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Taking out the Old, Bringing in the New: A Case Study in Developing a New Collection Deselection Process in a Small Rural Academic Library

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ABSTRACT

In August 2021 Southwestern Oklahoma State University hired a new Collection Management Librarian. One of the first tasks assigned to this new librarian was to start a weeding project on the main collection. It quickly became evident that the previous policy did not meet the needs of the library or university. This article describes the analysis of the previous deselection policy, and the decision process for changing the previous policy. The paper will further discuss how the CREW methodology was chosen as the new policy, and how it was implemented.

KEYWORDS

Academic library; CREW method; deselection; rural library; small library; weeding

Introduction

Southwestern Oklahoma State University (SWOSU) is a regional university located in rural western Oklahoma, with 14 nationally accredited programs. More up-to-date literature is needed to support these programs, especially in the technology and medical fields, in which the university is seeking to expand its accredited programs. The data pulled about the collection showed the library had some physical books that met this demand, but many of the books in the collection were too dated to be useful. [Table 1](#) provides data that was pulled before the new deselection process began. It shows 81.18% of the books were published in or before 1999, which makes the majority of the collection older than 22 years. [Table 1](#) further shows that 66.53% of the collection is over 31 years, while only 18.76% of the collection is younger than 21.

In August of 2021, the new Collection Management Librarian (CML) started working at SWOSU in the Al Harris Library (AHL). In a meeting with the library director, tasks were outlined for the CML to start with as her main focus. The previous CML, who had worked at the Al Harris Library for over 30 years, did not make weeding a priority. The director

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Table 1. Breakdown of the number of books housed in the Al Harris Library.

	Totals	Percent
Total books	157485	100.00%
Published in or before 1999	127841	81.18%
Published in or after 2000	29542	18.76%
Published in or before 1990	104773	66.53%

told the new CML, that weeding had been done as an afterthought and the collection was very outdated. Thus, one of the first tasks the director wanted completed was to have a deselection schedule established. Weeding in rural small academic libraries is a necessity. Many factors play a role in why weeding needs be on a continuous schedule. Unlike large academic libraries, small academic libraries do not have the size to keep every item. Nor do they have the option for offsite storage. The need for up-to-date materials for current and new degrees means the collection is in constant need for new material, and due to limited shelf space older or outdated materials must be removed. Because of budget restraints, cuts or flat budgets, on small academic libraries and the ever-increasing prices of databases, cuts for subscription resources are being made. Due to this, it increases the need to rely on physical books to meet patrons' demands. All these factors play an important role in ensuring there are up-to-date physical materials supporting academic programs.

Before examining the collection, the CML reviewed the deselection policy. At the time it was "Items that were older than 20 years and had not circulated in 10 years are to be reviewed for deletion." Even this deselection policy indicated that items were older.

The CML created the first schedule based on the previous librarian's schedule and their weeding policy. Once the schedule was created and shared with the other librarians, it was the expectation of the CML for the work to be completed on-time based upon their weeding section assignments which were based on their liaison responsibilities. The CML started a spot check on the 330s (the Al Harris Library has long been organized by the Dewey Decimal System) using the previous deselection process. While the CML understood that weeding had been an afterthought task the CML was prepared to remove a few books. However, in just a tenth of this section, 2247 books were selected for removal, with all these titles meeting the old policies requirements of "older than 20 years and had not circulated in 10 years". Fearing this was going to be the case elsewhere, the CML decided to spot check another section and removed an additional 1594 books that were also "older than 20 years and had not circulated in 10 years". A majority of the books removed were from the '60s and '70s and had never circulated. Even the basic concept of collection development, weeding the old edition when adding

a new addition, had been ignored. Several titles had multiple older editions that had never been removed when the new edition was added to the collection.

When the CML discovered that the situation was much more serious than originally thought, data showing the state of the collection was shared *via* email with the other librarians. Almost all the librarians responded that they knew the collection was outdated but did not realize how bad it was. The other librarians either never responded or responded with strong opinions and questioning the CML rights to do such a thing. Being a small academic library, the collection should be current due to space limitations and the practice of removing a book when adding a book (Miller and Ward 2021, 37). Gregory writes,

A bloated collection crammed onto the shelves is not necessarily a good collection. Indeed, often quite the opposite is the case. It is more important to have items that users actually need and that are up-to-date to satisfy current users' needs. (2019, 113)

Baumbach and L.L Miller go on to say after weeding “The ‘good stuff’ will be more apparent to your users and not hidden among the dusty, dull volumes. Most importantly, students will find what they need to do their assignments and answer their questions honestly and accurately.” (2006, 4). However, when the CML ran reports showing the copyright dates, she found much the collection was published before 2000 with most of the books being published in the ‘60s and ‘70s. If they even followed the practice of removing a book when adding a book, the collection would be less cluttered. Figure 1 and Table 1 are the same charts presented in a report to the librarians showing the age of the collection. This report

