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Deduplication at Comprehensive Universities: Benefits and Barriers

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What I’d like to start out with here is an image of what I think a lot of us view as the ideal. The lone scholar working their way through the stacks, chasing citations, pouring through articles, doing a complete literature review.

But let’s juxtapose that against the reality of cramped shelves of journals that see little if any use.
In spite of this idealized or romanticized image of how users use libraries, or even want to use libraries, the reality is that library users show a clear preference for online journal usage.

Another reality is that it is the rare library that is not tight on space (even at GVSU where we’re building a new library, space and future growth is a concern).

Yet time and time again, I hear from librarians institutions like my own who have not even taken the first steps toward deduplicating their print collections. I am going to discuss some of the barriers to deduplication at comprehensive universities like my own and also some of the benefits of heading down this road.
Barriers to Deduplication
I think we need to consider the role of a comprehensive university library
- at our university
- and within the library community

It seems like comprehensives have a bit of an inferiority complex compared to ARLs and or we’re viewing ourselves as mini-research libraries. The reality, at least at GVSU, is that we building collections for the now. Not for posterity. As the university’s curriculum changes and evolves so will our collection.

Just as my neighborhood public library has a very different mission from the New York Public Library, my library at a comprehensive university has a very different mission from the University of Michigan or Yale or Cornell.
Time was, libraries needed to be self-sufficient bastions of knowledge. Resource sharing and access to information was not easy or convenient, but today that is not the case. This allows libraries to take more risks. I can risk a certain level of loss because I know I can easily rely on other libraries, vendors or repurchase access to information. For example, at my institution we are canceling subscriptions to print journals that are also available in aggregator databases and JSTOR. We realize there is a certain amount of risk involved in this venture, but at worst I am looking at five year gap in my holdings that can be filled via ILL or by picking up that subscription again.

The other point here is that our vision for what libraries are now or what they could be is often clouded by romanticized views of how libraries were used in the past. Whether that romanticize vision fits reality or not, it can prevent us from moving forward. When we look at our print reference collections, they are generally sitting there unused, while our online reference sources are seeing strong use. Yet, we resist changing how we collect in those areas, much less deduplicating those print resources because we have this vision of what it was like to teach a student how to use Nineteenth Century Literary Criticism.
Probably what this should read is actually a lack of priorities or a lack of will. Yes, it takes time and often money to engage in a deduplication project, especially an initial project with a large backfile. What we need to weigh, though, are the pro’s and con’s of the situation, and the reality is that these projects are often not as daunting as they may seem.

We ran into this this year at my institution. We decided we needed to deduplicate our ERIC fiche. We are planning a new library and didn’t want to move sixteen large fiche cabinets into the new library. Plus our education collection had moved to another library on our downtown campus and there wasn’t room for cabinets of ERIC fiche at that library. We were met with resistance from staff who felt it would be too time consuming and that it would be expensive since we wanted to recycle the fiche. I personally thought that this would be a multi-year project, but you know what? They started working on it last month and by the time I return from vacation next month they’ll be done.
We hear all the time that we can’t do this or that because faculty wouldn’t let us. Or I’ll have other librarians ask us, how did you get faculty to let you get rid of ¾ of your print reference collection? What did the faculty say? Well, first we didn’t ask. And second, the faculty didn’t say anything after the fact; at least I didn’t have one complaint make its way to me, my associate dean or our dean. We had some comments, but we were also able to back our decision up with reasoning and data.

Librarians have a role in the university because we bring expertise to the table. If we didn’t have something to offer, we wouldn’t have a job. Yet, libraries continually back away from making changes because of fear of reaction. If what you are doing is the best thing for the institution, you should be able to justify and explain that decision. If no one is using print journals and we have a perfectly good online equivalent and we feel reasonably sure it’ll be around for a few years, then go for it. I’m not saying you should throw caution to the wind and ignore political implications of certain decisions. But we shouldn’t let fear of reaction prevent us from doing what is best for our institutions.
I am more and more convinced that libraries today base their decision making not on the middle of the bell curve, but on the outliers. It’s true of users who are outliers and parts of our collections that are outliers.

