Submitted on: 02.09.2016

High-Yield, Low-Risk Deselection in an Academic Library

Meredith Giffin
Collections Coordinator, Concordia University Libraries, Montreal, Quebec, Canada
E-mail address: meredith.giffin@concordia.ca

Abstract:

In conjunction with a multi-year renovation of Concordia University's main library, a comprehensive collections reconfiguration project was launched. The new library floor plans provided for increased study space and a reduced footprint for stacks. Significant deselection of physical format materials such as circulating books, reference works, government publications, and microforms was therefore necessary in order to achieve the necessary space reduction and still maintain room for growth.

Although different weeding strategies were developed for specific collections and disciplines, the key factors considered were usage, currency and duplication. By focusing on reducing duplication – multiple copies, superseded editions, replication across different formats – and using data extracted from the library system, it has been possible to remove a large volume of items with minimal decision-making required from subject librarians. Virtually all weeded materials have been sent to a non-profit reseller or recycled, in keeping with the university's commitment to environmental sustainability.

This approach has resulted in the removal of over 60,000 duplicate copies from the monograph collection alone. At the same time access has been retained to most unique content within the collection, allaying faculty concerns about library deselection. In less than two years the original goals of space reduction for print and microform holdings have been exceeded.

Keywords: deselection, weeding, collection management, academic libraries, university libraries.

Introduction

In *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen declared that “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (2010, 29). One might also suggest that among librarians, it is a truth universally acknowledged that an academic library in possession of a good-sized collection must be in want of a weeding.

The literature on library collection management regularly discusses the importance of weeding or deselection as a component of collection assessment. A 1911 editorial note in *New York Libraries* makes the case for a “firm and vigorous policy of elimination” (*Discarding Useless Material* 1911, 222). One hundred years later, Gregory states that

"developing and maintaining a quality collection requires a commensurate ability to undertake the considerably less fun jobs of continuous evaluation and deselection. These tasks are just as critical to the development of a quality library collection as acquisition of items in the first place" (2011, 126).

There are many good reasons to deselect library materials. These may be grouped under the goals of saving space, increasing user satisfaction, and improving efficiency. By reducing the physical size of collections, space is created in libraries not only for newly acquired books but for new uses and technologies such as wired study spaces, collaboration zones, learning commons, and maker spaces. When damaged, outdated, duplicate, and little-used items are removed, library users can more easily locate current and relevant resources. Regular review and deselection also serves to maintain a collection aligned with user and institutional needs. And less-crowded shelves in central and convenient locations improve access for both library users and for staff that are shelving, shelf-reading and taking inventory (Slote 1997).

Yet deselection is also one of the least popular of library activities. As one writer puts it, "Next to emptying the outdoor bookdrop on cold and snowy days, weeding is the most undesirable job in the library" (Manley 1996, 1108). There are a number of factors contributing to its unpopularity. Slote describes five: emphasis on numbers, or the size of a collection being considered an indication of its quality; professional work pressures, which often cause the labour-intensive task of deselection to be postponed; public displeasure with the idea of discarding books; sacredness of collection, a deep-rooted social belief in the intrinsic value of printed books; and conflicting criteria for deselection, such as the possible disparities between books which patrons use and books which librarians feel are most worth keeping (Slote 1997, 5-6). The significant financial investment made in a collection over time is often a deterrent to discarding library materials (Ward 2015), as is the personal investment of library staff in the collections (Demas and Miller 2012).

For all of these reasons, librarians are often hesitant to weed. In university libraries, the mandate to support not only the curriculum but current and future research needs of faculty and graduate students only adds to the difficulty of identifying titles to remove. As a result, academic libraries for many years have tended to defer or avoid routine or comprehensive deselection (Demas and Miller 2012; Ward 2015). But no library has unlimited resources or facilities for maintaining physical collections. The emergence in the past 20 years of electronic equivalents for print resources, in addition to better infrastructure for resource sharing, has created new opportunities and methods for deselection (Lugg and Fischer 2008). In recent years a number of reports of major weeding projects carried out in college and university libraries have appeared in the library literature (Acadia 2016; Arbeeny and Chittenden 2014; Gillies and Stephenson 2012; Martin, Kamada and Feeney 2013; Murphy 2013; Oliva 2016; Reich 2013; Snyder 2014; Soma and Sjoberg 2011; Way and Garrison 2013). The impetus for nearly all of these projects was space-related: plans for renovation, a new library building, or a storage facility; the need to thin over-crowded stacks; or to transform existing library space for other purposes. At Concordia University this was also the case.

