

Future Tense — Weeding: The Time Is Now

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On a recent flight from Manchester to Chicago, it occurred to me that I must have been the only person in the world who had chosen **Stanley J. Slote's** 1997 classic *Weeding Library Collections: Library Weeding Methods* for airplane reading. I can't imagine why. Who would choose **Dick Francis** or even **P.J. O'Rourke** over a work that begins with this choice 1787 epigraph from the **Reverend Reginald Heber**: "*A small collection of well chosen books is sufficient for the entertainment and instruction of any man, and all else are useless Lumber.*" Although the work is somewhat dated ("The Book Card Method" occupies an entire chapter) it remains an excellent and practical book in its articulation of the benefits of weeding. My pleasure in it is heightened by the fact that my copy, purchased through **abebooks** (now a province in **Greater Amazonia**), was actually withdrawn and discarded from **Sterling Municipal Library** in Baytown, Texas. Every book its reader indeed.

Weeding has been much on our minds lately. In virtually all of the 80+ libraries with which **R2** has worked closely, overcrowded stacks and storage facilities pose a significant problem. They press on the conscience like that extra ten pounds we'd like to shed, or those files we really should back up. Deep down, most librarians of a certain age recall the 1968 **Kent Study** at the **University of Pittsburgh**, which discovered that 40% of the books in academic libraries never circulate — not even once. We uneasily realize that this number is probably much higher 40 years later, when so much content is available in electronic form. We cringe slightly at the size of our print reference and government documents collections, knowing these serve fewer users every year. We begin, with some misgivings, to store or withdraw those bound journal volumes to which we have purchased electronic backfile access. And, as we seek to provide the learning commons, collaborative study spaces, writing centers, and even cafes that please most users, we confront important questions regarding both the current and residual value of our print collections.

Consider a few specific scenarios we have encountered in just the past couple of years:

- Shelves in the **Davidson College Library** are more than 90% full, and books loom over browsers in towering stacks that require liberal distribution of foot stools throughout the library. At present, the library has neither compact shelving nor offsite storage, though these are under consideration. The library also issues hardhats to visiting consultants. (OK, not really.)
- The **Millar Library at Portland State University** has created an exemplary "Collection Containment Plan" that revolves around a concept of "sustainable collection development." Because stacks

are more than 90% full, one component of the plan calls for weeding of 175,000-350,000 volumes.

- The **University of California, Santa Cruz**, as part of a building renovation, had to select and move 50,000 volumes to the **UC System's Northern Research Library Center** in a three-month period. It is unclear how many of those will return to the library when the renovation is complete.
- The **University of Utah's Marriott Library** recently opened an **Automated Retrieval Center (ARC)**, which now houses 40% of the print collection in robotically-served compact shelving. Among its other benefits, students reportedly achieve alpha-wave trance states while watching it operate.
- The **Auraria Library** at present has no additional shelf space in subclass ranges N-NX, until a major shift (which doubles as a student worker fitness program) has been completed. This means that the newest Art books are stored on overflow shelves behind the Circulation desk.

These are just top-of-the head examples, intended only to highlight how common and severe the problem actually is. Nor are these isolated situations; in our experience, variations on these circumstances exist in almost every library. The space associated with storing print books and journals is beginning to look very scarce and very expensive — in direct costs, maintenance costs, and opportunity costs.

Solutions such as automated compact shelving (e.g., **Colgate's LASR** (Library Automated Storage & Retrieval) and **Valparaiso's ASRS** (Automated Storage & Retrieval System) enable denser storage of books onsite and will buy some time. Shared offsite storage facilities such as the **Harvard Depository**, the **University of California's Northern and Southern Research Library Centers**, and the **Five Colleges Library Depository** (better known as "The Bunker") provide additional lower-cost space, but also enable librarians to defer decisions about withdrawal. And even these massive facilities are filling rapidly. They are part of a sustainable collections strategy, but only part. The underlying problem remains. There are too many books. There are too many copies of the same books. And there are too many unused books to justify the space they now occupy, and the time spent caring for them.

