Comprehensive weeding of an academic health sciences collection: the Briscoe Library experience*

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INTRODUCTION

Weeding or deaccessioning of materials is an important component of collection development, yet it receives less attention than the selection of new materials in most health sciences libraries. Some libraries conduct weeding of their collections on a continual basis by weeding old editions, specific-subject areas, or damaged materials, while other libraries conduct comprehensive weeding of entire collections. For many libraries, the need to conserve shelf space is an important impetus for weeding. In all likelihood, most health sciences libraries do some weeding to keep current materials on the shelf and to reclaim needed shelf space. This article describes the experiences of one academic health sciences library, as we embarked on a comprehensive weeding project.

The Briscoe Library of The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio (UTHSCSA) is an academic health sciences library serving medical,

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dental, nursing, allied health, and biomedical graduate schools. The library moved into its first building in 1968 and into a newly constructed building in 1983. Some materials were weeded from the collection on a routine basis as part of standard retention policies identified for particular titles, or when shelf space became scarce in certain areas. However, a comprehensive weeding of the entire book and audiovisual (AV) collection had not been conducted since the library's beginnings. In January 1999, Briscoe Library staff began a weeding project that encompassed the entire book and AV collection, with the project completed in May 2000. The weeding project resulted in reclaimed shelf space, removal of out-of-date and duplicate materials, and identification of books needing repair or replacement.

WHY WEED?

A comprehensive weeding project is a time-consuming, labor-intensive effort, and library professionals debate the extent of collection weeding that is prudent. In fact, as Berry states in a 1997 editorial in *Library Journal,* ''most readers simply don't understand why a library, of all places, would want to throw away books'' [1]. So why weed? Slote identifies several different reasons for weeding, including appearance or condition of the material, removal of superfluous or duplicate volumes, poor content, language of publication, and age [2]. Magrill and Corbin identify three groups of criteria that are ordinarily used in making weeding decisions: usage, value or quality, and physical condition [3]. Kellerman states that ''weeding is the other side of selection. One part of the decisions on what to weed will again be dictated by the mission of your institution'' [4]. Stueart, in a 1985 overview of weeding, observes that the ''value of weeding lies primarily in developing a quality collection by eliminating out-of-date information that is potentially misleading and, in areas such as medicine, even dangerous'' [5]. Despite valid reasons for weeding, some librarians may be reluctant to weed due to possible repercussions from administration, faculty, or the community when large numbers of books are discarded. Other librarians may be reluctant to weed for fear of discarding material that may become important for future historical research.

Prior to beginning the comprehensive weeding project, we identified the compelling reasons to embark on weeding the Briscoe Library's collection, including opening up shelf space for newer volumes, withdrawing no longer needed duplicate volumes or older editions of standard textbooks, and deleting older materials that might contain dated or inaccurate information, were out-of-scope for our collection, or were no longer used. In addition, we sought to identify and repair or withdraw materials that were in poor condition and to determine areas of the collection needing new acquisitions. Some libraries use either on-campus or off-campus storage for old or little used materials; we did not consider either storage option viable for our library, because readily accessible storage facilities were not available.

Table 1
Briscoe Library: books and audiovisuals to consider for weeding

Consider for weeding if the book or audiovisual is:
- A piece published or produced prior to 1990, with no circulation since 1983 (the start date for online circulation records) according to circulation record or date-due stamp.
- A duplicate copy published prior to 1990. For books published in 1990 or later, generally retain one duplicate copy of heavily used textbooks.
- A major textbook, weed all editions except the two most recent. First and third editions can be kept for historical reference purposes.
- A yearbook or almanac published prior to 1990.
- A work that is damaged beyond repair.

PROJECT PREPARATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Several preparatory steps were necessary prior to beginning the weeding project. In a 1981 study of weeding policies in eleven health sciences resource libraries, Goldstein stated that: ''Obviously, the existence and nature of provisions governing the disposal of library materials in a given institution must be determined before the first book is thrown in the trash can, put up for sale, or given away'' [6]. Thus, consultation with the university's legal and inventory offices was the first necessary step to determine allowable disposal methods for materials purchased with university funds. Before disposal, we were required to make weeded material available for acquisition by other University of Texas (UT) system libraries; then we were free to offer withdrawn materials to UTHSCSA faculty, staff, and students; and finally we could discard any leftover materials. Once rules for disposal were identified, we developed guidelines for those materials to be considered for withdrawal, planned for obtaining faculty feedback regarding potential materials to be withdrawn, and wrote procedures for removing books and audiovisuals from the shelf and withdrawing them from the collection.

