

A Tale of Two Depositories

Weeding Federal Depository Collections

Laura Sare

Library weeding involves selecting materials to be withdrawn so that a high-quality collection is maintained while providing space for new materials. Weeding is especially important for depository libraries now that so many documents are available online; often tangible copies in print or microfiche have been replaced by online revised editions. The superseded copies need to be withdrawn so that the documents collection remains current. Weeding also frees shelf space for new items, and can save money by not housing or preserving outdated materials.

I have worked at two federal depository libraries. Both were selective depositories, meaning that the libraries chose specific item numbers that represented groupings of materials the libraries wanted to make available in their collections. By contrast, regional libraries must accept all items distributed by GPO.

West Texas A&M University

The first library I worked at, Cornette Library at West Texas A&M University, became a depository in 1928. It selected 50 to 60 percent of all the items available through the depository program. In 2001, the FDLP inspected Cornette Library and suggested that the print collection be weeded. Up to that time, only revised titles listed in the *Superseded List* (purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS22813) had been weeded on a limited basis.

I was familiar with the federal depository print collection because I had recently helped shift many sections of it after we installed additional shelving. Seeing areas with revised and obsolete documents while shifting made me wonder if they were still of value.

Before weeding could begin, parameters needed to be developed. One decision was to keep any publication with statistics, because those are used for historical purposes. Also, specialty areas determined by the Government Documents Department's collection development policy were not weeded. For example, items about Texas, or those supporting the uni-

versity curriculum in agriculture and education were kept. Primary resources were also not weeded. The needs of public users were also considered—most of their questions were for legal or tax information. In some cases, items that were easier to use in print than in other formats were kept on the shelves. All of these considerations were in addition to the weeding guidelines outlined in the *FDLP Handbook* requiring that only items older than five years could be withdrawn from the collection, and items not superseded had to be offered to other depository libraries before withdrawing (purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS89341, Chapter 5.14).

After establishing what not to weed, criteria for items for removal were created. Because the collection for the most part had never been weeded, many revised editions had never been withdrawn. Most of them were annual informational pamphlets sent out by agencies to describe their services to the public. In most cases, only the most recent pamphlet was retained.

Other items involved a change in SuDoc numbers. Sometimes a revised edition is given a new SuDoc number, making it necessary to find and weed the old edition with the earlier SuDoc number. The best example of this is the *Medical Supply Catalog*. It has been under four different SuDoc stems: HE 1.64, HE 20.302:M 46, HE 20.5002:M 46, and HE 20.9002:M 46. I identified these titles when I was working on a government documents serials project updating holdings after the library's ILS migration. Sometimes the MARC records in the catalog or in WorldCat would show the earlier stems for serials, but often the information was not complete, so it was labor-intensive to follow the changes in SuDoc numbers and then to update the catalog records.

Time-sensitive or ephemeral materials, such as calendars, telephone directories more than five years old, or forms with expiration dates, were immediately pulled. Also targeted for withdrawal were manuals for internal agency use that were twenty years old or more. I chose the twenty-year threshold

because these manuals showed no usage statistics and they often discussed computer hardware and software technologies that were no longer in use.

Another criterion used was check-out status. From the mid-1980s, government documents that were checked out of Cornette Library were added to the online catalog. Starting in 1995, all government documents received were cataloged into the OPAC. A pre-1995 document that had not been checked out by 2001 was a likely candidate for weeding unless it had historical or statistical information. Following these criteria meant looking at each document, one shelf at a time. It was a slow process that only freed up an inch or two of space on each shelf, but it did give the collection some breathing room. On a positive note, this exercise was an excellent way to become acquainted with the historical print collection.

