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ATG Interviews Rick Lugg and Ruth Fischer

Partners, Sustainable Collection Services LLC

by **Tom Gilson** (Associate Editor, *Against the Grain*) <gilson@cofc.edu>

and **Katina Strauch** (Editor, *Against the Grain*) <kstrauch@comcast.net>

ATG: *Sustainable Collection Services is a new venture for you. Tell us about it. Who are the partners? Is it a sole proprietorship, a sub-S, or another configuration? What is your remit? How many employees will you have initially?*

RL/RF: Sustainable Collection Services (SCS) grew directly out of R2's consulting work. In project after project, we saw libraries struggling to find space to accommodate users. Stacks are full, and yet print collection use is low and declining. Weeding and storage processes, especially for monographs, are incredibly labor-intensive. We realized that new thinking and new tools were needed to support efficient deselection, based on rules defined by the library. We decided it would be interesting to build one of those tools.

We needed help, and called on our friends **Andy Breeding** and **Eric Redman**. In February 2010, we formed SCS as a partnership. We've known **Eric** for years in his role as Chief Architect and Director of Engineering at **Blackwell's**. He knows the MARC format inside out, and has long experience with large record sets. **Andy** and **Rick** met 20 years ago in the MLIS program at **Simmons**. **Andy's** skills in product design, user experience, and high-end SQL work were exactly what we needed, and he very much wanted to be part of a start-up. **Ruth** and **Rick** have previously built Web products and decision-support systems, and have spent years immersed in library workflows and strategies. The four of us make an excellent team.

On our Website (<http://sustainablecollections.com>), we define our remit like this:

Sustainable Collection Services (SCS) provides data-driven deselection services to academic libraries. SCS tools enable carefully managed drawdown of print monograph collections, while supporting shared print archiving efforts.

ATG: *Are you still running R2 Consulting? Can you tell us the difference/relation between the two companies/ventures?*

RL/RF: There is still strong demand for R2's services. For the past 18 months, we've been running both businesses. We've now decided to take our own advice and stop doing some tasks in order to focus on others. R2 will be on hiatus for 2012 so that we can work exclusively on SCS. We'll revisit that decision at the end of the year.

ATG: *As we understand it, you are focusing on deselection issues with Sustainable Collection Services. You have always focused on popular trends. Is deselection a trend driven by circumstances (need for space for example)? What is your definition of sustainable?*



RL/RF: As library entrepreneurs, we've always looked for unsolved problems and gaps in the market. We now see many libraries struggling to find enough space for users. The demand for collaborative study areas, expanded information commons, integration of Teaching & Learning centers or writing centers into the library — even coffee shops — is enormous. Funding for new space is very limited. Meanwhile, much existing library space is occupied by bound print journals, tangible government documents, large print reference collections, and circulating monographs that don't circulate much. So space and low use are definitely drivers.

But there are others. We see an increasing emphasis in higher education on ROI (return on investment); libraries and collections are not exempt from this scrutiny. We need to prove we're using institutional resources wisely. Also, use of digital content far outstrips use of print. Raw volume count is a much less important metric in ranking and accreditation. Most withdrawn titles can be easily accessed in the event they're needed — in both print and digital form. Intelligent deselection makes a lot of sense in this context.

Over time, we anticipate that libraries will manage print collections very differently. The number of surplus copies will be reduced. Low-use titles will continue to be held, but in regional shared print programs. Individual libraries will allocate a fixed amount of space for print collections, and will need to manage to that footprint. This is what the 'sustainable' in our name refers to. In order to live within the library's 'carrying capacity' for print, every volume acquired means that another volume must be withdrawn. The SCS tool identifies withdrawal candidates based on criteria defined by the library.

ATG: *Has the traditional role of libraries as preservers of information for future generations changed? What do you say to those that feel that print collections still have value? Please explain your answer.*

RL/RF: That preservation role is more important than ever. As a community, we must assure that all content is secure, and that nothing disappears from the scholarly and cultural record. This means that both a secure digital version and multiple print copies of all titles must be retained. **HathiTrust** already provides a digital archive for more than five million book titles, and at its 2011 Constitutional Convention the group voted to establish a distributed print archive. Regional efforts such as the **Western Regional Storage Trust (WEST)** and **CIC** are moving toward monographs. In our work at **SCS**, we regularly encounter informal shared print arrangements. In short, archiving and preservation are best handled regionally or nationally.

