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A Fine Balance: Tangible or Electronic?

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Abstract

As the government documents librarian, I was appointed to an ad hoc library task force in the spring of 2010. The task force was to determine if our library should remain in the Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) as a selective depository. Ultimately, the group recommended that we remain in the FDLP, and the library administration accepted our recommendations. The recommendations included shifting from tangible government documents towards electronic documents wherever possible. However, tangible government documents of significant historical and/or research value were to be retained. In addition, a special weeding project to reduce the size of the current collection was implemented. The library task force's assessment and analysis of Rod Library's participation in the FDLP, the information gathered and utilized throughout the process, the potential benefits and drawbacks of our depository status, and the criteria used to determine retention or withdrawal will be addressed.

Introduction

In January of 2010, I was approached by the now retired Dean of Library Services. She indicated that she would be appointing a task force of library faculty and staff to analyze the government documents depository collection and recommend whether or not the library should retain its status as a selective federal depository library. With budgets growing tighter, we needed to prove the value and worth of the depository program and collection to the library and university administration.

Background

Rod Library at the University of Northern Iowa has been a selective federal government depository since 1946. As a selective federal depository library, Rod Library receives federal government documents published by the Government Printing Office (GPO) and distributed through the FDLP free of charge. Selective depositories are not required to select and receive everything published by the government and generally select publications based on the research needs of its users. Rod Library's depository serves the university community and the First Congressional District of Iowa. The collection occupies the west half of the main floor of the library and covers 7,022 linear feet of shelving, approximately 65%

capacity. The depository collection includes print materials, microfiche, CD-ROMs, DVDs, maps, kits, and other types of materials. In 2010, Rod Library was receiving approximately 60% of the government publications produced by the GPO. Newer government documents are issued online but there are a significant number of older, historical government documents that have not been digitized and put online yet. The task force felt that it was important to gather and analyze information that would give an objective and comprehensive snapshot of the depository library collection and its use, both physically and electronically.

The Challenge

The task force was composed of four library faculty and staff: the government documents librarian, the head of Reference and Instructional Services, the Technical Services government documents assistant, and an Access Services staff member. The charge given to the task force was:

Analyze and study the Rod Library Government Documents Depository status to determine whether use of the collection, both print and electronic, warrants retention of depository status as it currently exists considering costs associated with maintaining current status. Include cost of human resources and supplies and space

occupied by the print collection. Consider option of changing entirely to Documents without Shelves status. Identify process required to eliminate or modify the depository status and to change entirely to Documents without Shelves status. Make recommendations on whether we retain depository status as is and/or how the collection might evolve; submit report to the Dean by June 1, 2010 (Mercado).

The task force began meeting twice per week in February of 2010. First, we conducted a literature review to determine if other depository libraries in the United States had gone through the process of examining their depository collection and status. One library, the Suffolk University Law Library, had gone through the process of dropping their depository status entirely. It had been a selective depository for about 19 years and had an 11 percent depository selection rate. Its collection was small and had no historical government documents. There were many differences between the depository collection at Suffolk and the one at Rod Library. The description of its depository relinquishment process is the most detailed one found, and the steps would be the same for any depository library (McKenzie, Gemellaro, and Walters 305).

Since there was not much literature available, the task force also posted a query to other depository libraries on the government documents listserv, GovDoc-L. We asked:

For those of you that have heavily weeded the tangible collection, gone to Documents without Shelves entirely, or dropped depository status entirely, would you let me know how the experience was? I am interested in the particulars of the process: time, money, staffing, space and other factors that one might not think of. (Gould)

A number of responses were received and, while some input was helpful, it was apparent that each depository library was unique in their collection, staffing, budget, and so on.

Relevant Information and Data Gathering

The task force ran circulation and usage statistics for the government documents depository collection. This would determine which

government documents were being used in the physical collection. The statistics were limited to government documents in print format as that was the largest component of the government documents collection. Approximately 14,000 government documents circulated once or more since 1989, the year Rod Library launched its online public access catalog, UNISTAR. Since January of 2005, 2,500 government documents circulated once or more. Since January of 2009, 438 government documents circulated once or more. In addition, 698 government documents circulated a total of five or more times. Internal use statistics were only available for the time period of June 2009 through June 2010. 711 government documents were used internally during that time period.

