Current Professional Thinking on the Deaccessioning of Rare Books in Academic Libraries

RICHARD W. ORAM

In 1981, Brown University was the site of the first (and to date only) conference to be devoted entirely to the topic of deaccessioning rare books. In effect, the Brown symposium, organized by Samuel Streit and Thomas Adams, brought deaccessioning out of the back room and into the light of day. One might have expected a spirited curatorial debate to follow, much like the one that raged in the art museum world in the 1970s and '80s. Instead, after an initial boomlet of articles on deaccessioning of rare books, the rest has been largely silence—a silence which may mean that the topic is simply no longer controversial. The fact that a subsection of the "Guidelines for Institutional Practice" in the revised RBMS Ethics Statement is devoted to deaccessioning also seems to indicate that there has been widespread professional acceptance of the practice.

Has deaccessioning become a fully established collection management procedure in most academic special collections? Did the prediction of the Brown conference organizers that "more and more rare book and special collections libraries will contemplate deaccession as a means of alleviating their straitened circumstances" come true as well? And if some librarians continue to object to deaccessioning, on what grounds do they object? I attempted to answer these as well as related questions by surveying both current attitudes and practices relating to deaccessioning of rare books (manuscripts and other non-book items were specifically excluded) in college and university special collections. At the outset, I felt that it would be helpful to refer to a generally accepted definition of "deaccessioning" (or is it "deaccession," the term preferred by the Brown conference organizers?). Unfortunately, there apparently is no such thing. The term is not listed in the latest editions of the ALA Glossary or Harrod's Librarian's Glossary. In Library Literature, we find only a cross reference to "Disposal of books, periodicals, etc.," a catch-all heading that includes guides to running book sales and weeding of general collections. So it became necessary to supply my own definition. The first difficulty arose in the process of determining what "accessioned" means in the library context. Whereas in a museum, single items are "accessioned" by a registrar, in rare book libraries the concept of "accessioning"
is less precise, since most special collections no longer keep accession logs. For my purposes, both cataloged and uncataloged books are considered part of the accessioned collection, yet the weeding of gift items when they first enter the door is not considered to be deaccessioning. I also excluded the concept of intra-institutional transfer, while including external transfer as well as the sale of rare materials, before arriving at this somewhat cumbersome definition: "For the purposes of this survey, deaccessioning is considered to be the permanent removal of printed materials from a library collection. The routine deselection of non-rare books from gifts at the time they are accepted (even if they are not actually disposed of until later to comply with IRS regulations) will NOT be considered deaccessioning, nor will internal transfers from the rare books/special collections department to another library unit or department at the same institution."

In May 1995, I sent questionnaires to a representative group of one hundred American college and university libraries. I received responses from professional staff at sixty institutions listed in Appendix A; 65% of the responses came from rare book collections with fewer than 100,000 volumes and 60% of the responses were from public institutions. The data I received indicate that deaccessioning is both a more widespread and less controversial collection management practice than it was a decade ago. Those opposed to the practice may, however, take some comfort in the fact that such acceptance is far from unanimous.

To find out how widespread deaccessioning is at present, I inquired if there had been any such activity in the respondents' institutions during the past five years. Exactly half of the libraries had deaccessioned books from their collections within that period. Further, I attempted to gauge whether there was comparatively more or less deaccessioning activity going on today in individual libraries than there was in 1985. Thirty-one librarians (or 55%) said there was essentially no change (but of course the status quo could represent either a low or a high level of activity), twenty-two respondents (39%) reported there was somewhat or substantially more activity, and only three (5%) said there was less.

Continuing the summary of current practice: disposal of duplicates was the most frequent reason given, followed by "items were deemed to be non-rare" and "items were out-of-scope." Uncataloged rather than cataloged items were more likely to be candidates for removal, but over half of those libraries that participate in some kind of deaccessioning had removed cataloged material from the collection. Direct sale or trade to dealers without a bid process was the preferred method of disposal, though sale or transfer to other institutions and direct sale (e.g., booksales) were also popular. It was surprising that only 20% of the deaccessioning libraries had used an auction house to dispose of books.

In an overwhelming majority of those libraries which do deaccession rare books, the department head is the person with primary responsibility for the process. Collection curators or library directors were given that responsibility in a much smaller number of institutions, and only two libraries employed committees to make deaccessioning decisions. In 93% of the deaccessioning
DEACCESSIONING OF RARE BOOKS

libraries polled, funds derived from selling rare books were rolled back into collection development, as the current RBMS ethics statement prescribes. The same funds are in a handful of cases used for preservation of materials, but they almost never are used to subvent operational costs or to support capital projects. And everyone agreed that funds derived from deaccessioning have provided a relatively minor source of revenue for their institutions.