Tables 1 and 2 summarize the general weeding and retention guidelines that the librarians used, along with their subjective judgment, to identify whether a book or audiovisual should be considered for weeding or retention. In addition to the guidelines shown in the tables, some special guidelines were developed for reviewing audiovisuals. Librarians were to weed audiovisuals that were in formats no longer supported by the library, for example, filmstrips and three-quarter inch videocassettes, slide sets with ten or more missing slides, and some videocassettes produced prior to 1993.

Table 2
Briscoe Library: books and audiovisuals to consider for retention

Consider for retention if the book or audiovisual is:
- A publication with content that is historical, written by local authors or The University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio (UTHSCSA) faculty, or unique to Texas or San Antonio.
- A work whose volumes are part of a numbered monographic series (for example, *Ciba Foundation Symposia, Progress in Clinical and Biological Research*).
- A piece whose volumes are in a series indexed by MEDLINE (for example, *Major Problems in . . .* series).
- An edition of selected major textbooks to be kept for historical purposes (for example, *Williams Obstetrics, Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*).
- A book containing statistical information that can be used to study trends.
- A biographical directory.
- In doubt, keep it!

Librarians from the Public Services and Collection Development departments volunteered to weed collection sections of particular interest to them, and one part-time librarian was hired to work under the direction of the associate library director for collection development to assist with the weeding project. The head of technical services produced reports, obtained from the Briscoe Library's Innovative Interfaces, Inc. (III), integrated library system, identifying materials that received little or no circulation since 1983, when automated circulation records were begun.

''Weeding librarians'' used the lists developed from the III catalog and circulation records to do shelf checks of books and audiovisuals that had received little or no circulation since the 1983 cut-off date. In addition to books and AVs that were listed on the potential weeding list, librarians checked virtually every book on the shelves to determine use of material, its condition, and its subject-matter relevance. After reviewing a book or AV on the shelf, librarians inserted a bookmark with a call number in each book or audiovisual identified for potential weeding. Books and AVs identified for weeding with a bookmark were kept on the shelf for at least two months, up to a maximum of six months. A notation on the bookmark requested any potential users of the material to comment on whether the book or AV should be kept or withdrawn. Shelving staff were also instructed to pull bookmarks from materials identified for weeding that circulated or were found to have been used inhouse during the reshelving process. In addition to identifying books to be weeded, librarians also identified books needing repair by tagging them with a repair slip. These books were later pulled from the shelf and repaired, withdrawn, or replaced as needed.

After identifying books and AVs to be weeded, the weeding librarians gave this information to the library's cataloging staff, who marked the item record for each piece to be weeded in the III catalog record. The item information was used to compile final lists of materials to be weeded from the shelf and withdrawn from the catalog. The catalog item records were also used to produce a year-end accounting of materials withdrawn from the library's collection, a process conducted on an annual basis.

The library's Web team used the III item records to produce lists in hypertext markup language (HTML) format of materials selected for weeding. These HTML lists were posted on the library's Website for UTHSCSA faculty and UT system collection development librarians to review, with the intention that faculty could request items for retention and other UT libraries could request items to be transferred to their collections, if they desired.

