

Chapter 21

Collaborating with Faculty to Weed an Entire Science and Engineering Book Collection

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ABSTRACT

Weeding book collections and collaborating with faculty are necessary activities for academic libraries. Librarians, however, are often reluctant to remove books from collections and collaborating with faculty is often viewed as a difficult affair. In the fall of 2008 the Montana Tech Library, a small university library specializing in engineering, the sciences, and medicine, successfully collaborated with teaching faculty to weed the entire book collection. This chapter discusses how to successfully collaborate with faculty and offers advice on how to overcome the hesitation associated with weeding. Successful collaboration and overcoming the reservations of weeding can ultimately lead to the creation of a true “use collection” generated by customer driven collection development.

INTRODUCTION

Montana Tech of The University of Montana, located in Butte, Montana, is a small university specializing in engineering, science, energy, health, technology, and information sciences. The Montana Tech Library serves a population of 2,800 undergraduate and graduate students. The library houses 79,600 books covering diverse topics such as nursing, geotechnical engineering, mining engineering, metallurgy, and petroleum

engineering. In 2008, the librarians decided to weed the entire book collection.

Parts of the collection such as nursing had been assessed during the previous three years but the collection as a whole had not been assessed in thirty years. Librarians placed considerable emphasis on collections in the applied sciences such as mining and environmental engineering seeking to create concise collections that would be relevant to teaching and research at Montana Tech (MT Tech). The library’s goal was to build

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a true use collection emphasizing print materials that are of immediate necessity and value to faculty and students.

In creating a use collection for the students and faculty, it was important to incorporate those users into the assessment process. At the same time, librarians needed to manage the process internally and retain control over the collection, which included maintaining the integrity and perspective of the collection as a whole. To accomplish this, the librarians conducted a literature review to determine best practices and assessment criteria, and then adapted those practices and criteria to suit the needs of their small, specialized institution while meeting the assessment and weeding needs of the project.

BACKGROUND

Weeding books in a library collection is just as important as purchasing new titles. However, as Eleanor Dubicki (2008) points out, “There is a general reluctance among librarians to remove any books from library collections” (p. 132). This reluctance may stem from the idea that someone at sometime may wish to use a book on the shelf, so it should be kept for that purpose. This is sometimes referred to as the “just in case” model of collection development. Additionally, for many libraries and librarians collection size relates to value (Engeldinger, 1999). Thus, historically the thought has been that no book should be discarded unless devaluing the collection is a priority of the institution. Agreeing with Engeldinger (1999) on collection size, Dubicki (2008) also points out that lack of experience in weeding from the librarians’ viewpoint, and time constraints as well as the notion that a book might be used in the future are all reasons why weeding is viewed as a burden to libraries and librarians. The authors, however, feel that these ideas need to be reassessed.

If a collection becomes too unwieldy, many users will not succeed in locating appropriate

materials; thus, it is actually counter-productive to keep all items on the shelf. If time restrictions make it impossible for libraries to weed an entire collection at once, (as was the case at MT Tech), it is worthwhile to weed on a piece meal basis. Weeding in this manner provides experience at the task and should be minimally invasive to a librarian’s time. If librarians do not weed, how will they gain that much needed weeding experience? By separating the proverbial wheat from the chaff, librarians can create or build a collection that is tailored more to their patrons needs. Tailoring a collection to faculty and student needs also keeps the collection in line with the school’s curriculum and academic mission. At the same time, it allows users to easily discover the books that are of most value to them.

The literature discusses two more legitimate reasons why weeding is not on the top of a librarian’s to-do list. Soma and Sjoberg state that often librarians are unsure of their qualifications in weeding decisions (2011). This apprehension towards weeding may stem from two factors. First, librarians are troubled with their lack of weeding experience (Dubicki, 2008). How are librarians supposed to weed if they have no experience doing so? Second, some academic librarians are assigned subject areas for which they do not hold degrees. The lack of a degree can make the librarian feel unqualified to make weeding decisions in assigned subject areas. If either of these factors affects a library, then a collaborative book weeding effort between librarians and teaching faculty can assist in alleviating the fears librarians may harbor about weeding. (For the remainder of this chapter teaching faculty will be referred to as faculty.) A successful collaborative effort can also increase the chances a book collection will become a true use collection, rather than a traditional just in case collection.

Faculty are traditionally part of the collection development process in many academic libraries. A review of the literature creates a picture that promotes the use of faculty in collection devel-

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