Concordia's Library Collections Reconfiguration Project

Concordia University is a comprehensive university located in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, with a student population of over 27,000 FTEs (86% undergraduate) and over 1,800 full- and part-time faculty. As many students attend part-time, total enrolment is over 45,000. The

university was created by the merger in 1974 of Sir George Williams University, a comprehensive institution in downtown Montreal, and Loyola College, a liberal arts college located about 8 kilometres away. The university thus has two campuses and two libraries: the main Webster Library downtown and the smaller Vanier Library on the Loyola campus.

In 2013 a major renovation of the Webster Library was approved by the university, to begin in 2015 and be completed by 2018. Since 1992, when the Webster library opened in its current space, student enrolment has nearly tripled at Concordia and the library receives an average 2.2 million visits per year. The total library space at both locations was well below provincial norms, with the lowest ratio of space per FTE student among comparable university libraries in Québec and Ontario. The primary goals of the space planning exercise were to increase the number and variety of user spaces in the library, including silent study halls, group study rooms, social and collaboration spaces, and a graduate student suite, and to implement an innovative technology program with multifunctional teaching spaces, discovery counters, a technology sandbox, and a visualisation studio.

The Collections Reconfiguration project was launched in 2013 in tandem with the space planning exercise. Its principal objective as defined in the project charter was to reduce the Webster Library collections footprint by initiating weeding projects and relocating selected portions to the Vanier Library or offsite, if necessary.

In a prior assessment project conducted in 2011-2012, print journals were evaluated: duplicate subscriptions between the libraries were cancelled and back issues weeded, as well as print titles where electronic backfiles had been purchased with perpetual access rights. Only the latest 5 years of active journals were retained at the Webster Library, while older volumes were consolidated at the Vanier Library in compact shelving.

For the current project, circulating books, reference works, government publications, and microforms were targeted for significant reduction by 2016, while collections such as music scores, standards and media would be deselected to allow for growth, based on current space allocations. Excluded from the project scope were items held in Special Collections and bookplated volumes purchased with donor funds.

The guiding principles of the reconfiguration as communicated to the university's academic cabinet were to responsibly manage and shape the collection to meet the university's research and teaching needs; establish good assessment practices to guide decision-making; incorporate consultation with stakeholders throughout the process; consolidate collections physically; update and improve access to resources; and re-use and recycle materials as much as possible.

Monograph Reconfiguration

Although some subject areas had been deselected in the past at both libraries, this was the first comprehensive review of the circulating book collections. In 2013, based on data from the integrated library system (ILS) and partial shelf counts from 2010, there were estimated to be 725,000 volumes in the monograph collection at the Webster Library, occupying approximately 64,685 linear feet. As the projected shelf space available for monographs in the renovated library was 53,100 linear feet, with another 17,700 linear feet of free space left for growth, return of items on loan, and ease of access, it appeared that over 11,000 linear feet of books or about 127,400 volumes would have to be removed or relocated. However,

after an inventory (the first in over 20 years) and a shelf-by-shelf measurement were done in the summer of 2014, it was found that the actual volume count was closer to 625,250 and the collection currently occupied 55,360 linear feet, with a floating 1,500 linear feet of items on loan at that time. The discrepancy was determined to be the result of catalogue records batch-loaded when the ILS was implemented in 1992 which included items previously weeded; records not updated when books were transferred from one library to the other; and books lost over the years.

While the new target for removal at the Webster Library of 2,260 linear feet or about 25,000 volumes was deemed an acceptable proportion for deselection, thereby eliminating the need for relocation or offsite storage, this still represented a significant quantity to assess and process within a relatively short timeframe. Several staff members expressed uneasiness at the prospect and fears that unique, useful material would be discarded. A monograph working group of librarians established four approaches for deselection, in order to identify a sufficient number of volumes to remove while mitigating risk. These were, first, identification and removal of duplicate copies; second, removal of print series where electronic versions had been acquired with perpetual access rights; third, identification and removal of older or superseded editions with low or no usage; and finally, selective weeding of unique titles that were never used, outdated or no longer supported the university's programs.

