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Controlled Access and Availability: A Conundrum in Academic Libraries*

Abstract

In response to the University of Calgary librarians' concerns regarding access policies for atypical items the relevant literature was examined and Canadian universities surveyed. Operating within the specific university context and the general principle of maximization of access and availability, guiding principles and specific criteria were developed for four categories of atypical items.

Introduction

The University of Calgary follows standard practices for controlled access in order to protect library items that require special treatment by virtue of their rarity, unusual physical characteristics, value, fragility, course demand, medium, size, and high use. Items that meet these criteria are retrieved primarily by library staff and housed in a range of library locations (e.g., Special Collections and Reserve). Unit collections and access policies are based on well-established library practices and are similar to those, which exist for most Canadian academic libraries.

In 2002, a number of librarians identified a need to review access policies and to develop access guidelines for items and collections that are not currently covered by written policies. For purposes of this article, these items, called by some libraries "medium rare," will be called atypical items and collections.

Because there are no policies in place to cover atypical items, decisions are, at present, based on past practice. These decisions are ad hoc, given that past practice may be interpreted in various ways. For example, one librarian may locate a costly item (\$1,000) in Special Collections, whereas another may place a similar item in open stacks. Also, because there are no written policies for atypical items, they may remain unprocessed for long periods of time pending access and location decisions.

Survey of Canadian University Libraries

When examining Canadian academic library policies certain patterns emerge. Across Canada, academic libraries follow standard library practices in regard to the provision of controlled access. This is especially true for collections designated Reserve, Special Collections/rare books, on-site storage, and off-site storage, where varying degrees of controlled access are in place. Certain fine arts materials, government documents, maps,

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microforms, music scores and recordings, other audio/visual materials and periodicals are often protected with specific controlled access policies. As well, geographical, historical, institutional, and other factors may determine the subject and format focus of access issues in any particular institutional context. (see, Appendix A)

Determining where to place atypical items is a longstanding problem for Canadian academic libraries. A query was posted to two listservs, soliciting institutional policies or procedures dealing with atypical items. Eight librarians from six Canadian universities replied. (see, Appendix B) Based on these replies, and previous web searches and telephone queries to colleagues, the author concluded that there is very little consistency in regard to the provision of access to atypical items in Canadian university libraries. Practices regarding atypical items appear to be, for the most part, based on past institutional practices. Only one librarian cited a relevant written policy. This was a recently adopted and flexible University of Western Ontario Library reserve policy, which states that high-demand materials may be placed in Reserve. Other librarians cited informal practices. Dalhousie Library puts “unique” non-circulating items in Reserve. Queen’s Library appears to have a practice informally stated, “if in doubt send to Special Collections.” The University of Alberta Library places atypical items in Special Collections or open stacks. York University has a practice called “librarians’ reserve” whereby librarians may place high demand or controversial items in the Reserve area. Carleton University has a special storage facility established by Special Collections and located physically close to it for items that do not meet the criteria for Special Collections. Items included in this storage location are those, which are at risk because they are difficult to replace, of high value, unusual format, or fragile condition.

European and United States Libraries

North American academic libraries have historically favoured open access, where possible. A survey of the meager literature on controlled access in North American academic libraries reveals a history of increasingly flexible access policies. Library resources are usually arranged in the stacks in a subject-based order. This arrangement provides researchers with the often questioned but “attractive”¹ benefit of browsability. However, because different aspects of a topic are scattered throughout a classification system, the overall effectiveness of browsing has often been questioned. Browsing practices may discourage the development of those skills required to effectively use bibliographic tools.² Ratcliffe states that the “necessity of instruction in library use is an indictment of an open access principle.”³ Heyworth concludes that when “equal ease of physical access” is balanced against “equal availability” the latter must take precedence.⁴ It appears that while North American librarians rightly take pride in “open access for all,”⁵ they generally “offer access while protecting Special Collections.”⁶

