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Future Tense -- Doing What's Obvious: Library Space and the Fat Smoker

Rick Lugg
R2 Consulting LLC, rick@r2consulting.org

Ruth Fischer
R2ConsultingLLC

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Future Tense — Doing What’s Obvious: Library Space and the Fat Smoker

by Rick Lugg and Ruth Fischer (R2 Consulting LLC, 63 Woodwell’s Garrison, Contoocook, NH 03229; Phone: 603-746-5991; Fax: 603-746-6052) <rick@r2consulting.org> www.r2consulting.org

As a lifelong fan of disturbing ironies, I have to stop and savor this one. Fortunately, the opportunities to do so are legion. R2’s work takes us to dozens of libraries each year, and it is rare that we encounter a building that does not suffer some form of this malady. While it can be encouraging to see every seat filled, every workstation claimed, and every couch devoted to napping, there is often an accompanying sense of unmet demand and missed opportunity. The whirr of the espresso grinder echoes through deserted aisles in print Reference. Students seeking a carrel get lost in the empty Government Documents rows. Up on the fourth floor, the small rooms on the periphery of the jammed and silent stacks are reserved for faculty and library staff, and remain locked lest a student project group invade. Meanwhile, in the administrative suite, plans to expand the Information Commons or incorporate the Writing Center are tacked to the wall, as a capital campaign or a foray to the Provost to seek funding for expansion gets underway. There just isn’t enough space for everything and everyone.

Perhaps we can agree on four assumptions at the outset of this argument:
1. New or expanded library space will be harder to come by, at least in the near future.
2. Print collections and users are competing for the same space.
3. It is preferable to reduce onsite collections rather than limit the number of users.
4. Coordinated regional offsite collections could handle all low-use materials.

Clearly, local circumstances may vary and require some modification of these premises, but the trends and realities they reflect seem pervasive.

In our previous two ATG articles on managing print monographs collections, we described first the need for immediate action (“Weeding: The Time Is Now,” ATG v.20#4 September 2008), and then one possible solution (“The Disapproval Plan: Rules-Based Weeding and Storage Decisions,” ATG v.20#6 December 2008-January 2009). Our research into these areas points to another common and disturbing irony: more than 40% of the material filling these encroaching shelves has never been used, and is unlikely to ever be used. Not only are library users being crowded out by reading material, they are being crowded out by unwanted reading material!

As our new hero Stanley J. Slote, author of Weeding Library Collections: Library Weed-
Conference

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ing Methods (Englewood, Colorado: Libraries Unlimited, 1997) puts it: “Every library consists of two distinguishable collections, the collection that is used, and the collection that remains in the library unused. […] The collections look alike. Each subset consists of newer volumes and older ones, of all the subjects, and frequently one author has books in both collections. These subsets are called the core collection and the noncore collection. […] Once these two collections are identified, the following rule should be followed: No volume in the core collection should be considered for weeding. And, as a corollary of the above rule: All books in the noncore collection are candidates for weeding and probably should be weeded.

In most libraries, the core collection consists of only six out of every ten monographs currently housed in the building. That means that 40%, repeat 40%, can and probably should be weeded or stored elsewhere. While this application of Slotte’s rule may sound harsh, we suggest this is an obvious and necessary course for most libraries. Removing the “noncore” monographs would have no effect whatsoever on user service. On the contrary, such straightforward action would dramatically improve service in ways that users actually value. Furthermore, it would do so at a fraction of the cost of a building addition or construction of a new facility. A decision to “right-size” print monographs collections would immediately release 40% of the space currently occupied by stacks to other uses.

This represents an immense opportunity to convert a seriously underutilized resource to one that yields substantial value to library patrons. Combined with already-occurring reductions in bound journals and print reference works that duplicate electronic content, and potential reductions in Government Documents, most libraries could remove half of their shelving and claim that rediscovered land in the name of users — at minimal cost and without negatively affecting access to desired content. It’s an obvious choice. So… what are we waiting for?

There are practical reasons. One problem that is good tools don’t exist, at least until the “disapproved plan” previously described has been built. Another is that volume count retains negatively affecting access to desired content. It’s an obvious choice. So… what are we waiting for?

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Rumors

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And the Call for Papers for the 2009 Charleston Conference is now up online! Turn in your proposal at http://www.katina.info/conference/callforpapers.php. See details this issue p.8 as well.

And speaking of Conferences, the incredibly resourceful Rosann Bazirjan (Dean of University Libraries, UNC-Greensboro) — long time principle coordinator of the Charleston Conference — is organizing a conference with Wake Forest University — Inspiration, Innovation, Celebration: An Entrepreneurial Conference for Librarians. It is June 3-4, 2009. See more details this issue, p.21.

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1. It's about a permanent change in lifestyle. Transformation is not a one-time event; it must become a way of life. In a library context, this might mean that onsite print collections must shrink by 50%, and then remain at that level or lower. We need to lose the weight, but then and we need to keep it off. To achieve and maintain sustainable collections, the library must incorporate new activities into its routine operations. This means that the print collection must be regarded as dynamic. For every item that is added to the collection each year, another item must be withdrawn — based on usage. De-selection must become as routine as selection. Weeding is not a special event; rather it is an integral part of the lifecycle management of content. The goal is no longer to build a larger collection; the goal is to assure that content most likely to be used is onsite, and that space for users continues to take precedence over inert content. And a number of libraries in any given region would rely on a shared offsite facility to house little-used material.

2. You must change the scorecards. At present, the scorecards still favor high volume counts, although this is changing. ARL has moved to materials budget as a more relevant indicator of access. We suggest that use (of collections, of space) must become a more central metric, and that it be monitored consistently. Onsite print collections should be measured like an inventory, with prime shelf space reserved for titles with high “turns.” Offsite storage should be managed like a warehouse, with fill rates and fulfillment time benchmarked and measured. User satisfaction with “the library as place” might have its own scorecard, much as it now does in LIBQUAL+ surveys. Libraries might focus on eliminating user turnaways at peak hours, or devise other metrics that highlight the satisfaction level of users.

3. Leadership: Get Serious, or Get Out of the Way. It is vital that the Library’s senior leadership remain focused on achieving a higher return on the institution’s investment in space. Leaders need to describe why additional space is needed, how it will be used, and how it supports the teaching and learning mission of the university. They need to make the case internally and externally that these changes will not affect user service. They need to educate all constituencies; champion and defend this low-risk, high-yield activity. Selectors are likely to get push-back from faculty as material is moved offsite, and it is critical that the administration articulate, support, and actively sell its decisions and actions, and insist that the library staff stick to the plan. There is much to be gained here, but nothing will happen without committed leadership.

As in art, limitations often spawn creativity. The fact that money and space are tight in many libraries, while regrettable in some respects, offers us the chance to re-examine our priorities and change our behavior. The first step toward fitness is right in front of us. All we have to do is take it.