
Policies and Practices in Discarding

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K. D. METCALF says that his library is too large for Harvard's current needs,¹ and J. T. Babb reports that "for the first time in the history of the Yale Library we carry in our accessions statistics a figure reducing the over-all growth of the Library."² Since Yale has well over four million volumes and Harvard approximately six million, most of us, with libraries considerably smaller, might conclude that we have plenty of time before we are faced with the problem of maximum size. But eventually the day will come.

Some twenty years ago L. S. Shores, in commenting on the average undergraduate college library, as contrasted with such collections as are represented by Harvard and Yale, said that it:

. . . should be highly selective and definitely limited in size and scope. Whereas the research library's book selection problem may be solely one of acquisition, the educational library will be equally concerned with elimination. As protection against the nuisance of research ambitions, the college collection should have a maximum, say 35,000 volumes, imposed upon it, beyond which its collection may *never* expand. Each year the college may undertake to purchase 500 new titles, on condition it weed out 500 old works from its collection for discard or for presentation to some ambitious research university endeavoring each year to report a bigger and better library. In this way only the number will remain static; the educational library's contents will always include the basic books, plus an ever-changing collection of ephemeral material. The result will be a highly serviceable educational library with abundant material to furnish a true culture to young people who want it.³

The fact that very few such institutions have established such collections—the 100,000-volume Lamont Library, for Harvard's undergraduate students, is an outstanding exception—is immaterial here. The significance of Shores' conception lies in its challenge, if not to the commonly accepted, at least to the commonly practiced pattern

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of college library administration. Though the restrictions of this paper will not permit a treatment of Shores' idea in its broader aspects, it is believed that no more effective introduction to the subject of discarding could have been chosen. This is especially true when we consider that university and other research libraries represent but a small fraction of the total number of libraries, whereas the policy advocated by Shores—that of a live, working collection—is subscribed to, theoretically, at any rate, by tens of thousands of small and medium-sized libraries: school, college, and public.

One of the most complete studies that has been made of college library use was conducted by H. L. Johnson, who studied the circulation figures of five mid-western college libraries where the combined collections totaled 345,000 volumes. In the academic year being surveyed, he found that the students from all five colleges used less than seven per cent (22,537) of the total number of books available. Harvie Branscomb, who reports on the Johnson study, does not recommend that the remaining 73-odd per cent of the volumes be thrown out, but when he says that "a collection of 25,000 volumes *correctly selected* would have served the undergraduate needs for the year of all five colleges, reference materials excepted, and 10,000 volumes would have taken care of any one of the colleges," he indicates very clearly that a thorough weeding was long past due.⁴

College President Carter Davidson (formerly of Knox College, now of Union), after considering what could be done to avoid the cost of a new library building every twenty years, gives a forthright recipe: "We can cull, we can weed, we can keep the size of our active book collection at some reasonable figure, say fifty thousand volumes for a student body of five hundred, and we can store those of the others we should keep. Burn, bury, sell, or give away the rest."⁵ What has been said of college libraries applies, of course, with at least equal force to school libraries, and with even more force to most public libraries.

In order to avoid confusion, in the minds of inexperienced librarians, between the terms "discarding" and "weeding" perhaps it would be well to state that when a book is discarded, it is weeded, but that when it is weeded, it is not necessarily discarded. To keep library collections up to date hundreds of thousands of volumes are weeded out every year, but most of these volumes are simply shifted from active shelves to other locations where borrowers will be less conscious of them. "Weeding" has been defined as "the practice of discarding or transferring to storage superfluous copies, rarely used books, and material no longer of use." A discarded volume is one that has been

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“officially withdrawn from a library collection because it is unfit for further use or is no longer needed.” The withdrawal process involves “removing from library records all entries for a book no longer in the library.”⁶

While this paper is concerned chiefly with “discarding,” the emphasis will be on the steps taken by a library staff, through the elimination of unsuitable material, to improve the excellence, from whatever point of view, of its main collection; and this process will naturally involve weeding, in the broader sense. In general, the author has consulted for this paper the literature of the past decade or so, but a monograph which he has in preparation will attempt to cover all contributions on the subject, including a considerable number that have had to be slighted here because of space limitations.

For every librarian who talks about the desirability of weeding, there must be ninety-nine who never get down to business. The reasons, rationalizations, and excuses are numerous. Some of these will be mentioned here, along with arguments from the other side.