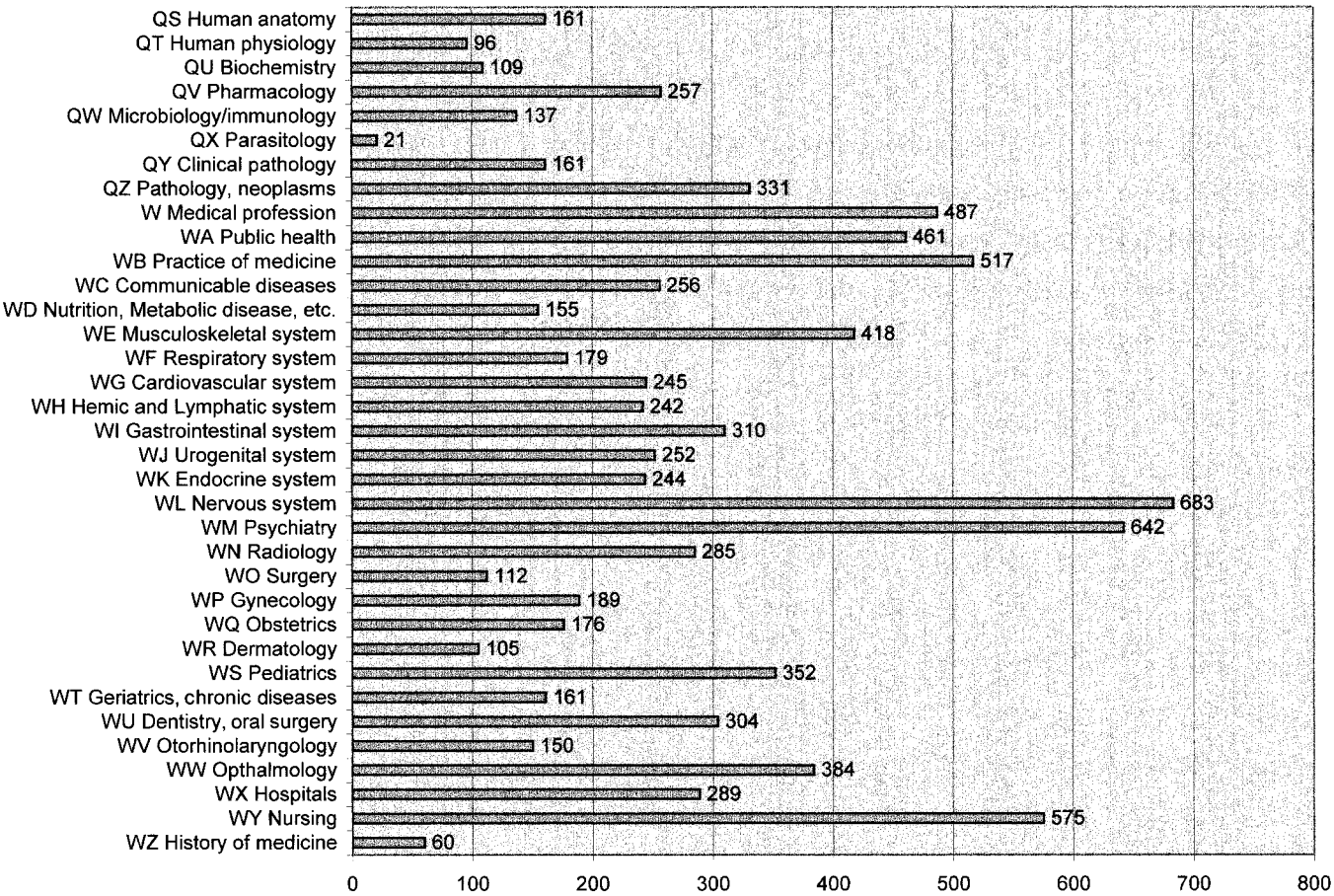
At the beginning of the weeding project, we mounted a colorful display about weeding the collection at the entrance to the library as a communication mechanism to alert library users about the weeding project. In addition, throughout the weeding project, we published articles describing the progress of the weeding project in the *Library News,* the library's monthly newsletter distributed to all faculty. The articles referenced the weeding Web page, so that faculty and other interested individuals could review the list of items to be weeded and provide feedback about the selections to library staff.

RESULTS

The comprehensive weeding project required eighteen months to complete and resulted in 11,777 books and audiovisuals being withdrawn from the library's collection of more than 116,000 books and audiovisuals. This represented a 9.9% reduction in the library's book and AV holdings. Figure 1 summarizes the major National Library of Medicine (NLM) call number classes, along with the number of items weeded from each class. Using the NLM classifications, we weeded the largest number of books from the neurology, psychiatry, practice of medicine, health professions, and nursing sections and the fewest number of books from the history of medicine, parasitology, and physiology sections. History of medicine was a logical class requiring little weeding, because the materials in this area were historical by nature and thus did not become dated as did books and AVs intended to describe current practice. In terms of the percentage of books weeded in relation to the total number of books initially held in the various NLM classes, the largest percentages of materials were withdrawn from the otorhinolaryngology (39%), pathology and neoplasms (34%), hospitals (22%), and hemic and lymphatic system (20%) sections. The smallest percentages of materials were withdrawn from the following classes: pharmacology (7%), microbiology/immunology (6%), surgery (5%), biochemistry (4%), and history of medicine (2%).