It was hoped that the first two rules-based approaches would identify a high yield of volumes to discard with minimal involvement by subject librarians, whose efforts could then be focused on assessing superseded editions and unique titles for deselection. During consultation with university administration and faculty about the reconfiguration, concerns had also been voiced by some faculty in the humanities about the deselection process; any weeding of unique titles in these subject areas would therefore be limited in scope and require careful review by librarians and faculty. The proposal to remove duplicate copies, however, did not elicit any negative reactions from these stakeholders.

Anecdotal evidence from library staff and the fact of the libraries' having served two separate institutions prior to 1974 suggested there were many extra copies of monographs. Analysis of the catalogue confirmed this hypothesis. The working group defined these parameters for duplicate deselection: only titles published after 1950 and acquired before 2000 would be included, to avoid removing rare items or books too recently acquired to have much use data; and only copies linked to the same bibliographic record would be considered duplicates. Use was the other criterion: if total loans of all copies of a title since the implementation of the ILS in 1992 exceeded 15 transactions, then all copies would be kept; for titles with fewer than 15 loans, only 1 copy would be kept. These criteria were communicated to faculty who found them to be entirely reasonable.

Lists of multiple copies were generated from the ILS and filtered in Excel to meet these criteria. The duplicates thus identified were divided into titles found only at Webster, only at Vanier, or at both libraries. For the first two categories, staff weeded volumes to leave one good copy on the shelf. For duplicates located at both libraries, Vanier Library stock was verified to ensure one good copy remained there. If so, any extra copies there and all copies at Webster were then pulled. If no copy was found at Vanier, all but one copy was removed from the Webster collection. Concentrating lower-use books at the Vanier Library was a planned outcome of the reconfiguration, as users could already request books through the

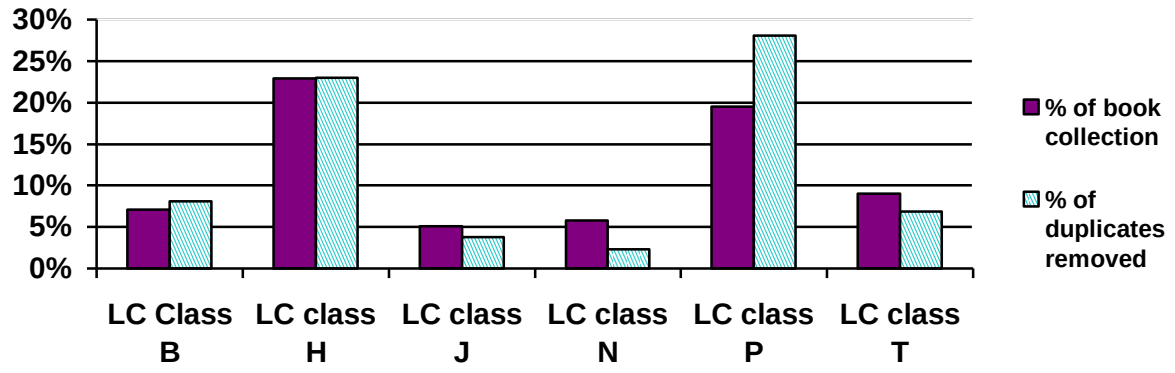
library catalogue to be delivered for pickup at either location, with twice daily inter-campus delivery supporting this service.

Removal of the extra copies took place between November 2014 and May 2015. Based on the pick lists, the yield from both libraries was projected to be at least 50,000 volumes. As Collection Services staff had recently been reduced due to a wave of retirements, 3 temporary workers were hired for the project. The process of updating the library catalogue was streamlined by using stand-alone pocket scanners to capture the barcodes of weeded items and then uploading the files of barcodes to the ILS for batch deletion.

By the end of the six months over 63,000 duplicate volumes had been weeded from the monograph collections at both libraries. 84% of these were from the Webster Library, where over 4,000 linear feet of books were removed. When the files of barcodes from weeded items were reviewed in the ILS for any unique items, it was determined that fewer than 250 unique items had been pulled by mistake, an error rate of less than half of one percent. Many of these were in fact near duplicates: different imprints or editions of the items flagged as duplicates.

An analysis of the weeded items revealed that the targeted duplicates were not distributed evenly throughout the collection. For example, while books in LC class P (Language and Literature) made up 19.5% of the collection before weeding, 28.1% of duplicate volumes removed were from this section. Conversely, LC class N (Fine Arts) accounted for 5.8% of the collection, yet only 2.3% of volumes weeded were from class N. Figure 1 shows these proportions for several LC classes:

Figure 1. Percentage of collection vs. percentage of duplicates, by LC class



These results are primarily due to multiple copies of literary works being regularly purchased in the past to support the curriculum - particularly before the widespread online availability of works where copyright has expired. While results may vary among university libraries, for a monograph collection which has not been regularly weeded the literature section is likely to yield good results when duplicates are targeted for removal.

