Short on Space, Libraries Look to One Another for Solutions

By Jennifer Howard

Christopher B. Loring, the director of the libraries at Smith College, has a problem with his Strategic Air Command bunker—it's almost full.

The bunker, long since retired from military service, now operates as a high-density book-storage facility for Smith and the rest of the Five College Consortium (Amherst, Hampshire, and Mount Holyoke Colleges and the University of Massachusetts at Amherst). It can hold about 570,000 volumes and now contains about 540,000. In about five years Smith will run out of places to house all its books, according to Mr. Loring.
And there are always more books. The college spends about 65 percent of its $3.5-million acquisitions budget on electronic content, but it still buys many print volumes. "There's been a slow march toward more electronic content. But there are certain types of materials—art books are good examples—where you'll be buying print," Mr. Loring says. He and his staff have to find somewhere to put new acquisitions as well as less-used collections of older books. The year "2018 is when we really hit the wall almost everywhere in our facilities," he says.

Talk of digital revolutions and bookless libraries notwithstanding, academic libraries around the country are feeling the squeeze as legacy collections outgrow shelves, and shelves give way to learning commons and shared study areas. Those twin pressure points—too many print books plus new demands on library real estate—have spurred academic libraries to try a set of state and regional experiments to free up library space to suit modern learning styles and still make sure that somebody, somewhere, hangs onto books that make up part of the intellectual record, even if those books haven't circulated in years.

For such experiments to succeed, librarians say, they should build off existing relationships among libraries, and they should draw on solid data—on persuasive and detailed analyses of what's in a collection and how it's used and whether those books are available somewhere else. The streamlining of collections has to be handled in a way that doesn't enrage faculty members who still cherish access to physical books. Many disciplines, especially the sciences, favor electronic resources, but print still holds powerful appeal for a lot of scholars.

Shared print management "has really become a growing concern for academic libraries, almost all of them," says Lizanne Payne, a consultant who works closely with groups of libraries on how to jointly manage collections. She's the project manager for WEST, the Western Regional Storage Trust, a repository system set up in 2009 by the University of California system and several other institutions to consolidate and maintain their print journal archives. More than a hundred individual libraries participate.
With WEST and other journal-management projects well under way, libraries have turned their attention to the thornier problem of monographs. "There's been a really notable shift in the past year from an emphasis on serials and journals to an emphasis on monographs," Ms. Payne says. The pressures at Smith exist everywhere, and librarians "are feeling highly motivated to reduce the footprint of their book collections," she says.

Mass-digitization projects, notably the creation of the HathiTrust digital repository with its nearly 11 million volumes, have also encouraged libraries to act, according to Ms. Payne. If electronic copies of monographs exist, that takes some pressure off libraries to have print copies of them close by. (About 3.5 million of the digitized works in the HathiTrust are in the public domain, according to the repository.)

That's the hope anyway. "People haven't really figured out how to make that linkage work, but everybody has the sense that HathiTrust is part of the solution," Ms. Payne says.

What to do about legacy print collections has become a big topic at the national level, with federal agencies like the Institute of Museum and Library Services, nonprofits like the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and consortia like the OCLC and the Center for Research Libraries supporting the search for answers. Many libraries have already concluded that the best place to look for a solution is close to home, in partnerships with other libraries in their state or region. Smith's Mr. Loring is helping to lead the latest regional venture, the Northeast Regional Library Print Management Project.

"How many copies of a little-used monograph do we need in the Northeast? How many do we need in the country?" Mr. Loring says. "We don't have the answers, but we need to start finding our way toward them."

Shared-Print Projects
The Northeast project kicked off an 18-month planning phase in July 2013 with the help of $50,000 from the Mellon foundation. About 70 campus libraries sent
representatives to the July meeting, including big institutions like Harvard University and smaller ones like Wellesley College. (About 90 institutions, including four community colleges, ultimately joined the first phase of the endeavor.)

The organizers set a modest goal: not to come up with "one solution for all print in the Northeast" but to figure out which models "might capture enough interest that they might be viable," says Neal B. Abraham, a physicist who is executive director of the Five College Consortium and co-director of the Northeast project.

Different libraries worry about different things, he says. Some want to share the responsibility of maintaining legacy collections of monographs. (Mr. Abraham calls this the "You keep some things, we keep some things" approach.) Some want to find more off-site storage at facilities like the bunker-turned-depository. Others want to augment their holdings through greater access to items held in other collections. Working groups are supposed to make proposals about the most pressing concerns by next summer.

