

Posted to ACRL Members Discussion Board at ALA Connect, July 30, 2023

POST

Poster: Kris Johnson, MSU Bozeman Library

Subject: Thoughts on Maintaining or Dismantling Print Reference Collections in Academic Libraries

Post: Since discontinuing our reference desk in 2018, librarians are not actively using our print reference collection. We observe minimal use of this collection by users and I'm considering proposing that we conduct a deselection project then move the remaining materials to our general collection. I've done a lit review but am casually wondering what folks' thoughts are on this topic and this point in time for our profession. Feel free to reply to me outside this thread if you like (krisjohnson@montana.edu) or contribute to the conversation publicly by replying here. I'm looking forward to learning from all of you.

RESPONSES

1. University of Portland, Clark Library (Oregon)

- a. This year my weeding project was my library's reference collection, and in reviewing in-house usage statistics I saw that many items had not been used in the past year. Plus, my colleagues and I have not been referring people to the collection as often, our curriculum has changed so students don't have to use certain encyclopedias or handbooks that had been in reference, and some major titles had ceased publication or moved online. So, in consultation with my colleagues I withdrew or move to stacks 90% of the collection. Our reference collection now looks like what I remember having as Ready Reference many years ago – fewer than 15 items. The collection had been in compact shelving so we removed the shelves and recovered the space for more work tables.
- b. Heidi E. K. Senior, Reference/Instruction Librarian, senior@up.edu

2. The Ohio State University at Newark/Central Ohio Technical College/University Libraries

- a. We're a regional branch campus of Ohio State University (collocated with a community college). Just this summer, I did an overhaul of our print reference collection and integrated most of it into the circulating, general collection. I did also weed a LOT of the stuff—my basic question I asked myself about many things was “would I, personally, just search for this info online?” which pushed me to toss things like general almanacs, gazetteers, our general encyclopedias (my thought was basically if I, a librarian, wouldn't pull a book out to find this answer, there's no way a student would), and things that have just lingered in reference because it's always been ignored in previous weeding projects. The few things we kept in the ref collection were: drug reference manuals and other desk reference stuff for our nursing program, the standard citation/style guides (they don't get a lot of use, but sometimes they are just what you need), and a handful of

things that we know are used by specific classes and we don't want to put them into circulating for fear a student would check them out and disrupt the assignment (we also have print reserves, but space there is limited so we opt to put some things in reference). One thing I will note about our space: our reference collection is on the ground floor while the circulating collection is on the second floor. We now have a lot of "prime" shelf space on a different floor and are struggling to figure out how to split apart the collection to make this work—our stacks are quite full so the general collection can only ***barely*** accommodate merging the two so we need to figure out how we can split the general collection without confusing students.

- b. Dai Newman, Reference and Instruction Librarian, newman.876@osu.edu

3. Haverford College Libraries (Pennsylvania)

- a. We did exactly what you proposed--disbanded our reference section and moved the reference books to the general collection. Many of them are still non-circulating, but I'm wondering if I could ease up on that, too. I'm afraid I don't have any evidence to share about whether they are being used more or not. But I do think it's more intuitive to find them, and certainly the browsability helps.
- b. Carol Howe, Science Librarian, chowe@haverford.edu

4. Mohawk Valley Community College Library (New York)

- a. I've overseen the dismantling of the Reference Collection at both institutions I've worked at! One was a small community college, the other a medium-sized CC. At both, usage of the collection was nearly nonexistent (being shelved in Reference impeded the use of the titles that were still useful- students would avoid books they couldn't check out even if they were the perfect resource), and the shelves were taking up much-needed space that we could better use for other services; at the smaller institution we used the shelf space to create an often-requested leisure reading collection (moving items from the Ps that seemed like likely candidates to do so). At my current institution we dismantled the shelves to give students more study space. At both institutions we discarded more than ¾ of the titles, moved others to the circulating collection, and put a very select high-demand few (DSM-5, citation manuals- probably 5 to 10 titles per institution) behind the desk as Reserve items. The projects were labor-intensive but successfully "renovated" a space with a zero-dollar budget. A few long-time faculty grumbled a bit about the way of the world (but couldn't say they hadn't been kept informed), while reaction from students was extremely positive. At my current institution we've been without the Reference Collection for a full academic year now, with no impact on the reference staff's ability to assist students. Things we did that worked well:
 - i. Collected good data on use of the collection and requests for the service we hoped to provide in its stead, to show we were innovating to meet a need, rather than just changing for change's sake.
 - ii. Communicated early and often what we were doing and why (and that any useful information contained in the collection wasn't going away: we would either keep or replace electronically anything anyone needed).
 - iii. Got buy-in and valuable contributions from everyone on the library's staff (might be challenging at a larger institution). While two or three people did the

bulk of the work, it felt like "our" project, which was much more successful than one person going it alone.

