

Every Document Its Depository

Lessons Learned from an Intercampus Transfer

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Over an eighteen-month period, Duke University's law library collaborated with the larger selective depository on campus to transfer more than 2,000 individual federal document titles, as part of a campus library renovation project that will send most of the larger depository library's collection into off-site storage. The transfer project raised a number of important considerations, including the value of physical access to historical documents materials, the importance of developing catalog records and finding aids for individual document titles, and the identification of partnership opportunities both for housing physical documents and for enabling wider electronic access through digitization projects.

Do your users actually want this old stuff?

Aren't these all online, anyway?

Is this really worth all the time you're spending here?

Questions like these, from well-meaning but skeptical passersby, occasionally interrupted the dusty tedium of a five-month flagging project. One year before, the larger selective depository on campus (a federal depository since 1890, currently receiving 80 percent of available documents) had begun planning to move the bulk of its print collection into off-site storage, as part of a long-term library renovation project. Our independently administered law school library (an 8 percent depository since 1976) was invited to review their print collection first, and identify any titles that we might wish to add to our own documents collection. Our state's regional depository librarian, preferring to keep as many documents on-site as possible, gave blanket permission for any flagged items to move within an inter-campus transfer, rather than require the campus library to seek regional permission by submitting lists of specific titles.

The law library considered this project a great opportunity to fill the historical gaps in our documents collection.

Although we had not formally joined the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) until 1976, we did already own a robust historical collection of federal documents from the 1930s and 1940s; this seemed like a convenient way to obtain many pre-1930 documents, as well as to add what was missing in our collection from the 1950s and 1960s. In contrast to the highly trafficked, and thus highly-desirable, documents real estate of our campus library counterparts, our smaller FDLP collection is housed in a lower-traffic area of the law library with compact shelving, which had the (admittedly unusual, for research libraries) luxury of room to grow.

We were also fortunate that our collection was already fully cataloged within the university's shared integrated library system (ILS). Our campus counterparts were not so lucky, estimating that at least 20 percent of their large historical documents collection was not reflected in the online catalog, their holding records accessible only through a legacy printed shelflist. An even bigger portion of their collection was cataloged with brief title records, but the individual volumes within a larger series were not itemized or barcoded. This made the transfer project's workflow clear: law library staff would need to physically review and flag desired items in person, as no reliable holdings list could be generated in the ILS for remote examination. Armed with iPads to check specific titles against the law library's collection, and stocked with piles of yellow paper flags, the law library documents coordinator and several subject specialists examined approximately 82,000 volumes in the campus depository collection, ultimately flagging nearly 2,200 documents for transfer.

Since their documents collection was in a high-traffic area, we encountered many campus library colleagues over the five months of sporadic flagging. Several expressed gratitude that the law library wanted to "rescue" the older and uncataloged titles, which might have otherwise faced a quick discard instead of the processing required for off-site storage. Others found the project puzzling, given the growth of online document repositories like HathiTrust, which seeks to eventually create a comprehensive

registry of digitized federal government documents.¹ Still others expressed belief that the libraries' various commercial databases, which offer sophisticated indexing and search functions, would be a suitable enough replacement for much of the print documents collection.

As the first of nine shrink-wrapped book trucks arrived, law library staff began the lengthy process of sorting, cataloging, and shelving our newest acquisitions. Along the way, we, too, considered the value of maintaining this historical print documents collection in an age when electronic access to documents continues to improve. For depository libraries that might be facing similar space concerns as our campus colleagues, the lessons we learned as the beneficiaries of a documents withdrawal project might merit some consideration.

Accessibility and Discoverability

Much of the skepticism about our transfer project was rooted in two related ideas: first, that hardly anyone used the historical documents print collection; and second, in the unlikely event that someone wanted to do so, they could find and use the desired title just as easily (if not more) online. It is true that researchers enjoy a number of options for electronic access to digitized federal documents, including Google Books (books.google.com), HathiTrust (www.hathitrust.org), and the Internet Archive (www.archive.org). Commercial databases like ProQuest Congressional (search.proquest.com/congressional), Readex (www.readex.com), LLC Digital (www.llmc-digital.org), and HeinOnline (www.heinonline.org) provide subscriber libraries with additional access to congressional and executive agency documents, albeit with varying degrees of coverage, usability, and financial commitment.