I was personally curious to see how the deaccessioning process was regulated within various academic environments. For a number of years the University of Texas has had a Regents’ policy on the disposal of rare books and fine art by UT System institutions, but it seems that this situation is exceptional. Many public institutions undoubtedly have documents governing the disposal of state property or library books in general. Also startling is the fact that only eight libraries had a written internal policy regarding deaccessioning. It may be the case that institutional policy-making simply has not caught up with practice, or then again perhaps libraries do not want to draw undue attention to deaccessioning by creating written policy documents.

My open-ended questions, as I had hoped, evoked some strongly held and divergent opinions within the profession. Overall, some informal content analysis of the responses to a question whether deaccessioning was more or less controversial today than in the mid-1980s indicates that ten librarians thought deaccessioning was more controversial, sixteen less, and eight about the same. Among those who think it is just as controversial as ever or even more so, opinions are often strongly held. One curator returned the questionnaire unanswered, but stated in an accompanying letter that it was unthinkable that the library in question would ever participate in such activity. Another rare books librarian wrote, “if there was a legitimate reason to put a book into special collections in the first place, the chances are quite slim that reason would have changed.” In other cases, librarians appeared to regard deaccessioning with considerable personal distaste but put it in the same category with other unpleasant structural changes required by financial exigency. Other respondents distinguished between intraprofessional and extraprofessional acceptance of deaccessioning. They maintained that the practice was more controversial than ever among the public because of some widely publicized episodes involving the sale of cultural artifacts, particularly in art museums, but within the rare books profession it was increasingly accepted as an inevitability. Selling or trading duplicate volumes was mentioned as being the least controversial variety of deacquisition, with out-of-scope withdrawals (assuming “there is broad agreement about what is out of scope,” as one person added) more so, and high-profile treasures the most apt to cause problems. The use of deaccessioning-derived funds could make a project more or less controversial; raising funds for a “pet project” for example, was exactly the kind of thing to attract attention. Some of the consequences viewed as potential side-effects of public controversy were alienation of donors and a negative impact on overall library funding. While this kind of debate could be bad for libraries, in another sense controversy might
actually be desirable: “I believe it is a very controversial matter,” one respondent wrote, “one that must be addressed with all seriousness by those responsible.”

Those who regarded deaccessioning as substantially or somewhat more generally accepted in ’95 than a decade earlier tended to cite funding problems—what one curator termed “the 90’s zeitgeist”—more than any other reason. Here is a typical response: “greatly increased financial pressures make it easier to rationalize eliminating materials that would be better used elsewhere and using moneys brought in by deaccessioning to provide more funds in high-priority areas is seen as very sensible.” It was noted that financial exigency has required academic libraries to stress building to strength and cutting back on marginal collections, even “interesting and sometimes valuable” ones, and rare books have not been exempt from that trend. Only a few librarians referred to space issues in their replies—for example, one replied, “I am in a position now where my shelving is 99+ percent full. By deaccessioning at this point, I could create room until there is some relief.” Paradoxically, the data from a multiple choice question regarding causes of any increases in deaccessioning at individual institutions clearly shows that space concerns, and not financial issues, are actually the primary impetus behind the growth in deaccessioning activity. Even internal factors, such as changes in state laws, turnover in library administration, and reorganizations, were cited more frequently than purely budgetary ones. Yet it seems that there is a widespread, yet mistaken, belief among librarians that all those other libraries out there are deaccessioning books mainly in order to raise money.

The other open-ended question inquired, “To what extent should the deaccessioning of rare books be a matter of public record?” This matter came up in 1993 during the Section’s debate of the revision of the Standards for Ethical Conduct. The relevant section from the guidelines on institutional practice reads as follows: “the process of deaccession should be carried out in as open and public a manner as possible…. To the fullest extent possible, the library must make public information on the disposition of deaccessioned materials.” My intention was to discover how the phrase “to the fullest extent possible” is interpreted in practice and, more generally, what the consensus of professional opinion on disclosure might be.

The results on this score (30 in favor of disclosure; 7 more-or-less against) certainly constitute a ringing endorsement of the concept of public disclosure but the statements by rare book librarians reflect considerable ambivalence as to how to accomplish it. Most agreed that some kind of public disclosure is all but unavoidable in public institutions for obvious legal as well as ethical reasons, or as one librarian elegantly put it, it is “imperative there be no secrecy, real or perceived.” But how open is open? At one end of the spectrum, one respondent indicated that deaccessions should be publicized in advance so as to allow potential opponents to raise concerns. Others suggested that publicity should be given to the disposal of large collections or important single items but not for less valuable items. Various shades of gray appear in several responses: do not
advertise the deaccession but do make financial or collections records readily available for public inspection; notify the institution’s administration of the deaccession but do not otherwise make a big issue of it; or disclose only to the extent required by law. And a couple of people raised the issue of what forms publicity might take—they cited legal notices, a solicitation for bids, and listings in papers. One response in particular distills the professional ambivalence I found: “in theory, [deaccessioning] should be fully open public information. In practice, the less attention paid to it the better.” Or as another person put it, “there is a world of difference between discretion and denial or duplicity.”

