Library Deaccessioning: A Dealer’s Perspective

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In his Rosenbach Lectures of 1986, Terry Belanger showed graphically the immense ballooning of the size of U.S. academic libraries, and most people in the book world—especially collectors, booksellers, and librarians—until rather recently expected continued, steady growth of our rare book and special collections departments. Current budgets have taught otherwise. Change is not a buzzword but a byword. Change is one of life’s constants, yet it is perhaps the hardest constant to accept. Among the changes taking place in our nation’s rare book and special collections departments is deaccessioning, a topic that has recently been aired on EXLIBRIS, as Sam Streit has noted in his essay (see pp. 21–28 above).

Richard Oram (see pp. 9–18 above) and Streit have reminded us that deaccessioning is not an entirely new process, but as Oram has shown, formal discussion about it among librarians, at conferences and in journals, post-dates similar discussion among museum directors and curators.

For booksellers, deaccessioning has been a part of our lives since the first day we went into the business. Those of us who specialize in antiquarian books are quite often buying items that someone no longer wants, that someone has deaccessioned. Collectors are continually refining their collections, moving into new areas of acquisition, losing interest in former passions, and selling treasures acquired earlier on. In the institutional setting, the process may not be so continual, yet periodic reviews of holdings give librarians a chance to focus on institutional strengths and deficiencies, whether old or new; to put into perspective recent trends in library acquisitions and also the research use of patrons; to spot shelving, space, and conservation problems and needs in a timely way; and to take stock of duplicate or out-of-scope holdings. As a result of these analyses, institutional deaccessioning may be the result.

As Oram has pointed out, out-of-scope books are the most problematic materials to justify deaccessioning, or at least to justify to everyone’s moral and philosophical satisfaction. To begin with, as the recent electronic swapping of philosophies and ideas about deaccessioning on EXLIBRIS made clear, there are

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some who believe that already accessioned material can never be out of scope. Essentially the value system at work is, "If this book is here, it is because someone thought it worth having, and who am I to question that?" For that reason and others, from my experience as a bookseller working with libraries, I believe that discovery and disposition of duplicates is not only the easiest but the necessary first step in the deaccessioning and collections-refinement process.

Some librarians do not believe that there is such a thing as a true duplicate of any book printed from moveable type, for there is always something slightly different from copy to copy. The necessary corollaries to this are that someone, somewhere, cares about the minute variations that exist between various copies of a title, and that someone has found (or some day will find) these variations and make them known to the scholarly world. I wonder if the time and money it takes to seek out and disseminate this knowledge is really worth it in the long run.

If time and money are not to be invested in duplicates, some will say, there is then no real reason to deaccession them. They might add that duplicates are an indication of a collection’s wealth and greatness. But in the accounting, financial perspective, duplicates are not assets but financial liabilities: they create initial and ongoing expenses. Once a librarian accepts a duplicate, whether by gift, purchase, or exchange, with the intention of adding it to the library’s collection, that librarian has begun to take money from the operating budget and to sink it into that duplicate: the book must be cataloged and otherwise “processed,” shelved, and then preserved for the rest of its life. We all have an idea what the initial costs are just to get the book onto the shelf. And it is clear from the EXLIBRIS discussions that librarians are spending considerable time defending against acquiring duplicates through gifts and would-be gifts, even if they do not have a formal program of identifying duplicates already in the collection.

The long-term costs of maintaining duplicates already present in the collection look minimal, and we tend to dismiss them as inconsequential. But they are not. Duplicates occupy shelf space and must be preserved in a sound environment, safe from cold, heat, damp, and aridity; they must be protected from thieves and other enemies of books. All this costs money. Especially with books produced from about 1875 to the present, on highly acidic paper, who wants to think about the costs of conserving these volumes or migrating their texts into other formats? Duplicates will add significantly to the costs of maintaining the collection. With changes in technology that impact cataloging, we have seen major retrospective conversion projects costing millions of dollars. Future technology promises to make such conversion an on-going phenomenon. And duplicates will add to the costs of those projects as well.