In the first place, the book has been regarded as something of a sacred object. For generations, especially in the centuries closer to Gutenberg, no one except a vandal would think of deliberately destroying a book. Such awe has carried over into the feelings of many librarians even today; but this is passing. The train-loads of printed matter pouring daily from the presses give us a different perspective from what we have had in the past. If the volume has lost its “spark” or its utility, it is just so much paper, ink, cardboard, and cloth, ready to be junked.

Another argument against discarding is that the volume under consideration may be needed by somebody at some time in the future. This one is unanswerable. The point is, however, that only our large research institutions can afford to shelve this volume until the distant day when our somebody shows up, if he ever does. The only way the non-research library can keep within its financial and space budgets is to provide what is needed, not for everybody, but for its own special clientele, and not for all time, but for today. What it cannot furnish on this basis can be made readily available from one of the larger libraries through interlibrary loan or through some photographic or other reproductive process.

Putting it off, usually to an indefinite date, is doubtless the most frequent reason why discarding does not get attended to. There is never enough staff, never enough budget, never enough time—and of course there never will be. Fortunately, however, crowded shelves,

with no new building in sight, force the necessary action. Then, too often there is an orgy of discarding—unsystematic, wasteful, fatiguing: such an ordeal that the staff resolves “Never again!” The trouble is that too many librarians identify this kind of experience with discarding; hence the aversion. Those with experience recommend continuous discarding, with systematic completion of the process once every year or so. The job is never finished, no more than is the program of selection, unless we want our collection to stagnate. In those libraries which perform the task according to a day-by-day plan, as part of the regular routine, the traditional unfavorable attitudes toward discarding have been laid to rest.

Not the least popular feature of the University of Houston’s weeding program is that it has been spread over a generous period of time. Since at this institution the main library building is of recent construction, and since the University is young—meaning that the book collection is still relatively small and has only a minor fraction of dead-wood—the need for weeding is not a pressing one. But with the idea that the earlier the problem was faced, the less difficult and costly its solution would be, we set up a systematic schedule that has been unanimously approved by the faculty library committee. Under this plan each of the instructional departments having a book budget is assigned a certain month in which its representative confers with the library staff regarding the weeding of those parts of the collection of special concern to the particular department. This arrangement provides for complete rotation of the departments, and therefore full coverage of the library, over periods of about five years each. The areas of the collection not directly related to teaching departments are weeded by our own staff members, with the assistance of interested faculty members, specialists within the city, subject bibliographies, and other tools.

In school and college libraries, the obstacle to a sound discarding program is not infrequently the unwillingness on the part of the staff members to precipitate “scenes.” For they know that sooner or later, out of the hundreds of books discarded, one or more will represent mistakes, and at least one mistake will invariably get to the attention of Instructor “X,” who has never been very friendly toward the library anyway.

We had better resign ourselves to the facts: there is no discarding program on record without its mistakes, and some of these mistakes will cause trouble. We simply have to “exercise the best judgment

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we can command, humbly, not arrogantly, and risk the consequences." 7

In the past, the most convincing argument against discarding has been the cost involved. Not the cost of the time spent by the librarian in deciding, or helping to decide, which books should be weeded out, but the cost of canceling the volume from the library's shelf-list and public catalog, etc. But librarians who have listened to this argument have not taken some things into account. The reasoning goes: "It costs as much to discard a book as it does to buy shelf space for a volume the same size. So why bother? Forget about discarding and buy more stacks." Two important points are overlooked: (1) if the book under consideration is of the discardable type, it is a liability rather than an asset to the library, and a negative value can be placed on this, public-relations wise; (2) every time the book is dusted, every time it is shelf-read, every time it is inventoried, a slight (but significant, in the aggregate, and over a period of years) cost is involved.

A careful check of shelving costs today, and especially of the cost of a new building to house the shelving, may lead us to re-examine the basic argument. As to the "un-cataloging" costs, these can certainly be kept within reasonable bounds. No matter how difficult, and therefore expensive, it may be to incorporate a particular book into the collection, the complete withdrawal process, from the moment the discarding decision has been made, can be performed by a bright teen-ager.

