



*Using Evidence in Practice*

**Evidence for Removal of a Reference Collection in an Academic Health Sciences Library**

Linda Seale  
John W. Scott Health Sciences Library  
2K3.28 Walter C. Mackenzie Health Sciences Centre  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
Email: [linda.seale@ualberta.ca](mailto:linda.seale@ualberta.ca)

Trish Chatterley  
John W. Scott Health Sciences Library  
2K3.28 Walter C. Mackenzie Health Sciences Centre  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
Email: [trish.chatterley@ualberta.ca](mailto:trish.chatterley@ualberta.ca)

Marlene Dorgan  
John W. Scott Health Sciences Library  
2K3.28 Walter C. Mackenzie Health Sciences Centre  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada  
Email: [marlene.dorgan@ualberta.ca](mailto:marlene.dorgan@ualberta.ca)

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**Setting**

The survey was conducted at the John W. Scott Health Sciences Library, a large academic health sciences library, at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The Library serves undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and researchers in five faculties (Medicine and Dentistry, Nursing,

Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Rehabilitation Medicine and School of Public Health), as well as members of a number of affiliated research institutes, University of Alberta affiliates, members of the NEOS Consortium (a resource sharing collaboration of hospital, government, and academic libraries in the province of Alberta), and the general public.

## Problem

One goal of the Library is to maintain the relevancy of and provide optimum access to the Library's print resources. In the fall of 2011 it was noted that observational and anecdotal data gathered over the previous two years had indicated that use of the print reference collection was declining. Less re-shelving was required of titles removed from the shelves in the Reference Room, and fewer requests were made at the Service Desk for print reference titles. It is assumed the decline can be at least partially attributed to a change in the library's collections policy which now stipulates preferential purchasing of reference titles in electronic format to enhance access. A large deselection project was completed in the summer of 2011, with approximately half the titles from the Reference Collection transferred to the stacks so they could circulate. Four hundred and nine titles remained. Evidence was needed for further decisions on the future of the collection, and on its possible elimination.

## Evidence

A literature search was conducted, revealing that very little recent literature exists on the deselection of reference collections or on their replacement by electronic or virtual collections.

A shelf list of the Reference Collection was printed and a spreadsheet created to allow recording of the use of each title. A staff member verified that all titles on the shelf list were present and missing titles were located. With the cooperation of the Shelving Supervisor, the student shelving staff was instructed to record each title re-shelved for a 12-month period (January-December 2012). Notices were placed in the Reference Room asking clients not to re-shelve books.

In January 2013, the results were summarized and analyzed. While the evidence is somewhat imperfect as some students may have re-shelved their own books, it is the best available indicator of usage.

The evidence indicated that only 33% (n=136) of titles were used during that year. Of these, eight had more than ten uses and constituted 39% of overall use. The two top-used titles in this group together accounted for 22% of overall use. A further 14 titles had five to ten uses and constituted 20% of overall use. Both high-use categories were almost entirely comprised of pharmacy materials. Pharmacy titles (LC Classification RM and RS) represented 24.4% of the collection but 59% of usage. Titles with one to four uses accounted for 23% of titles overall, and those with no uses for 67%.

Usage peaked in the latter half of the fall and winter terms, when papers were due and examinations were pending, with two pharmacy titles dominating.

## Implementation

Overall the evidence indicated that levels of use did not warrant the maintenance of a separate Reference Collection. All the reference titles were transferred to circulating stacks, the majority with a standard circulation period. Six high use titles and eleven in the five to ten uses category were transferred but with a shorter (four day) loan period; all but three were pharmacy titles. (This selection was based on use, on the pharmacy librarian's knowledge of titles important in the pharmacy curriculum, and the availability or lack of electronic versions). Notices were placed in the Reference Room indicating that the books had been integrated into the regular collection. A few instructors who list reference titles with call numbers on student assignments were informed of the change so that assignments could be updated.

## Outcome

Circulation statistics for the period February-September 2013 indicate moderate circulation of short loan titles and low or no use of the majority of regular loan titles. However, this does not reflect in-house use, which would require a separate survey. Virtually no feedback from clients has been provided at the Service Desk.

The Reference Room is now used for quiet study and as a location for receptions for special events. Several classes have been held in the area and after the installation of glass doors at the entrance, it will be even more usable as a teaching space, a facility otherwise lacking in the Library.

### **Reflection**

The survey, the analysis of the results, and the implementation of the evidence all proved to be a straightforward process. The Shelving Supervisor was helpful in instructing student shelving staff in the procedure, and in ensuring that the new student shelving staff for each academic term were informed. A Library associate staff member collated the statistics and wrote the summary report. Another associate staff member changed the location and loan status of each title in the catalogue, removed reference stickers, and applied stickers indicating short loan as appropriate. Re-shelving was done on a daily basis by the student shelving staff over a period of three weeks, as part of normal operations. Although a formal evaluation was not conducted, no negative comments were received by subject librarians or by service desk staff. Given that feedback received from health sciences library clientele usually expresses a preference for electronic content, an assessment of the change was not deemed necessary.

The evidence obtained from this survey provided a sound basis for elimination of the Reference Collection, for physical re-location of the books, and for re-purposing of the Reference Room. It achieved the goals of providing optimum access to the Library's print resources and maintaining their relevancy.