

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

"Library after library has sacrificed reader accommodations to the imperatives of shelving. The crowding out of readers by reading material is one of the most common and disturbing ironies in library space planning." —**Scott Bennett**, *Libraries Designed for Learning*, Washington, DC: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2003.

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 Weeding 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 **Slote'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 is that good tools don't exist, at least until the

"disapproval plan" previously described has been built. Another is that volume count retains a vestigial grip on our perceptions of collection quality: bigger is better. Relatively cheap offsite storage has allowed us to ignore or at least defer action. We have not come to terms with the need to manage print (or for that matter electronic) content over its entire lifecycle. And, like all elements of our society, we harbor an expectation of continuous growth. We think there will always be more money, more space, more users, more content. We are reluctant to acknowledge limits.

But there are also psychological barriers to action. **David Maister**, in his excellent *Strategy and the Fat Smoker: Doing What's Obvious But Not Easy* (Boston: The Spangle Press, 2008): "The primary reason we do not work at behaviors which we know we need to improve is that the rewards are in the future; the disruption, discomfort and discipline needed to get there are immediate." The appealing prospect of attracting and accommodating 20% more users is contingent on the grimmer and more immediate reality of identifying and removing tens of thousands of volumes.

It's certainly true that weeding is disruptive, and will cause discomfort. The process often uncovers errors in bibliographic and holdings records, barcode and inventory problems, and many others. Their resolution can absorb far more time than expected. The shade of **Nicolson Baker** hangs over the proceedings. Faculty members and library staff themselves often have strong attachments to the collections they've built title-by-title, and in some cases would rather retire than dismantle portions of their life's work. Emotion as much as reason governs the whole enterprise. It seems easier to shoehorn another book onto the shelf, move a few more titles offsite, and simply limp along unchanged. And in most libraries that is the state of the art.

Eventually, though, if the organization wants to live, motivation either develops or is imposed. Again from **David Maister**: "We all know the main thing that works: a major crisis! If revenues drop off sharply, it's amazing how quickly businesses can act to deal with known inefficiencies and bad habits they could have tackled years ago."

Well, academic libraries have now been presented with a major crisis, and in many meeting rooms at **ALA** in Denver we heard the comment: "Let's not waste a good crisis." This one is especially good, arriving as it does on top of a decade of continuous changes in content delivery, user expectations, and increasing

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competition. **R2** suggests that we use this moment to tackle at least one known inefficiency and bad habit: libraries are wasting a large portion of their most valuable space, a resource that is expensive and in short supply.

To return again to **Maister**: “Real strategy lies not in figuring out what to do, but in devising ways to ensure that [...] we actually do more of what everybody knows they should do.” So let’s conclude by thinking about strategies for transforming our libraries from fat smokers into reasonably healthy individuals. **David Maister** posits three elements for making a serious change.

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 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. 🌱