

10-1-2001

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Margo and Laning, Melissa (2001) "Zen and the Art of Stacks Maintenance: Rethinking an Ancient Practice," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 49: Iss. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol49/iss3/6>

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Zen and the Art of Stacks Maintenance: Rethinking an Ancient Practice

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The University of Louisville Libraries' 2000-2001 Strategic Plan includes specific objectives related to improving the delivery of materials to users. This broad objective covers many strategies ranging from increasing electronic access, improving web page design, using vendor-supplied cataloging records and reallocating funds to high demand subject areas. Undergraduate user demand for monographs remains high. Therefore, reducing the number of days required to shelve new acquisitions and to re-shelve circulated items is an important objective for the library. Leo Egghe notes that, "Shelving and keeping library shelves in order is very important and is basic for the use of a library."¹ A later study describes a user satisfaction survey that points to the continued importance of shelving. The authors found that among five issues with gaps between users' expectations and user satisfaction, "materials in their proper place" ranked number one.² This article addresses the organizational and workflow changes implemented by the University of Louisville Libraries to achieve improvements in shelving speed and accuracy.

Background

Anecdotal evidence from user comments in the suggestion box and from complaints sent to the University Librarian indicated that shelving was an area of serious concern for the users of the Ekstrom Library, the largest in the library system of 1.7 million volumes. Improvements were necessary. Past attempts to address the problem had some impact, but it was clear that there was more work to do. In 1997, there

were three separate library units involved in the shelving process. The Stacks Maintenance unit, consisting of one supervisor and 9-12 student assistants, was the primary organizational unit responsible for shelving. The Circulation Department and the Shelf Preparation unit were the other important players in the overall workflow. Prior to 1997, stacks responsibilities were assigned Circulation Department personnel who had to juggle shelving with other duties.

Moving shelving out of the Circulation Department allowed Stacks Maintenance personnel to focus their efforts solely on that function and, as a result the condition of the book stacks improved. An unintended consequence of the move, however, was that the unit became isolated from other units in the library. Communication among the various stakeholders was even more limited than before and problems ensued when "surprise" projects were initiated in one place that had an impact on other units elsewhere.

Despite the creation of separate Stacks Maintenance unit, data from a 1997 exit survey confirmed that users were still not completely satisfied with their ability to locate material in the stacks.³ The availability of this data and the arrival of the new University Librarian in 1997 provided the incentive to implement changes in the organization, workflow and supervision of the Stacks Maintenance unit.

Administrative & Organizational Changes

The University Libraries began a reorganization process in 1996, providing an opportunity to re-examine all areas of the library system. The self-assessment inherent in the reorganization process created a climate conducive to change in general, making it easier to address problems in the Ekstrom Library Stacks Maintenance unit. The first step was to make a significant organizational change. Oversight for the unit was transferred to the supervisor in Content

Access (also known as Technical Services) who also had responsibility for the Shelf Preparation unit. This brought two of the three relevant units under the same roof, literally and figuratively, since the staff was physically moved from a separate office in the stacks to a location in the Content Access area. The loss of independent status caused some concern for the staff and students in Stacks Maintenance, but the benefits of the close working relationships were so clear that the concerns subsided fairly quickly. Communication between the Stacks Maintenance and the Shelf Preparation units immediately improved which resulted in productive changes in procedures.

For example, Stacks Maintenance began returning book carts directly to Shelf Preparation as soon as new materials were shelved and Shelf Preparation began to alert Stacks about large numbers of new items in the same call number area allowing for better-planned shifts or alternate storage arrangements. In retrospect, the simplicity of these changes revealed how lack of communication hinders even the most obvious procedural improvements.

Workflow Changes

To complete the communication chain, the supervisor with oversight for Shelf Preparation and Stacks Maintenance units created a sub-team that included personnel from the Circulation Department. Since further organizational moves were unlikely, this quasi-committee arrangement allowed each group involved to finally share the big picture on the movement of books throughout the building. Having the three groups working so closely together enabled a much more thorough review of the overall workflow than had been undertaken in the past twelve years. The review resulted in four significant changes in the workflow. Because speeding up the re-shelving rate was a high priority for the combined group, they first worked to identify the sources of all in-coming books to the sorting stations in the stacks and the places where books stalled-out en route. Workflow revisions to streamline those stalling points were made. For example, Circulation now “rough-sorts” discharged books onto carts by call numbers that shelve on the 3rd and 4th floors and in other sub-shelving units. This allows Stacks

Maintenance personnel to spend less time sorting and more time on shelving.

Secondly, the group identified unnecessary duplications of effort that had been essentially invisible in the past. For instance, newly processed books were no longer “discharged” by the Circulation Department staff but rather went straight to the sorting stations from the Shelf Prep unit, reducing the time for new books to get to shelve from six to two days. The broad overview also helped to pinpoint fluctuations in staffing needs over a semester. Based on the sub-team’s workflow analysis, staff members and student assistants from the other two areas were deployed to the Stacks Maintenance unit during periods of heavy re-shelving, such as the end of the semester. During a large periodicals transfer project, stacks maintenance students assisted with attaching revised spine labels.

