Lost in the Weeds

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Books selected for appraisal by a faculty member

My library's on-site collection is approximately 30,000 volumes. Spread out across one large floor, our ranges do not look like a large library. However, as we constantly remind our students, we are but one small part of the 5-million-volume Penn State University Libraries system. We can have most books in their hands in 48 hours, and that seems to be good enough for most of our community.

From what others have told me, past librarians have periodically weeded portions of the collection, but low staffing levels and other priorities meant that this did not happen very often. A goal I set for myself in 2016 was to weed 10% of the collection. Why 10%? I did do some background reading, and kept coming across the 5%/year number. Since this has not been happening in my collection, I thought 10% might make me feel more caught up. (My favorite piece of weeding literature has been this 2008 manual created by Jeanette Larson for the Texas State Library and Archives Commission: CREW: A Weeding Manual for

). I also have some intentions to remove some shelving this summer, and need to make sure that everything will fit and have room to grow.

Most people are surprised to hear that throwing things away was perhaps a motivating factor in me becoming a librarian. My first library job as an undergraduate involved assisting the state documents librarian appraise an aging and extensive document collection and there was a certain thrill to me in generating new, empty shelf space for current publications. In my years as an archivist, I loved the sense of accomplishment I felt when selecting the best three copies of a publication in a box and recycling the rest.

I'm oversimplifying of course. There are a lot of nuances involved in the decision to keep or discard a book in a library collection and much has been written on the topic. A large percentage of our collection is related to engineering, science, and technology, fields about which I know very little. Engaging the faculty in helping with the process enabled me to understand that Biology lab workbooks from 1967 might no longer be useful. However, engaging the faculty has only gotten me so far – they have tended to become wrapped up in their section of the library, and rather than selecting out-of-date texts for me to evaluate, they start reading everything in their path. This method has only helped me weed about 1% of the collection, approximately 300 books.

So I turned to data analysis. Penn State Libraries are fortunate to have "The Annex" – offsite shelving where books are stored to relieve congestion in the library stacks. These books are circulating, but often they are books that receive very low usage. Our library has about 3600 volumes that also have at least one copy in our Annex. This means that likely another librarian has already determined that these volumes are worth preserving, but may not be as relevant or get the usage they once did. I took this list and narrowed it to books that had not been checked out in the past fifteen years, and found that almost all of them (approximately 3,400) fit this description. So now we are embarking on a much more systematic approach, pulling the books with Annex copies, and quickly appraising them off of our shelves.

I still occasionally stroll through the stacks and try to identify books to weed. There are books that are just clearly outdated, usually in the areas of self-help,

career advice, or software and Internet "how-to" books. This has also helped me understand what types of books we need to plan to refresh on a regular basis with more current versions. We have books that support no majors or course of study on our campus - we had a whole shelf of German literature (in German) that I removed (plenty of other copies in the system and I do not know when German was last offered as a language option on this campus).

But despite my love of creating shelf space, there are times when I have to chant "not an archive not an archive" to myself. When my emotions start to hamper my decisions, I know that I have weeded enough for the day. My brain fills with visions of *[The Day After Tomorrow](#)* (you know, that movie with Dennis Quaid where the next ice age suddenly starts). Jake Gyllenhaal and his friends are stranded in the New York Public Library and must burn the books to stay alive. What if I end up stuck in the library one day and the next ice age begins? Will we have enough books to fuel the fire? Or what if a solar flare destroys all of our electronic capabilities and we must revert to older technologies? Will I be sorry that I shipped the *Television Service Manual* from 1984 to the Annex? Or the *Closed Circuit Television Handbook* from 1969? My grandfather repaired televisions for a living - would he have been horrified to hear that I was throwing away tools of his trade? Would the *Chemistry of Winemaking* be a useful book to have on hand? *Micros and Modems: Telecommunicating with Personal Computers?* (1983). It is easy to convince myself that these will never be useful again, although I am not sure how I will feel when I get to the agricultural sections of the library.

Oddly, I found that I was not nostalgic or sentimental when weeding the library science section – our profession is growing so rapidly that in many cases, books published even ten years ago feel outdated. It's true that in my personal collection in my office, I still occasionally refer to some classic texts from the 1980s and 1990s, but *Building Better Web Sites: A How to Do It Manual for Libraries* from 2003 is not one of them. Begone! WorldCat informs me that there are still over 350 libraries in the country that hold you on their shelves. You had excellent intentions and I am sure you were useful to people in your time. But it is time for a new generation of web how-to manuals to take your place.