At the same time as duplicate deselection was in progress, a review of electronic book series acquired with perpetual access rights was conducted. Several series in the sciences and social sciences were identified where the library owned both print and electronic versions, including a number of conference proceedings. In total 2,180 print volumes were removed from the collection as a result of this exercise.

A process was also developed to identify multiple editions of works, using call number analysis. Catalogue records were exported to Excel and a macro applied to extract "base" call numbers without the publication year; multiple iterations of the same base call number were automatically highlighted. This analysis has been applied to several call number ranges in social sciences and business, where superseded editions are likely candidates for weeding (as opposed to literature, where different editions may well contain unique critical content worth retaining). Subject librarians review the candidate lists, which also contain loans data, before making final decisions on deselection. To date, over 1,000 such items have been removed.

Finally, since mid-2015 subject librarians have undertaken assessment of unique titles within their disciplines for deselection. Shelf lists are generated for call number ranges which can be filtered for specific criteria as established by the librarians within each discipline, such as publication date, total loans, and date of last loan. Using these lists in combination with shelf checking and faculty consultation, 7,000 volumes have thus far been removed in the fields of marketing, education, computer science, mathematics, and fine arts.

To date over 74,000 volumes have been weeded from the monograph collections using these four strategies, triple the initial quantity targeted for deselection. Nearly 5,000 linear feet of books have been removed from the Webster Library, resulting in a buffer of over 2,500 linear feet between the current collection size and the new space allocation after renovation.

Reference and Indexes

The assessment of Webster Library reference works and indexes required a different approach and involved significant input from subject librarians. The collection contained about 50,000 volumes and limited deselection had been carried out in the past. Project goals were to eliminate redundant holdings between the two libraries, with the circulating collections, and with online resources; to consolidate series currently split between the libraries; and to remove outdated material. It was estimated that weeding indexes and series replaced by online equivalents, as well as outdated directories, handbooks, guides, and bibliographies should reduce the number of volumes in the collection by approximately 40%.

The project began with a usage study conducted in 2013-2014, where volumes consulted were scanned before re-shelving. This use data was then compiled for librarians to consider in their decision-making. Although this is an imperfect method to gauge use, as some well-meaning library users will re-shelve items despite signs requesting they be left on trucks, in this case some 2,270 items had at least one use flagged during this period. An inventory was also conducted, and over 800 titles with incomplete cataloguing identified as a result; nearly half were discarded after assessment by librarians. Current subscriptions and standing orders were reviewed, and duplicates between the two libraries and with online resources were cancelled. For the indexes, data on online versions (both licensed databases and free digitized versions) was compiled together with details of print holdings in other local libraries to assist librarians in making retention decisions.

Finally, shelf lists were shared on the staff wiki for librarians to collectively annotate during winter 2015, marking items to retain, discard, transfer to Vanier Library or transfer to stacks. In June and July, volumes identified for removal were pulled by call number ranges and placed in a staff-only holding area in stages, enabling librarians to physically review candidates for deselection across subject areas and to consult with faculty before discarding.

By summer 2015, when the project finished, 60 subscriptions and standing orders had been cancelled. Over 28,000 volumes were discarded, including as expected a large number of indexes and statistical series which were now available in database form. Over 2,000 items were transferred to the circulating collection, and a small number to the Vanier Library. The Webster Reference collection now occupies 2,110 linear feet, about 40% of its size in 2014.

Government Publications and Microforms

Concordia University Libraries had been a depository for Canadian federal documents in English until that print distribution ended in 2014, as well as for certain Quebec official publications. The Government Publications section also contained documents from Canadian provincial and other national jurisdictions, and from several international organizations. The collection occupied over 5,000 linear feet and very little had been weeded in the past. Most items were not catalogued in the ILS and access was provided through a card index.