Several shared-print projects are already up and running. One of the most fully developed is the Michigan Shared Print Initiative, formed in 2011 by seven public universities in Michigan. The largest participant, Wayne State University, had more than three million volumes in its collection; the smallest, Saginaw Valley State University, had closer to 210,000. Despite their size differences, "these are libraries that have a history of working together," says Randy Dykhuis, executive director of the Midwest Collaborative for Library Services, which provides support services to libraries and facilitates the work of the shared-print project. "So there's a fairly high level of trust among the group."

That helped when the libraries sat down to decide which books to "deselect" to reduce duplicate holdings among the participating institutions. They settled on three criteria: titles that were published or acquired before 2005, that appeared in at least three collections, and that had circulated three or fewer times since 1999.
The libraries also needed to know what they actually had on their shelves. For that they turned to Sustainable Collection Services, a company that specializes in what its president, Rick Lugg, calls "data-driven deselection."

Mr. Lugg describes three categories of books in monograph collections: archive copies, held "to be sure that the record is safe"; "service copies, to make sure that we can get it into the hands of a user if anyone wants it"; and what he calls surplus books, "in which the other conditions are satisfied and there are still copies on the shelves."

Data have their limitations, Mr. Lugg says. Circulation figures "only go back so far," for instance. But "using data to justify the decisions or to inform the decisions is fairly powerful," he says. Libraries upload bibliographic and circulation data to Sustainable Collection's servers; the company then produces collection summaries and makes the processed data available for more detailed analyses through an online analytics tool it provides.

Thus armed, libraries can make data-enabled choices about what to keep. The Michigan group focused on about 535,000 titles, according to Mr. Dykhuis. "In some cases, there were four, five, or more copies" of certain titles held by the libraries, he says. "The criteria specified that two copies would be kept, so that means that Copies 3, 4, 5, etcetera could be discarded." Then, with the help of Sustainable Collection Services' algorithms, the libraries had to figure out which of them would keep which copies. "We called it horse trading," Mr. Dykhuis says. "There were a couple of times I held my breath, thinking, This is not going to work." In the end, though, "it came out pretty well, and everybody was OK with the lists that they got" of what to keep.

**The Value of Trust**

It's hard to calculate exactly what their collective work will save the participating libraries, Mr. Dykhuis says. A 2010 study estimated that it costs $4.26 a year for a library to keep a book on the shelf. "But of course that $4.26 per book is not fungible," Mr. Dykhuis says. "By removing 20,000 books, you don't get $85,200
back into your budget. What you gain is open space in the library, and that space could be repurposed for study space, classrooms, or reading areas."

The Michigan libraries signed an agreement to work with one another for 15 years. "Basically we're relying on everybody's professionalism," he says. "To do what librarians do, and that's make decisions about what's in the collection."

Trust has also been an essential ingredient in the success of another shared-print undertaking, the Maine Shared Collections Strategy. It brings together several academic libraries—at Bates, Bowdoin, and Colby Colleges and the Universities of Maine and Southern Maine—with public libraries, including the Bangor Public Library and the Maine State Library. The idea for the project began to take shape in 2009, when "everybody was flailing around with budget woes," says Clem Guthro, director of the Colby College Libraries. (He's also on the steering committee of the Northeast project.) In 2010, the Maine undertaking won a three-year, $821,000 grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

Excluding government documents, the libraries identified about 2.9 million print books in their catalogs. So far, they have made shared commitments to keep a million of those and are working through the remaining titles now. (Not getting a commitment doesn't mean a book is going to be tossed out; it just means that it's up to the individual library to decide what to do with it.) The libraries note their "retention agreements" in their catalog records, and also plan to record those agreements in WorldCat, an international catalog of bibliographic records run by OCLC, says Mr. Guthro. If enough libraries do that, a global picture of what's being preserved where will begin to take shape.

Even though they're a mix of public and private, the Maine libraries have a history of working together, and they use an interlibrary loan service with "a really robust statewide delivery system," Mr. Guthro says. "Faculty aren't going to be particularly happy if you give up your copy for something that's going to take three or four days to get to them," he says. "One day is pretty tolerable."
Like others involved in joint print-management planning, Mr. Guthro says it is "not about weeding but about making decisions about intellectual stewardship."

"You might have a Danielle Steel novel that circulated 300 times 20 years ago. Do you want multiple copies of that? Maybe not."