The key is to begin to manage print collaboratively. Once content has been secured through collective efforts, deselection can occur safely. There are literally millions of surplus copies of low-use books on library shelves. We are bearing costs that we do not need to bear. In order to proceed, though, libraries need actionable data and efficient processes. That's where **SCS** comes in. A controlled drawdown of print collections doesn't mean that print has less value. It means that we're learning how to manage print collections more cost effectively for the long term — matching the supply of print copies to the corresponding demand for them. It's an example of what **Lorcan Dempsey** calls the "network effect." Through mechanisms like **WorldCat**, **ILL**, courier services, and eBooks, we have the capability to manage our collective collection much more intelligently. That requires fewer copies.

ATG: *Are there specific deselection issues that academic libraries need to be most aware of? What type help do libraries most often need in coming to terms with the issue and then acting on it?*

RL/RF: The first challenge is to recognize and accept that we need to change our approach to collections. This is true even for libraries without immediate space problems. Print collections today represent massive investments that are yielding relatively low returns. It's difficult for all of us who built these collections to realize that they no longer play the role we expected them to. So sometimes libraries need help in making the case for deselection — not just to their stakeholders, but to themselves.

First, keeping books is not free. You don't have to agree with **Paul Courant's** estimate of \$4.26 per volume per year in open stacks to accept that there are real costs to housing and maintaining print collections. Second, usage of those collections is generally very low. Think of **Cornell's** study from last fall, which reported that 55% of its monographs had not

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circulated since 1990. Third, most low-use titles are securely archived and readily accessible elsewhere. All that's needed is the tool that pulls this information together.

Most libraries can also benefit from help with data management. It can be difficult and time-consuming to normalize bibliographic data for comparisons with external sources. Circulation data poses its own challenges, because it is inherently non-standard. Even libraries that have the necessary expertise don't always have enough time to pursue collection analysis. A vendor such as SCS can provide some of that capacity.

ATG: *Many librarians have spent their careers building print collections. How do you convince them that the need to deselect is paramount?*

RL/RF: Librarians are always deselecting, whether they realize it or not. No library buys everything that is published. Selection and deselection are the same activity. The choices that built those print collections involved "discard" of thousands of other titles that might have been added. At point of selection, librarians are attempting to judge which books will be used by their community — but without any data. At point of deselection, there is actually better data — a track record of circulation and sometimes in-house use. Deselection decisions are actually clearer than selection decisions. That doesn't mean they are easier, though. It's much harder to remove a book from the shelf than it is to ignore a publication announcement. But it's really the same intellectual activity, with the same effect on users. As **Lizanne Payne** likes to say, we shouldn't advantage older titles over newer titles just because they're already on the shelf.

ATG: *Is there an overall strategy that you try and get your clients to adopt as they tackle the deselection of their collections? What about issues of marketing the new changes to faculty? Do you recommend faculty involvement?*

RL/RF: Our emphasis is on data and library-defined rules. Very few libraries have the staff capacity to support title-by-title deselection. We're trying to provide a flexible and intelligent batch approach to a very time-intensive process. We assemble data on age, local usage, subject, location holdings in other libraries, presence in **Hathi**, and other factors. We enable the library to define its withdrawal and retention parameters, and first produce a collection summary. This helps gauge the effect of the library's chosen rules. Those rules can be adjusted and the process repeated until the library is comfortable with the results. This iterative approach is similar in some respects to writing and revising an approval profile, except that we can generate results immediately. This interactivity is a powerful tool, but it also gradually acclimates librarians to controlling deselection through rules, rather than title-by-title evaluation.

The degree of faculty involvement depends on the institution. We do think it's useful

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Sustainable Collection Services LLC

Sustainable
Collection Services **SCS**

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AFFILIATED COMPANIES: R2 Consulting LLC

FOUNDERS/PARTNERS: Rick Lugg, Ruth Fischer, Andy Breeding, Eric Redman.

