Weed 'Em and Reap? Deselection of Political Science Books

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ABSTRACT

Weeding academic library collections is widely acknowledged as a necessary and beneficial, but difficult, task. Little research has been done on how librarians approach weeding for a particular academic subject area and how they apply general weeding plans and criteria to a specific subject. This project examines the weeding practices of librarians with responsibility for managing book collections in political science and related disciplines through the use of a survey about their weeding experiences and perspectives. While survey respondents expressed similar motivations for weeding, the obstacles they encounter, and their approaches to developing weeding projects to those outlined in the literature, respondents were more confident about weeding and do it more frequently than one would expect from prior scholarship. Open text responses gave insight into how librarians apply broad and subjective weeding criteria, such as currency and relevance, to their politics-related collections.

Introduction

Many libraries face challenges in accommodating their print collections, whether these challenges are the result of the size and predicted growth of the collection itself or from pressures to use library space for new services. It is widely acknowledged, however, that weeding, "the process of removing materials from the active collection for withdrawal or transfer" (Johnson, 2014, p. 193), is an activity that gets pushed to the bottom of many librarians' task lists. Previous research in library science, as well as textbooks and handbooks, lay out a variety of perspectives and suggestions for implementing weeding programs.

It is unclear, however, whether general deselection guidelines are representative of the practices of many academic librarians and what subject-specific considerations might be relevant to weeding efforts. Little research has been done on how librarians approach weeding for a particular academic subject area and how they apply general weeding plans and criteria to a specific subject. This project examines the weeding practices of librarians with responsibility for managing book collections in political science and related disciplines such as international studies, public policy, public administration, and legal studies. While survey respondents expressed similar motivations for weeding, the obstacles they encounter, and their approaches to developing weeding projects to those outlined in the literature, respondents were more confident about weeding and do it more frequently than one would expect from prior scholarship. Open text responses gave insight

into how librarians apply broad and subjective weeding criteria, such as currency and relevance, to their politics-related collections.

Literature review

Collection development texts and articles addressing weeding generally start with a discussion of why libraries should want to, or why they need to, weed their print collections. It is generally agreed in the literature that the need for space is a driving force for weeding (Dubicki, 2008; Oliva, 2016; Soma & Sjoberg, 2010; Ward, 2015). Many libraries face challenges in accommodating their print collections, whether these challenges are the result of the size and predicted growth of the collection itself or from pressures to use library space for new services (Dubicki, 2008; Lugg, 2012; Oliva, 2016; Soma & Sjoberg, 2010). Decreased circulation and the vast array of electronic resources add to pressures to reduce the size of print collections (Banks, 2002; Lugg, 2012). Weeding is also proffered as a way to keep a collection in good physical condition, as well as fresh, current, and relevant for users (Dubicki, 2008; Oliva, 2016).

Although weeding is generally regarded as beneficial and necessary, it is also widely acknowledged that weeding is a difficult activity for many librarians. The discussion around weeding characterizes deselection as a difficult, unpleasant, and fraught task for librarians that many put off or avoid out of distaste, fear, or feeling overwhelmed (Dubicki, 2008; Francis, 2012; Johnson, 2013; Matlak, 2010; O'Neill, 2016; Singer, 2008). Some librarians characterize weeding as

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"unnatural," given the role and public image of libraries as repositories of knowledge (Johnson, 2013; Manley, 1996).

Librarians' confidence in their capacity for weeding is an important concern, as lack of confidence is often cited as a reason librarians put off weeding. Dubicki (2008) outlined a project in which librarians' fears of weeding were alleviated through the collaborative development of a clear weeding plan and specific weeding criteria. O'Neill (2016) developed a training program and tools to help librarians acquire the knowledge that would allow them to feel comfortable with weeding, including information about the collection assessment program, project explanations, and discussions of case studies of weeding at other academic libraries.

Given the tension between incentives to weed and the disinclination of librarians to do it, there is no shortage of literature within library science on the topic of weeding. Previous research in library science, as well as textbooks and handbooks for students and practitioners, address the development of weeding programs, particularly with regard to collection assessment and weeding criteria, and the role of disciplinary faculty in weeding. Many of the articles on weeding in the context of academic libraries are case studies of the design and/or implementations of a particular weeding program. The bulk of this work focuses on general or library-wide weeding, rather than how weeding looks from within a particular discipline.

General criteria for weeding are widely acknowledged, with the same criteria repeated across a variety of works (Crosetto, Kinner, & Duhon, 2008; Dubicki, 2008; Johnson, 2014; Martin, Kamada, & Feeney, 2013; Metz & Gray, 2005; Smith, 2012; Ward, 2015). Collection managers are advised to assess the physical condition of the collection (Dubicki, 2008; Handis, 2007) and avoid unwarranted duplication of items (Dubicki, 2008; Martin et al., 2013). Similarly, librarians can look for opportunities to replace some physical items with electronic versions (Oliva, 2016; Singer, 2008), although electronic collections should also be evaluated periodically for weeding based on timeliness and quality (Waugh, Donlin, & Braunstein, 2015). Reasons to keep a monograph include considering a book a classic, its relevance to the curriculum, regional interest, being published by university (or other highly regarded) presses, and titles that appear in standard lists, such as accreditation standards or Resources for College Libraries (Dubicki, 2008; Lewis, 2000; Oliva, 2016; Soma & Sjoberg, 2010; Ward, 2015). Some libraries begin their weeding efforts focused on journals first, as opposed to books (Metz & Gray, 2005; Thomas & Shouse, 2012) because, as Metz and Gray (2005) note "the most space is gained for the fewest decisions and least work with journals" (p. 274).