However, document digitization remains far from comprehensive. Both the free and subscription-based digital collections continue to have coverage gaps, although these grow steadily smaller with time. In particular, despite the federal copyright laws' exemption for works of the US government, documents that were published within the "orphan works" copyright time frame of 1923–63 are often displayed in a limited or "snippet" view on Google Books and HathiTrust.² In some cases, online collections may be missing particular volumes of a serial title; in others, digitized titles can suffer from inferior scan quality. In still other cases, particular document titles are yet to be digitized by any entity, leaving print collections as the only option for their use. As one documents librarian put it shortly after the debut of Google Books: "despite Google's best efforts . . . I suspect that much of the truly valuable information contained in legacy collections of government information will remain in physical format for many, many years to come; indeed, perhaps forever."³

Even considering the large number of federal documents that have already been digitized, librarians still caution against the assumption that current digital collections can, or should, effectively replace print collections. In a 2012 opinion piece, two documents coordinators warned that "while digital surrogates of paper may serve the needs of many users, libraries will still need an adequate number of paper copies for direct user examination when digitization is flawed or inaccurate and for redigitization with improved technologies in the future."⁴ A 2012 survey of urban public FDLP library directors echoed this sentiment, with all respondents expressing desire to retain a print collection in the future; several noted that "some documents are difficult to view in a digital format and that it might be better to keep them in print until the GPO streamlines the formats."⁵ In some cases, particularly when using statistical tables or if consulting multiple volumes of a series, print collections may actually prove more efficient for the user, if the titles are readily accessible.

Whichever formats might comprise the bulk of a library's documents collection, it is paramount that the titles are discoverable through library catalog records and/or federated full-text database searching. In the 2012 survey of public library directors, two respondents effectively outlined the pros and cons this issue, with one noting the clear correlation between cataloging and usage: "[A] huge amount of government documents [in many public libraries] are not cataloged. At a past job, when neighboring libraries cataloged, usage skyrocketed." Another respondent lamented the cost and staff time involved with retrospective document cataloging efforts: "How many libraries would be likely to re-catalog? There's not enough money."⁶

Historical collection analysis and cataloging is indeed a time-consuming process, but also may prove to be an invaluable way to provide users with fuller access to the documents collection.⁷ Our staff needed to create many original records for some of the uncataloged acquisitions, and fleshed out existing records for the titles that were not barcoded or itemized. While it is unlikely that any of the previously uncataloged titles would have rocketed to the top of the campus library's circulation statistics had they been cataloged decades ago, it is not difficult to imagine at least a few researchers consulting particular titles, had they been able to locate them easily with a search of the online catalog.

Title-level catalog records to commercial database subscriptions may also help to expose historical documents and encourage their discovery. In records for print titles, our libraries' catalog provides related online access links to Google Books, HathiTrust, and the Internet Archive's Open Content Alliance. Other title-level electronic records for commercial database subscriptions are purchased or created in-house only selectively; as a result, library users may be less aware that a particular title could

be digitized in one of the subscription databases as well. The purchase of commercial database catalog records can undoubtedly prove costly, particularly when added to the already substantial cost of subscription to the basic content. However, the benefit of increased access to specific titles may help maximize a library's investment in commercial database subscriptions, particularly if databases are being used to replace legacy print collections.

Training and Promotion

Catalog records, while important, are not the only way for users to discover the contents a library's documents collection. Even if an FDLP collection is housed separately from other library materials, items within the documents collection can and should be integrated, as appropriate, into library subject guides, instructional materials, and web content. Social media, in particular, can be an effective way to highlight unique titles in a documents collection.⁸ The University of Washington's Gov Pubs Finds Tumblr, launched in February 2015, is an excellent example of how libraries can highlight interesting and unique historical document materials.⁹ Our library is attempting to incorporate more historical print documents into physical book displays, as well as within library blog entries.

Subject specialists within the library should also be encouraged, if not outright directed, to review the documents within their respective fields. As "the dividing line between government documents and other library materials is disappearing," it is increasingly important that *all* public services staff—not just documents specialists—have familiarity and comfort with using a library's documents collection.¹⁰ In the case of our transfer project, other law librarians were invited by the documents coordinator to review and flag the federal agencies that were most closely correlated to their subject expertise. For example, our foreign and international law librarian took the lead in reviewing the State Department's many treaty and foreign relations publications; another librarian with a background in intellectual property law examined the Copyright Office and Patent and Trademark Office publications. Some of these staff members had little previous experience working with federal documents beyond the familiar primary sources of law, and welcomed the opportunity to learn more about historical agency publications in their subject areas. This hands-on staff review of the collection increases the likelihood that some documents might be remembered during future reference transactions where the items would prove useful.