As a result of increases in collection size and decreases in financial support, many academic libraries are forced to examine previously unexplored practical options for collections management. Availability has become an increasingly acknowledged priority. Previously closed stacks have been opened without major problems.^{7 8} Shill states, “stacks can be open in a medium-sized academic facility with significant benefits for individual patrons and without adversely affecting overall library performance.”⁹ Roberts and Wright found that the correlation between the loss of periodicals and the

location of periodicals in open stacks was “not obvious.” And yet, that: “when theft was a problem, libraries with open stacks noted a higher loss of issues.”¹⁰

Rovelstad’s statement that “the provision of a combined closed and open shelf arrangement can reconcile a library philosophy of service with the requirements of modern administrative principles”¹¹ exemplifies and summarizes current thought regarding the provision of access in academic libraries.

Theft, loss, and mutilation reduce the availability of library resources. A variety of security measures are used to maximize availability without reducing access. These include: tattletape, staff supervised turnstiles, close staff supervision of stacks, and staff checks at “the security desk.”¹² Shill states that, “the effectiveness of library security measures, whether manual or electronic, is an important determinant of a library’s ability to deliver books when requested.”¹³ Clapinson at the Bodleian Library states, “our policy has long been defined in terms of access rather than security, of use rather than preservation.”¹⁴

Choices regarding library facilities for housing library resources are often limited to those within existing campus structures or off-site storage. Land cost for off-site storage is generally lower than on-site storage. Consortia arrangements help to reduce costs. Because of rapidly increasing collection size, librarians and administrators frequently choose a combination of on-site and off-site storage.

Unless there are approved policies, clear criteria, and guidelines for atypical items, a separate facility for these items is not recommended. Over time this facility may become a dumping ground for a wide-range of items. A number of years ago Yale University Library developed an on-site facility for “medium rare” items (items that need protection or have unusual binding). The present-day Yale staff are now in the process of disbanding this facility and moving these items to an off-site facility. The on-site facility is being disbanded because of lack of space, and also because this facility had become a dumping ground for “we don’t know what to do with this” kinds of items (e.g., books with CD-ROMs were eventually added to this facility).¹⁵

Bridegam described the creation of a shared, closed, off-site storage facility for five college libraries.¹⁶ The need for increased space was the major driving force behind this project. However, browsing was seen as a “worthwhile way of supplementing a search for information”¹⁷ and browsing was allowed in off-site stacks.

There are, of course, monetary costs both initial and on going associated with varying degrees of access, and with various types of security provisions. Costs of controlled access may include: handling materials; repair; replacement; transportation; cataloguing; processing; identification; and the transfer of items.¹⁸ Controlled access may also result in cost savings (e.g., reduction in replacement costs).

Studies by Cooper and others have shown that the number of times an item is circulated determines the storage cost per volume. Cooper recommends open-stack storage for books that circulate five or more times per lifetime.¹⁹ The current practice of academic libraries is to place items in off-site storage if they have not circulated in the last five years.²⁰ Bridegam, states that there are “two factors which contribute to cost savings in an off-site storage collection.”²¹ First, climate control for the materials being stored, and

second, the reduced incidence of theft. Hickey reminds us that when assessing the cost of “derelegation” from off-site storage, “all attempts to assign monetary value to user costs are arbitrary.”²² Monetary costs are, of course, easier to assess than non-monetary ones. Both kinds of costs must be considered, when selecting a controlled access facility.

Categories of Atypical Items and Collections

The difficulty in designing an access policy for atypical items is that these items do not always share common characteristics. The following classification scheme, which outlines four categories of atypical items and collections, has been developed in order to assist librarians in making access decisions, and in developing access strategies.