You’ll hear this with collections. Someone will say we can’t weed this or that because it doesn’t work online. Those are the rare instances and they are there and you work around them. But for every journal that it doesn’t work for (we have 11) there are hundreds where it does work. We retain all of our image intensive art journals in print because our faculty feel they have the most value in that format and that online doesn’t work. We agree with them. We also follow up with them from time to time to make sure that is still the case. And we gather information on how those are being used to help them and us make informed decisions.

Talking about the user that is the outlier...

Every year we weed our JSTOR journal volumes at the end of the Winter semester. Last year I had a librarian come up to me in a panic. A faculty member was very upset because we had tossed a journal she was using for research. No big deal you say because she has complete access to everything in JSTOR. Well, apparently the work she was doing involved analyzing the make-up of each issue or volume or something like that. She could still do everything she wanted, it was just a lot harder. So we check other libraries in the state. MSU is only an hour away, surely they have it. No. Ann Arbor? No. Apparently we had the only complete run in the state. What are the odds? So after that we reassessed what we were doing. Should we have done anything differently? Should we have check shelving stats? It wouldn’t have helped, she was shelving them as she used them. But even then, I would have said, great! Another popular journal now available via JSTOR. Users are going to be thrilled! Should I have contacted every department to let them know we’re tossing print journals? Not if I don’t want them at my door asking for them for themselves... In the end, this user and this situation was an outlier. They didn’t fit the norm, but that doesn’t mean we did anything wrong nor does it mean we should change our practices. Unfortunately, what we see too often is that libraries set policies or make decisions based on the outlier. That instance that sticks in your mind. It stands out because it IS unusual. The ordinary, the mundane, the every day that makes up the middle of the bell curve doesn’t stick out. Yet, instead of putting our efforts into making sure they’re happy, we waste a lot of time, energy and resources serving a small population of users or resources.
I’ve heard librarians say, you can’t count on JSTOR for perpetual access because if you stop paying our access fees you’ll lose access. I have to tell you, the day I stop paying for JSTOR, I think we’re turning out the lights and locking the doors for good.

There is always a certain amount of uncertainty to what you do and in whatever decisions you make. I find it funny that librarians have to be among some of the most socially progressive people around, yet when it comes to managing our collections, you can’t find a more conservative group. Every institution has to examine what its role is and what level of risk they are willing to take. At my institution, we’re quite aggressive and willing and even encouraged to take on a certain amount of risk. We toss paper every chance we get. Your institution might be a little more conservative, but that doesn’t mean that you need to be holding onto everything.

Start with JSTOR. It doesn’t get more secure than that. Everything in JSTOR is in Portico, which is a verified secure archive. Whatever that means. They’ve got dark print archives in California and at Harvard. The Center for Research Libraries is trying to acquire its own run. The CIC is doing preservation of print JSTOR volumes, so are the five colleges, and on and on. I think if something’s reliable, it’s going to be JSTOR.
Implications of a Deduplication Project
No One Will Die
Reclaim...
I am at a library where space is horribly tight. We’re having to do a major shift of our collections this summer (again) because space is so tight. I just came back from vacation last week to be told we have three carts of new music books that can’t be shelved because the stacks are full. So for us claiming shelf space is an important thing.

If you empty it, they will come. Being at a library where we emptied out the stacks to create more user space, I can tell you it works. Our gate counts went up, our circulation has stayed steady and how the library is viewed on campus has been altered.
There are obviously staff costs and the cost of binding materials and the such, but I think one of the things that is overlooked or ignored is the carrying costs of keeping these materials on these shelves. There have been a number of studies, including one recently issued CLIR report by Paul Courant and Matthew Nielsen, that point to the cost of keeping a volume on the shelf.
If we’re not having to bind, shelve and shift and shift and shift, what are the other things we could be doing.
I think this leads us to the final benefit, which is much more intangible. If we’re taking up space with these things, we’re spending money on them and we’re taking time to handle them, that’s time, space and money that could be spent on other things. It’s that opportunity cost that is in many ways the most costly for us. It’s also the most difficult to grasp and to make an argument in favor of or against. Yet if you step back and think of all the wonderful things you’d like to be doing at your institution but can’t because of a lack of resources, you begin to see what an impact letting go could have on your users, your library and your university.
THANKS!

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