Another effective way to expose documents collections more widely is digitization. Because the vast majority of federal documents are free of copyright restriction, most libraries' document collections will have some excellent candidates for scanning and posting.¹¹ With the exception of heavily illustrated

documents or those with maps and other inserts, good-quality PDF scans of standard text-based documents can be generated from relatively low-cost scanning equipment. Completed document scans can be freely uploaded to the Internet Archive or housed on a library's own digital repository, such as through the Internet Archive's Archive-It subscription service.¹²

In spring 2013, the Duke University Libraries partnered with the Internet Archive to launch a pilot service called Digitize this Book. During the pilot period, current students, faculty, and staff would see an option to request digitization on the catalog records for pre-1923 public domain materials. Within two weeks of a digitization request, the titles are scanned and uploaded to the Internet Archive, where they remain available for public use.¹³ Following the completion of the documents transfer project, the law library hopes to add its historical documents collection to the list of materials that are available for digitization requests through the service.

In the meantime, we continue to scan and upload document titles as warranted by individual reference requests. One such document—an obscure housing agency publication from the 1940s, scanned in response to a reference question and then posted to the web—has now been viewed more than 100 times, illustrating both the unpredictability of demand for historical print documents, and the importance of their accessibility in a variety of places.

Conclusions

Only time can answer the skeptical questions that we heard about the ultimate value of the intercampus documents transfer project. The flagging process alone totaled approximately forty hours of law library staff time, and the subsequent cataloging, shifting, and shelving of these items stretched over the better part of a year. Was this time "worth it" in the end? How can we effectively measure this project's success or failure?

One simple—but simplistic—answer might lie in circulation statistics. With some exceptions in the library's reference collection, these documents are available for users to borrow. Circulation statistics can be easily generated in the library's ILS, making them an attractive potential metric. But circulation statistics seem like the wrong measure of success for historical research material: government documents simply will not circulate at the same level as popular collections like fiction, and the statistics will not capture more "reference"-style consultations, in which the user does not ultimately need to borrow the item. While statistics can provide some helpful information about usage trends and agencies of user interest, they cannot be assumed to tell the whole story of a particular research collection's value.

There were also several long-term benefits to the law library as a whole, which should be factored into the project's cost-benefit analysis. To help prepare and make space for the transferred documents' arrival, a long-planned documents collection review and weeding project was finally completed. Although only a small number of documents were ultimately withdrawn during this process, it did assist with cleanup of the collection. Some of these withdrawn titles were also placed with our regional library or to other locations via the Needs & Offers list, filling gaps in other libraries' collections.

The flagging process also provided several members of the law library's reference staff with valuable hands-on documents experience. Staff appreciated the opportunity to participate in the selection process, and learned a great deal about the publication histories of the relevant agencies. This indirect staff training in the existence and use of historical documents must certainly be factored into the project's cost-benefit analysis.

Finally, the potential for increasing the accessibility of documents that have not yet been digitized is another likely benefit. In the past, we have scanned and posted individual documents in response to reference inquiries, and have also loaned print copies of documents upon request to commercial vendors which were building a subscription-based collection. The campus libraries' partnership with Internet Archive for a scan-on-demand service seems like a natural next step; while details to include the law library government documents have not yet been finalized, we are optimistic that users will welcome a broadened opportunity to request scans of needed documents.

What can other documents libraries take away from our experiences? Certainly, most depositories do not have the luxury of space to accept thousands of withdrawn documents, but every depository could likely benefit from a thorough collection review.¹⁴ Withdrawn items might prove valuable to colleagues scouring the Needs & Offers list to build their own collections.¹⁵ In addition, historical titles may be good candidates for an in-house scan-on-demand service or for partnership with an institution which is building digitized document collections. While we might never find an easy formula to measure this transfer project's "success," it seems that any effort, however large or small, to heighten user and staff awareness of federal documents collections should warrant a checkmark in the "benefit" column.

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