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Case Studies in Collection and Technical Services -- Case Study Four: The Big Collection Assessment Project -- The Bane of a Selector's Existence, or a Beautiful Zen Experience?

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Case Studies in Collection and Technical Services

Case Study Four: The Big Collection Assessment Project — The Bane of a Selector's Existence, or a Beautiful Zen Experience?

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"Argh!" **Celine** moaned as she reached for the salt shaker. "How am I going to find time to review my stack areas for the collection assessment project. I can't think of a worse time. I know we have six months to complete the project, but still. Argh!"

Tracy patted her friend's arm in consolation. "Is this your first big assessment assignment?" **Celine** nodded.

"I remember my first, it felt so daunting. I wasn't sure how to start, didn't know how to plan for it." **Tracy** said soothingly to her friend and fellow subject specialist.

Celine and **Tracy** had just been served their lunches. They ate quietly while deep in thought. Right before lunch they had attended an all subject librarian meeting where a huge collection assessment project had been rolled out. Each of the librarians had six months to review their physical collections, assess a variety of things such as collection breadth, depth, strengths, weaknesses, preservation issues, rela-

tionship to consortial partners, and more. This was a Big Project. Both **Celine** and **Tracy** were feeling overwhelmed. **Celine**, because as a first time subject specialist she has never done a collection assessment before, and **Tracy**, because she has, though it has been at least five years since she completed the work.

At the meeting, the project time-line and the types of data they would have to provide were discussed. Report format and types of support they would receive throughout the project were presented and described. And then the meeting was adjourned and the room emptied amid the hubbub of anxious voices.

What's the best way for **Celine** and **Tracy** to get through this Big Project? What is the payoff, if any, for them? And, (for those PBS "The Electric Company" fans) where is **Naomi**?

The Experts Speak:

First off **Celine** and **Tracy** need to stop with the whining. They have actually been given a gift. They now have a reason to get to know their

collections intimately, physically, thoroughly. Let us step back for a moment. We want to emphasize that the worth of doing collection assessments is really two fold: first, the library gets a vast amount of collection information that can then be used for multiple purposes such as budget requests, external reviews, promotional materials, etc., and second, the librarians gain a strong visceral connection with the materials in the library for which they are responsible. This wisdom will stay with them and will help them make decisions, talk knowledgeably about their collections in various venues, and increase their professional worth.

So, How Should They Begin?

First, they need to put time slots in their work calendars to go into the stacks and start looking. If it isn't in the calendar, it won't get done. Everyone has their times of highest output, some are morning people, others thrive at different times of the day. Whatever time slots are their most productive, this is when they need to schedule these review periods.

Once scheduled, how ought they prepare for the sessions? First, dress comfortably, and expect to get dirty. While some parts of every collection are well used, others will be dusty,

continued on page 83



and sometimes hard to reach (either on the top or bottom shelves!). Next, take some sort of documentation, a chart or a map of the stack areas you will need to cover, with room on the paperwork to make notes, scribble, etc. You will also most likely want a clipboard, sharp pencils, and some sort of flag or marker to delineate where you began and stopped your review. Unless of course you finish it all in one fell swoop. And, yes, it has been done!

Now that You are Scheduled and Fully Armed, “Onward to the Stacks!”

What ought you look for? Below is a checklist to get you into an assessment frame of mind. Remember, each subject area has its own idiosyncrasies, so no list of what to look for will be exactly the same from one subject to another. Also, the more you spend time with your collection, the patterns will make themselves evident to you. You are the expert. Trust your instincts. If something looks weird or out of place to you, it most likely is.

Basic Assessment List:

- Are the books neat and in order? Are they stuck together or dusty? (if clean and neat, may have just been shelf-read and cleaned; if stuck together and dirty, maybe an area where no one uses the materials anymore for any number of reasons — your job is to figure out what and why)
- Are the books terribly out of order, all over the place, lots of room on the shelves, and a generally messy appearance? (This could indicate a very high use area — think about looking at circulation counts for materials in this call number range)
- How many books are there in the same call number range — lots? Few?
- What types of books are in each call number range — undergraduate level, textbooks, professional, reference, other?
- What looks weird? Or not? Are there things there you never thought about before? Never knew you had? What is the overall impression you get from the stacks — Good? Bad? Ugly?