D. A. Woods, in a series of time studies conducted in 1950, found that books in the Milwaukee State Teachers College Library could be withdrawn for about ten cents per volume. Estimating the cost of stack construction at a dollar per volume, he figured a saving of ninety cents for every book discarded.⁸

Reference has already been made to Harvard's Lamont Library, which is limited to 100,000 volumes. In 1949 Donald Coney, referring to Harvard's 5,000 undergraduates and the 1,100 seats and (at that time) 80,000 volumes of their new library, estimated that to construct "a Lamont Library on the Berkeley, or Minnesota, or Illinois, or Michigan, or Texas, or Wisconsin campus," to accommodate "three, four, or five times" as many undergraduate readers as Harvard has to provide for, would cost "from four to six and one-half million dollars."⁹ This is the kind of money that we have to talk about, at least for a number of institutions, when library building costs are being considered; and these figures, remember, would apply to library collections from which

the material of little use to undergraduates has already been eliminated.

At the Southern Illinois University Library an ambitious, seemingly highly successful weeding program was launched six years ago with two graduate students performing most of the preliminary work. The project is still underway, costs are apparently justified by the results, and faculty reaction has been excellent. "In all cases it has been favorable, and in some cases, enthusiastic."¹⁰

Very few libraries have a written policy in respect to discarding. Doubtless most of them assume, correctly, that when the decision is made to withdraw a volume, the basis for the decision is according to "the same standards that govern the choice of new material."¹¹ There appears to be general agreement on this point: that book discarding and book acquisition are part of the same process, and that a given library's book collecting policy determines that library's discarding policy, if it is to have one at all.

Large research libraries such as those at Harvard and Yale, mentioned earlier, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and many others, are naturally concerned about space problems, but there is little discarding that they can do, relatively speaking, outside of duplicates and some of the superseded editions, without compromising their basic policy of collecting and preserving. A few of our large municipal libraries, such as those in "Detroit, Cleveland or Cincinnati where the public library has the largest collection of books in the city and has established for itself something of a place as an inclusive collection of books," must also follow, to a certain extent, the same policy that applies to other research libraries.¹²

L. Q. Mumford, when he was assistant director of the Cleveland Public Library, reported that his library had "a general statement as a guide for weeding the main library collections," but he found that "the policy followed in any particular division depends upon the subject fields covered, upon demand and use of material, and upon the subjective judgment of the division chief and her staff."¹² After making a survey of some of the other larger public libraries in Ohio, Mumford found that their weeding practices varied so much that he could not offer detailed suggestions that would be applicable to any given library.¹²

A discarding policy workable in a regional library (or, by adaptation, in a large municipal or county library system) was drawn up more than a decade ago by J. S. Richards, librarian of the Seattle Public Library, with the cooperation of R. T. Esterquest, then director of

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the Pacific Northwest Bibliographic Center. According to this policy, loyalty to the region, as implemented by a practical cooperative scheme, would prevent a Northwest library from discarding the last copy of any volume that might be useful to any reader in that part of the country.¹³

Iowa State College is one of the few academic institutions where the library, convinced that "systematic and continuous weeding of the book collections is an essential part of a well-rounded and progressive acquisitions program," has issued a statement covering its policy in this connection. The statement covers "Types of Materials to Be Discarded," "Identification of Materials to Be Discarded," and "Disposal of Discarded Publications." It is characteristic of the research use to which this library is put that the policy provides for the retention of "at least one copy of each edition of every book in the collections that is directly related to the subject fields emphasized by the College."¹⁴

Whether or not a library has a policy on discarding—or almost regardless of the policy, if it has one—the process of eliminating many of the unsuitable volumes from the rest of the collection must remain in the final analysis, an art—an art requiring the same qualifications that are required in competent book selecting. And no matter what kind of formula is used, the decision to discard must be made, at last, on the merits of the individual volume. Except in a research library, where even the most trivial pamphlet may be needed for documentation, the librarian should feel justified in discarding any book for which he anticipates, in the near future, no further demand, especially if he has evaluated this demand in terms of the "volume, value, and variety" suggested by Helen E. Haines.¹⁵

A difficult question that often arises in the discarding program is: When is a book out of date? For much material the answer is obvious, of course, but there is no rule of thumb. Usually, especially when decisions are being made regarding the removal of the less-used material to storage, arbitrary limits are assigned. The time factor will naturally depend on the type of material and the type of library. One would suppose that if certain books in the collection had not circulated for ten years, it would be safe to remove such inactive volumes from the rest of the collection. But this would have been a mistake at Tulane University (where a change in the book-pocket system made it possible to check into this situation), since their statistics showed that demand for the old material amounted on certain days to as much as 13.6 per cent of the general circulation.¹⁶ To have permanently discarded such material—a step that might have been quite in order for most non-

research libraries—would have been for Tulane, of course, a wasteful blunder.