During the project, eleven librarians assisted with identifying materials to be weeded. Some librarians

Figure 1
UTHSCSA library distribution of weeded materials, National Library of Medicine classes



worked on the project for limited periods of time, usually devoting two to three hours per week, whenever they could find time from their regular duties. In addition to full-time librarians who volunteered to work a few hours per week on weeding, a part-time librarian was hired whose sole duty was to work on selecting materials for weeding. Because librarians who volunteered to assist with the weeding project had many other duties, the project would probably not have been completed within the eighteen-month time frame without hiring a part-time librarian whose duties were focused on selecting materials for weeding.

During the weeding project, faculty requested some books for retention, and we generally honored these requests. Other books identified for retention through the bookmark method, being used either inhouse or through check-out, were in most cases not weeded from the collection. We obtained the most information about retention of material identified for weeding as a result of the bookmarks pulled by reshelving staff after a book or AV was used inhouse or circulated. Because we did not maintain inhouse use records for books or AVs, this reshelving information proved to be very valuable in determining items that were still in use but had little or no identified use in circulation records.

A major benefit of the weeding project was to increase the amount of open shelf space available for future collection growth. A planned inventory followed the weeding project and removal of unnecessary materials prior to the inventory was another benefit of weeding. By weeding older books and audiovisuals, we anticipate that over time newer materials will be more visible, and circulation will increase as a result. However, at present, we do not have data that support increased circulation following weeding. In a 1988 review article, Roy cites several articles that examine the effect of weeding on circulation of materials, however, her conclusion is that the effect of weeding on circulation is still ill defined and warrants further study [7].

Following withdrawal of books and AVs, we disposed of weeded materials by holding weekly book

giveaways, transferring some books to campus departments or faculty, or discarding materials not disposed of by some other means. A few local charities were interested in accepting some withdrawn books, but, after review of a sample of weeded books, the charities realized that the discarded materials were old and possibly out of date and only accepted a few books. We received no requests from other UT system libraries to transfer materials to their collections, a finding similar to that reported by Eldredge and Guenther during their journal weeding project. During their project, they offered weeded journals to other health sciences libraries through an electronic mailing list, but no libraries accepted the offer of weeded materials [8].

CONCLUSION

Weeding continues to be an important component of collection development, particularly in health sciences libraries where the most recent information is needed for decision making and where retention of out-dated materials may have critical consequences, such as an outmoded method of therapy being employed as the result of dated material kept on the shelf. Reclaiming shelf space for collection growth is also an important benefit of weeding, as is identification of materials needing repair or replacement. Despite its benefits, many libraries do not undertake comprehensive weeding projects due to the staff time required to conduct such a project. Other factors discouraging weeding may be institutional or governmental policies regarding disposal of purchased materials and fear of faculty dissatisfaction about materials weeded from the collection.

During the project, we learned that comprehensive weeding requires a considerable amount of staff time. It is relatively easy to underestimate the amount of time needed to review an entire book and AV collection and to withdraw materials identified for weeding. We also learned that communication with the library's clientele during the weeding project was especially important. We communicated information about weeding progress by frequent articles in the library's monthly newsletter, through the library's Website, and by marking materials identified for weeding with a bookmark. An important lesson is to be flexible—it is just as easy and prudent to keep a faculty member's favorite book as to withdraw it. In retrospect, we could have improved our weeding project by keeping track of the reclaimed shelf space by measuring the space occupied by the weeded materials.

With any weeding project, librarians run the risk of withdrawing material from the library's collection that may become useful in the future for historical reasons. However, the weeding project at the Briscoe Library has resulted in opening up shelf space by removing dated, damaged, and little-used materials from the shelf, and these benefits must be weighed against the risk of withdrawing material that may be needed in the future.

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