Perhaps no criterion is more often discussed than the usage of an item, generally assessed by circulation counts and/or citation analysis of faculty research (Banks, 2002; Kellsey & Knievel, 2012; Oliva, 2016; White, 2017). Many of the cases studies of weeding activities implement a system in which "items older than X years with fewer than Y circulations" are flagged as possible candidates for weeding. Rose-Wiles and Irwin (2016) caution that libraries should take in-house use statistics into account to obtain an accurate picture of total circulation for use in collection development. White (2017) argues that circulation counts are insufficient for weeding monographs in research collections and that citation counts should be considered instead. The purpose of books in an academic library, White contends, is not to circulate, but rather to provide information:

> [E]ven at their time of purchase many titles in academic libraries are known to be of interest to only a small subsection of all library users and have been added to the collection for the purpose of providing valuable coverage of specific topics. To come back… and measure them on the basis of circulation data is to subject them to a test that they were never intended to pass.
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> (White, 2017, p. 61).

White's contention is that measuring by circulation does not match the needs and purpose of academic libraries.

Criteria for weeding such as physical condition, circulation, and duplication are often considered "low hanging fruit" by librarians, suggesting that more subjective criteria such as currency and relevance of an item are more difficult and possibly discipline-specific. Martin et al. (2013) identify these criteria as "evaluative" because they are factors that librarians should assess, as opposed to parameters that can be used to generate lists. Similar subjective assessments feature in Borin & Yi's collection assessment model (Borin & Yi, 2008) and underpin Ward's framework for right-sizing a collection (Ward, 2015), both of which emphasize making assessments of how collections fit the needs and perceptions of particular academic communities.

Several common themes emerge in the discussion of the implementation of weeding plans. Quite a few authors highlight the importance of having collection development plans and policies that address weeding (Demas & Miller, 2012; Handis, 2007; King, 2012; Smith, 2012). Weeding decisions may also be influenced by the holdings and policies of library consortia and shared print repositories (Crosetto et al., 2008; Demas & Miller, 2012; Gillies & Stephenson, 2012). Research libraries are likely to keep books, but they can consider how many copies are held by consortia before they will discard. Ward recommends librarians look to an items in wider holdings—how many copies exist beyond consortia to those available nationally or in a region. Librarians, Ward (2015) suggests, must consider the total number of holdings below which they feel an obligation to keep a copy in their collection—she suggests under 30 is a good guideline, though librarians may look at the locations of those copies (off-site storage facilities versus general collections) as well (p. 114). Oliva (2016) suggests that if a WorldCat search reveals that at least 50 other libraries had this or a more recent edition of this title, then perhaps interlibrary loan could be depended on as an option (p. 38).

Working with stakeholders both internal and external to the library is another consideration. Several authors advise creating collaborative structures for teamwork in the library (Dubicki, 2008; O'Neill, 2016; Soma & Sjoberg, 2010). The major focus of achieving buy-in for weeding, however, is on faculty. Concerns about resistance from faculty and the need for their substantive input lead several authors to advise that weeding plans be transparent and well publicized, as well as incorporate channels for faculty input or involvement (Dubicki, 2008; Metz & Gray, 2005; Soma & Sjoberg, 2010). Some find that the process of weeding creates opportunities for better relationships with library faculty because of the collaboration and teamwork required to successfully complete weeding projects (Dubicki, 2008).

The disposal of materials is often of concern to faculty and the public, and can be a difficult point to address in weeding (Metz & Gray, 2005). McGowan (2011) suggests that those in charge of weeding projects also consider the potential for other libraries to add to special collections from withdrawn material.

Much of the weeding literature (Acadia, 2016; Dubicki, 2008; Handis, 2007; Johnson, 2014; Martin et al., 2013; Ward, 2015) approach weeding from a general or library-wide perspective. Commonly, publications intended to shed light on the weeding process will reference individual selectors applying criteria specific to their disciplines as needed. For example, Acadia (2016) notes, "Each liaison set her or his own weeding criteria that were judged to be the most appropriate for their discipline" (p. 147). Similarly Ward (2015) notes that "books in different subject areas may require different withdrawal criteria," (p. 107). Few, however, have elaborated on these subject-specific criteria. It is the intention of this article to examine aspects of subject-specific weeding within political science and politics-related collections.

A few articles have attempted to grapple with discipline-specific perspectives on weeding. Smith (2012) discusses how general weeding guidelines apply to a music collection, including how a music librarian might assess the quality and currency of content, and the importance of maintaining a balance of perspectives in a collection. Kellsey and Knievel (2012) evaluated whether library collections were needed/used