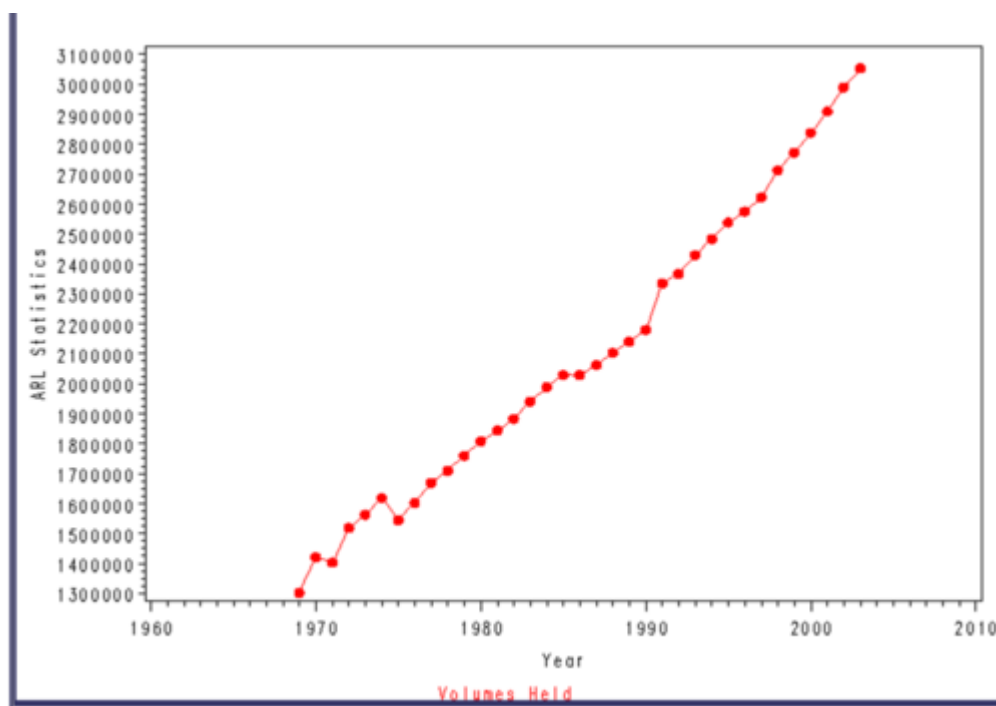


# The library de-supply chain

Rick Lugg / 22 October 2013

Anyone who recycles or composts on a regular basis knows that disposing of things responsibly can require more effort than acquiring them in the first place. Library collections are no different. When handled with appropriate care, **the back end of the content management life cycle involves as many decisions, task, and interactions as the front end.** But because academic libraries have for decades not prioritized deselection and related tasks, **work processes tend to be underdeveloped and are only partially supported by vendors.** This is beginning to change. Out of necessity, we are inventing what I will call the 'library de-supply chain.'



Beginning in earnest with the library construction boom of the late 1960s and early 1970s, academic libraries began to amass local collections of books, journals, and government documents that may never again be equaled. Locally-held print volumes offered convenience to users and were essential to library ranking and accreditation. Collection growth was the order of the day, as it was the best way to serve users, and to assure the preservation of the scholarly record.

**The scale of book purchasing from the 1970s through the early 2000s outstripped the ability of most libraries to manage that work without assistance. The library supply chain began to develop.** Book vendors and subscription agents began to appear, and libraries found benefit in consolidating orders with a source that could in turn deal with myriad publishers on their behalf. Over time, vendors extended their role from order fulfillment to selection and eventually deep into library workflows and systems. Approval plans

helped librarians identify and automatically acquire relevant titles. As library staff faced a greater variety of demands on their time, vendors developed web-based selection and order management systems, integrated ordering and invoicing with ILS vendors, and provided cataloging and shelf-ready books. In short, the library supply chain evolved in range and sophistication, growing into **an indispensable component of library operations**.

We can argue over the degree and pace of the change, but libraries are beginning to rethink the role of local print collections, and of necessity to reduce the number of low-use, widely-held volumes on their shelves. As a community, **we are now beginning to identify and remove millions of surplus copies from library stacks each year—sometimes bound for storage, sometimes for digitization, sometimes to be resold, donated, or recycled**. The workload generated by these processes is remarkably similar in scale and complexity to that of acquiring books in the first place. **Operationally, these are new and rapidly growing tasks**, and most libraries find themselves pressed to find staff hours to dedicate to them.

