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Emptying the Dump Truck: A Library's Experience with A Large Donation

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Emptying the Dump Truck: a library's experience with a large donation

Introduction

In 2013 Dr. Homer Blass, a professor of history, retired from teaching at Liberty University. He died later that year. In early 21014 not long after the opening of the new Jerry Falwell Library, Dr. Blass' family contacted the university about donating his legendary book collection to the library. Several of the librarians knew Dr. Blass as a voracious reader and borrower of books, so we were interested at once. After some negotiation, the university agreed that the JFL would acquire the Blass Collection and this agreement included transporting the collection to the campus.

While Dr. Blass' reputation was well-known, when librarians visited the Blass home, the full extent of his collection became apparent. The collection was spread throughout the house, filling in addition a two-car garage and a backyard shed with book shelves. Almost none of the collection had been packed yet. The family was preparing to move out, and the library had a week to get all of the books boxed up and shipped out before the house sale was finalized and new owners took possession. We had little time to form and execute a plan to move an enormous quantity of books.

Sometimes a donor will have the resources and foresight to have the donation packed up and ready to ship to the library. The Blass family had made a start of packing up Dr. Blass' books, but the size of the collection made that a daunting challenge both for the family and for the library staff. Most of the Blass Collection was still on its shelves, or stacked on the floor, or wrapped in plastic shopping bags. The first objective was to prepare the books for transportation. Our library used book boxes on pallets to transport and store the donation. Boxing up books accomplished two things at once - it prepared the books for transport and ordered them for storage.

The size of the Blass Collection made the task of compiling a title list next to impossible for the library, and it was certainly beyond the capability of the family. Donations librarians always want a title list, but expect that most donors will not have them available. Librarians who visited the Blass home to collect the donation considered doing some preliminary sorting by subject or condition, but this would certainly have slowed the loading process, so the idea was abandoned.

We considered hiring professional moving crews to box and transport the books. Instead, the university was able to pitch in extra labor from the groundskeeping staff. They also provided delivery trucks from the campus fleet to move the boxes to the campus storage facilities. This was less costly and more efficient than attempting to use staff's personal vehicles to move boxes to the library.

The groundskeeping crew saved the project; the library did not have the manpower or the vehicles to box up and move that many books in the short period of time available. Our library administration did some hurried negotiation to secure their help, but now we know we can get the help if we need it again.

We did not have the moving crew mark the boxes with tape or permanent markers as they were packed. Once the books were in a university storage facility, there was some confusion as to which pallets of boxes belonged to the Blass Collection and which belonged to other donations. The Blass Collection was not the only donation that the library received during this time. A consistent labeling format would have eliminated that confusion and enabled accurate counting of boxes and pallets.

As the moving crew filled boxes, they stacked them on pallets; and used shrink wrap to secure them. The number of boxes per pallet varied; this made it more difficult to get an accurate count of the boxes. The moving crew used only one type of box, while the family had used boxes of several sizes, and the boxes got mixed together on pallets, making the stacks irregular. This could have been avoided by stacking all of the irregular boxes on their own pallets.

Library staff that worked with the donation were allowed to dress appropriately for the work. The Blass Collection was not all clean, as it was housed in a garage and shed, so it was helpful to work in jeans and sturdy shoes. No one wants to wear their favorite work outfit while handling dusty dirty books. Some parts of the Blass Collection were in particularly poor condition, covered in dust, dirt and cobwebs. Most of the books only needed wiping off, but at this stage there was not time to do it. Some were later found to be in truly unusable condition.

We quickly acquired rubber and cotton work glove and breathing masks to compensate for the work conditions. Book dust or mold can aggravate allergies and make staff sick. Even without direct health concerns, working unprotected in dirty conditions will pull down staff morale.

Once we had the collection on campus, we had to address the issue of storage. The library building did not have room in staff areas to house twenty one pallets of boxes so they went to a campus-owned warehouse facility. This created another step in the process, requesting that the warehouse staff arrange transport for the pallets to the library.

The library's loading dock area had enough room to store two or three pallets. Even inside the building the boxes still had to be transported by hand and by hand-truck to the staff areas.

Sorting

Once the Blass Collection was in the University's possession, we could begin the process of sorting and evaluating the books.

Our Collection Development policy guided this part of the process by specifying what kinds of material we could include and what we could exclude. The policy excluded some binding formats like spiral, staple and 3-ring as inferior. Damaged books and mass market paperback editions were discarded as well.

Duplication of the collection was the major reason for not adding a donated book to the collection. Our library's collection development policy states that we will not house duplicate copies of works except for when requested by faculty, or indicated by consistent high usage.

The next order of business was sorting out what books we already had. This was the most time-consuming and labor intensive aspect of the processing the donation. Student workers from outside the Collection Management area were employed to check carts of books against the catalog. The Collection Management librarian had to ask for help, and the decision was made to use student workers already in place rather than hire temporary help for the duration of the project. Either method would work, but the existing students had already been trained in general library functions so there was no time lost in getting them started.

As carts were sorted out into duplicates and new titles, they returned to Collection Management. The Collection Management Librarian reviewed all the books that were new to the collection.

The CD policy served as the general guideline for determining whether a new book would be added to the collection. Most of the Blass Donation was broadly "History" but under that umbrella Dr. Blass' interests were wide-ranging.

