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Bob Kieft
rhkrdgzin@gmail.com

Jacob Nadal
ReCAP, jnadal@princeton.edu

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Curating Collective Collections — ReCAP, Centralized Book Housing, and the Economy of Shared Collections, or, From Book Barn to Service Center

by **Jacob Nadal** (Executive Director, ReCAP) <jnadal@princeton.edu>

Column Editor: **Bob Kieft** (688 Holly Ave., Unit 4, St. Paul, MN 55104) <rhkrdgzin@gmail.com>

Column Editor's Note: *It's a pleasure to welcome Jake back to these pages, which carried his byline in the February 2015 issue (v.27#1) on a piece called "Silvaculture in the Stacks, or, Lessons From another Conservation Movement." Jake continues to think creatively and hard about library collections from the vantage of his position at ReCAP and his membership on the HathiTrust Shared Print Program as well as his ongoing involvement in the preservation community. He presents widely and often at conferences and is a major force in shaping the national discussion about the future of library materials access. In this column, he shares thinking he has done based on the elaboration of ReCAP's role among its member libraries, Columbia, New York Public, and Princeton, as well as among libraries more generally. He makes a case for centering the activities of such facilities as ReCAP in the future configuration of library collections services and for regarding large-scale regional book housing as integral to that configuration. The argument he makes is a nuanced, provocative, and powerful, user-oriented glimpse of a reordering of the spaces that constitute libraries. — BK*

Since the **Harvard Depository** and the **University of California Regional Library Facilities** opened in the 1980s, there has been a steady increase in the number of dedicated library collection storage facilities. They all serve an essential role in allowing libraries to continue collecting through the simple expedient of giving their builders a place to put things, but their utilization as a sort of second-class stacks needs reconsideration. Changing the way we think about this infrastructure gives us an opportunity to leverage the affordances of this infrastructure to dramatically improve the level of service and comprehensiveness of access we offer to readers across the United States.¹ Our initial vision of these facilities — as closed stack, second-tier storage in an era when print was the only available information channel — made them more of a necessary compromise than something intrinsically desirable. They were not reader adjacent like the open stacks seemed to be, and this remoteness shaped their service model to emphasize rapid delivery on request as an approximation of walking into the stacks.

That service model still has some merit, but we are now operating in a world where print is only one of the channels of information our readers use. Print is an exceptionally rich medium, and we know that it is favored where

its particular affordances are best suited to readers' needs. But print usage and direct stacks browsing are a small share of the information seeking and usage that now occurs. Libraries need to reenvision the services they offer to support reading and research across a variety of formats and using a variety of methods other

engaged in the shelving and circulation of collections, making a like-for-like comparison difficult.

Shifting the comparison to **ReCAP** staff and ARL student staffing, as in the table below, is good healthy food for thought, though like having an apple and an orange for a snack:

ARL Averages			ReCAP Comparison
Student salaries/Initial Circ.	\$5.39	\$4.67	ReCAP Total Staff Salaries/Request ²
<i>87% of the ARL Average Cost</i>			
Student Staff FTE/Initial Circ.	0.0003	0.0001	ReCAP Staff FTE/Request
<i>33% of the ARL Average Student Staff Level)</i>			
Student Staff/Holdings	0.0000098	0.0000014	ReCAP Staff/Holdings
<i>14% of the ARL Average Student Staff Size</i>			

than cover-to-cover reading. In the current context our library storage facilities deserve a second look.

At **ReCAP**, we have started to make the case that such facilities as ours should not be viewed as off-site but rather as the center of an expanded set of library services that are pertinent to the largest set of research materials. When they are understood as the hubs for collective services or the anchors of our preservation efforts, a small number of networked, large-scale collections management facilities, like **ReCAP**, could have a transformative effect on the service offerings of all libraries. The potential for this transformation is latent in any center that handles library materials as freight rather than intellectual content, of course. Making this distinction lets us apply the best operating methodology to the largest portion of the library materials life-cycle: the time between its acquisition by the library and use by a reader. The benefits of this approach have been especially apparent at **ReCAP** for two reasons, though: scale and collaboration. It is the combination of these two factors that makes the case study for the collective collections effort, but let's start by examining each one individually.