The library-vendor ecosystem invented a supply chain when it was needed. We are now in the process of **inventing a library de-supply chain, to assist with careful and orderly removal of low-use surplus copies from library shelves**.

My partners and I at Sustainable Collection Services (SCS) recognized this emerging need back in 2008, and began to create **a key link in the de-supply chain: decision-support services and systems for monographs**. Our services capture and normalize data on collections, holdings, and usage, enabling rules-based deselection decisions that are both informed and efficient. The underlying technique (using rules to define relevant content) is remarkably similar to that used in approval plans, but deployed in support of a different part of the content lifecycle.



As with selection, however, **a deselection decision is only one step in a more comprehensive workflow**. Deselection can lead to a range of possible actions: storage, withdrawal, transfer, digitization, retention, or preservation. Each of these involves a different workflow, but all of them generate significant amounts of

physical handling, record maintenance, and problem solving. Still more work may be required in order to enhance some records (e.g, by adding links to e-book editions or adding tables of contents) to improve discoverability and description of materials moved offsite.

In short, there is a boatload of new work being spawned by deselection decisions. It may be useful to look at these tasks categorically:

- **Verification:** Years or decades of deferred inventories and shelf-reading make in-hand verification necessary for both withdrawal and retention commitments. At some point, every book needs to be handled, to assure it's there and to gauge its physical condition.
- **Physical disposition:** Storage candidates must be flagged, retrieved, and moved. Withdrawal candidates require the same, but may also require staging for review by librarians or faculty. Preservation candidates (i.e., titles held scarcely in other libraries) need to be evaluated, and possibly moved to special collections or digitized. After final withdrawal decisions, books might be shipped to a re-seller, or to a State surplus property office, or donated to libraries in another country. And in some cases, books may be recycled.
- **Record maintenance and enhancement:** Books to be stored offsite require changes to location codes, and often re-labeling or re-barcoding to accommodate high-density inventory systems. If an explicit retention commitment is made, that needs to be recorded in the MARC 583. Item and bib records must be maintained, suppressed, or removed. WorldCat holdings must be adjusted. Enhancements might involve insertion of a URL for a Hathi Trust public domain version into the 856 field, to assure ready access even after the print version is withdrawn.
- **Project management:** While it may be preferable to integrate deselection tasks into ongoing workflows, this is not always an option. When deselection work is driven by an immediate space need or planned renovation, the timeline can be short and workload enormous. Libraries often have lean staffs and competing priorities. Projects of this scale benefit from dedicated management.



It seems abundantly clear that academic libraries will need support in these areas, and that vendors can play a valuable role--much as they do in the early stages of the content lifecycle. In addition to the collection analysis and decision-support offered by SCS and others, **there is a growing need for services closely tied to the deselection process, including in some cases temporary onsite assistance.** Some of this is already underway:

- **Resellers** such as Better World Books (<http://www.betterworldbooks.com/>) and Alibris (<http://www.alibris.com/sellers>) offer convenient shipping options for large-scale withdrawals. Some already offer onsite support.
- **Library relocation firms** such as William B. Meyer (<http://www.meyerlibrary.com/>), Clancy-Cullen (<http://www.clancy-cullen.com/library-relocation-services-new-york-city.html>), and National Library Relocation (<http://www.nlrbookmovers.com/index.php>) are experts in large-scale collection moves. Some of these firms also offer climate-controlled high-density facilities for contracted offsite storage.
- **Library services vendors** such as Backstage Library Works ([http://www.bslw.com/on\\_site/](http://www.bslw.com/on_site/)) can provide remote or onsite record maintenance and enhancement, and work with ILS vendors to build or improve batch maintenance capabilities related to deselection and shared print management.
- **Project managers**, such as Lizanne Payne (<http://www.linkedin.com/in/lizannepayne>) and Sam Demas Collaborative Consulting (<http://samdemasconsulting.com/>), can augment and guide efforts to develop and meet timetables, organize work, and create policy frameworks for shared print.

At SCS, we recognize that **successful deselection projects require far more than good analysis and decision-support. Our vision is to assemble a suite of services that supports all aspects of deselection workflows.** We will maintain our focus on our core strengths in data management and decision support. But we also intend to establish strategic partnerships with firms who provide related services. Together we can create a library de-supply chain that is as useful and efficient as the library supply chain.