

# Kansas Library Association College and University Libraries Section Proceedings

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Volume 7  
Number 1 *Building the Future on Strong  
Foundations*

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Article 3

2017

## Making Room for New Spaces and Services: Engaging Your Community to Help During the Deselection Process

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### Recommended Citation

Lindsey, Robert M.; Leon, Jorge A. Jr.; and Taggart, Lindsey (2017) "Making Room for New Spaces and Services: Engaging Your Community to Help During the Deselection Process," *Kansas Library Association College and University Libraries Section Proceedings*: Vol. 7: No. 1. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2160-942X.1064>

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## **Making Room for New Spaces and Services: Engaging Your Community to Help During the Deselection Process**

### **Abstract**

Leonard H. Axe Library at Pittsburg State University (PSU) is undergoing a 5-year building renovation focused on creating new services and spaces, including technology rich spaces, media recording rooms, group study spaces, and more. As part of the renovation project, Library Services was tasked with reducing the circulating collection footprint by approximately fifty percent. One part of the challenge was to face the traditional campus and librarian perceptions of reducing the collection. If mishandled, perceptions of the process can turn into negative emotions or public outcry that can delay or shut down a project. Librarians at Axe Library set out to engage our campus during the de-selection process and make everyone an active participant. The de-selection process, documents, and guidelines were accessible and transparent to campus faculty. Campus stakeholders were invited to share their concerns and opinions with the library throughout the process. As a result, faculty are discovering materials the library has in its collection and helping request newer updated content. In addition, new and surprising partnerships emerged from the conversations and interactions.

### **Keywords**

weeding, deselection

## Introduction

Pittsburg State University (PSU) is a medium sized university with around 6800 FTE. The Leonard H. Axe Library, a four-story building with 65,000 square feet, housed approximately 300,000 circulating volumes in 2014. The Library Services department also operates a branch location in the Kansas Technology Center to serve students, faculty, and staff at PSU's College of Technology. In addition to serving as the hub for Library Services, Axe Library is home to the Writing Center, the Student Success Center, and a coffee shop. In 2014, Axe Library was presented with an opportunity to reinvent itself. With the building slated for a multi-year renovation project, the library and PSU administration worked with faculty, staff, and students to envision a drastically different space. A few important factors played into plans for the facility renovation. Library Services sought to focus on student needs and user experience. A comparison with academic libraries at peer institutions showed that Axe Library had a severe deficit in study space. Feedback from students, gathered through a variety of meetings with individuals, classes, and student groups, also evidenced interest in creating more student-focused spaces such as group study rooms.

External trends also played an important role in the renovation plan. Weeding the print collection to make room for flexible student-centered space helped to address three major trends in academic libraries: a reduced need for print resources, changing student study behaviors, and the movement towards the library as an Information Commons. Circulation at academic libraries has trended downwards since the 1990s, especially for print volumes (Anderson, 2011). Usage of Axe Library's online databases has increased, reflecting the larger trend of students preferring digital content for academic research. Student study behaviors have also shifted, with students preferring environments that support engagement, experiential learning, and social learning (Lippincott, 2010). The Information Commons model can be understood as just such an environment; a physical space that is conducive to collaboration and information sharing and that is centered on learning (Heitsch and Holley, 2011; Lippincott, 2010). The renovation plan at Axe sought to address these trends and the needs of the community. A reduced print collection will allow for the innovative use of newly available square footage, resulting in a user-centered, collaborative Information Commons.

## Initial Concerns

There are many reasons that weeding is important: It ensures that items in the collection are current, reflective of the curriculum, and in good physical condition. It helps librarians sustain familiarity with the collection and can uncover content gaps or areas for development. Importantly, it also frees up space, which was a major driver of this project. However, even when librarians are aware of the benefits of weeding, there is usually an accompanying degree of trepidation and lack of confidence in making weeding decisions (Some and Sjoberg, 2010; O'Neill, 2016; Dubicki, 2008). To compound this issue, many Library Services team members did not have extensive weeding experience, as the undertaking of such a large-scale weeding project had never been attempted at Axe Library. In addition to questions of confidence, there were concerns about physical demands and burnout. Other academic libraries have seen success in lessening weeding anxiety. Soma and Sjoberg (2010) had success in using a team-based approach, allowing librarians with different subject liaison areas to collaborate in weeding decision-making. Dubicki (2008) makes several recommendations, such as open communication, multiple reviews of items, having a clear project plan, and ensuring participants that "no decision is irreversible" (p. 133). Librarians at Axe Library worked to combine many of these recommendations with a focus on transparency, collaboration, and communication.