1. Categories and definitions of items requiring controlled access:
 - 1.1. High demand, controversial, and desirable items. Items which may be at high risk of theft or vandalism;
 - 1.1.1 High demand. Items that librarians and others anticipate will be frequently used.
 - 1.1.2 Controversial. Items that are challenged, censored, or banned.
 - 1.1.3. Desirable. Items, which are especially sought-after by some groups or individuals, who may want to acquire them. (e.g., books on sex, tattoos, or body piercing).
 - 1.2. Items that need special handling, preservation treatment, or have unconventional formats;
 - 1.2.1. Fragile. Items that are in poor condition, have brittle paper or need careful handling or preservation. (e.g., books published in India with plates)
 - 1.2.2. Unconventional format. Their format makes these items unsuitable for shelving on open stacks because they are unwieldy due to their size, bindings or other characteristics. (e.g., Buddhist scripture with non-western book binding)
 - 1.3. Items that are costly;
 - 1.3.1. Costly. Individual items valued at more than \$1,000. This amount was selected because it represents a dollar value which is significant for the library, and yet it is not so low so as to include large numbers of items.
 - 1.4. Collections that have special significance;
 - 1.4.1 Collections of such significance that they become an object of research. The intellectual value of the collection, as a whole, far exceeds the value of the parts. As well, the collection may have a monetary or bibliographic value that exceeds the sum of the value of its parts. (e.g., Arctic Institute of North America “pipeline collection” at the University of Calgary)

Guiding Principles

Our challenge as librarians is to effectively connect the researcher with the needed resources, while providing the appropriate level of security for library resources. The

following guidelines are designed to assist librarians in making decisions regarding the appropriate level of access for atypical items and collections.

1. The library seeks to provide researchers with rapid, direct, non-mediated access to its collections whenever possible, without the intervention of library staff.
Therefore, the proportion of items placed in controlled access will be kept as low as possible. Every effort will be made to keep as much as possible on the open shelves.
2. Items covered by existing written controlled access policies will not be considered for atypical controlled access. (e.g., items covered by Special Collections and Reserve policies.)
3. Staff will be located close to on-site controlled facilities in order to provide general assistance to researchers, retrieve items, and to provide security for the facility.
4. Atypical items will be catalogued and accessible through an electronic system of description with subject access.
5. Only those items that meet the criteria for atypical items or are covered by existing written controlled access policies will be located in controlled facilities.

The following are guidelines that will assist in determining locations for atypical items.

1. Existing controlled access facilities will be used whenever possible. Every effort will be made to expand existing controlled facilities, and to continue to maintain these facilities as the most efficient way to meet researchers information needs. However, it is important to maintain the integrity of certain existing controlled access collections, such as Special Collections and the art and music collection.
2. Controlled access service points will be kept to a minimum. Large numbers of service points do not necessarily maximize ease of access.
3. Controlled access service points should be concentrated, as much as possible, in one area of the library allowing for a secure shared reading room.
4. Items with high circulation should be located in accessible on-site facilities whereas, items with low circulation may be located in a storage facility.²³
5. Items designated for controlled access may circulate or be for “library use only.” Circulation will vary according to the degree of level of concern for security.

Recommendations for Handling Atypical Items and Collections at the University of Calgary

The author believes that these recommendations may be useful for other academic libraries in developing access policies for atypical items.

1.1 High demand, controversial, and desirable items, require a high level of availability and should be placed under staff mediation in the Reserve area.

1.2 Items needing special handling or preservation and those that have unconventional formats should be housed in a secure, environmentally controlled facility, and they should be handled with care. Those that have low circulation should be located in a storage facility and subject to Special Collections procedures for use. Items in this category, which have high circulation, will be located in Special Collections.

1.3 Costly items require a high level of security. Those that also have low circulation should be located in a storage facility. Items in this class, which have medium to high circulation should be located in Reserve and designated for “library use only.”

1.4 Collections that have special significance. There are many factors to consider in making access recommendations for this category. Judgment calls will be required and institutional decisions will vary. The University of Calgary Arctic Institute of North America “pipeline collection” is a collection of special significance. It is difficult to obtain subject access to these items through the library catalogue, which makes browsing essential. The author recommended that an expert in the field should assess this collection to determine its value, and in the interim that the status quo of the open shelves and circulating should be maintained.