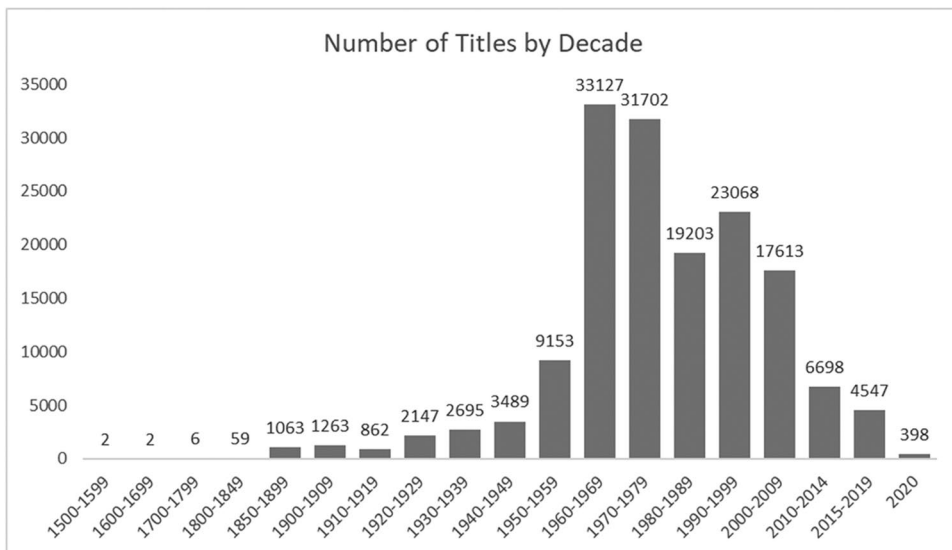


Figure 1. Number of titles by decade.

revealed that basic deselection practices had not been done. In the 2010s, the expansion of database subscriptions and electronic resources played a part in diverting funds away from the physical collection exacerbating the problem of negligence. Books that convey outdated practices, terminology, and ideologies continued to remain on the shelves. This is not acceptable, especially in a small academic library that supports medical and technical programs.

The CML then took the report one more step further and did a sample circulation report on a selection of the collection. The section the CML chose to highlight is the 330s, economics. The CML chose this section because it was where the CML began reviewing the collection.

The report showed a total of 7,248 books in this section, of those 5,395 books were published before 2000 and 74% of this group had never circulated. The low circulation numbers may have been due to a loss of data from a recent library migration from Voyager to WorldShare; however, it would require verification from a book's due date slips to discern the accuracy of the data. The CML pulled a selection of books from the sample report and checked their date due cards. To their credit, the Al Harris Library kept the original due date cards with the books. This data validated the CML's assessment that many of the books had either never circulated nor checked out since the '70s. It had become a dangerous cycle. Programs that rely on up-to-date information, are being hindered with outdated and sometimes dangerous materials.

Literature review

It is generally agreed upon that weeding is an important part of collection development and in smaller libraries a necessity (Baumbach and Miller 2006; Gregory 2019; M.E. Miller and Ward 2021; Scilken 1976; Trueswell 1965; Trueswell 1976; Vnuk 2022). Despite this being normal collection development practice for decades, it is something libraries still struggle to address. There are many factors that play a role in the lack of deselection or weeding at libraries. Public outcry, possible patron needs, faculty and librarian reluctance, and time (Gregory 2019; Trueswell 1965; Vnuk 2022) all play a part in why libraries don't weed as much as needed, and something the Al Harris Library is currently experiencing. Even though the books being removed from the library are extremely outdated, a few librarians are upset about books being removed from the library. They do not care the books being removed are outdated they just see the large gaps on the shelves. The gaps on the shelves have also been noticed by the SWOSU community and have made them curious about what the library is doing with the books.

Support and nonsupport

While the library director has been incredibly supportive about refreshing the collection, not all the librarians have been enthusiastic about the extent of work involved. One librarian was very vocal about keeping all the books often stating, “we are not a Barnes and Noble”. This individual was worried that the weeding would get rid of important and foundational books, and they would be replaced with popular nonfiction titles rather than academic titles. The CML assured the librarian that it was not her intention to remove all the old books, and each librarian would get to approve/make suggestions to the new policy. They would also play a role in the deselection process by reviewing their liaison areas. The CML also assured the librarian that they would be able to select replacement titles, and that academic titles were going to be the priority in purchasing. Luckily, this viewpoint was the minority. Most of the librarians and library staff are incredibly supportive of this CML’s effort of creating a weeding schedule and new deselection policies, even before they knew the severity of how outdated the collection is for a small academic library. After their eyes were opened, they acknowledged large-scale weeding needed to be done.