Although some weeding apprehension is internal, some fears are based on potentially negative external interactions. There have been numerous media accounts of public outrage when libraries decide to discard books. Rumors and “concerned citizens” caused some controversy at another Kansas academic library, eventually leading to the university calling for the involvement of their internal auditor (Murphy, 2014). It was important for Axe Library to avoid negative publicity and ensure continued goodwill with the community and campus. Meta and Gray (2005) offer several keys to success in navigating public relations and weeding projects: offer advance notice of the project; have clear criteria about what will be removed from the collection; and provide a prompt, candid response to any criticism.

A final concern was a set of Faculty Senate guidelines outlining how Library Services was supposed to handle broad changes. These outdated guidelines from 1982 stated that faculty are to have two weeks to review materials. This created a number of logistical concerns, especially given the short number of weeks faculty have available during a semester.

### **Initial Plan**

Prior to starting the project, or even to finalizing weeding logistics, the librarians focused on updating the collection development policies. The updated policies were submitted through the Faculty Senate Library Services committee to the broader Faculty Senate for review. This step was key to the success of the project. This was the first opportunity to communicate, in a visible and transparent manner, to faculty and administrators the process Library Services was going to follow. This allowed faculty to provide feedback and start being engaged in the process.

After communicating the updated policies, the next step was to determine what the collection evaluation criteria and procedures would look like. Of the various methods to approach a collection-wide deselection project, the librarians chose to develop a single evaluation criterion that all books could be tested against. The criteria chosen for this project was that “books added to the collection prior to the year 2000 and with ‘0’ circulation statistics since the year 2000” would be reviewed. This uniform criterion was easy to communicate out to administrators and faculty. Along with communicating the criteria, librarians also communicated that materials falling within the criteria would be evaluated and reviewed, not just blindly removed. In keeping with the updated Faculty Senate guidelines, faculty would be informed of a two-week window when materials in their subject areas would be available for physical review at the library. Two weeks before the physical review, faculty were sent electronic files with the titles that were under consideration for deselection. They were strongly encouraged to visit the library during the physical review window to evaluate the physical condition of the materials and provide feedback. This opportunity for feedback was crucial and stressed to the faculty. They could communicate with the librarians electronically or when they physically evaluated materials. During the physical evaluation of materials, faculty were provided with flags to indicate items they wanted to retain in the collection or if they wished for withdrawn items to be transferred to their department or office library for personal research..

### **Pilot Program**

In theory, Library Services had created a collection de-selection criteria and plan that addressed initial librarian concerns and apprehension, but the plan needed to be tested. The oversize collection was used to conduct a pilot project during the spring semester of 2015. This collection was chosen because it represented materials from a large number of disciplines and subject areas. This pilot program was very revealing. It confirmed concerns that there would be some strong opposition to any removal

of materials, but it also showed that the outspoken voices were the exception, not the rule. It also helped identify areas where the message was not clear. Overall, the pilot project served to prepare the Library Services group for the full-scale project, starting during fall 2015, that was slated to last two to three years.

### **Progress and New Opportunities**

During the first few semesters of the weeding project, librarians encountered all types of feedback, from concerns of the library “losing its literary heritage” to engaged faculty happy to help in the process. A number of the faculty who were engaged in the process soon discovered materials and titles in the collection they never knew the library had. These faculty were exceedingly pleased to know that the library was willing to retain the material or even transfer materials to their departments for personal research. Negative feedback was outweighed by positive feedback. New opportunities started to emerge that were not originally anticipated. The New Partnerships section below outlines a few unique opportunities.