ReCAP holds some 13.5 million items on site, adds one million items in an average year, and fulfills over 200,000 requests each year — sufficient holdings and enough transactions to make it a top-10 ARL in its own right and to give it the peculiar distinction of being the largest library under a single roof in North America. More important, however, is that it provides these services with just 20 FTE staff. That's an unfair comparison, you'll rightly say, for most ARL library staff are not directly

A facility like **ReCAP** radically improves the efficiency of all the interstitial operations required to make libraries function. Every step between the decision to acquire and the delivery of materials to address a research need happens at a lower cost when performed at scale in a facility designed around physical objects rather than call number. This is what we knew all along about off-site high-density storage, though. What becomes more important is what is possible when we question the boundary layers and points of interface between a facility, a library, and a user.

Because high-density library logistics centers reduce the time and costs of retrieval, they can also shorten the turn time between a request and the initiation of services. Storing the content of **ReCAP** in conventional library shelving would involve about 60 miles of stacks, enough to line the turnpike, roads, and tunnels from **ReCAP** to **Columbia University**. Unless you serve a user population of marathon runners, you have to start piling that up in multiple stories and running parallel aisles of shelving to make such a proposition work at all. In short, you have to repeat what we all ended up doing over the last 30 years, that is, recognize that high-density storage is not a compromised version of open-stacks collections but rather a naturally emergent way of managing information density as collections grow past the limits of browsability towards comprehensiveness.

What really happens in library storage facilities is that we achieve a short turn time over a large volume of materials, with near-perfect reliability. From there, compelling services start to be possible. Same-day digital fulfill-

continued on page 62

Curating Collective Collections from page 61

ment up to 50 pages is our standard at **ReCAP**, and some requests get filled in just a few hours. That means articles and chapters, tables of contents and introductions, or selected figures and tables can sometimes be in front of a user before they could possibly find a time to go to the library, locate and check out the work they needed, and throw it on a scanner-copier or get it back to their workspace.

From this vantage point, I think libraries need to start revisiting the work habits and assumptions of users. Now, from the moment they click “request,” it is hours until the item moves from storage into its fulfillment channel. For digital requests, that means they have their item within a day. For physical deliveries, that means affiliated users can have the item within a day or two, and any user within a week, faster and more consistent than interlibrary loan. It is also possible to think about chaining together or scheduling these actions. The request does not have to be for delivery “as soon as possible,” but for the most convenient time according to the user.

Altogether, this approach to library logistics constitutes a major advance in a key area of library service: saving the time of the reader and ensuring that using the library is simple. To borrow from **Lorcan Dempsey’s** formulation, we are in the attention support business now, and we want our readers’ attention focused on their work, not on the complexities of how and when to request a book from where.³

Hand in hand with this approach, we ought to be rigorous in thinking of on-site open stacks as a very specific user service that we offer against the backdrop of a collective collection managed at purpose-built library service centers. The chief virtue of thinking this way is that it’s objectively correct, of course. Most ARL libraries see an annual circulation rate around 4% and already have a great deal of their materials off-site. Even if readers browse an actual order of magnitude more materials than they check out each year (say 40%),



the majority of the collection spends its time untouched on the shelf, and all the evidence suggests that the vast majority of on-site collections are rarely consulted.

My argument does not advocate for removing books from libraries. It does, however, prompt us to consider two critical changes in our thinking about making libraries more effective. The first is to stop worrying about adjacency to a place — the campus, the reading room — and start worrying about connections to fulfillment services. The second is to shift our thinking about the content of user-accessible library spaces in a more curatorial direction.

Scott Bennett’s description of successive library service models — from the reader-centric, to book centric, to learning-centric — can be valuable here when we read it not in terms of displacement or depreciation, but as a layering of services.⁴ Individual readers still read, we still benefit from having browsable collections at hand, and we have ever more need to offer learning and research support services. But those services should be interlinked around a collection that is lean enough to change rapidly in response to new academic directions.