Creating a new deselection policy

While the previous deselection guidelines met the needs of the library in the past this was no longer the case. Technology has played a major part in how quickly books in multiple subjects become outdated. This policy also let books that had outdated, and dangerous viewpoints remain in the collection. The first step that was taken was attending Amigos’ *Let it Go: Weeding Your Library’s Collection* class in March of 2022. While many attendees were from public libraries there were several who were from small academic libraries. The teachers of this class were able to provide examples that academic librarians could relate too. When it came time to discuss the different types of deselection methods available, they ensured to show not only how it was being accomplished in public libraries but academic ones as well. During this class the CML became aware of the Continuous Review, Evaluation, and Weeding method or CREW method (Larson 2012) and felt it would work best for the AHL. The CREW method was first introduced in 1976 and has since “become the benchmark tool for weeding library collections” (Larson 2012, 7). It was originally designed for public libraries but has been adapted by school and academic libraries. While there were several types of deselection methods discussed the CREW method’s formula of (copyright age/last circulation/MUSTIE factors) is not very different than the previous policy (20 years old, 10 years no circulation, condition). The two major differences between the previous policy and the CREW methods are the MUSTIE factors which are: “Misleading, Ugly, Superseded, Trivial, Irrelevant, Elsewhere” (Larson 2012, 52–53). And having individual policies for each subject area instead of one

blanket policy for the entire collection. Once the CML had made the decision to go with the CREW method, the next step was to get the approval of the director. The CML provided the director with information on the CREW method and showed the director that other academic libraries had adopted it to their needs. Once the director approved of the new method, work began on adapting the CREW method to meet the needs of the AHL. Once finished the draft was presented to the director for their input. After several drafts the new policy was ready to be presented to the other librarians. They were given a copy of the new policy and had the opportunity to review it. To ensure that the worries of the librarians who voiced their concerns were addressed there were phrases like “Be aware that older books may have gender, sexuality, racial, ethnic, or medical (mental and physical) bias and should be replace with newer unbiased books”, “retain books that collect primary documents”, and “Also retain classics” were included in each subject area. Once the other librarians had time to review the new policy everyone meet *via* zoom, and it was voted on the approve the new policies unanimously.

After approval

Once the new policy was approved, a new deselection schedule was created. An additional meeting took place to discuss any questions anyone may have and to fill in the subjects that did not have a librarian covering that section. The goal of this was to have each librarian weed the subjects corresponding to their liaison areas, and so far it has been a success. Since implementing the new policies for each subject area, four librarians, including the CML, have been enthusiastic about the new deselection guidelines. The weeding schedule started at the beginning of the Dewey Decimal System, that way shifting could be done at the same time. All six librarians have a couple of subject sections they are supposed to be weeding each semester. However, two librarians are still hesitant to weed their sections. Motivating these reluctant librarians remains allusive. One way the library addressed this reluctance was setting up a lease plan with a book vendor, for example Baker and Taylor. This lease plan allows the constant addition and removal of computer science material regardless of librarians’ motivation or reluctance. Despite this reluctance between January and October 2023, four librarians have removed over 5000 monographs in the computer science, information science, general works, philosophy, psychology, and religion sections.

Challenges faced

A few challenges arose while implementing this project because of the number of books being removed at once. First was where to store these books while waiting for them to be shipped to a recycling center. Gaylords that had been sent to AHL were being filled almost immediately, and

required the library staff to wait for the filled ones to be sent out and the new ones to be brought in. This waiting also meant the process was not very streamlined and a backlog of books sitting on carts appeared in storage rooms and in areas that were not being used. This limitation was not one that was expected until it was encountered and caused the AHL to slow down the project. Another challenge the Al Harris Library faced is only having one cataloger. She quickly became overwhelmed with the number of books that were being removed. One of the ways this challenge was overcome was by training the part-time acquisitions technician in the deletion of titles from the system. During the deletion process the Cataloger discovered an issue when double checking that the item's holdings were being removed from the libraries holdings on the MARC records, she discovered an issue within WorldShare Management System (WMS). The cataloger would remove AHL local holdings on the monograph records, but when she would review a deleted title the next day, week, sometimes a month later, WMS still indicated the library held the title. The library director, cataloger, and CML troubleshooted this problem which required contacting WorldShare's support services. We found that WMS holds on to local holdings for various lengths of time after being deleted. Despite these few setbacks we are determined to continue with this collection development policy.

Conclusion

Overall, the new guidelines have been successful. While reviewing the information, general works, philosophy, psychology, and religion sections, the library has removed books with outdated ideologies, racist principles, outdated views, and outdated perceptions of people with mental illnesses, and much more. Showing even more how the new policy was and is needed. While it has not been a seamless process, it was a necessary process. The concerns of a couple of librarians and the time it is actually taking a librarian to work on their section has accelerated the need to revise the new guidelines and schedule. In 2024, the new policy will go through its first round of revisions since being implemented.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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