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# November 2000: Habent Sua Fata Libelli; Or, the Fine Art of DeselectionSeptember 2000: Dacus Moves

Dacus Library

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# the dean's corner

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## *Habent Sua Fata Libelli; Or, the Fine Art of Deselection*

***In a large, organic body like a library, deselection – weeding, purging, whatever the chosen word – has its place because library materials eventually must give way to newer, more accurate research.***

**H***abent sua fata libelli.* Books have their fates, or, each book has its destiny. I first saw the phrase in Joyce's *Ulysses*. It figures Joyce would have said it. His motto seems to have been "obscurity is the next best thing to being there."

Terentius Maurus, its author and the only fragment of his we have, had it right. Books do eventually outlive their usefulness. In a large, organic body like a library, deselection – weeding, purging, whatever the chosen word – has its place because library materials eventually must give way to newer, more accurate research.

Now before anyone hyperventilates over the word, deselection, let me hasten to add that as a librarian this is the hardest of tasks. I liken it to euthanasizing a pet. Nothing is harder, and yet when you see the struggling creature, you realize there is no other way. Removing books from the shelves is the last thing on our "To Do" list but it *has* to be done.

Nearly everyone who has made a career around books has his or her own favorite horror story about deselection. My own is this one: librarians at the Monastery of St. Catherine, more likely than not, out of sheer desperation began hauling to the

dumpster all excess materials they could not find room for. Their chagrin could not have been more palpable than when the scholar Tischendorf discovered the *Codex Sinaiticus* in their trash dump and whisked out this priceless manuscript to the hands of those who would give it proper care.

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Everyone on the planet has read Nicholson Baker's "The Author vs. the Library" in the 14 October issue of *The New Yorker* in 1996. Baker chronicled a huge brouhaha. Librarians at the San Francisco Public Library (SFPL) were moving into a new facility and Baker chose to write about the wholesale weeding practices mandated upon them. He was right to call attention to the insipid weeding policy. Likewise, those at Free Library of Philadelphia. It was charged with destroying over 300,000 *usable* books. Go, as they say, figure.

Which brings us to the topic at hand. Since books have their fates, what is the Dacus policy (and why do we do it at all since it is obviously rife with danger)?

Another Latin phrase springs to mind: *abusus non tollit usum*. Abuse does not abolish use, or abuse is no argument against proper use. And so, with proper use in mind, let me see if I can clearly articulate our policy.

First to be remembered is that Dacus is a limited facility. We are at about 96%-98% of all usable space in Dacus (without renovation). Both materials and space are part of the formula for accrediting teams, so we can't scrimp on one to salvage the other.

With that in mind, where do we go from here? Can't we just wait for the new and/or renovated Dacus? Unfortunately not. Being so near capacity, and the with the new and/or renovated facility 5-7 years away (a most optimistic prediction!), we *have* to come up with another plan.

An intelligent reader might ask any one of the following questions. Why not buy more shelving? We do have this on the agenda, but with respect to our limited space, we do not have much room in which to mount additional shelving. Moreover, it isn't cheap, coming in at about \$4,000 a range. This of course only buys us a few months before we are overcrowded once again. Remember, each new range crowds seating space

and risks violations of accreditation standards.

Have you ever heard of compact shelving? Indeed we have. This is a very viable prospect and one that could be reused in the new and/or renovated building. Regrettably, it costs about three or four times as much as regular shelving. While it remarkably increases space (a single unit increases book storage by just over 50%), its cost makes it a major drawback.

Have you thought about off-site storage? Yes, both on and off-site storage. But there are difficulties: 1. You can't take just any old facility. It must have load-bearing capabilities (i.e., not sink beneath its weight). 2 It must be immune to heat, cold, moisture and bugs. 3. It must be accessible to limited staff (i.e., you can't simply stack books to the ceiling without proper limited access to retrieve and re-shelve items). Finally, as you might suspect, such a facility has not only its rental and upkeep tabs, but also shuttle expenses, which can be costly depending on how far away it is. Then there is the problem of adequate turnaround. Should patrons expect the books delivered in an hour, a half day, or the next day?

Couldn't you just digitize discards? Yes. But this, too, is both time-consuming and costly. *At the very least*, we'd have to hire more staff, and that's the least expensive digitization route.

When you add up all these alternatives, however good they are, you are still left with the significant economic question. *Should this much money (and it is significant) be spent on materials that we know are not now being used,*

*nor have they been used for at least two decades?* Further, when we know these little used materials are not on standard bibliographies in the field, are not considered the *locus classicus* by any expert in the discipline, and could be retrieved in a reasonable amount of time (for next to nothing in terms of cost) via interlibrary loan, the choice does seem to come down to *habent sua fata libelli*: books have their fates, too, and must go the way of all flesh.

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With deselection as the only sensible alternative, here's how Dacus goes through its library materials retirement process (for serials the criteria is slightly different):

1. We select monograph titles that have not circulated for 20 or more years. At first, everything is selected and "shadowed" in the catalog for *possible* deselection. (Any set is returned to the shelves even if only *one* of its volumes circulated while the rest gathered dust.)
2. Next, library subject experts check through the list to make sure they are not on standard bibliographies. Those that are, are "unshadowed," (i.e., released back to the shelves).

3. A final list is sent to the department faculty in question. If titles "spill over" into other departments, these are sent to those departments. What faculty select to go back on the shelves, goes. What remains is put up for sale or otherwise discarded.

For serials, we generally discard defunct and cancelled titles. Occasionally, some microfilm antedating the First World War is put on the list if its no longer being used. In *every* case, with books and serials, faculty are consulted.

Frankly, we don't like the idea of deselection any more than you do. Every library in the country goes through this process, and we're hardly any different. Over the last five years, accrediting bodies have begun asking about "routine" deselection policies. They, too, recognize that you can't build a better library without one.

Libraries are living, organic entities. Like a garden, they do not grow (or even produce) without periodic weeding. In the case of gardens, weeds are generally easier to spot, which is why we do not rely on our heads alone, but on experts throughout the process.

So, the next time we begin a deselection (and we are doing it even now), *don't panic*. We're not doing anything you won't be made aware of in due course. In the end, not only will the library be better for it, but the students we are charged with teaching will have a much better resource than ever before from which to harvest their own cornucopia of knowledge.

**Mark Y. Herring**  
**Dean of Library Services**

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