We should also consider the **Claude Shannon**-esque notion that information is surprise as we think about the library collections we assemble around our on-site users. The longer we store large and static collections of material on-site, the more we risk creating a steadily less surprising and informative environment for our readers. We risk creating the collection that fits inside a building up until a certain point in time, rather than the collection that supports and challenges the ideas in play at this point in time.

Libraries are building shared collections right now, and the decision about how and where they deploy those collections will have a profound impact on the ability to lower barriers to access and raise opportunities for research for generations to come. Do not hear what I am not saying: we are still a long way from the governance and business models that will make everything for everyone, pretty much when and how they want it, into a reality, but the

decisions libraries are making at present will have a profound influence on what it takes to achieve a more perfect union. And I do think that the fundamental weight of our professional commitment to increase the diversity of readership and the diversity of collections available to each reader means that we need to be diligent at present about setting up well-managed regional partnerships that can eventually be knit into a cooperative national network. We need to work on getting a critical mass of the materials committed to those partnerships located in the kind of fulfillment center that lowers their management costs and raises their flexibility for multi-site shared use.

Most shared print projects are operating on retention commitments that run from 10-30 years, and that is a comfortable timeline to do this work. It will take several years to transition, several more to refine and perfect a new way of offering collections services, and several more years beyond for that way to become the new normal for our users. This timeline is comfortable and manageable, but it has also started. 🌱

Endnotes

1. I am focusing on the U.S. academic and research libraries in this essay, but in principle, these ideas are applicable in other library sectors and other countries. Focusing on large American research libraries brings together a clear interest group within a common legal framework and logistics infrastructure, and it’s an interest group that has a lot of books.
2. This is based on the total expenditure for **ReCAP** staffing, but about half of **ReCAP** staff activity is devoted to intake, rather than retrieval, which has a per-transaction cost closer to \$2.50, including retrieval and refiling.
3. **Lorcan Dempsey**. “Libraries and the Long Tail: Some Thoughts about Libraries in a Network Age.” *D-Lib Magazine* 12, no. 4 (2006). <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/april06/dempsey/04dempsey.html>
4. **Scott Bennett**. “Libraries and Learning: A History of Paradigm Change.” portal: *Libraries and the Academy* 9, no. 2 (2009): 181-197. <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/262845>

Rumors from page 22

Speaking of interviews and the **Charleston Conference**, there are many! The interview and keynote with **Jim Neal**, the incoming president of **ALA** is particularly provocative! <http://www.charlestonlibraryconference.com/video-live-stream/> (live during the 2016 Charleston Conference)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUPHk4HMeBE&list=PLIGL162pr1M6F-QS1R1X9FkGPM9AP-Ah&index=1>

A big Shout out from the **2016 Charleston Conference!** Thanks to **Jason Price** (SCELC) who filled in at the last minute for the closing session of the conference when **David Worlock** took sick! **Jason Price** joined **Erin Gallagher** who has done the closing session for three years. They did an awesome job. **Jason** had to rush to make a flight but, hey, he had twenty minutes to spare! Thanks, **Jason!**

Ramune Kubilius did one of the Dine Arounds on Friday night at the Conference! Guess what? While the group was dining, some cameras came in, filming the reality show **Southern Charm**. **Ramune** says that about half

of the group consisted of conference first timers! The **Dine-Arounds** were led by many **Charleston Conference** regulars like **Tony Horava**, **Anthony Watkinson**, **Jack Montgomery**, **Glenda Alvin**, **Corey Seeman**, **Eleanor Cook**, **Rachel Fleming**. They are a nice feature created by **Audrey Powers** and administered by **Caroline Goldsmith** (**Leah’s** sister by the way) to expand on opportunities to socialize and get to know each other. We are always looking for volunteers for the **Dine-Arounds**. Let **Leah** know if you are interested and if you have a restaurant to recommend! Obviously, 492 King Street should probably stay on the list for next year.

continued on page 71