Rod Library's information systems specialist programmed software that would track the number of electronic government documents accessed through UNISTAR. A significant majority of government documents in electronic format are assigned a Persistent Uniform Resource Locator (PURL). We tracked the number of PURLs patrons accessed on a monthly basis for two months. In March of 2010, 140 electronic government documents were accessed a total of 191 times. In April of 2010, 379 electronic government documents were accessed a total of 429 times.

Survey Questions and Responses

The task force felt that it was important to survey the faculty, staff, students and general public regarding their use of the government documents depository collection. The task force also wanted to get a sense of how many people were actually aware of the fact that Rod Library was indeed a federal depository library. The task force consulted with the regional depository librarian for the state of Iowa and the director of Collection Management and Preservation at the GPO and developed an eleven question online survey (see table 1) (Bancroft). The survey was publicized by utilizing social media tools, e-mail, presence on the home page of the library website, and word of mouth. The survey was open for approximately one month.

Table 1

Rod Library's Government Documents Depository Collection and Usage Survey Questions and Responses

1. Did you know Rod Library provides access to tangible and online government documents?	Yes —78 No —10 Unsure —2
2. How frequently do you access government documents?	At least once a week —6 At least once a month —14 Occasionally (3-5 times per year) —24 Rarely (Once every year or two) —27 Never —17 Other Comments —5
3. Which formats do you use? (Select all that apply)	Online —59 Paper —59 Maps —29 Microfiche —11 Posters —6 CD-ROM — 6 Other formats —2
4. What type of document do you use most frequently? Please briefly describe.	Responses —54 Census materials, statistics, congressional hearings, and maps are the most heavily used types of government documents
5. What are you most likely to use the government documents for?	Research —41 Class/Paper —23 Personal Use —17 Other —5
6. How did you first hear of or find government documents at UNI?	Library Staff —35 UNISTAR (catalog) —14 Library website —10 Database/Google/Online —7 Professor —7
7. What changes could we make to more readily facilitate your use of the collection?	Leave it the way it is; no changes (a broad collection of print/online/microfiche) —43 Go all online —25 Focus on tangible and online documents of significant research value —11 Other (Specify) —15
8. Do you have any questions, concerns, ideas, or comments regarding the government documents collection at Rod Library?	No —11 Other comments —15
9. If Rod Library no longer had depository status and provided access to fewer tangible government documents, what impact would that have on your classes or research?	Generally, little to none —12 Other comments —38
10. Does your UNI department (or other group) make heavy use of a specific part of the government documents collection? If so, please describe.	No/Not applicable —9 Other comments —17
11. Please identify yourself.	UNI Faculty —40 UNI Student —29 UNI Staff —18 Other —2

A total of 90 survey responses were received and almost half of the respondents were faculty members on campus. The survey responses showed that, while the government documents depository collection was not heavily utilized on a daily basis, it was still used on a fairly regular basis for classes and research. The respondents indicated that the three top formats used in the government documents collection were paper, online, and maps. Microfiche, CD-ROMs, and posters appeared to be used very little. Most of the survey respondents wanted the collection to remain pretty much the same. Tangible government documents in certain areas were still heavily used and, in some cases, the preferred format. These tangible formats included, but were not limited to, maps, soil surveys, statistical information, congressional hearings and reports. While many respondents preferred to get their government information online, they utilized the tangible documents when it was more feasible for them to do so. The misconception that everything is available online was reflected in some of the comments. Contrary to popular belief, that is not necessarily the case with government documents. The current trend seems to be that historical government documents (pre-1930s) and new government documents (post-1990) are available electronically. Between about 1930 and 1990, it seems to be hit or miss with government documents available online. The survey responses reflected that a number of professors on campus used government documents heavily in their research and for their class assignments. Overall, the survey results reflected that the government documents collection was still relied upon by the university community.

Input from Library Subject Bibliographers

After the information had been gathered and the survey results analyzed, the task force envisioned that the government documents depository collection could retain tangible government documents of significant historical and/or research value while moving towards a predominantly electronic government documents collection. An e-mail was sent to the thirteen subject bibliographers at Rod Library and the task force requested which specific tangible government documents titles the subject bibliographers thought held significant research or historical value and, therefore, should be

retained in the tangible collection. The subject bibliographers responded with categories of government documents, such as statistics and congressional hearings, as well as specific individual titles or series that they wanted retained in the government documents depository collection.