To add a catch-22, even the deaccessioning process adds costs—but it is the last cost. To return to Oram’s point, deaccessioning duplicates is relatively uncontroversial; where hackles are raised is when one begins talking about deaccessioning out-of-scope books and manuscripts, which are laden with precisely the same maintenance costs that I have spoken of for duplicates.
Deaccessioning duplicates saves money, will make money, and avoids hassle, which is why I suggest that duplicates should be the librarians' first items to deaccession.

One of the points that emerged from the latest EXLIBRIS exchanges is that librarians seldom sell books primarily to raise money; gaining shelf space is a greater motivation. Librarians never see deaccessioning as a long-term fundraising tool, though I should add that in some cases libraries have realized a good deal of income from the sale of particular volumes.

My advice is that any librarian considering deaccessioning materials must seek and take market advice from those in the marketplace, but the librarians must control the process from the beginning. They must select the items for deaccessioning, prepare a list of what is to be sold, and ask dealers or auctioneers for appraisals of the worth of the items chosen. They must decide what the deaccessioning timetable is to be, and also the order of the items they wish to part with. On the basis of the appraisals, they may wish to withdraw items from being deaccessioned. They must decide whether the items are to be sold or traded, privately or to a dealer, auction house, collector, or other institution.

Be aware that auctioneers can promise nothing about how much you will realize. Auctioning of books is gambling with your books: you might win, you might lose. You cannot negotiate for a better price. You cannot be assured that the auction will not occur the day after a crash in the stock market. Similarly, be wary of any dealer who is not willing to produce a contract of sale or of consignment, a contract with all terms clearly specified. Beware of anybody who wants you to do anything right now. Try to see to it that if special political or other needs are going to be present, they are suggested early; for example, will you need discretion or secrecy with the sale? or will there be a public announcement along with a full catalog of the items to be sold? These should be specified clearly at the beginning of the negotiation with the party who will be handling the deaccessioned items. More than one EXLIBRIS writer said that honesty with donors about what might happen to their donations is essential, and similar forethought and straightforwardness with the selling party are also essential. Late-arising demands or suggestions may affect your agent's workflow or budget in ways that can sabotage the deal—and/or the long-term relationships. In any case, be businesslike; do everything in writing. Confirm every telephone call with a letter recapitulating your understanding of what was said. When the items are being boxed for removal from the library, both the seller and the librarian responsible should have a deaccession list and each item should be carefully checked off as it is boxed.

Also, be prepared for the inevitable backlash. Someone will tell you that you should have received more money or credit for the books, or that you should have waited another year for the market to peak before consigning your books to the auction room. Librarians and private collectors alike will always have a gnawing feeling that they sold at the wrong price or at the wrong time or to the wrong person or through the wrong agent.
As a bookseller who has been asked to give the trade's view on this topic, I would like to add a few other observations from this perspective. First, librarians should *always* keep careful, easily locatable, permanent records of what has been deaccessioned. Responsible dealers, librarians, and collectors who acquire ex-library books are likely to write to inquire about deaccessioned books with ownership markings but without believable release markings. The longer it takes a librarian to determine if a book has been deaccessioned or stolen, the longer an inquiring dealer must sit on an investment he cannot attempt to sell (punished for his biblio-civicmindedness). And while ownership marks are necessary to prevent the unauthorized return of library books to the marketplace, they need not be so large, ugly, and vandalously placed as to destroy market value for all time. Nor it is necessary to rubber-stamp RELEASED or WITHDRAWN in large purple capital letters across all ownership stamps and markings, thus doubling the disfigurement. One defenseless book I recently acquired was stamped RELEASED in capital letters even though it had no ownership markings.

Deaccessioning is not an easy decision or process. Nor is it right or necessary for all libraries. Legal restrictions, philosophical concerns, abundant space, and ample budgets will mean that some libraries will be spared the time-consuming and thorny process. But all libraries should have a clearly defined and codified deaccession policy. The session for which this essay was written was entitled “Easy Come, Easy Go.” While we can all wish books to come more easily, surely “easy go” will always remain enticingly ironic.
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