Increasingly, government documents from many jurisdictions are published online. Many older series have been or are in the process of being digitized. There are also several other federal and provincial depository libraries located in Montreal and nearby in Ottawa. The criteria for deselection were therefore online availability; obsolete or superseded data; holdings in other nearby libraries; very incomplete coverage in a series or jurisdiction; and damaged materials. Documents were flagged for retention where there was no equivalent electronic version, or where print versions were frequently used; if Concordia's holdings were unique in Montreal; and for series or organizations where the library had agreed to retain print copies within Quebec's university consortium. These criteria met with the approval of faculty and other subject librarians during consultation.

In total, over 60% of the print volumes were removed, some frequently-used series transferred into Reference, and some older, brittle material moved to Special Collections. A long-term project is now underway to catalogue these documents. In the meantime, a detailed online finding aid to government publications was created in 2014 which is regularly updated.

In 2014 the libraries' collections of microfilm, microfiche and microcards occupied 123 cabinets at the Webster Library and 33 cabinets at Vanier. These contained primarily journals, newspapers, theses, and primary source document series; ERIC microfiche; and government publications from various jurisdictions. Again, the collection was largely static, containing only a handful of continuing titles. The reconfiguration exercise consisted of weeding duplicate material held by both libraries; consolidating split runs of newspapers on microfilm at the Vanier Library, as the Journalism and Communication Studies departments are on that campus; removing ERIC material now available online; and compressing and shifting the contents of all cabinets. As of December 2015 the Webster cabinet count stood at 69, representing a 44% reduction and exceeding the project goal by 17%.

Re-Use and Recycling

Concordia University is committed to environmental sustainability on many levels. In addition to waste reduction and recycling programs, other initiatives include a Minor in Sustainability Studies program, three LEED-certified university buildings, low-waste water

drinking water solutions, industrial composters on campus, student-run greenhouses and an urban farm.

For the Collections Reconfiguration project re-use and recycling solutions were actively sought for deselected library materials. The majority of books weeded from the monograph collection were sent to Better World Books, a US-based non-profit book reseller supporting book donation, literacy, and library initiatives worldwide. Several giveaway sessions were held in the library where faculty and students took discarded maps, atlases, reference works, older government documents with attractive bindings, microfilm, and microfiche. Several art projects have been created using these items. As well, books are periodically donated to a local bookbinding workshop for student practice, and to the university's annual used book sale.

Volumes which were not given away or did not meet Better World Books criteria for resale, such as old textbooks, dated reference works and damaged items, were recycled through the university's facilities. An outside recycling partner was also found for microforms. The emptied metal microform cabinets were all donated, some to library staff and the rest for storing supplies in a new painting workshop. And, throughout the multiple library collection moves resulting from the ongoing renovations, shelving is being dismantled, stored, and reinstalled in new configurations in the library. The projected shelving surplus when renovations are complete will be either be re-used at the Vanier Library, donated, or recovered as scrap metal through the university facilities.

Future Plans

At the three-year point in its four-year mandate, the project has met all objectives for the assessment of the larger collections. Deselection of over 10% of the Webster monograph collection has been accomplished largely through removing duplicate copies and formats and superseded editions, allaying concerns of faculty and administration as well as many library staff members about weeding library books on this scale. A generous buffer of free space has been achieved for the post-renovation shelf allocation.

This success has led to a recent decision by the library renovation committee to further reduce the footprint of the monograph collection in the final construction phase, in part to allow for the offices of the newly created Concordia University Press to be located within the library. The section of stacks thus eliminated provided 2,270 linear feet of shelving and would have housed about 18,700 volumes. While the current buffer space does absorb this reduction, the monograph working group has decided to carry out a second round of duplicate detection and removal, targeting multiple copies published between 1910 and 1950. Librarians who had previously insisted on the more conservative date range for duplicate deselection have been reassured by the success of the exercise and the lack of negative reaction from faculty and students.

Subject librarians continue to identify superseded editions and little-used unique titles for deselection based on discipline-specific criteria. This and the review of collections such as curriculum materials, music scores and media will continue through 2017.

Planning has also recently begun for the renovation of Concordia's Vanier Library. And discussions are underway with other institutions regarding possible partnerships for shared library spaces. It appears 2017 will mark not the end of the collections reconfiguration at Concordia, but the beginning of ongoing collection assessment at the consortial level. As a result of the current project, however, Concordia Libraries are better placed to participate in shared collection facilities. Library staff and administration are also more confident in their ability to implement reasoned, effective and responsible deselection of library materials.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank those former and current colleagues whose vision, dedication, and hard work have ensured the success of Concordia University Libraries' Collections Reconfiguration Project.

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