

The lives of books

Legacy print collections and the learning-centered library

Few librarians and teaching faculty who worked at Augustana College (IL) in 2011 will quickly forget the events of that year. As Carla Tracy related in a July 2011 article for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, an effort that spring to withdraw books that had not been used in 25 or more years led Augustana's library "to inadvertently sen[d] part of a reprint collection, written in classical Chinese, to the recycling center."¹ Unsurprisingly, neither the construction project being planned for the library building nor various early attempts to prepare the campus—including a white paper and a faculty retreat speaker—made the fate of these books (not to mention the library's larger book-withdrawal plan) seem palatable for much of the campus.

Disposing of books touches a basic human nerve, not just for those, such as campus faculty, who feel a sense of immediate ownership, but for anyone who hears a story like ours. Reader comments on the *Chronicle* article were largely supportive but ranged to incredulous and very angry. The local newspaper published an article about the incident.

Two years later, Augustana's saga reached the status of cautionary tale when an article in *C&RL News* cited it as a signal example of what happens when "non-reuse minded or rash weeding decisions are made"; i.e., "deselection may become justifiably conflated with 'libricide' in the minds of patrons."²

Our purpose here is to begin reframing the questions that surrounded this incident. That means, first, reviewing the event itself. But even more important is the event's historical moment, a time when an over-abundance of print has crowded college libraries, even as transformations in the delivery of information and undergraduate education itself necessitate reimagining those libraries' very purpose.

We worked for Augustana College at the time the Chinese books were removed, and we were significantly involved in the campus-wide weeding conversations that followed; thus, we can be precise about what occurred.

As Tracy has written, the Chinese volumes in question were "inadvertently sent . . . to the recycling center" just as the college began earnestly to plan a new Center for Student Life (CSL).³

By the time of its completion in August 2013, this construction would not only add significant square footage to the library building but also repurpose one-and-one-half floors of existing library space in order to accommodate academic support offices, multi-purpose rooms, and the college's central dining facility. The college's administration had indicated that construction of this building would be on a fast track, primarily due to the pressing need for more student meeting space and for replacement of a truly antiquated dining hall.

Greatly concerned with doing such an extensive weeding project in a short amount of time, the librarians decided to do a first "sweep" of outdated and unused textbooks and of some professional materials in business and education. But a mistake was made when areas of literature were also weeded. As part of a reprint collection of major classical Chinese texts,⁴ the recycled volumes were not rare; in fact, the collection is held at numerous research libraries in the United States. Only one or two professors at Augustana were able to read the classical language in which they were written.

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The books' greatest value thus resided in the personal meaning they held for certain faculty on campus; the dismay of those faculty, combined with others' shock at the news, made the books' fate at the recycling center seem, to many, like sudden, heartless "shredding."

On the surface, the Augustana library's experience may seem merely to reaffirm what most of us already know about the emotional attachments people have to books. (Public libraries deal with those attachments regularly.) To consider this particular incident from that perspective only, however, would be to obscure the fundamental shift that ultimately underlay both the Chinese books' removal and the emotional responses in themselves.

The controversy that appeared at first glance to swirl around a discrete set of individual titles was, in truth, a debate about what constitutes an undergraduate library collection. Claims about the use to which those volumes could have, or should have, been put merely hinted at more fundamental questions about the very definition of usefulness. Many smaller academic libraries will face these pressing concerns—What is an undergraduate collection? and What makes that collection useful?—in the coming years, and they will need to treat them separately from traditional questions of attachment.

At Augustana, the connection between the classical Chinese books' removal and construction of CSL is intimate; in fact, those books, and the campus-wide weeding controversy their recycling ignited, cannot be discussed outside the context of CSL. The library accidentally removed the Chinese books as it faced the imminent decision to construct CSL and anticipated the significant shrinkage of the book collection that construction would require. Although our community's response was certainly fueled by its emotional attachment to books and its distaste for destroying them, the conversation was ultimately about far more, and weightier, questions about libraries and the future of liberal arts colleges:

- What is the purpose of a college library's print collection?
 - to signify the college's academic standing and prestige?

- to preserve institutional memory (in this case, the legacy of the faculty member who had brought the classical Chinese books to our campus)?

- to provide a record of the collection development decisions made by librarians and faculty through the years of the college's existence?

- to encourage intellectual curiosity by enabling students to make surprise discoveries?

- to provide resources on a "just in case" basis? Or, rather, "just in time"?

- How do we justify using so much space, in so many libraries, for resources that are rarely touched and are duplicated elsewhere? How many copies of any given book do we need?

- What role will libraries have at liberal arts colleges in the future?

- For that matter, what role will small, residential liberal arts colleges have as the educational landscape of the United States transforms?

The temporary halt to weeding that our president called after the Chinese book controversy gave the entire campus time to recover from the event's emotional impact. The fact remained, however, that once plans for CSL received final approval, weeding had to proceed, even with the promised installation of compact shelving on the building's ground floor. When weeding began again several months later—with streamlined plans in place for soliciting faculty input, establishing giveaway shelves for students, and sending the remaining discarded books to Better World Books—the campus community had to face a new reality in which library books' lifespan would be determined by use, relevance to the curriculum, and suitability to undergraduate research.

The Augustana library, which had done little weeding in the previous 150 years of its history, removed tens of thousands of books in the ensuing eight months prior to the start of construction. Now, with the completed CSL in place, we envision a vibrant, ever-changing collection, responsive to the curriculum and enriched by the millions of titles in Illinois's statewide academic library consortium, which one Augustana librarian humorously referred to

during the weeding process as our very own “off-site storage facility.” One might say that CSL effectively forced many of the above questions about the purpose of print collections on our campus and challenged us to create a new kind of library.