Many authorities mention "five years" as perhaps a suitable length of time beyond which inactive material may safely be relegated to the less public areas of the stacks, or even to the discard pile. The author once had occasion to use this time limit in changing an undergraduate college library collection into three different divisions. All books that had not been used during the previous five years were pulled out of the collection and shelved, according to the original classification system, in some newly installed basement stacks. Their book cards, each indicating by a stamp the volume's changed status, were kept at the circulation desk where students were advised to inquire in case they sought one of these titles among those of the live collection. A large number of the weeded books should have been sold, exchanged, or otherwise discarded, but the administration forbade any procedure that would decrease our official holdings. Too few college presidents, college and public library boards of trustees, and high school principals and superintendents have exposed themselves to such statements as the following: "It is a sign of a healthy condition of the book collection and a wise administration of the book fund when the library's annual report reveals a fair correspondence between the number of new books regularly purchased and the number of books regularly discarded."¹⁷ Nevertheless, the compromise effected within the building itself certainly provided our students with quicker access to the books they wanted.

As new books were acquired, all except a few of a very specialized nature were placed in a conspicuous part of the main reading room, where they were classified under prominent shelf labels, so that they could scarcely be overlooked by even the most indifferent user of the library. The book cards for these titles were likewise kept in a file at the circulation desk, from which they would be pulled for charging purposes. A constant turnover in the new-books section was provided by adding new titles as received and by retiring those that had been on display for a year. In the same way the five-year collection was being continuously refreshed by the addition of titles retired from the new-books section, and periodically weeded by the relegation of unused books to the basement.

Although the system just referred to is not exactly what Shores had in mind, it does give prominence to those titles which have the freshest point of view, and which, therefore, are most likely to appeal to undergraduate students.

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The five-year period used by some libraries as their arbitrary measure of obsolescence may be too long a period for others. F. K. W. Drury suggests that books which have not circulated for two years be removed from the active collection, and that "after another period"—presumably of no longer duration than the first—they be withdrawn altogether. (He reminds us, however, that lack of adequate publicity may have been responsible for the fact that these volumes were not used.¹¹ Publicity for the less moribund members of the collection must not be overlooked either. After a vigorous "retirement" program had been conducted in one library, the patrons were most happily surprised at what they found. "I didn't know you had this. When did you get all these books!" But the wonderment was not aroused by new acquisitions. The titles "had been on the shelves all the time but had been lost among the weeds."¹⁸)

C. F. Gosnell has worked out special formulas, using logarithmic curves, as guides for determining the obsolescence of books in various subject fields, in the same manner that actuaries in insurance offices compute mortality tables. His figures will therefore apply to whole groups of books, but not necessarily to particular titles. He estimates that at least half the book collections in many college libraries consist of titles over thirty years old, and that less than ten per cent of these titles are being used.¹⁹

That the periodic discarding of unused, out-of-date material from all non-research libraries will improve the efficiency and vitality of the collection, there can be no doubt among those who have had experience with weeding programs. One case is reported where the failure of a certain public library to discard obsolescent and other unfit material from its collection is cited as the probable cause of its closing down.²⁰ Most adults as well as children have an ingrained respect for the printed word, especially the printed word found in a library; and we do them an injustice, and give ourselves poor publicity, when we make it possible for them to take out material that includes obsolete information. Even college students, it seems, have to be protected against themselves. Woods reports that many of them "show no appreciation for imprint dates but continue to use Hutchinson's *The Conquest of Consumption*, 1910; Tolman's *Safety*, 1913; Notter's *Practical Domestic Hygiene*, 1905; Spargo's *Common Sense of the Milk Question*, 1908. They read the third edition of some titles when the sixth edition is available. This is deplorable and often serious because of the misinformation involved."⁸

No matter how popular, and/or how well-recommended, a book has

been in the past, its qualifications for discarding become stronger every passing year. A glance at the list of top best sellers of the last fifty years will readily reveal to any librarian born this side of 1900 the unfamiliarity of many of the titles, despite the fact that in their day each of these books enjoyed sales of half a million or more.²¹

"Dead, but not yet taken away"²² is an apt description of thousands of volumes that "rest in peace" on our library shelves. Obviously a healthy collection is dependent on our willingness to hold frequent memorial services. And the librarian need remind himself that many members of his book family die young.

Further attention to obsolescence cannot be given here, but since it applies to all classes of books, with the exception of historical source material, the classics in literature and art, and perhaps a very few others, it is clear that this is the principal concern of book weeders.