- b. Claire Ehrlich, Reference & Instruction Librarian, cehrlich@mvcc.edu

5. Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, Bell Library

- a. We dismantled our reference collection a couple of years ago. The collection received minimal if any use and took up a lot of space. We had an opportunity to collaborate with our student academic success folks to create a Learning Commons in the library and needed a place to put it, so we targeted the print reference and government documents collections for removal and/or relocation (the latter only for a small subset of materials). Our library is small, and any expansion is far down the road (if it happens at all). The space has been reconfigured for tutoring and study, and is very heavily used. It was a solid decision. At the time, I reached out to colleagues at UNC-Greensboro, where I had worked previously, and they told me that they had dismantled their reference collection years before. That made me feel like we weren't out of step.
- b. Lisa Louis, Director, User and Research Services, lisa.louis@tamucc.edu

6. Forsyth Technical Community College Library, North Carolina

- a. At the community college where I work, we've made some exciting changes lately by transitioning to RFID technology. One notable change is that we've integrated the Reference books with the rest of the collection. The good news is that now, Reference books can circulate, except for the legal collection, which remains in the Reference section of the library. Our main motivation for dismantling the traditional reference collection was to boost circulation. It made sense in larger academic institutions, but here at our college, we wanted to ensure that the materials we offer are actually being used and are relevant to our student's needs. I believe this shift will help us stay in tune with our students' demands and optimize the resources we have available. It's an exciting time as we adapt to the evolving needs of our community and make our library even more valuable to our college's academic experience.
- b. Placedia Miller, Library Director, pmiller@forsythtech.edu

7. Huntingdon College Library (Alabama)

- a. I'm at a small private college (for context). While we have conducted a deselection of our print reference collection, we still have one and it's maintained as a reference collection (though we have moved some titles to our circulating collection). There are titles in our print reference collection that aren't available in any other format (and likely couldn't be replaced even as print). Does the print reference collection get used? Not much, with the exception of a few areas (such as biblical commentaries), but I believe it is still worth maintaining, and we do occasionally add a title to the collection (though electronic certainly has become the main format when adding "reference" titles to our collections).
- b. Eric A. Kidwell, Professor/Director of the Library/Title IX Coordinator

8. University of Jamestown Library (North Dakota)

- a. I'm at a small university in ND; we weeded our print reference collection pretty heavily last summer and were not the only library in the state to do so (a few of us presented about this at our state library association conference last fall). Our print reference section was not large to start with (~2400 titles), but last summer just over half of the collection was withdrawn or transferred to the general collection (mostly withdrawn). Our reference shelves surround our main group study area, so I then also spent some time trying to make the reference shelves more visually appealing and easily browsable with subject signs and face-outs, and to draw attention to the most commonly used items. For us, that's citation manuals and test prep resources. We made the choice to emphasize and add to those two areas specifically (acknowledging that test prep resources aren't necessarily traditional reference materials), and anecdotally that has seemed to work, although the rest of the collection is still largely ignored. So, we haven't gotten rid of it completely, but we did start down that path last summer.
- b. Amanda Walch, Reference and Instruction Librarian

9. King's College, Corgan Library (Pennsylvania)

- a. Due a very uncertain building renovation we are in the process of evaluating our large and outdated reference collection, so I am looking forward to seeing responses. Over the past few years we've moved a few things to the circulating collection, but we still have a ton of excess. Our issue is that we have several hundred reference books and series on religion and theology because we are a small private Catholic college. These books are used regularly by the clergy on campus who are scholars and researchers, and they want to know those books will be on the shelves. We are debating whether the theology material should be the bulk of a revised reference section or something else. We've always had so much space it actually made sense to keep a larger collection even if it was outdated because otherwise all those shelves would be empty. However, I know from experience elsewhere that aggressive weeding resulting in a lean, carefully curated total collection greatly improves circulation. Another issue is that we have a lot of good multi-volume sets, and I remember from when I worked elsewhere that as soon as those were made circulating the key volumes went missing. For me the cost to replace expensive items with a flat budget is a big reason for some sort of reference designation, in addition to availability. We thought it would be so easy to downsize our Ref collection but when we actually went through all kinds of thorny issues came up.
- b. Krista Pegnetter, Instruction & Reference Librarian

10. Cleveland Institute of Art Library

- a. We are a very small private college of art & design. We heavily weeded our print reference collection in 2017 and moved everything we kept to the circulating collection. We took a conservative approach to circulating those items, making them one week items instead of our normal circ period. They did not see a bump in use and many of them are part of our weeding project this summer. There has never been a moment of regret over this project here.
- b. Laura Ponikvar, Library Director

11. New York Institute of Technology

- a. We did this a few years ago. We are a small private college and we needed the space so we weeded the print ref collection and integrated the rest into our general collection but kept them as Reference books and put a large R sticker on them.
- b. Eduardo Rivera, Librarian

12. University of Houston Libraries

- a. We did just this about 12 years ago. We dumped our print ref collection into the circulating collection and things have been just fine. Any faculty who were upset at the prospect were encouraged to place reference materials on course reserve (so we could get a better idea of usage), then gradually dropped them or were provided with usage stats and encouraged to remove them (b/c they weren't being used). We're also e-preferred, so a print reference collection doesn't align well with our approach there. But that's more recent.
- b. Kerry Creelman, Associate Dean for Collections Strategies & Discovery

13. California State University Fresno

- a. I saw your request on today's ACRL ALA connect and thought that I would respond. What you are suggesting is exactly what you should be doing. I am retired now, but when I was at Fresno State I made everything circulating except for Special Collections. Students could check out regular books, reference books, bound journals, even microfilm (which of course, no one ever wanted). Loan periods varied, but everything was available. We left the reference books on the reference shelving at the time. We also kept data on in-house usage of all materials. After a few years, we had accurate data on what was and wasn't being used throughout the library. Not surprisingly, with a few exceptions, use of most reference books was zero. We then weeded the collection and opened up some prime space on the first floor (the reference area) for seating and other uses. When we first started circulating reference books, some of the librarians were worried about what would happen if they did not return. That was a natural concern that proved to be pretty much negligible. So few books ever went out and they pretty much all came back. I encourage you to weed and move the books that you want to keep. When they are in the stacks students will discover them while they are looking for other books and might check them out. If you do not have room in the stacks, keep them in reference but make them circulating. Once you have solid data on their usage, you will find that you will be weeding even more of them.
- b. David Tyckoson, Librarian Emeritus