As of August 2013, Augustana’s Center for Student Life brings the college’s library, writing center, multicultural student life office, and international student office into the same building with student activities, multipurpose rooms, and the central dining hall. CSL not only centralizes many academic support services but also emphasizes the connections between student learning and the rest of campus life. The library portion of the building has a smaller circulating collection, as well as improved group study areas, a technology classroom, and an expanded special collections classroom, allowing us to accommodate 21st-century needs while highlighting the part of the library collection—our rare books and archives—that will remain unique into the future.

Why is our story relevant to other libraries? We at Augustana have come to understand CSL as a (thus far) unique incarnation of what it might mean to have a learning-centered library. Scott Bennett not long ago defined the change in “paradigms” from “book-centered” to “learning-centered” libraries: put simply, as libraries undergo the shift from print to largely digital information, and students no longer need to visit library buildings to obtain many research materials, the purpose of library spaces will change as well to facilitate learning rather than storage of books.⁵

The problem many academic libraries, including smaller ones, face is that they are still crowded with their legacy print collections, even as information becomes more and more easily available and students’ learning styles demand better study areas and a variety of academic support systems.⁶ Very few of these institutions have the resources to construct and staff a proper storage facility. The removal of the Chinese books catalyzed Augustana’s conversation about our legacy print collection in a way that no one would have wished for. But the conversation itself is one that dozens, if

not hundreds, of academic libraries across the country will need to lead with their campus communities in coming years.

We at Augustana hope to communicate what we have learned about conducting such conversations as more libraries transition from book- to learning-centered; in this way, the more difficult parts of our journey might help others in the future. Of course, complete analyses of Augustana’s weeding project and construction of CSL are not possible in an article of this length. Thus, interested readers are invited to revisit Tracy’s 2011 *Chronicle* article and read 2013 publications by Tracy and Augustana’s president Steven Bahls.⁷ Other Augustana librarians have works in progress about re-envisioning circulating collections in the context of complex disciplinary and campus cultures.

We admire the strength of our colleagues in the library world who have faced or continue to face the dismay of community members when they learn that books are being discarded or otherwise withdrawn from the shelves. In telling our own story here, we hope to add a needed dimension to the conversation, that is, to begin encouraging colleagues in the academic library profession to consider what defines the lifecycle of collections and how to proceed with the necessary campus conversations about this vital issue. We welcome and invite ongoing conversations with other libraries that face similar transitions in the years ahead.

Notes

1. Carla Tracy, “On Mistakenly Shredding a Prized Collection,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 57, no. 42 (2011), <http://chronicle.com/article/article-content/128366/>.
2. Natalie Tagge and Char Booth, “Constructive Destruction: Examining the Life Cycle of Texts through RE:BOOK,” *College & Research Libraries News* 74 (2013): 404.
3. Tracy, “On Mistakenly.”
4. *Ibid.*
5. Scott Bennett, “Libraries and Learning: A History of Paradigm Change,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 9, no. 2 (2009): 181–97.

(continues on page 581)

Net neutrality advocacy continues

ALA and the Center for Democracy & Technology recently urged the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to adopt strong, enforceable net neutrality rules essential to preserving freedom of speech, educational achievement, and economic growth online. In a letter to the FCC, the organizations call for the FCC to set the bar higher than the “commercially reasonable” standard the agency had proposed—whether using Title II for reclassification or Section 706 of the Communications Act, for a standard of Internet reasonableness to preserve the open nature of the Internet.

In October, John Windhausen, network neutrality counsel to ALA and president of Telepoly Consulting, represented libraries and higher education institutions as a panelist for an Open Internet roundtable discussion hosted by the FCC.

ALA launches educational 3-D printing policy campaign

In September, ALA announced the launch of “Progress in the Making,” a new educational campaign that will explore the public policy opportunities and challenges of 3-D printer adoption by libraries. The association released “Progress in the Making: An Introduction to 3D Printing and Public Policy,” a tip sheet that provides an overview of 3-D printing, describes a number of ways libraries are currently using 3-D printers, outlines the legal implications of providing the technology, and details ways that libraries can implement simple yet protective 3-D printing policies in their own libraries.

Over the next coming months, ALA will release a white paper and a series of tip sheets that will help the library community better understand and adapt to the growth of 3-D printers, specifically as the new technol-

ogy relates to intellectual property law and individual liberties.

OTIP leaders attend ICMA Conference

ALA staff attended the International City/County Management Association Conference in Charlotte, held September 14–17. Larra Clark, OITP deputy director, shared findings and new tools from the Digital Inclusion Survey, with a particular focus on how local communities can use the new interactive mapping tools to connect library assets to community demographics and concerns.

OITP director appointed to University of Maryland Advisory Board

The College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland has appointed Alan Inouye, director of ALA’s Office for Information Technology Policy, to the inaugural Advisory Board for the university’s Master of Library Science degree program. The Advisory Board comprises of 17 leaders and students in the information professions who will guide the future development of the university’s MLS program. The board’s first task will be to engage in a strategic “re-envisioning the MLS” discussion. *~*

(“The lives of books” cont. from page 562)

6. For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Carla B. Tracy, “Fast-Forward: The Transformation of Excellence,” in *Excellence in the Stacks: Strategies, Practices, and Reflections of Award-Winning Libraries*, ed. Jacob Hill and Susan Swords Steffen (Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2013): 55–56.

7. Tracy, “On Mistakenly”; Tracy, “Fast-Forward”; Steven Bahls, “When a President Needed to Recalibrate His Thinking,” *Inside Higher Ed*, 11 September 2013, www.insidehighered.com/blogs/alma-mater/when-president-needed-recalibrate-his-thinking (accessed October 8, 2014). *~*

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