A main question to answer was "does the University have a class or program for which the book is relevant?"

For example, biographies of state government figures from the mid-twentieth century were not added, unless the subject had also risen to national prominence.

If the donation were of smaller size, we would have taken the time to do further analysis on duplicates. A heavily-used title would justify adding the donation as a second; a donated copy might be in better physical condition than the current one. Checking circulation history for a title is done through the library's ILS, but the student workers did not have usage rights in the system, so this step was not done.

The books coming out of the boxes still smelled and were covered in dust. Staff handling the initial sorting and the evaluation wore gloves and masks. Once books were approved to be added, the cataloging staff took on the task of cleaning the books before adding protective covers and library stickers.

In the staff work areas, staff had to make space for the Blass Collection on shelves and on carts. The Collection Management librarian piled boxes on the floor outside of his office.

Books once unboxed and sorted went onto shelves to await cataloging, and when the shelves were filled books went back into boxes stacked in a different location. A system quickly emerged of unsorted boxes going in one place, empty boxes going another, and sorted boxes going in a third.

With all of the movement of the books within the library space, labeling of shelves and boxes was a critical activity to prevent donations from becoming lost or intermingled with purchased books. Several non-public areas of the library housed books from the Blass Collection for a time. Communication between CM & TS, as well as the library facility manager had to be kept up so all parties knew what was being stored where.

Collection Management worked with Cataloging, which of course also had to keep up with books that had been purchased, to balance the two workflows. The manager of Technical Services

decided how much staff time would be dedicated to processing the donations. Donations took a lower priority, and as a result a backlog of sorted books grew in Collection Management. Donations are by policy a lower priority for cataloging, so the backlog has not yet been fully absorbed.

Shelving

Stack maintenance and shelving is handled by the Borrowing Services area of the library. They also were included in discussions of how to handle the large number of books coming into the library.

The Blass Collection was a challenge to integrate into the library's book tower, both because of its size and its content focus. Dr. Blass was a history professor, so nearly all of his collection went into LC classes C through F. The history sections of the library browsing collection, held in the book tower, amounted to 302 shelves. At an average of 1 shelf inch per book, the books from the Blass Collection that were added to the catalog took up 146 shelves, nearly half the size of the existing history collection. The Jerry Falwell Library uses an ASRS (automated storage and retrieval system) to store the bulk of the collection, so it was a simple matter to direct much of the Blass Collection there. Books with more recent publication dates got priority in assignment to the book tower, while older works went into robotic storage.

Even though much of the Blass Collection was diverted to the ASRS, the stack maintenance staff found it difficult to keep up with the increased volume coming out of cataloging. A donation that covered many subject areas would be broken up when it came to shelving, but the Blass Donation was concentrated on one half of one floor of the book tower. Getting them onto the shelves required much staff time to shift the collection and make room for the donations.

Collection Development policy

The library's biggest tool to employ in handling donations is a well-defined collection development policy. A written policy that has the support of the library and university administration supports the library's negotiation with potential donors by explaining:

- What the library will take and what it will decline
 - What formats are collected (such as periodicals and multimedia)

- o What subject matter is appropriate for the library's collection
- Under what conditions the library will accept a donation

The CD policy for the Jerry Falwell library says that we will accept any donation, but that all donations become the exclusive property of the library, and we can dispose of any donated items as we see fit. We use a standard donation form which lays out the 'no conditions' policy, and ask donors to sign the form. This language avoids the frustration of committing staff resources to adding in items that are obsolete, out of date, damaged or irrelevant. Such things are not on the administrators or donor's mind until the library explains it. The donations librarian should always explain this to a potential donor, and then get the donor's agreement in writing.

The fate of the rest

The Blass Collection contained some true gems of historical scholarship, and we kept as much of it as the collection policy allowed. There remained the question of what to do with the rest of it. The decision was to simply recycle most of what we couldn't use. This did not mean destruction in every case. Other campus departments took away books with attractive bindings to decorate office areas with shelves of hardcovers. The library hosted an art contest where entrants took discarded books and created book sculptures from them. Once we determined that there were no other options, books were discreetly moved to local paper recycling facilities.

At the start of this project we didn't know how big the Blass Collection was. The final count of all items included and excluded was 11,816. Of this total we added 4,377 books to the catalog.

Conclusion

Every stage of this project required a major investment of staff time. Large donations will necessarily require either many hands or many hours. The Collection Management librarian committed half of his work week for nearly a year to the Blass Collection.

Some of the simpler steps are suitable for volunteers or student workers, but the evaluation of condition and collection relevance should be handled by staff and librarians who are well-acquainted with the library's mission and the school's curriculum.

Planning can be done in a hurry but it should be done where there's enough time to think everything through. Once the Blass collection was on campus and secured in the warehouse, the rush was over. We could take as long as we needed to decide what to do. Not every library have this luxury, a large donation can crowd out purchased books in work areas with limited shelving. Some donors have an expectation that their contribution will be introduced immediately into the browsing collection. Fortunately this was not the case. The library's administration decided the collection should be processed within a year so librarians and staff had to give it priority.

The success of the donation project was the result of planning that included all the departments of the library, ongoing communication as the plan was amended, a willing staff and strategic use of storage space on the campus and in the library. The key was the collection development policy which answered many questions about the donation before it arrived on campus.