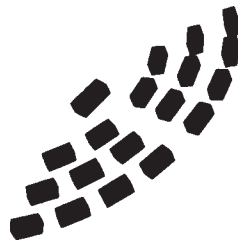
One issue developed with titles published in the 1980s and 1990s that had switched formats from paper to microfiche. This involved verifying if certain old print documents had a microfiche version. If the title had switched to a microfiche format, it was necessary to see if the latest edition was still in

microfiche or was now online. This is a good project for student workers, who searched for the titles online for me, and it was a good training exercise for them as well. Out-of-date print editions continued on microfiche were withdrawn and current microfiche titles were pulled if they were available online.

The first area I chose to evaluate were items published by the Health and Human Services agency—recommended by the nursing liaison librarian. These items were chosen because the West Texas A&M Nursing Department wanted only current materials in the library collection due to accreditation standards. Many manuals from the 1960s and 1970s with outdated medical practices were removed, while documents with statistics were retained for their historical value.

Also evaluated were items published by the Internal Revenue Service. Access to all forms and instructions is now online. One consideration was whether the public would prefer to continue to have access to some forms in a paper format. Some paper forms were duplicated by other publications such as the *Reproducible Copies of Federal Tax Forms and Instructions* (SuDoc no.: T 22.57:1132 L). Duplicates could be weeded.

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Other forms were superseded by an online edition, but no one had withdrawn the last edition of the print version, which often dated from the mid-1990s.

I also found other odds and ends, such as individual copies of executive orders of the president that were duplicated in either the *Code of Federal Regulations, Title 3, The President* (SuDoc no.: AE 2.106/3:31) or the *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States* (SuDoc no.: AE 2.114:). These individual sheets were weeded because of their poor condition—they were printed on old acidic paper and were literally falling apart. This discovery led to another criterion for withdrawing items. If the document was disintegrating, was the information in it necessary for the collection? If it was, a copy was made on acid-free paper for retention. The original was then withdrawn as photocopying usually destroyed it.

The next criterion for weeding focused on agency changes. For example, the Social Security Administration (SSA) used to be part of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). Many of the HEW documents were superseded by SSA documents, but had never been weeded. Often the documents had the same internal agency assigned publication number, which made weeding easier. The same thing happened with the Coast Guard. It began under the Treasury Department, was moved to the Transportation Agency, and now resides under Homeland Security. The *Guide to U.S. Government Publications* was a useful tool in tracing these agency changes, making it possible to withdraw all of the previous editions not needed.¹

These weeding criteria worked well and gave me a greater knowledge of older materials in the collection. But these methods only gained a few inches of space on each shelf. More growth room was required. In order to create more space, it was necessary to look at major print sets. One major print set evaluated was from the Census Bureau. Prior to the 1980 census, block-level statistics of all fifty states for several decades had been collected by Cornette Library. This in-depth level of statistics for states outside of the local five-state area was never used by patrons. By withdrawing the block-level items of the other forty-five states, several feet of free shelf space was created. The items were offered on the Needs & Offers (N&O) List (purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS2045). The statistical booklets were highly coveted on the N&O list because many depository libraries needed to replace missing copies or wanted to add second copies of the states they collected. It was labor-intensive, but fortunately student workers were available to create the lists.

Another method to gain shelf space was to purchase microfiche to replace some print volumes of the *Congressional Record* (SuDoc no.: X 1.1:). The library had obtained many

volumes of the *Congressional Record* before it became a depository. Even though they suffered a fire in 1914 and were damaged, the books were still kept, filling about fifty linear feet of shelf space. The deteriorating volumes were replaced with microfiche as soon as funds became available. Withdrawing these print volumes finally provided the growth space the department needed.

Texas A&M University

My current position is at the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M University. This federal depository had not been significantly weeded in several years, beyond withdrawing replaced editions on the *Superseded List*. This collection is much larger than Cornette's, with an 85 percent selection rate of FDL P materials. Yet both libraries required weeding in the areas of revised editions, SuDoc, and agency changes.

Many of the same criteria developed at Cornette applied to Evans. For example, check-out status could be used to evaluate items. Evans began cataloging government documents in the online catalog back in the late 1980s. By applying the same rule, if an item had not been used or checked out in more than twenty-five years and contained no historical or statistical information, it was withdrawn.

