In Favor of Weeding

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Editorial

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In the spring of 2014, Colby College’s renovation of its Miller Library garnered national attention, much of it negative. As part of its multi-million dollar library renovation project, Colby moved 170,000 books, approximately 40% of its existing monographic collection, to an off-campus storage facility. The intended goal of this transition was to make space for “large open areas filled with group study spaces, as well as office spaces for Colby’s academic information technology department, a writing program and a center for the arts and humanities” (Hongoltz-Hetling, 2014). But the proposed renovation and accompanying move of the collection were not well received, on campus or off.

In an open letter to the university administration published in the student newspaper, members of the Colby College faculty raised a number of concerns regarding the reallocation of library space, including the lack of faculty involvement in the process, the inherent value of the books being sent to storage, and the importance of browsing and serendipity to the research process (Besteman et al., 2014). Additionally, opinion pieces in national publications such as The New Criterion (Graff, 2014) and Slate highlighted the vehement reactions to the renovations by the Colby College community and focused on petitions signed against it. Rebecca Schuman’s article
for *Slate* was particularly critical of the decision to remove books from the library, stating, “Books, *simply as props that happen also to be quite useful if you open them up*, are the best—perhaps the only—bastions of contemplative intellectual space in the world” (Schuman, 2014).

As noted in a recent article in *Inside Higher Ed*, “One of the reasons library renovations are often controversial is that browsing for books seems to be pitted against creating spaces for doing other things – group work, study spaces, digital humanities labs, academic services like tutoring or writing centers” (Fister, 2015). As was the case at Colby College, arguments against the discard or storage of both monographic and serial collections generally tend to focus on the intrinsic value of the printed word and the benefits of browsing the collection, but, ultimately, at the heart of most objections raised against weeding and storage initiatives in libraries is a debate on the role of the library itself.

The Changing Role of Libraries

A library fulfills a variety of purposes, meeting a wide variety of needs within its user community, and accordingly the demands of the space within a library are equally as varied. A study at the University of New South Wales assessing the needs and preferences of students in regards to library space identified several themes: collaborative study, individual study, flexible space design, social spaces, availability of technology, noise levels, and a service desk component (Bailin, 2011). According to Nitecki (2011), “In the past two decades or so, academic libraries have taken a new focus on the use of physical space, trading collection shelving for more seating for readers and sometimes upgrading these public work areas with technologies and equipment. Accompanying this shift has been an increased awareness of the
library as a service organization, with ambitions to not only meet but the exceed ‘customer’
expectations.”

The library’s role as a repository for books, journals, and other physical resources is diminishing,
evolving into a space dedicated not just to the retention of knowledge, but also to group
interaction, exploration, and creation. It is important to note, though, that the locus of this
evolution is external to the library. Changes to library collections and spaces are a direct
response to the changing demands of user communities. To cite an example, in preparation for
an upcoming renovation, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) Libraries held
meetings with students to determine what they wanted to see in their library. The students’ ideas
included suggestions such as group study rooms, a cafe with coffee and snacks, spaces to learn
and create, places to enjoy art and exhibits, places to take a break, and media creation tools
(Denny, 2014). Accommodating requests such as those from the MIT students necessitates
changes to the physical space within the library, and it is not unlikely that, as plans for the MIT
renovation progress, the difficult question of what to do with existing collections will arise.

The Cost of Space

At Colby College the critiques of both the library renovation and the decision to place a large
portion of the collection in storage focused largely on the perceived value of the materials
themselves, not on the value of the space those items occupied. The dollar value of space within
a library is relatively easy to quantify. According to the construction estimator RSMeans, the
average cost for a new library in 2013 started at $145.71 per square foot. Using this RSMeans
data and shelving pricing from Demco, the Annoyed Librarian, an anonymous blogger for
Library Journal, estimates the cost of building new space for books to average out to $11.93 per book.

Some renovations and new construction can run much higher in cost, however. For example, the new 35,000 square foot Learning Commons at Drexel Library at Saint Joseph’s University “offers students and faculty the latest technologies, including a presentation practice room with video capabilities; an audiovisual multimedia lab; and a digital media zone with dual-monitor computers, comprehensive research content, and the latest software.” But all of these features came at a high price; the Drexel Library Learning Commons cost $16 million (American Library Association, 2014), averaging out to $457 per square foot. Taking into consideration the investment required to build and equip new library spaces, “the space associated with storing print books [begins] to look very scarce and very expensive -- in direct costs, maintenance costs, and opportunity costs” (Lugg & Fischer, 2008).