KEY PRODUCTS AND SERVICES: SCS offers decision-support systems and data services for rules-based deselection of print monographs. The firm also provides consulting related to the managed drawdown of print monograph collections, shared print archiving projects, offsite storage, and deselection workflows.

CORE MARKETS/CLIENTELE: Academic libraries.

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 4 

to make the case for deselection directly to faculty. They need to understand the choices and hear the rationale. A couple of libraries have even asked SCS to do that on their behalf. It's especially important if deselection is likely to be controversial, which it often is. We've thought a lot about this issue, and have concluded that direct and frequent engagement with all stakeholders is critical, as is an ongoing communication program. For those interested in the public relations aspects of deselection, **Rick's** blog contains a number of entries. (<http://sampleandhold-r2.blogspot.com/>).

ATG: *What roles will initiatives like the HathiTrust and other shared collections strategies like remote print storage play? Are such strategies financially viable for smaller libraries that have substantial investments in print collections?*

RL/RF: There are really two issues here. First, we want assurance that all content is secure. **HathiTrust** and shared print archives can satisfy that need, allowing individual libraries to withdraw material without risk of it disappearing from the collective collection. The second issue is accessibility — can my library re-obtain withdrawn content in the unlikely event that it is subsequently wanted? There may be several avenues for this. Membership in **Hathi** or a regional shared print program is one way to provide that access. In some respects it may be the healthiest option for the community, as these organizations need financial support to make shared archiving viable. But ILL remains an option as well. Many titles will also be available from commercial eBook providers — perhaps even for short-term circulation. Used print copies may be readily available. Print-on-demand will become an increasingly viable option. Any of these avenues will require expenditure on an item that was previously held, but the chances of this happening are slim. Most withdrawn books have not circulated in more than a decade. And the cost of re-obtaining a few titles pales in

comparison with the direct costs and opportunity costs of keeping all of them on the shelves.

ATG: *You mentioned in a recent blog post that "As a community, it behooves us to face — even embrace — this situation (the case for deselection, shared print, etc.) How should the library community do that? What are the costs? What are the benefits?*

RL/RF: Managing down print collections is really just another kind of stewardship. We need to move excess copies out of the system, so we can support more users in new ways without having to expand our buildings. Users want other things more than they want large onsite print collections. Libraries need to tackle this situation before the Provosts and Chief Financial Officers come calling. The cost of deselection is significant: data analysis, decision-making, communication, record maintenance, and materials movement. Collaboration imposes another layer of costs, but action in a collective context is really the only way to make responsible progress. And the benefits of shared print are compelling, not just to the scholarly record, but to participating libraries. Just look at **Constance Malpas'** projections in the **OCLC** report on *Cloud-sourcing Research Collections*. She estimates that the median **ARL** library would realize 45,000 square feet in space savings and \$500,000-\$2 million in annual cost avoidance. That's worth some effort. And think of what else might be done with that space — all without risk to the integrity of the collection.

ATG: *During ALA Midwinter, OCLC issued a press release announcing a 'strategic partnership' with SCS. What does that partnership entail?*

RL/RF: For some time, **OCLC** has been talking about opening up **WorldCat** data for libraries and other partners. Their recently-announced **WorldShare** platform gives third-party partners improved access to its Web services

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and data. Because WorldCat holdings data is central to SCS's offerings, we jumped at the chance to develop one of the first third-party applications on WorldShare. The partnership allows SCS to develop our own version of a collection analytics application on the same core data used by OCLC — and to create a new avenue for returning value to member libraries. In our view, the WorldShare model opens up lots of potential for innovation and mutual benefit. We're very pleased to be part of that.

ATG: *We've been discussing a lot of serious issues but before we let you go, we were hoping that you could tell us a little bit about you and your family. What do you do with your spare time? What do you like to read? Do you have any hobbies?*

RL/RF: We both have big extended families, Rick's in New England and Ruth's in Colorado. We spend time with both. Daughter Emily is an artist living just down the road from us and son Lincoln is an engineer working in Louisville, Kentucky. Most evenings when we're home we gravitate toward the long story arcs of shows like "The Wire," "Battlestar Galactica," "Deadwood," or, most recently, "Six Feet Under."

