SCLSNJ's Evolving Collection

by Lynn Hoffman, Director of Operations at SCLSNJ

Lynn Hoffman received her MA in Library and Information Science from the University of Iowa in 1996. Since then, she has spent her entire career working in large public library systems, and the last decade as an administrator responsible for providing responsive day-to-day public service. Lynn is currently Director of Operations for the Somerset County Library System of New Jersey, which is her third Library Journal Star Library award-winning library, an award which recognizes the efficiency and effectiveness of a library's services to the public.

Based on the International Publishers Association Annual Report[1], over 300,000 new and re-issued titles were published in the United States in 2013. Facing this statistic, public librarians have two challenges. The first is selection: evaluating new titles against budgetary constraints, popular interest and existing holdings to decide which of these new titles to purchase and make available to the public. The second is to make room for these thousands of new items through the careful process of deselection.

Somerset County Library System of New Jersey (SCLSNJ) adds approximately 70,000 new items to the collection every year. To say that for each item that is added to the collection, another must be withdrawn is a slight oversimplification, but only slightly, as the physical space available for storing and displaying library materials at each facility is limited. In order to decide how to allocate limited shelf space while continuing to meet the changing needs and interests of the public, libraries typically approach deselection from a number of different points of view.

SCLSNJ looks to the CREW method, a widely accepted standard for collection maintenance, when planning how to incorporate the deselection process into the overall management of the collection. First developed in 1976 and updated to reflect the ongoing addition of new formats to library collections, this method focuses on a cycle of Constant Review, Evaluation and Weeding to maintain a collection that contains useful material, and that is easy for people to use. In the same way that new materials are being continually added to library collections, CREW recommends that deselection also happens on a regular and continuous basis.

Factors SCLSNJ considers during the deselection process

Condition is one of the most straight-forward factors to consider in deselection. Not only are individual items that are visibly worn or damaged unappealing to a browser, they often stand out on a shelf of other items in good condition, giving the appearance that the condition of the entire collection is similarly shabby. According to the *CREW: A Weeding Manual for Modern Libraries*, "Even perennial favorites and classics benefit from being replaced by clean copies with updated covers. Circulation can be increased

by simply making the shelves look more attractive and user-friendly, even if there are actually fewer books."[2]

Libraries use data about collection performance to make decisions in deselection. Data can reveal the relative lack of the public's interest in a particular item by looking at the last time someone checked the item out, or it can more broadly indicate that a certain subject or type of material is more or less in demand than another. A review of relative use data can guide librarians in deciding how to allocate shelf space to best match the demonstrated needs and interests of the community. A librarian may also observe that a portion of the collection is used regularly within a library facility but is seldom checked out. By balancing the observation of use patterns with analysis of quantitative data, a librarian ensures that the right resources remain on the shelves.

Sometimes even popular items are removed from the collection, not because of their condition or lack of use, but because the information they contain is no longer current. Particularly in non-fiction subject areas, the library is expected to have materials that are accurate and up-to-date, and librarians must be on the lookout for items that either contain information that is no longer correct, or that do not include recent events or developments. In many cases, librarians can replace such items with updated editions or new titles that cover the same subject. In other cases, where there isn't a new book available, librarians turn to informational databases to meet community needs.

<u>Why deselection is necessary</u>
Unfortunately, there are cases in which the continuous maintenance of the collection through deselection is not given priority, which can lead to a situation in which a library's shelves become overfilled. A library in this state may experience a decline in circulation due to the increased difficulty patrons experience in browsing the collection. The optimal "comfort factor" in filling library shelves is approximately 75%, meaning that shelves are easiest to browse when no more than three-quarters full.[3] This typically leaves 8-10" of empty space at the end of each shelf, making it visually clear where the material on one shelf ends and the next begins, and providing a convenient place for a user to place items being considered for checkout while browsing for others. As shelves get more and more full, identifying the location of a specific item requires more effort, and browsing can begin to feel overwhelming. In some cases, pulling an item off of the shelf can be physically difficult, especially when material is packed so tightly that it cannot move freely and easily. Shelves that are filled to 100% capacity or more can also pose risks to the materials themselves (e.g. crushed spines and bindings, cracked or bent covers) and to users who may inadvertently cause multiple items to fall from the shelf when trying to retrieve just one. When a library's shelves reach this point, it may become necessary to embark on an intensive project to improve the patron's experience by withdrawing a large number of items at once.

Books as physical items are unique in that they can continue to be used after a very long shelf life and hundreds of readings, and we have many examples of centuries-old books that can still be read today in spite of their age or condition. Unlike many academic libraries, archives and museums, however, the role of the public library has not been to maintain a repository of items. Rather, public libraries have always focused on being responsive to the changing needs of their communities. Thus,

instead of evaluating the ongoing usability of any given item, public libraries tend to focus broadly on providing access to the content that people are looking for, a job that has grown easier as technology has advanced. Improved data analytics tools offer more detailed insights into patterns of collection use, and libraries are beginning to make use of predictive algorithms to help refine selection of new items in response to needs and interests. From ebooks and digital content to improvements in resource sharing and interlibrary loan services, each library has more and better ways to quickly find and procure items that are not currently part of the collection.

<u>What happens to the materials after deselection</u>
Because library materials often do have potential life after being withdrawn from the collection, most public libraries try to find new users for deselected items that are still in good condition. Book sales, often conducted by auxiliary Friends of the Library groups, generate funds that are invested back into library services, programs and facilities. Some libraries work with local social service agencies to give materials a second life in their own communities; some work in partnership with international aid groups to donate books overseas. Most public libraries try to dispose of any remaining unwanted items responsibly through public and commercial recycling programs.

<u>Why is deselection critical to SCLSNJ?</u>
Without context, deselection can seem arbitrary – discarding perfectly good books, DVDs and other materials. Deselection is a critical part of the life cycle of a library collection, however, helping librarians make the best use of their space and allowing them to bring in a constant flow of new materials. By employing well-tested techniques and evaluating materials against defined criteria, librarians ensure that their collections continue to reflect the needs of the community, making the library a broadly public service that remains relevant and effective.

<u>SCLSNJ's deselection policy</u>
SCLSNJ deselects materials from the collection:

- if the material(s) are visibly worn, torn, faded, discolored, or smell of dampness;
- if the print item hasn't circulated in the past three years or a media item hasn't circulated in the past two years;
- if the print item older than 10 years is no longer accurate/relevant (applicable to non-fiction);
- if a health, legal and computer print item is no longer accurate/relevant; and
- if a reference item has been replaced with online databases or reference eBooks.

<u>Resources</u>
1 http://www.internationalpublishers.org/market-insights/data-and-statistics/255-ipa-releases-annual-report-and-2014-global-publishing-statistics
2 Larson, Jeanette. *CREW: a weeding manual for modern libraries.* Austin, TX: Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 2012. http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/ld/pubs/crew/index.html
3 Nelson, Sandra et al. *Managing for Results: effective resource allocation for public libraries.* Chicago: American Library Association, 2000. p. 218.