In summary, the deaccessioning of rare books in academic libraries is an increasingly widespread but far from universal practice. The prediction made by the organizers of the Brown symposium that deaccessioning would be an important source of funding for rare books institutions has not come to pass. Principally because of mounting space concerns and not financial ones, it has indeed become more prevalent in the mid-'90s than it was in the 1980s. Those who oppose it in principle, though now in the minority, appear to be more vehement in their opposition than deaccessioning's supporters, who regard it as an essential feature of a rational collection development policy. The topic continues to be capable of generating sparks, yet one might reasonably conclude that the trend toward increasing acceptance within the rare books profession is not only clear but in all probability irreversible.

First presented, in slightly different form, as a seminar paper at the 37th RBMS Preconference, July 4, 1996.

NOTES


Deaccession Remunerative—the sale of assets for money or exchange”).

6. Thanks to William R. Oram, who compiled the questionnaire data (see Appendix B).

7. I asked respondents to look back ten years rather than fifteen (i.e., to the era of the Brown Seminar) because institutional memories often go back no farther than that, especially in small shops with lots of curatorial turnover.

8. Standards for Ethical Conduct, xx.

### APPENDIX A

**Responding Institutions**

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<tr>
<th>Anonymous (2)</th>
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<td>Indiana University</td>
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<td>Marquette University</td>
<td>University of Notre Dame</td>
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<td>Oberlin College</td>
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<td>University of California, San Diego</td>
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APPENDIX B

Data from Questionnaire on Deaccessioning of Rare Books in Academic Libraries

Total responses 60
From private colleges/universities 24
From public colleges/universities 36

Collection size (rare books only):
Fewer than 25,000 vols. 8
25,000–99,999 vols. 32
100,000–249,999 vols. 12
250,000 vols. or more 8

1. Did your library deaccession any rare books during the past five years? (Note: please review the definition above.) If the answer is “no,” please skip to question 10.
   • yes 30
   • no 30

2. For what reason(s) were these books deaccessioned? (check any that apply):
   • subject area(s) was/were out-of-scope 17
   • items are duplicates 25
   • items were deemed to be non-rare 19
   • other (please specify) 3 (condition, donor requested transfer to other institution, superior copies acquired)

3. What categories of materials were deaccessioned? (check any that apply):
   • uncataloged materials 27
   • cataloged materials 18

4. What method(s) of disposition do you use for materials selected for deaccessioning? Check all that apply.
   • direct sale or trade to dealers (without the use of a bid process) 22
   • direct sale or trade to dealers (through a bid process) 5
   • direct sale through other outlets (e.g., public book sales, Friends auctions) 13
   • sale or transfer to other institutions 16
   • auction house 6
   • other (please specify) 0
5. Are there state laws or institutional regulations which specifically apply to the disposition of rare books (as opposed to library books or state or institutional property in general)?
  - yes 2
  - no 28

6. Does your department have a written policy and/or procedure statement relating to the deaccessioning of rare books? If so, is this policy part of the institution's overall collection development policy?
  - yes, part of institution's collection development policy 4
  - yes, but not part of collection development policy 4
  - no written policy or procedure 19

7. Who has the primary responsibility for authorizing the deaccessioning of rare books?
  - department head 18
  - collection curator 5
  - committee 2
  - library director 5
  - other (specify) 3 (combination of the above [3])

8. Are moneys derived from deaccessioning used to fund? [check any that apply]
  - collection development 28
  - preservation 3
  - library operational costs 1
  - capital projects 1
  - other (specify) 1 (used for endowment fund for historic building where collections housed)

9. Do you consider such funds a
  - minor source of revenue 29
  - major source of revenue 0

10. Is there more or less deaccessioning activity now in your institution than there was in 1985?
    - substantially more 6
    - somewhat more 16
    - no change 31
    - somewhat less 2
    - substantially less 1
11. If you checked “substantially more” or “somewhat more,” do you believe this increase is the result of
- financial factors 2
- space problems 16
- changes in institutional policy (specify the nature of the changes, if possible) 6 (change in collection development policies [4], creation of special collections dept., staff changes)
- other factors (please specify) 6 (change in collection development policies [2], increased institutional acceptance, nature of recently acquired collections, staff changes, creation of special collections dept.)

12. If you checked “substantially less” or “somewhat less,” do you believe this decrease is the result of
- changes in institutional policy (specify the nature of the changes, if possible) 1 (staff changes)
- negative reactions from administration, patrons, or other parties
- other factors (please specify) 2 (other priorities, staff changes)

Your thoughts, opinions, or comments are solicited on the following matters:

13. To what extent should the deaccessioning of rare books be a matter of public record?
- Generally favorable to public disclosure 30
- Generally opposed to public disclosure 7

14. Do you believe that deaccessioning of rare books is more or less controversial in the profession today than it was in the mid-1980s? Please explain.
- More controversial 10
- Less controversial 16
- About the same 8
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