Appendix, A

CONTROLLED ACCESS POLICIES FOR SELECTED CANADIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

	University of Calgary	University of Alberta	University of British Columbia	McGill University	Dalhousie University	Queen's University
Fine Arts/Architecture	Controlled access to the Fine Arts pamphlet file of exhibition catalogues			Art & Architecture. Open access to the Blackader-Lauterman materials. Non-circulating materials: pre 1900, storage materials, books marked LAUT, current issues of journals, reference books microforms, unbound journals, catalogues, fragile, brittle books, multi-volume books (more than 3 vols)		
Government Documents	Open access; shelved with other materials on the same topic. Most circulate, with some exceptions.		Circulate Most government titles are shelved alongside other books in the same topic	Government Documents Dept. Materials circulate. Includes hard copy, microforms and electronic data products		
Maps	Controlled access for atlases and topographic series maps	William C. Wonders non-circ				
Music (Audio Visual)	Controlled access for, sound recordings; music scores/parts	Music Collection housed in Special Collections. Music recordings do not circulate		Music Library Special Collections	Music Collection is Housed in the Special Collections Audio Room	Controlled access to Performance Library scores Controlled access to Sound and Video Recordings. Open access for Music scores, books, reference materials. (In May 1999, Special Collections and the Music library merged into a newly renovated space.)
Rare Books/Special Collections	Library use only	Bruce Peel Special Collections. Closed stacks. Materials are primarily in the humanities and social sciences, which	Library use only. Rare Books, Special Collections, Cartographic archives and historical maps, manuscript collects.	Rare Books and Special Collections Division. Lande Reading Room Non-circulating. Contents: Architecture		Closed stacks two floors below ground Rare Book And Edith & Lorne Pierce Canadian Collections Interlibrary loans to

	University of Calgary	University of Alberta	University of British Columbia	McGill University	Dalhousie University	Queen's University
		need special handling because of fragility, rarity, value, unusual formats, or controversy. Non-circ.	Collections of Canadiana, rare books, children's literature, archival research materials, a collection of historic maps and photographs. Non-circ.	(Blackader-Lauterman Collection) Canadiana, History, History of Ideas, History of the Book, Literature Poetry, English Literature, French Literature, German Literature, Yiddish Literature, Manuscripts, Map Collection Print Collection, Social and Cultural History, Canadian Olympic Collection, Cookbook Collection, Children's Books Collection, Reford Sporting Books, Boy Scout Collection Puppet Collection Western and Cowboy Fiction Non-circ.		other academic libraries. The borrowing library must retain the items in a locked special collections area. Non-circ.
Reserve	Controlled access. Material is normally only available to the academic community. Borrowed hourly, to a maximum of three days.	Restricted access to the Reserve Room. Some reserve materials may be restricted to use by students, faculty and staff.		Controlled access. Reserve materials held behind the Circulation desk	Controlled access	
Reference Collection	Open access. Non-circ.			Open access. Non-circ.		