Once you begin to walk through the stacks and look at your materials with these types of questions in mind, you will begin seeing other types of patterns. While you are there, pretend you are a library user walking these shelves looking for something. What would your perceptions of the collection be?

And finally, have fun! When you are through you can be sure you will have gained an immense and valuable amount of knowledge about your collection. And you will quickly find that the payoff from having that knowledge is huge! 🍀

Little Red Herrings — Reading at Risk

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

The National Endowment for the Humanities released a shocking study (*Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading*) barely two years ago showing a rapid and sharp decline in reading over the last 20 years. Most of that decline has occurred in the last ten years. The percentage of adults who read literature has dropped in the year of the study, 2002, to 46%, down from 57% just twenty years earlier. The drop in reading among 18-24 years olds is even more dramatic. According to **Dana Gioia** of the NEA, “Literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated especially among the young.” **Gioia** goes on to point out why this is important to libraries if it isn’t already obvious: “Reading a book requires a degree of active attention and engagement. Indeed, reading itself is a progressive skill that depends on years of education and practice.” Years of education and practice. When we lose this in our culture, we lose the desire for places to house books, places in which we can engage our minds in a progressive fashion.

Some might argue that literary reading is a different kind of reading and so should not be too alarming. Who really wants to read *Wuthering Heights*, *Erewhon*, *Vanity Fair*, or any number of other “boring” books? But it is the very interconnectedness of reading that requires this to be important. One puts down a book as too troublesome and he will later put down a newspaper that may be too challenging. With the newspaper gone, so go newsletters and any other intellectual substance that cannot be digested quickly, easily and in sound bite fashion. Indeed, the NEA survey found that “total book reading is declining significantly.” Just how far is this decline? From almost 60% in 1982, to 2002’s abysmal 43%, young people have all but quit reading. While one cannot say with certainty why this is, the most obvious reasons for this decline are that students simply cannot read well, combined with an increase in both television and Web surfing. **Mark Bauerlein**, project manager of the NEA report, blames “the proliferation of Internet, email, iPods, and Blackberries.”

Meanwhile, if all of this were not bad news enough, studies of college-age students reveal similar findings: students do not read, do not want to read, and find reading a labor when they have to do it. Although sure to be discounted as anecdotal, informal surveys I’ve conducted with faculty who teach honors students reveal the same sad findings even among the putatively more literate of students. This concurs with the honors students I have taught. Require more

than 30 pages a week and one is certain to endure a riot. When combined with the now known fact that the college-aged watch more than three and a half hours of television a day, the recipe for both disaster and illiteracy is very high. When they aren’t watching television they are blogging, or at least most are. Estimates of the almost 32 million blogs on the Web contend that nearly 60% of them are run by 13-19-year olds. Read any 100 of them and literacy, or even budding **Jack Kerouacs** (about whom, if I may remind, **Truman Capote** said, “[He’s] not writing; [he’s] typing.”) do not come to mind. NetGeners, Gen-Xers, students of hover parents, or whatever we call them now, are a vocal, often self-absorbed group but they are not readers or writers in the traditional sense. Before someone argues that that’s just the point — they are meant to be unconventional — bear in mind that these unconventional habits are drawing them away from literacy. *We live in an age where the culture that built libraries and cherished them has been inherited by one that does not like them and does not care to learn how to use them.* That some are seeing libraries as pointless should come as no surprise. Add to this **Google’s** enterprise to put ten million books online and you have a recipe for vanishing libraries.

Nor is it just reading, or its lack, that should trouble us. Many of these same young people are not volunteering, not involved in or with anyone or anything else, and are not well-versed with the real world going on around them. For example, among high Internet users in the young adult category, only 11% use it to keep up with the news. The remaining numbers (82%) said they watch television. About 20% still read a newspaper everyday compared with their peers in 1972, of whom almost half did. Of incoming freshmen at UCLA, only 34% see keeping up with politics as important, about half what it was compared to their hell-no-we-won’t-go peers in the 1970s. This might come as good news if only we could be sure the news they do get is not entirely limited to *The Jon Stewart Show* or others like it.

Should we think that this loss in reading is not so big a deal, that same NEA report indicates that declines are present in what many would consider related activities: museum visits, visits to historic sites, or volunteer work? While 96% of the adult population surveyed watch at least one hour of television a day, (and almost half watch three hours or more) only 45% have ever read a play, 17% ever seen a play or an opera, and not even a third have seen a live performing arts activity.

continued on page 84

