 60%. The director did not oppose the buildup of a large cataloging backlog over time. Technical Services and student employee workload focused on project work rather than their usual tasks, and the director approved the reallocation of funds for collection development toward the initial EDS purchase, platform switching fees, and additional expenses unique to the projects at hand.

Hornbuckle and Sampson took cues from agile methods used in software development (Cervone,

2014; Wells, 2014), breaking seemingly insurmountable projects into discrete manageable tasks and avoiding entanglement in extensive planning and meeting phases. The reference librarians communicated with stakeholders, inviting faculty to visit and give input regarding holdings in their disciplines, but worked in a manner assuring that progress never came to a standstill. Conversations occurred on a daily basis rather than during scheduled meetings and strategic planning sessions. The Head of Access Services helped tremendously, assuring that student workers knew how to withdraw books and had instructions to do so when they did not have other assignments. Lasell's Plant Operations made the transformation possible cooperating with library staff to move dozens of recycle bins in and out of the library and to disassemble and remove ranges of shelving.

The Brennan Library greeted new and returning students and faculty with a better-organized, aesthetically pleasing space, with more and additional types of seating and more natural light. The stacks featured clean, newer books, easier to browse, and without brittle, dust-covered volumes or titles representing outmoded perspectives on culture and society.

Lasell College now offers more scholarly resources than ever before, available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, from on campus or remotely, on the full spectrum of platforms and devices. This provides improved service to the college's growing population of graduate students, many of whom never step foot on campus, and to digital natives who have never known a world without information on demand and at their fingertips.

Amy Thurlow analyzed the first month of EDS usage statistics and observed a dramatic increase in full text retrievals, indicating user success in finding desired resources, when comparing September to October 2016 to the same time period the previous year. This happened during the soft rollout of LaserSearch, without any official launch or promotion on the library's part.

The introduction of LaserSearch and the changes in the library's physical space occurred over time, gradually making improvements and rolling out new features. To date, the Brennan Library has not hosted an open house or produced promotional materials boasting its extreme makeover. While both

remain possibilities, the authors speculate that the past year's success relied largely on easing into changes as opposed to blindsiding users with a grand reveal of changes all at once.

Response to the changes have been overwhelmingly positive. Faculty who may have opposed "throwing out books" trust the librarians' judgement and also appreciate the addition of thousands of quality e-resources. The withdrawal of materials involved a triage system, sending items to Better World Books, Big Hearted Books, and to a recycling center, assuring stakeholders that the project was conducted in a sustainable, environmentally responsible manner. Reference librarians report that students call LaserSearch "cool" and enjoy the improvements on the website, without complaints about changes to the site to which they were accustomed. As the authors presumed, patrons realize that websites change over time, and as long as changes offer improvements rather than confusion, they respond positively.

Finally, the relationship between the Brennan Library and EBSCO brought forth key realizations. Adopting a discovery layer seemed daunting, yet EBSCO provided the staff to ease the process, even for a library without an electronic resources librarian or systems librarian. Throughout the implementation process, Sampson learned that she did not have to know how to do things, just who to ask for help. Additionally, the process incentivized the Brennan Library to work with publishers and vendors willing to cooperate with each other. The facility of EDS integration with Kanopy and with Gale products assured the library's loyalty to these vendors. When navigating EDS, some resources remain more difficult to retrieve, requiring additional clicks before a patron finds their full text destination. These products will undergo increased scrutiny during budget cycles and may get dropped if analytics fail to show high usage and adequate return on investment to warrant retaining them.

Moving forward, the Brennan Library intends to avoid repeating past mistakes. Sampson rewrote the library's collection development policy to incorporate standards for appropriate purchasing and weeding on a regular basis in an equitable, data-driven, format-neutral manner. She also designed a liaison manual to standardize the way reference librarians engaged in collection development and

material selection interact and communicate with their corresponding departments. This year the weighted collection development allocation formula will extend to all discipline-specific acquisitions and subscriptions, including databases, and vendor analytics will inform retention decisions. The hiring of a technical services assistant and an electronic resources librarian creates a dynamic staff unit prepared to serve the community's information

needs for both tangible and digital information. In less than one year, the Brennan Library achieved Hornbuckle's vision to create a 21st-century academic library. Reaching this goal happened because of her leadership and the cooperation of a results-oriented staff, strategic planning for high-impact results, and successful partnerships between Lasell's small library staff and a team of helpful vendor representatives from EBSCO and beyond.

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