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# Weeding Physical Collections for the Library of the Future

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**ABSTRACT:** The turn toward digital resources has come with blessings and challenges. Electronic journals are quickly accessible and have, more or less, diminished the need for print journal collections. Electronic books afford simultaneous usage from an entire class and so can offer an affordable textbook alternative. In addition, the move toward Open Educational Resources is also facilitated by digital resources. Nevertheless, theological libraries (like other humanities disciplines) still see a valid need for physical, printed books and resources. In this session, I discuss my personal weeding story with an emphasis on how it impacted library space; and focus on the way that the physical collection will be used in the future. The weeding of a library is not only a part of routine maintenance, but it also should be responsive to the needs of library patrons and the institutions to which the library belongs.

I work at a small academic library with only five full-time employees. This means that collection maintenance can be quite challenging due to our heavy workloads. Additionally, being an academic library, we face unique challenges, as faculty often feel a strong connection to the texts. When I began my role as a theological librarian, I faced a daunting task. The collection was 52 years old and had never been systematically weeded. To complicate matters, our seminary had just merged with a larger institution, resulting in curricular overlap. In addition, the merger resulted in the loss of circulation data from the Seminary Library collection.

I began contemplating the library of the future. The library of the future is context dependent. Each library is going to be different based upon its own context. For the purposes of my library, I view the future library as a welcoming space facilitated by a librarian, with a curated collection that meets the needs of the patron base.

These needs encompass study space and information resources comprised of print and digital materials that meet the needs of the curriculum and also allow for intellectual exploration.

Our initial collection consisted of over 114,000 volumes, many of which were duplicates, outdated, or damaged. We had books spread across 19 holding locations and over 900 print journal titles. Through our weeding efforts over the past seven years, we've managed to streamline this to 85,000 volumes in just four holding locations, with only about 100 non-archival journal titles.

When the project began, my primary goals were twofold: to make the collection healthier, and to make the space more inviting. Regarding the health of the collection, I hoped that the weeding process would improve accessibility, simplify holding locations, and allow us to remove damaged books. The whole process was designed to open the space of the library and would allow our library to move away from the old model where collections dominated the space and librarians were approached only "as a last resort." Creating study spaces has become crucial in fostering the academic culture of an educational institution. The overarching aim was to evaluate and shape the physical collection to transform our library space, making it adaptable to our institution's evolving needs.

We faced several logistical challenges in this process that ranged from deciding what to do with discarded books to alleviating faculty anxieties about the process. When it came to determining what to do with discards, we explored options like book sales, donations to libraries in developing countries, partnering with Better World Books, and, as a last resort, disposal. While we are certainly empathetic to the goals of recycling, a workflow to do so was beyond our capacity given our current roles. The physical process of moving books was particularly challenging due to limited workspace following our merger. To get books to the disposal spot took a significant amount of effort.

One way we were able to address faculty anxiety was the fact that as Theological Librarian I participate in seminary faculty meetings. This role has traditionally been reinforced because of ATS accreditation. Despite my presence in faculty meetings, the merger of the Seminary and the University had already caused some unease, and faculty often have reservations about new learning modes and digital

resources. I found that sharing data, particularly circulation statistics, helped alleviate some concerns. But keeping clear communication lines was essential. At the beginning of the weeding process, I would allow faculty to examine the carts of withdrawal books. This did make the process slower than I would have liked, but it was worth the time for the benefit of the social capital.

We began with print journals, using digital access as our primary criterion for removal. If we had the series in our digital (Atla) collections, we would remove the print volumes. When we started, we tried to recycle the paper from these bound periodicals. We would cut out the paper, load it in boxes, and take those boxes to a local recycling center. We eventually had to stop this because we overwhelmed local recycling facilities.

After periodicals, we moved to the reference collection, but focused on the areas of the Library of Congress classification system that were not directly related to the seminary's curriculum. Because we lacked circulation data, we used several criteria. Chief among the criteria was relevance to the seminary curriculum. In addition, the age of the work, duplication, physical condition, and whether or not a title was located freely online were all factors in the decision-making process. Once we had completed the reference area, we began looking at the lending collection with the same strategy.

Recently, our school administration approached the library looking for space. Thanks to our weeding efforts, the library was able to be part of the solution. However, this has presented new challenges in terms of our future resilience and space allocation. With the loss of space is the loss or changing of library services, but by cooperating with the administration in the change, the library shows a willingness to work towards the goals of the organization.

This has been a long-term project, and the full impact remains to be seen. We've now instituted consistent weeding as part of our collection development policy. Throughout the process it has become apparent that there is no perfect system for weeding. Mistakes will be made, but thankfully most mistakes can be remedied through interlibrary loan or new purchases. Another observation is that faculty support is crucial for smooth operations and increased library usage. Lastly, the process of discarding books often involves

helping people through anxiety about change and fear of missing important resources.

In conclusion, the library of the future, in our view, is a welcoming space with a curated collection that meets the needs of its patron base. It provides space for study, resources for research, opportunities for connection, and integration with modern technologies. As we move forward, we will continue to adapt our space and collection to meet the evolving needs of our institution and its patrons.

After this presentation, there was a strong discussion about strategies for weeding and how those strategies help to posture the library within a university. Space is at a premium in many seminar-ies and colleges, and the library often represents unused space. The weeding process, like any change, brings with it both positive and negative aspects. The challenges related to weeding physical collections highlighted the need for theological librarians to be engaged in the school's curriculum so as to offer the most strategic forms of deaccession possible. Having a vision for the library's space and purpose when it is not occupied by physical books is also helpful.