For those libraries and institutions unable to afford a costly renovation or expansion, the alternative is to look at repurposing existing spaces. As Sellers and Gragg (2012) point out, “Dealing with existing space constraints generally means figuring out what to weed as things get tight or how to find storage space off-site. The underlying issue, of course, is that many libraries were built with a certain life expectancy… and now librarians find themselves needing to know how to preserve limited or dwindling capacity, rather than how to preserve a quantity of materials.”
Lamenting the fact that online resources lack the browsability of print materials, Schuman points out in her article that Colby College is but one of many institutions reappropriating library space in the age of digitization. It is a common misconception that the adoption of electronic resources, databases, online journals, and the like have lead libraries to discard print materials, and, admittedly, “the ever-expanding offerings of electronic database providers have made weeding physical collections easier, although perhaps not more palatable” (Sellers & Gragg, 2012). However, it is a fallacy to say that libraries weed an item simply because it is available online. A number of factors are weighed in the decision to discard an item, including criteria such as age, use statistics, condition of the item, and how widely owned the title is. But, ultimately, it should boil down to the space that the item takes up on the shelf. In making decisions about what to weed, what to keep, and what to store, libraries are evaluating whether or not the space an item occupies is best used for retaining that particular item or for another purpose, which could include making room for newer, more pertinent materials.

The professional literature is full of examples of libraries that have successfully reduced the size of their collections, either through weeding or storage, to enhance their physical spaces, providing necessary and highly utilized services for users. To cite just one example, at the University of Louisville much of the first floor of the main library was repurposed as a learning commons, allowing for “more open and inviting spaces for collaborative work, greater access to technology, and the ability to create multimedia projects” (Detmering & Sproles, 2012). As part of the redesign, librarians evaluated the currency, age, and the purpose of the reference collection. Some materials were moved to the circulating collection, while others were discarded, and ultimately the size of the reference collection was reduced by approximately half.
By scaling back the physical footprint of the reference materials, more space was opened up for the expansion of user-friendly spaces and services within the learning commons.

Best Practices

To be certain, the Colby College renovation was not without its mistakes. One of the primary complaints by the faculty and students at Colby regarding the library renovation was the lack of input they felt they had on both the outcome of the renovation and the fate of the library materials. Establishing and adhering to institutional best practices for weeding may help to avert, or at least mitigate, objections to the weeding or storage of library collections.

When embarking on any weeding or storage project, it is, not only beneficial, but critical to be open and transparent in communication with library constituencies about the deselection process. This includes sharing the reasons for the weeding, the desired outcomes and goals, and offering community members and library users the opportunity for feedback and input. As they prepare for their renovation, the MIT Libraries have worked to keep their campus community informed at all stages of the project by soliciting user feedback, actively working to gather student opinions, communicating with university faculty via committee and the faculty newsletter, maintaining a website devoted to the renovation and progress, and openly sharing the architectural plans. Should concerns about weeding the collections arise, the MIT user community will already be well informed about the needs and goals of the project.

Establishing clear criteria regarding what will be weeded and adhering to those criteria can help reduce anxiety amongst both patrons and library staff. Examples of weeding criteria could
include items over a certain age, items that have never been circulated, items that do not match
the library’s core mission, etc. Use of a collection analysis tool could help streamline the
gathering of data elements and expedite usage analysis. Examples of commercial collection
analysis tools include OCLC’s WorldShare Collection Evaluation, Bower’s Book Analysis System, Sustainable Collection Services’ GreenGlass, Intota Assessment and others.

It is important to note, though, that library patrons are concerned not just with what items are
weeded, but also with what happens to the items once they are weeded. For example, Alameda
County Library in northern California came under public scrutiny when thousands of weeded
books were found in the dumpsters of one of the branch libraries (Chant, 2015). Ensuring that
weeded volumes are disposed of responsibly -- via recycling, selling, or donating -- can also help
alleviate community concerns.

Often libraries wait to embark upon weeding projects until space is at a premium, but the
resulting large-scale deselection projects tend to generate more anxiety and increase the
likelihood of patron blowback. “Even if all the weeded books meet the weeding criteria, the
sheer volume can get people worked up,” Holly Hibner, adult services coordinator at the
Hibner went on to say, “Large-scale weeding is what gets libraries in trouble and [is] where
mistakes can happen.” Hibner recommends a more proactive in our approach, wherein weeding
is treated as a normal part of the collection development process. “Taking a few minutes every
day to look through the collection and pull titles that don’t belong anymore can save library staff
from having to undertake a major project” (Chant, 2015).
Conclusion

Increasing demand from library users for more collaborative learning spaces, group study rooms, cafe space, computer commons, writing centers, and the like require that library staff make tough decisions regarding how they use and define their spaces. Accommodating the demand for more user-oriented spaces requires that we examine our physical collections and the space they occupy critically. Libraries simply can no longer afford, both literally and figuratively, to devote so much of their physical space to storing monographs, reference works, and bound journals when the demands on space and for other user-oriented services is so high. Through judicious reduction of collections through established best practices, we can provide both the information resources our users require, as well as dynamic spaces that adapt to the to the needs of the community.

Reference List