Appendix, B

RESPONSES TO THE CONTROLLED ACCESS QUESTION POSTED TO TWO LISTSERVS*

	University of Alberta	Dalhousie University	Queen's University	University of New Brunswick	University of Western Ontario	University of Winnipeg
Pamphlets	Pamphlet collection-policy changed to include only what we collect, esp. limited edition of modern poetry, Social Credit materials – held in Spec. Coll. Recently, according to J. Charles pamphlets were moved from special collections to stacks.	The Killam does not add many exhibition catalogues and pamphlet like materials. If important enough it is catalogued and located in the main stacks. Special Collections has several historical pamphlet collections.	Well established collection of broadsides/posters, historical maps and pamphlets, mostly Canadian in context but also donations of broadsides such as Marxism and the arts, Chinese Cultural Revolution and Russian propaganda.			Has a pamphlet file that housed small items- realizing that they have little control over them from a security point of view. Housed in open stacks
CD's/Videos		Some CD-ROMs, computer software and floppy discs are housed in the Reserve Collection. Generally books with CDs, tapes or slides and spoken word go into the media collection with is housed in Special Collections. Not closed stacks and loans are allowed on some items. Materials is not considered rare	Have a few videos and audio recordings- Special Collections is sharing information desk with the Music Library. Not encouraging this type of format. Concern expressed about cabinets.	Most housed in Reserve. Some relating to New Brunswick history, literature and biography housed in Special Collection. Don't collect heavily in these formats	Videos/DVDs used by faculty in class are housed in Reserve along with reference materials and heavy demand course materials	
Unique/ expensive/ bindings – non Circulation	Unique bindings go to Special Collections				Moved over 100 “special “ titles out of Reserve to stacks with the exception of expensive art books that were moved to Spec. Collections	
Other					Do not have a general collections policy about this type of material. Each library seems to be using some form of control through Circ or Res. Some materials in storage with retrieval possible within a day or so. Rushton related materials were put in “storage.”	3 ring binders are sometimes placed on Reserve Serlox bindings often have heavy cloth tape put over them to make it stronger

	University of Alberta	Dalhousie University	Queen's University	University of New Brunswick	University of Western Ontario	University of Winnipeg
Artifacts			Often have to take some donations along with the materials that we really want but do not generally collect museum pieces. Original artworks go to the Agnes Etherington Art Centre			
Of Special Interest to University			Separate University Archives housing literary, political and personal papers, manuscripts, correspondence, Queen's historical paper etc. Special Collections collects only published materials			
High Demand					New written reserve policy states that high-demand materials may be placed in reserve-flexible.	

* The following question was posted to the CLA- Special Collections Interest Group listserv and a Collections listserv: "This question is with regard to policies at your libraries regarding materials which do not fit within rare book/Special Collections parameters but which might require special handling or have other access issues such as pamphlet material or books with unique bindings. Are there specific policies or are there procedures which you follow and what are the criteria for these so that rare book/Special Collections units do not become the home for "we don't know what to do with this" kinds of materials?"

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Notes

¹ F. W. Ratcliffe, "Problems of Open Access in Large Academic Libraries," *Libri* 18(2) (1968): 97.

² John J. Boll, *Shelf Browsing, Open Access and Storage Capacity in Research Libraries*. Occasional Paper #169. University of Illinois, Graduate School of Library and Information Science. 1985: 5.

³ Ratcliffe, 107.

⁴ P. L. Heyworth, *Report*. Committee on Stack Access to the Robarts Library. University of Toronto. February 29. 1972: 4.

⁵ Boll, 5.

⁶ Antoinette Nelson and Pollyanne Frantz. "Accessing Closed Collections: the Librarian Holds the Key," *Technical Services Quarterly* 17(1)(1999): 33.

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¹² Shill, 225.

¹³ Shill, 221.

¹⁴ Mary Clapinson, "Services and Development Issues Related to Manuscripts and Other Unique Materials," *Journal of Library Administration* 19(1) (1993): 38.

¹⁵ Edwin Schroeder provided information on the Yale experience.

¹⁶ Willis E. Bridegam, *A Collaborative Approach to Collection Storage: the Five-college Library Depository*, (Washington, D. C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2001): 3-4.

¹⁷ Bridegam, 8 (alternatives).

¹⁸ Bridegam, 4-5, 7-8 (proposal).

¹⁹ Michael Cooper, "A Cost Comparison of Alternative Book Storage Strategies," *Library Quarterly* 59(3) (1989): 257.

²⁰ Librarians frequently cited this number in discussion with the author.

²¹ Bridegam, 8 (alternatives).

²² C. David Hickey, "Serials 'derelegation' from Remote Storage," *Collection Building*, 18(4) (1999): 154.

²³ In this paper low circulation refers to items in the open stacks, which circulate less than five times in the past five years; medium circulation refers to items, which circulate once a year; and high circulation refers to items, which circulate more than one a year.