In addition, Axe Library partnered with Better World Books, an organization that accepts large volumes of books and sells some, with part of the proceeds coming back to the library, and some books they pass on to other libraries around the globe. This was a relief to many librarians who did not want to see perfectly good books recycled, but has also worked as a public relations tool. Many faculty with concerns about what was going to happen to all the old books had a sense of relief when informed that the books were being sent to Better World Books.

### **Communication**

A major impact of the process was the open dialogue created between library faculty and counterparts across campus. For a number of years, the library had been perceived as stagnant, with an aging collection that was misaligned with current academic needs. The weeding project allowed Library Services to evidence our interest in collaboration and support for student learning and faculty research. Throughout the process, faculty members were able to revisit parts of the collection and discover resources they may have missed. Faculty were also able to give valuable feedback about gaps in the collection and areas that needed updating to their liaisons. As a result, faculty have increased their requests for library acquisitions and for course reserves.

### **New Processes**

In an effort to capitalize on these open lines of communication, the library instituted a number of new processes and policies. Since faculty have invested much time and effort in the weeding project, Library Services hopes to communicate the value of their actions by providing additional ways to publicize new renovations, programs, and services. New acquisitions are now published in a monthly LibGuide. Newsletters, both campus-wide and department-specific, help to inform the community about what is new at the library. Axe Library has started hosting an annual “Welcome Back” event for faculty during the spring semester, allowing the library to socialize with stakeholders and showcase new spaces that were completed during the summer. The library is also working to streamline the online acquisitions request form, and to build relationships with new faculty during the University’s annual New Faculty Orientation program.

### **New Partnerships**

Several new partnerships are emerging from this project and the expectation is that there will be more new opportunities as the Information Commons continues to evolve and spaces remodeled.

- English and Modern Languages Reading Room: As faculty from the English and Modern Language department helped evaluate materials, they saw an opportunity to supplement a reading room in their department's building. A number of titles, such as older volumes of "The Best American Short Stories," will now be available for students in their lounge area and reading room.
- Herbarium: A faculty member with strong opinions on retaining materials and institutional history saw the value in having several withdrawn biology books sent to the campus herbarium. This partnership would allow students to use the historical texts and books in a location where they would most likely need them.
- Gender Studies Resource Center: As collection space is reduced and shelving is taken down, new opportunities are developing. One partnership is developing with the faculty in Women and Gender Studies and gender advocates on campus to create a safe study space in the library. Axe Library is excited at the prospect of serving a need on campus and seeing what additional programming opportunities occur.
- Artwork: In addition to partner opportunities, new spaces are also giving an opportunity to provide an artistic outlet and display works created by students. The library had the opportunity to serve as a "client" for students in a PSU art course and commission them to create murals. Currently four large murals are on are now on permanent display throughout the main floor. Axe Library was also the recent recipient of a group of paintings donated to the University by Dr. William and Norma Reals. The works, by noted Kansas artist Lester Raymer, are on long-term display on the main floor. Over the next few years Axe Library aims to continue to empower students to shape the space and showcase their talent.

### **Lessons Learned**

As the project enters its final stage, there are a number of lessons that can be extrapolated from the experience. One of the biggest takeaways is the importance of being consistent and communicating frequently. Along with communicating, it is important to have a core set of people to communicate this plan in a consistent manner. Many of the concerns and potentials for negative public relations dissipate when there is a clear process and a set of expectations. Especially when users can communicate and provide input.

Another big takeaway is the importance of paying attention to fatigue, both for the crew processing materials and for the faculty. Trying review, process, and move 150,000 books out the door in just a few years can really tax staff. Moving all those books to a review space, taking them out of the catalog, taking them out of OCLC, moving them into boxes for shipping to either Better World Books or for books in poor shape to the recycling center, takes a lot of effort and coordination. In addition, the teaching faculty also can get fatigue by getting too many lists sent to them in addition to all their normal duties of teaching, research, committees, and community service. There was a decline in enthusiasm and response as each semester got closer to the end. The last lesson for any library trying to undertake a large-scale weeding project is to start with a small pilot project. The pilot project can shine a light on areas that need to be tightened up before a full-scale project can start.

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