Finally, the sub-team looked closely at the workflow in the Shelf Preparation area since it is one of the most labor-intensive and “procedure-intensive” areas in the flow of books. The group believed that this was another area where re-thinking could produce greater efficiencies and quicker processing rates. One outcome of their discussion was that, like adopting the rough-sort change in Circulation, Shelf Prep now rough-sorts newly processed books by 3rd and 4th floor call numbers before sorting the books in perfect order.

Supervisory Changes

In addition to speed of shelving, a second important objective for improving the condition of the stacks was greater accuracy of shelving. A study conducted at Brigham Young University indicated that accuracy can be improved through well-defined job standards and focused supervisory feedback.⁴ Unfortunately, most library employees consider shelving one of the least appealing tasks in academic libraries and the task is usually relegated to student assistants, who do not have a strong appreciation for its importance. As a result, this critical aspect of library service moves to the bottom of everyone’s priority list and receives inadequate attention until enough complaints are registered.

A crucial step toward improvement of the stacks in Ekstrom Library was to provide stable supervision. A permanent staff position was assigned to the shelving unit, whereas supervision had been previously shared by a group of library staff with other, multiple responsibilities. The library-wide reorganization mentioned above provided an ideal context for the Stacks Maintenance's move to the Content Access Team (also known as Technical Services). Another permanent staff position was added to provide supervision during all hours that students were on the job. The new staffing arrangement provided more consistent training and oversight than had been possible in the past. An additional change was a conscious attempt to hire a supervisor who had not previously worked in the Stacks Maintenance unit or the Circulation Department. Previous supervisors had been promoted from within the organization and while this approach may have shortened training time, it sacrificed a fresh perspective.

Today, the primary goals of the Stacks Maintenance supervisor and assistant are to ensure accurate and efficient shelving. They have developed and refined procedures to accomplish these goals. A critical aspect in achieving these goals is student training. The students are given an overview of employment policies, tour of the library and attend a library-wide workshop on the importance of patron service. A self-paced tutorial on the Library of Congress classification is combined with supervised shelving sessions to develop accuracy. The students then shelve books with flags that are checked by the supervisor. Once the students are trained the supervisors continue to monitor and evaluate their shelving.

To monitor accuracy, the supervisors conduct unannounced shelving checks every three to four weeks and use their findings to retrain students who make recurring shelving errors. The students are assigned a cart of books and are required to read the entire section where the books are shelved. All students are required to shelf-read twice per week in areas of high-circulating call numbers. This approach to shelf-reading is validated in Abraham Bookstein's article where he notes that, "Those books that are heavily used will more likely to be mishelved than lightly used books, and once mishelved, more likely to result in frustration."⁵ To monitor efficiency, the supervisors routinely

track ten books each to determine the time between the day the book is discharged and the day the book is shelved.

The supervisors have found, much like Curtis L. Kendrick reports in his article, "Performance measures of shelving accuracy", that the performance check program is a minor inconvenience.⁶

Results

The last in-house user survey at the University of Louisville Libraries was conducted in 1999, so recent input about shelving is not available from patrons. There is, however, evidence that improvement has occurred. The book searcher from the Circulation Department reports that there are many more successful searches than there were 18 months ago, i.e., books searched are found on the shelf where they are expected. The end of the semester shelving backlog is virtually non-existent. This year, one week after classes ended, there were two carts of books in the sorting station to be re-shelved instead of 15 carts that accumulated the previous year. Most importantly, there have been no complaints to the University Librarian's office about shelving during the past year.

Conclusion

Since undergraduate demand for books remains high at the University of Louisville, specific objectives related to the Libraries' strategic plan included improving the delivery of material to users. Increased speed and accuracy of shelving books was one focus for improving the delivery of materials. The improvement of speed and accuracy of shelving books was achieved by a combination of organizational, workflow, and supervisory changes. These changes provided a framework for enhanced communication among the relevant organizational units and improved accountability for the staff and student assistants in those units.

The positive results that have been achieved thus far reflect the emphasis of the Libraries' strategic plan on patron service and the University Librarian's expectation that all activities will support that end.

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Nominations sought for Outstanding Southeastern Library Program Award

SELA is now accepting nominations for the SELA Outstanding Southeastern Library Program award. The purpose of the award is to recognize an outstanding program of service in an academic, public, school, or special library in a Southeastern Library Association member state. The winner will be announced at the Bi-Annual Meeting: Joint Conference with South Carolina Library Association, Charleston, SC, October 24-26, 2002. Forward nominations to Bob Fernekes at address below by no later than [April 15, 2002](#).

Criteria:

- The program of service must take place during the biennium in which the nomination is made.
- Any academic, public, school, or special library in the member states of the SELA may be cited for an outstanding program of service. Programs of service may include, but are not limited to library activities, projects, or programs.
- The minimum time span for a nominated library program must not be less than three months, including the development and evaluation stages of the program.
- The person making the nomination must be a member of SELA.
- Nomination applications for the award should include the following information:
 - SELA member's name
 - Library's name, address, telephone number
 - Beginning and ending dates of the program
 - Narrative statement describing the program
 - Its goals and steps to achieve the goals;
 - Special contribution of the program/project
 - Supporting documents related to program publicity

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