There were some differences between the two collections. The Evans collection contained multiple copies of documents acquired either through multiple purchases for the various reference desks or as gifts. The new policy dictates that duplicate copies go on the N&O lists, because the library needs only one copy for historical purposes. These duplicates freed up a significant amount of space. For example, the library had a complete set of ERIC microfiche from the Department of Education, but also received some ERIC microfiche through the depository program. By withdrawing all of the depository fiche, an entire cabinet of microfiche was emptied. Another difference between the libraries affected the weeding of Evans. Texas A&M is a research institution; therefore, there are many more subject areas that require research-level collections to support the university curriculum, so these areas were weeded sparingly if at all.

The biggest difference in the libraries was that Evans needed to free more space than Cornette Library, but weeding was different because the collection was still primarily paper based. The main weeding criterion for this library was to rely on the online access to government information through the GPO Access website (www.gpoaccess.gov). Because current titles were available online, the item selection process for Evans was drastically changed from print to electronic versions. Now such titles as the *Federal Register* (purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS1756), *Public*

and *Private Laws of the United States* (purl.access.gpo.gov/GPO/LPS5052), and others are no longer received in print. This switch from print to online is sanctioned by the FDLP in the document *Substituting Electronic for Tangible Versions of Depository Publications* (www.fdlp.gov/collections/collection-maintenance/141-substitution-guidelines). Since most major titles in GPO Access are also archived online back to 1994 or 1995, current plans are to weed the print or microfiche back to their online start dates. Many of these documents are also available through vendor databases the library subscribes to or through other federal government sites such as the Library of Congress legislative website Thomas (thomas.loc.gov).

Recommendations

To begin a weeding project, choose a few agencies as a small project and shelf-read those sections. Learn about the documents the agency produces and how publications change over the years. Then start to weed revised editions, duplicate copies, and outdated materials. When in doubt, keep it. Make a list of questionable documents and monitor their use for a specified time. After the period of time determined has passed, go back and decide if the documents need to go or stay, based on whether they were used in the trial period.

When weeding begins, let patrons and library staff members know what was weeded so they are aware of the changes. For example, they will need to know the different SuDoc numbers for some new editions. If there are alternative formats, such as the online titles at GPO Access, a training session, newsletter, or e-mail is helpful to library staff to know where to lead patrons to the new formats. Also, make sure the technical services staff have the time and space to work on the withdrawn items, especially if they will have to change holding and item records in the online catalog. Items may have to be withdrawn in stages.

Weeding a depository collection can be intimidating. First, consider what types of documents and information patrons are using in the collection. Working a reference desk can help librarians get a feel for what is often needed and what is never requested. Also, ask other reference desk staff for their opinions. Often they know of areas that can be weeded.

If the library does not have one, develop a solid collection development plan for government documents. It is the best place to state the criteria and parameters clearly, and to provide background information on the decisions that led to them. This will also be very helpful to the next documents librarian who will have background information about changes that have been made in the collection.

Weeding is especially important now that so many revised documents are available in an online format. Superseded tangible copies in print or microfiche need to be withdrawn so that the collection is not dated. Weeding frees up space necessary for new items, and can save money by not housing or preserving unneeded items. This satisfies library directors' priorities, and makes reference staff confident that they are providing the most current information to patrons. Finally, weeding is one factor in ensuring that the collection continues to be of the highest quality.

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References

1. Donna Batten, ed., *Guide to U.S. Government Publications, 2009* (Detroit: Gale, 2009).

Give to the Rozkuszka Scholarship

The W. David Rozkuszka Scholarship provides financial assistance to an individual who is currently working with government documents in a library and is trying to complete a master's degree in library science. This award, established in 1994, is named after W. David Rozkuszka, former documents librarian at Stanford University. The award winner receives \$3,000.

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