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Curating Collective Collections: The Maine Way with Shared Print for Monographs

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Curating Collective Collections — The Maine Way with Shared Print for Monographs

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*Column Editor's Note: I am pleased to take on the editorship of this column from **Sam Demas** and to enjoy the privilege of building on the tradition of wide-ranging coverage he has established in the last three years. Shared collections projects are aborning and implementing around the country, all of them relevant to the interests of **ATG** readers as libraries address not only immediate space and budgetary questions but, more important, strategically reposition services and staff vis-á-vis the resource base on which students and faculty draw in their work; new publishing formats, modes, and technologies; and evolving faculty and student work practices, pedagogy, and research methods.*

*In future and with the help of guest writers, the column will bring **ATG** readers reports on important projects, maybe an interview or two, and coverage of events in the shared collections community. For this issue of **ATG**, I am happy to cede the floor to **Matthew Revitt**, program manager for the Maine Shared Collections Strategy (MSCS), which has just concluded its work under grant from the **Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS)**. Along with **Lizanne Payne**, Consultant, and **Constance Malpas**, OCLC Research, I was privileged to serve as an advisor to the project for three years from 2011-2014 and from that relatively safe vantage to watch **MSCS** develop a leadership position in the emergent shared print infrastructure.*

*MSCS have been generous from the beginning in sharing their purposes, deliberations, and progress on the way to achieving their goal of developing a model for collaborative management of print monograph collections. In this column, **Matthew** distills the experience MSCS gained from the project; together with the "user's guide" he mentions in the final paragraph, his essay at once witnesses MSCS's desire to offer advice regarding the issues that shared print initiatives must address and documents MSCS's negotiation of those issues. MSCS's guide is an important moment in the history of shared print agreements, for it is the first document to codify at length practices for a monograph program and to share a consortium's thinking in such a formal and public way. The record in the guide of their decision-making processes, the commentary on motives and circumstances, and the rehearsal of strategies adopted and alternatives considered, along with their treatment of lessons learned and lessons gained from other projects, will benefit all of us working on shared print agreements. We owe these Mainers a great debt of gratitude. — **BK***

"Imagine" a world where libraries both academic and public can come together and collaborate on the shared stewardship of their print collections. No, this isn't an extra line of **John Lennon's** seminal hit recently unearthed, but the reality of a project that has been referred to often in previous **CCC** columns, the Maine Shared Collections Strategy (MSCS). We managed to meet our project objectives (and in some cases exceed them), but there are definitely some things we would look out for if we did it again. Here are five lessons MSCS learned during their project that we hope may be of use to other libraries exploring the world of shared print.

First the Background

Like most libraries, those that would eventually form MSCS faced the challenge of housing legacy print collections while at the same time lacking the funding and space to build new stacks. Their users expected them to devote increased room for study and collaborative and technology space as well as keep the same access to information resources. The libraries also felt pressure to responsibly steward sizable, historic print collections. The partners saw the growth of large-scale digital collections such as the **HathiTrust** as an opportunity to rethink the management and delivery of their collections. In this context libraries need to develop collaborative approaches to collection management because the issues exceed the capacity of any single library or organization. Therefore, in 2010 Maine's two largest public libraries, **Portland** and **Bangor**; the **Maine State Library**, the **University of Maine**, and **University of Southern Maine**; three private colleges, **Colby**, **Bates**, and **Bowdoin**; and the statewide consortium **Maine InfoNet** formed the Maine Shared Collections Strategy (MSCS) to create a cooperative strategy for the long-term preservation and management of legacy print collections.

A number of factors contributed to our success. MSCS has been supported by a three-year Institute of Museum and Library Services National Leadership Demonstration Grant. The funding we received from IMLS along with matching funds allowed us to hire a full-time program manager, a contracted systems librarian, and the services of collection analysis vendor **Sustainable Collection Services**. We also benefited from the long history of cooperation and trust between the MSCS libraries dating back almost 100 years. The shared library management system infrastructure (all use Innovative's ILS and are members of the INN-Reach union catalog MaineCat) that exists between the MSCS partners connects them both technically and organizationally.

MSCS has had some notable achievements over the last three years including:

- Going beyond the project goal of *developing a model* for jointly managing and preserving print collections to *actually agreeing* to commit to retain a total of 1.4 million titles for a 15-year period.
- Becoming the first shared print initiative to record retention commitments for monograph titles in the **OCLC** Local Holding Records of titles and to disclose those commitments using the **OCLC** Shared Print Symbol. MSCS also documented retention commitments in the local systems of partner libraries and the union catalog MaineCat.
- Establishing a governance structure for the post-grant activities of the Maine Shared Collections Cooperative that is documented in a Memorandum Of Understanding, and approved by the partner institutions.
- Developing eBook-On-Demand and Print-On-Demand service delivery models, with 1.4 million public domain **HathiTrust** records loaded into the union catalog MaineCat.

Lesson One: Don't Analyze Your Dirty Data

You know that group of records where you have a vendor number in the 001 field instead of the **OCLC** control number? Or those records where a local prefix had been added to the 001 number? Well, before you begin a shared print project that involves collection analysis you should consider just how reliable your collection data actually is; particularly data that will be used as matching points in the analysis. Then, consider what steps need to be taken to clean the data prior to the analysis, so you can accurately compare holdings across the project participants' collections.