There are several ways to control collection size, of course. One is to reduce the amount of incoming material, e.g., by cancelling print subscriptions in favor of securely archived e-journals. This approach is increasingly being adopted. For current US Federal Government documents, more than 95% of current titles are available in electronic form, allowing receipt of tangible items to be dramatically

reduced. For monographs, eBooks are gradually assuming a role in new title decisions. Some enterprising librarians, such as **Peter Spitzform at the University of Vermont**, are experimenting with a purchase-on-demand approach for new print monographs from major publishers — deferring purchase until a title is requested by a user. Collaboration can also help control collection size. Consortia such as the **Orbis/Cascade Alliance** have initiated "distributed print repositories," in which member libraries divide responsibility for last print-copy archives of major journal backfiles — allowing other members to withdraw their copies, releasing valuable shelf space. The **Colorado Alliance of Research Libraries** is in the third year of testing a shared approval plan, which will reduce the aggregate number of copies held by participants.

But the problem is bigger than any of these solutions. Even if the incoming volume can begin to be controlled, our collections overflow with the results of past decisions and deferred maintenance. Ultimately, *libraries really do need to weed*. It's like dieting or cleaning out the attic, though. We know it's the right thing to do, but as **Slote** notes "It is hard to find practicing librarians who feel that their collections have been weeded sufficiently."

It's time to usher in a **Golden Age of Weeding** — i.e., to de-select from collections built over the past 40 years with the same dedication with which we selected for them.

Permit us a note of pre-emptive defense: We are not advocating the abolition of print. We are not advocating that research libraries abandon their mission of collecting for the ages. While we believe that it is possible that some content has no value, we are not even advocating withdrawal and discard of that. We are simply suggesting that little-used content need not be so widely held, especially in print form, and that the space occupied by the miles of shelving now required can be used more effectively. There is far more redundancy in the current system than is needed, even for the most ambitious collectors.

Why focus on weeding? First, it benefits libraries and users. **Slote** and others cite five major benefits:

1. To save (or recover) space
2. To increase book usage.
3. To increase reader satisfaction.
4. To save staff time.
5. To make room for new technologies.

Why now? Conditions are currently better for weeding than at any time in recent memory. Consider how the following factors a) reduce the risk of withdrawing titles; b) increase accu-

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racy and efficiency in weeding; and c) reinforce the need to start now:

1. More content is accessible digitally. Print is more often the format of last resort.

2. The infrastructure for resource sharing has improved. Couriers, union catalogs, direct borrowing, ILL, and shared print repositories all allow timely access to shared print titles.

3. Withdrawn content is easier to access or replace if needed. **Google Book Search** has 1 million digitized full-text titles; the Open Content Alliance 750,000. **Lightning Source** has 400,000 print-on-demand titles. Commercial eBook providers collectively offer more than 200,000 titles. **WorldCat** holdings are easily visible to members. Out-of-print or used book dealers can provide millions of older titles.

4. Circulation statistics are easy to retrieve from most library systems.

5. Volume count is becoming a less important metric in assessing collection strength. ARL and other statistics have begun to use materials budget rather than volume counts as a measure of collection strength (although accreditation boards for specific

disciplines may not).

6. New tools are being developed to support rules-based weeding and batch maintenance transactions. R2 has a patent pending on a “Sustainable Collections System” that we hope to introduce in 2009.

7. Space for collections is becoming a lower priority. University and college administrators are more reluctant to build and maintain space for “warehousing” printed books and journals.

8. We can’t (and shouldn’t) afford to keep doing what we’re doing.

Yes, there are plenty of issues to resolve, even after we accept the need to weed. Complaints surface regularly about relying on other libraries’ collections: timeliness of access or delivery; inaccurate or disparately expressed holdings; missing issues in runs that are purportedly complete; the relative condition of materials; the effect of constant transport on their longevity; restricted access to some titles. But these can and should be managed, through standards and service agreements. Over time, digitization will ameliorate some of these problems — and create some new ones. There are also some ironies here. Better discovery tools such as consortial borrowing, ILL, **Google Book Search**, and **WorldCat Local** may actually *increase* print usage of older titles, even as they are being withdrawn or moved offsite. This long tail effect may be especially pronounced in research libraries, where unique content abounds.

But while all of these issues must be monitored and addressed, there remains an enormous problem, and an equally sizable opportunity. As with the making of books, there is no end to their weeding. It’s time to consider what level of collection is sustainable, and to take steps to manage accordingly. It’s time to move vigorously in this direction, as responsible stewards not only of our collections, but of our space, talent, and other resources that also belong to our host institutions and users. 🐼

*Column Editor’s Note: This is the first of several articles on this topic. In future issues, we will consider *A Rules-Based Approach to Weeding*; *Sustainable Collection Development*; and *De-Selection Workflows*. — RL*