Although no two libraries will have exactly the same kind of material, or collecting policy, or clientele, and therefore no two libraries, if they discard at all, will be discarding the same things, the items listed below will be suggestive. Whether the particular library removes the material to some kind of storage, or whether it withdraws it, depends on the use to which that library is put.

Duplicates. Even the research library discards these. Here is perhaps the easiest group of books to begin with. In school and college libraries the fact that books on reserve (where the greatest number of duplicates are likely to be found) are not given full processing, makes the discarding of them a relatively simple process.

Unsolicited and unwanted gifts. The ones that come without strings are no problem, but the others can be "dynamite, such as gifts of the principal, board members, etc. Here go slowly, and try to find some printed authority to back up your own judgment of inclusion or omission."²³ Of course, the advice of not a few librarians—those who have had bitter experience—that such discarding be postponed until the donors have moved out of town, retired, or passed on, may not be without its value.

Obsolete books. This has already been dealt with in a general way. Special attention should be given to science, medicine and health, technology, geography, transportation, and travel. Watch for obsolete style and theme as well as for obsolete subject. Weeding out the material on World War II, "the most reported event in history," is, by itself, an immense undertaking, but the path has been cleared by a carefully prepared article on this subject.²⁴

Superseded editions. Obsolescence applies to this category too, but

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it is a large class in itself, especially since textbooks are included here.

Books that are infected, dirty, shabby, worn out, too juvenile, too advanced. "But it must seem strange to a student to be asked to treat books carefully, and then be given some battered wreck that has earned a well-deserved rest!"²⁵

Books with small print, brittle paper, or missing pages. Do not strain your patrons' eyes, or give them a guilt complex if a page breaks in the middle, or assume that they are psychic.

Unused, unneeded volumes of sets. "Do not make a fetish of 'full sets' that possess no specific and evident usefulness."²⁶

Periodicals with no indexes. "I find it practical to discard magazines according to the dates of the volumes of the *Readers' Guide*; because it seems unfair to dangle bait before a student if we cannot produce the material. The cumulative volume covers a span of three years, and that, plus the current issues gives you a four-year coverage."²³

Space limitations prevent an extension of this list. The chances are that if a library staff has commenced to discard, it has already found helpful advice or picked up useful experience regarding types of potentially discardable material not discussed above; and if its weeding program is not yet launched, it will have plenty to do for a few years, anyway. Pamphlets, documents, maps, music, etc., have not been covered in this paper, but the same principles will apply.

Yale is discarding "incomplete volumes, imperfect volumes, indices without texts, pamphlet collections that are duplicate, cheap reprints of well-known books, some translations into strange languages, books written only for children, and . . . some volumes on practical agriculture which are much better at the Experiment Station."²⁷ (Under Yale's "Selective Retirement" program, incidentally, it has transferred some 50,000 volumes of little-used material to a location in the basement of the main building. "The only difference to the reader will be a wait of twenty-four hours instead of four minutes." An example of the type of material stored here is the shorthand collection, which "although fully cataloged, showed no sign of circulation for twenty years."²⁷)

Wilson and Tauber list thirty-eight different categories of "materials which librarians might find it expedient to store."²⁸ Non-research libraries may find the list useful in suggesting kinds of materials for possible discard. *The Teacher-Librarian's Handbook* describes ten classes of discardable material, with helpful comments.²⁹

Enough has been said or implied about when to discard—do it all the time; make it a standard routine—and who should discard—these

should be the same people responsible for book selection and for the effective use of the books once they are selected. How to dispose of discarded books has not even been touched on, but this is really another problem. We have been concerned here with separating from the live books those that are dead or dying. Storage areas for weeded material have been briefly discussed, but the problem of selling, exchanging, giving away, junking, or burning the withdrawn items is, to repeat, a separate subject—related, to be sure, but having a considerable literature of its own.

The routine of canceling the library records on withdrawn books is covered, in more or less detail, by Woods,⁸ Akers,³⁰ Beall,³¹ Minster,³² and Reyner,³³ among others. The description of some of the "short cuts" mentioned by two or three of these writers will probably repay the librarian for the time spent in consulting the pages referred to.

In conclusion, C. B. Roden's notion of the public library of the future corresponds to Shores' idea of the college library. In both cases the collections would "consist of a nucleus or core of the books of permanent value, rigidly and competently selected and kept in condition by equally competent discarding and the full recognition of . . . 'book obsolescence,' a malady with which most libraries are afflicted and which few of us have dared to attack."³⁴

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