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Solving the Reference Dilemma

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ABSTRACT
At the June 2014 Association of Christian Librarians Conference, the workshop “Solving the Reference Dilemma” was presented by Mick Williams. This article encapsulates what was presented there verbally and via PowerPoint, as well as some details regarding what has transpired since at Nyack College’s Bailey Library.

Librarians face “The Reference Dilemma”: reference collections are being used less than in the past. Because reference books traditionally cannot be checked out, they tend to be ignored by students. Students tend to use reference books only if no other option exists, which is seen at Bailey Library as student usage of reference commentaries. These facts make it difficult for librarians to justify large reference collection purchases. On the other hand, students are more apt to use certain resources, including circulating collection books, e-books, and course reserves.

In the face of this situation, librarians have essentially two options. The first option: they could continue with the unsatisfactory and ultimately unsustainable status quo. The problem with this is that the reference collection will only grow even more irrelevant with time, and its already limited use will fade away. Once evangelical publishers’ materials begin to become more readily available online there will be very little reference collection use in its current configuration at Christian colleges. The second option: librarians can proactively engage in a paradigm shift. Although this may be frightening for some, it is far wiser than the status quo.

One way forward is to partially integrate extant reference collections into the circulating collection. This can be done by having many single-volume reference works be designated as circulating items instead of reference. This will take minimal work on the part of catalogers. Multi-volume reference books can be retained in the reference collection. One exception at Bailey Library will be our reference books from Dewey Decimal System (DDS) 200s (i.e. DDS 200–299). Most evangelical publishers’ reference books are not available in e-format, so this constantly used, shared resource needs to stay designated for in-house use at the present time.

An analysis was made of part of Bailey Library’s reference collection in order to get an idea of how many books would potentially be added to the circulating collection.
In the DDS 800s, 384 of the 739 books (approx. 52%) were single-volume reference books. In the DDS 900s, 345 of the 905 books (approx. 38%) were single-volume reference books. These numbers, if even somewhat illustrative, lead one to believe that perhaps slightly less than half the reference collection could eventually be integrated into the circulating collection. For this to transpire, however, some weeding of the circulating collection would be necessary.

At the present juncture there is very little room in Bailey Library’s circulating collection, despite many years of weeding. This is the case because new books are added every year. Since neither off-site storage nor compact shelving are options, careful weeding becomes necessary for the project to be able to take place. The so-called “80/20 rule” (i.e. 80% of the use is derived from 20% of the collection) is almost certainly the case at Bailey Library, as at most libraries. On the other hand, many books rarely or never get checked out. This leaves room for weeding, which, if done using wise parameters plus the professional judgment of librarians, can be both thorough and very justifiable.

Examples of reasonable weeding parameters might include limiting weeded items to those with copyrights at least twenty or thirty years old, depending on the library in question. Regarding the circulation history, one might say that only books not checked out for either ten or fifteen years would be eligible for weeding. Professional judgment is still necessary: The Odyssey or The Iliad are still “keepers” even if they have not been checked out recently. On the other hand, if the library has three copies of each then one or two of each could perhaps be weeded. Also, each segment of the collection may need to be treated differently. The DDS 200s should not receive the same parameters as the DDS 300s, for example.

A project of this size can actually serve as an exercise in morale building among the library’s student assistants (SAs). Inasmuch as it is a huge effort, getting through the process will require most or all of the SAs to participate. It came to light in the course of conversation at Bailey Library that SAs enjoy being a part of a “barn raising” type activity that really requires shared effort.

The initial goal was to get through the whole process in just a little more than a single year, but that was no doubt optimistic. Bailey Library just transitioned from one type of library software to another, so before the old software contract expired we created a report of all the circulating collection books that had not been checked out during the five years of the old software’s use. This would be a good starting parameter for potential “weeding candidates.” This came to roughly 40% of the circulating collection. We then printed out the report (in 20-page stapled packets), which came to 1,493 pages.

One should lay the ground work during the summer before the academic year begins by gathering data on the last year each item was checked out. During the
summer of 2014 the SAs were able to go through at least 200 of the 1,493 pages. Inasmuch as the software only went back five years, this data must be gathered via a visual inspection of the date-due slip at the back of each book. In our case we also have to gather the copyright date manually, due to the limitations of the report generated. We provided each SA with a Roman numeral conversion sheet to help her should she need it.

During the fall semester and spring semester of the academic year, one would be engaging in more data-gathering on potential “weeding candidates” and the actual weeding by the reference librarians and the catalogers. One would also have the catalogers begin changing most single-volume reference books into circulating collection books. In the case of a very modest (< 100,000 books) collection and an anomalously quiet year, it might be possible to complete the whole project by the end of the summer following the academic year, but probably not one out of ten given years would be that quiet. Even then, it would take an all-out effort, including careful scheduling and building in time cushions (winterim, spring break, etc.).

To the extent possible, it is a good idea to send weeded books to others who will benefit from them. Those books that are appropriate should be sent to groups like the Theological Book Network, which is part of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA). Other groups, such as Better World Books, can also be a valuable resource.

In the end, this process will result in a classic “win-win” situation. First, the former reference books transferred to the circulating collection will get more use. Second, the circulation collection will get a careful weeding, which benefits library patrons. Third, vacant space previously housing some of the reference books can be repurposed. Fourth, the new space made available can be showcased at the start of an academic year.

The future of reference collections will look increasingly different than the past. Far more of the reference collection will be e-reference. There will be some reference databases that are paid for annually, and there will be some resources that are paid for once and only require an annual maintenance fee. There will be increasing “demand driven acquisition” (DDO) for reference. The reference print collections will be smaller, containing a mixture of older “legacy” reference, evangelical materials, and carefully chosen print items. Much more of print reference will be immediately placed in circulating collections.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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