ATG: *Rick and Ruth, we want to thank you for taking the time to talk to us. As always, we learned a lot.*

RL/RF: Our pleasure. Thanks for asking! 🍄

against the grain people profile

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(or google "Rick Lugg blog")

Rick Lugg & Ruth Fischer

BORN AND LIVED: Rick: A New Hampshire native: "Live Free or Die." Ruth: College Park, MD; Earlham College; and after 27 years, still a newcomer to New Hampshire.

PROFESSIONAL CAREER AND ACTIVITIES: Rick: 18 years at YBP; 12 years at R2; 1 year at SCS. Ruth: Teacher and administrator at independent schools; 10 years at YBP; 12 years at R2; 1 year at SCS.

FAMILY: Emily, 27, is a visual artist. Lincoln, 23, is an engineer.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Rick: *Lonesome Dove*. Ruth: *The Once and Future King*.

PHILOSOPHY: Ruth: "People don't change." Rick: "All life consists of moving objects from one place to another."

MOST MEMORABLE CAREER ACHIEVEMENTS: Both: Building a profiling decision-support system at YBP in 1993; creating and growing R2 Consulting; staying married while working together for nearly 20 years!

HOW/WHERE DO I SEE THE INDUSTRY IN FIVE YEARS: Collection development will continue to evolve toward curation of a discovery environment. Instead of deliberately trying to identify titles most relevant to a discipline, broad categories of material that may be relevant will be enhanced for optimum discoverability, immediate delivery (in either print or digital form), and partial or temporary use. 🍄

Something to Think About — Responsibility for the Future

Column Editor: Mary E. (Tinker) Massey (Retired Librarian) <eileen4tinker@yahoo.com>

We have arrived at a new year and changes that bring challenges to all libraries.

In the past, we have seen different challenges for different libraries dependent upon monies available for our functions. Now, we have been drawn together to find relevant solutions to problems we all share. There is a push to receive, develop, publish and create our information systems digitally — ONLY! If we never include the older materials, this will be a daunting task and still leave our facilities looking for physical space to house those older materials. Most libraries, no matter what size, are working on their own grants to protect the rare materials that provide us with the history of special subjects still developing today. I am reminded of my own experience with my Information Brokerage firm finding information for doctors and others who desperately needed the knowledge of a rare disease or human condition to solve a present problem. When searching a current need/problem in the seventies, I found that I had to wander back through the journal articles of the fifties to find relevant information for the doctor. I was surprised, but the doctor explained that this human condition had

not been noted in the literature for many years. That is why he used my firm to find that lost information. If we start with the current years of publications only, we miss important material that is vital for doctors and others. Making older information available to researchers is a major task and a necessary one. It's not only something to think about, but a MUST! We cannot cull portions of the data to soothe our need for "ALL DIGITAL." As digital becomes more and more primary to our needs, we also discover that libraries are destroying the older data as unnecessary. Some of the rare materials a single library owns, once well-known and preserved by hundreds of libraries, are now known in only 1-5 institutions. How soon will that become none, as we determine someone else should keep it, not us? That day has reached our doors, and we can no longer rely on others to do our work. Our responsibility is to procure, organize and provide access to as much human achievement as possible, or else we will need to recreate that effort everyday. Have we forgotten our mission? Are we being goaded by administrators who cherish space rather than providing their researchers with

as much raw data and knowledge as possible? We cannot be expected to create something from nothing. Have you experienced a loss of contact with the Internet because of natural disasters? If earlier data was unnecessary, I would hate to find data banks empty when information had been lost as to how we could create electricity, because the primary source had been lost. If you had to re-create a method to obtain a basic system because of disaster, could you? Who would you ask? Who could you rely on? The decline of the library is based on this change! We are becoming less able to supply answers. Do you find this something to think about? I do! If the library system as a primary knowledge source dies, it will be because we allowed it and ignored the early signs of decay. Think about it, and find a solution! 🍄