At MSCS, we decided that in order to clean our data we needed an **OCLC** reclamation project. As expected, the reclamation exposed problems in the local catalogs: for example, records with no 001 fields, ISSN in the 001, etc. The reclamation took over 12 months to complete and, although our systems librarian coordinated the process, significant local staff time was required to investigate and address issues with the data.

In the end, the reclamation was worth it because **OCLC** were able to update just over a quarter million 001's, synthesize holdings, and remove holdings for materials that were no longer locally held. This work was important not only for the matching required in collection analysis, but also for facilitating the batch loading of retention commitment statements into catalogs which relied on the **OCLC** control number.

Lesson Two: Choose your Collection Analysis Support Wisely

Your collection analysis vendor needs to act like a good friend. You need to trust them because when you hand over massive amounts of collection data and get back massive lists, you can't easily recreate their results, particularly when they apply your retention rules to the data and provide withdrawal and retention candidates. Like a good friend, they won't judge you or put you down, even if some of your retention rules are somewhat unorthodox; they will instead listen to your needs and support you in developing more realistic retention and withdrawal scenarios that can be applied to collection data. Good collection analysis support should be there for you when things get tough, like when you can't decide where to start with analyzing millions of items. They can be on-hand to provide reports and charts that can help you focus on manageable chunks of the collection and outline potential retention and withdrawal scenarios. They will also bring out the best in you, putting your ideas into practice.

At MSCS, our new best friend became **Sustainable Collection Services (SCS)**. We benefited greatly from **SCS's** experience of working on similar projects and would not have been able to make the progress we did in assigning retention commitments in the confines of the grant period without their support. Like a good friend, **SCS** also made us smile when they pointed out that all the partners own the title *The Lobster War*.
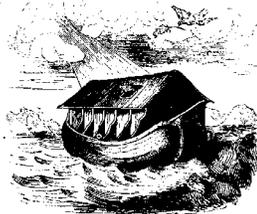
Lesson Three: Bring a Lifejacket

As information professionals we are aware of the dangers of information overload and the need to assist library users in narrowing or focusing their information searches. When analyzing collection data we need to follow that advice ourselves — otherwise there is the danger of drowning in data. Having clearly defined objectives in mind can help you decide what data is going to help you make retention decisions as opposed to what is just interesting or nice to know.

Another situation where projects can easily feel like they are drowning in data is when looking at title lists. Although at MSCS we began the process intending to make decisions at scale, it was tempting to want to micromanage the analysis process. We found that while some title-level reviews might be necessary, it's not feasible to expect staff to conduct widespread title-level reviews when analyzing millions of titles and items. Instead, we created categories that enabled us to tweak our retention commitments mid-stream while still making decisions en-masse. These categories were: items that were mistakenly included in the analysis, publishers of what we considered were outdated and superseded textbooks, manuals, test preparation guides, travel guides, and some paperback versions of popular fiction. The partner libraries wanted the freedom to de-accession these titles in the future.

Lesson Four: Recognize Grubby Guides and Pulp Paperbacks

Despite all best efforts to make decisions at scale, sometimes there will be issues with individual items. For example, when looking at lost or damaged items that have been committed to retain, libraries have balked at replacing some common titles (especially in that specific edition).

To address ongoing issues we have developed a policy and procedures for situations when libraries identify on a limited title-by-title basis (i.e., not in large batches) titles which should have their retention commitment removed or transferred to another library. This is where trust in the professional discretion of each other's staff is going to be essential because in our case the policy and procedure don't include a peer review.

Lesson Five: Eat, Sleep, and Breathe Shared Print

While they have (some) lives outside MSCS, our systems librarian and program manager have spent a significant amount of their time over the last three years thinking about shared print — a scary thought! They have acted as focal points for the project and as administrators for its activities, which ensured consistency throughout.

Having the program manager as a full-time position meant that this person didn't have competing interests and distractions, which allowed making MSCS their priority. The role combined investigating information from various sources and leading decision-making processes as well as administrative tasks, e.g., meeting management and documentation.

In our case, the systems librarian fully managed all aspects of wrangling library system data in and out of multiple library systems. It was extremely helpful that the systems librarian took control of this process because it ensured the work was carried out consistently across the group and staff at each library did not have to relearn the specialized knowledge necessary.

Conclusion

We hope that an important part of our legacy at MSCS is that other projects can learn from our experiences, both good and bad, and develop strategies for managing their own legacy print collections. MSCS have shown that although analyzing collection data and developing retention policies can be a difficult process, it is possible for multi-type libraries to successfully collaborate and make shared retention commitments across large collections. Libraries should be aware that getting to this stage will require complex analysis and difficult decisions; to succeed, the initiative will need the support and leadership of those managing the project. The rewards of agreeing to the retention commitments will be great, not only for individual libraries to maximize dwindling resources, but also for the greater good of the library community by guaranteeing access to titles for years to come. 🌳