Documents Without Shelves

Documents without Shelves is a commercial service available through MARCIVE, Inc. MARCIVE provides the subscribing libraries with full MARC records with URLs for government documents that have been published online. These records are then loaded into a library catalog on a monthly basis and patrons can then access government documents online. Rod Library chose to go the less expensive route and pay for *all* online government document titles instead of choosing to pay a little more for MARCIVE to tailor the MARC records to match our selection profile that was on record with GPO. While there was some savings in going this route, Rod Library's online catalog was flooded with huge numbers of government documents. This, in turn, made more work for the patrons as they had to sift through more online catalog records to find the relevant government documents.

Time and Expenditures Assessment

Another part of the charge given to the task force was to assess the time library personnel spent on government documents as well as the various expenditures that supported the government documents depository program and collection. It was estimated that 1,844 hours per year are spent on the government documents depository program and collection. This includes the time spent by the government documents librarian, the Technical Services government documents assistant, the Technical Services library associate, the cataloging librarian, and student assistants from Reference and Instructional Services and Technical Services.

For expenditures related to the government documents depository collection and program, we looked at the expenditures for supplies and subscriptions to online services. On average, Rod Library spent approximately \$20 dollars per year on supplies to support the government documents depository program and collection. The majority

of the costs came with our subscription to MARCIVE's *Documents without Shelves*. The total amount spent on the MARCIVE subscription was approximately \$3,962 dollars per year.

Benefits and Drawbacks

The task force felt that enough information and data had been gathered to start considering different scenarios. The task force came up with five possible scenarios:

1. Transition to a mostly electronic depository collection which included retaining our depository status, heavily weeding the depository collection, and shifting to take up less space.
2. Transition to a hybrid print and electronic depository collection which included retaining our depository status, heavily weeding the depository collection, and shifting to take up less space.
3. Transition to a hybrid depository collection which included retaining depository status, modifying and hybridizing item selection list, but no heavy weeding or shifting.
4. Do not change a thing.
5. Drop depository status completely but retain subscription to MARCIVE's *Documents without Shelves* service. This involved relinquishing our depository status, offering all of our government documents to other depositories, and de-accessioning materials from our catalog and OCLC.

The task force specified all the benefits and drawbacks under each possible scenario. It was a very detailed and complex process. The more significant benefits to retaining depository status included:

- Receiving all government documents, tangible and electronic, for almost no cost to Rod Library.
- Access to federal government databases that Rod Library would not otherwise have access to.
- Free MARCIVE records tailored to our item selection profile as a depository library participant in the GPO's Cataloging Record Distribution Project.
- Retention of depository status would let Rod Library keep older government documents that were considered valuable.

The major drawbacks to completely relinquishing our depository status included:

- Relinquishment of Rod Library's depository status would be an irrevocable decision.
- Rod Library would be terminating a 64-year partnership with the federal government.
- Our patrons would lose access to all government documents, tangible and electronic.
- Every single government document would have to be individually de-accessioned from the catalog and OCLC, listed and offered to other depositories, which would heavily burden the workload of the Technical Services staff.

Task Force Recommendations

After the task force had analyzed all of the relevant information it had gathered during this semester long process, it put forth its recommendations to the Rod Library administration:

We recommend that Rod Library retain selective government depository status. We further recommend that the selection profile be changed to focus on electronic resources whenever possible. The Task Force recognizes that it will be important to keep some resources in tangible form because some publications do not yet exist in online form, or are not easily usable by researchers in electronic format (this is the case with most maps, for example). We further recommend that the size of the current tangible collection be reduced through a special weeding project. The project will focus on keeping sources that are of historical and/or research value to the local community, and that do not exist in usable (or any) electronic form. (Marshall 1)

Conclusion

Rod Library's administrators accepted our recommendations and agreed that Rod Library should remain a selective federal government documents depository. In the fall of 2010, a second task force was appointed to develop a detailed plan and process for weeding the government documents collection. With a detailed process in place, Rod Library has begun weeding the tangible government documents collection.

Contrary to the beliefs of many, everything is not online. As the task force discovered through this process, there is still value to having a tangible government documents depository collection. There is also tremendous value to maintaining a partnership with the federal government that benefits all parties involved and furthering the mission of access to government information.

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