



Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

### **Donated Discards: A Creative Way to Dispose of Unwanted Library Books**

An initiative that sends discarded books from the campus library to people who will value them is obviously a good idea. However, an administrative challenge stands between the idea and its success. Knowing what it is will make it that much easier for other schools to implement such a program with success similar to that of San Jacinto College.

#### **Weeding Is Fundamental**

If pressed on the issue, many academic librarians will admit that their library could probably stand to weed unwanted books from its collection more reliably than it currently does. Over time, the inevitable result of this neglect is an embarrassment of out-of-date books supporting, in theory at least, programs in the allied health fields and computer science, to pick two disciplines for which older books are anathema. We may add to this list superseded textbooks, damaged books, and books plainly inappropriate for the scholarly needs of the library's patrons. In the same way that it works for gardens, weeding keeps library collections useful by removing unwanted material.

Weeding can also become a tool to help the library strengthen a working relationship with academic departments. When a librarian asks faculty for help in weeding their subject area, the faculty member gets the message that librarians are taking their support for the faculty member's students seriously, and that they are willing to work with faculty to improve the library's collection. In any but the smallest libraries, faculty recommendations for removal will yield more than a few discards and will especially do so in libraries where collection evaluation has not been done recently.

#### **Regulations for Disposal**

Texas academic library discards come under the purview of the Texas Government Code, section 2175, specifically section 2175.241, "Destruction or Donation of Surplus or Salvage Property," and section 2175.304, "Exception for Institutions of Higher Education." While the reader should not mistake anything in this article for legal advice, the text of section 2175.241 states plainly enough that surplus property—i.e., discarded library books—may be donated to an "assistance organization" if the property either has no resale value or cannot otherwise be disposed of or sold according to the other parts of the chapter.

Naturally, the school is interested in getting any value it can from discarded property, and auctioning the library's discards would be the disposal method of first choice, were there a strong market in out-of-revision textbooks, worn paperbacks, and the like. Experience tells us that there is not. In recent years, the auctioneer used by San Jacinto College had had trouble moving discarded library books. The books were delivered to him in boxes packed with no regard to subject, to save valuable staff time. Few auction attendees were willing to bid on the boxes and take a chance that they could re-sell them at a profit. Books that were not sold during the auction went into the dumpster. In fact, the auctioneer eventually had refused further shipments of library discards, as handling them was more of a problem than they were worth.

Handling discarded books costs the school, as well, in staff time. They must be evaluated, deleted from the library's catalog, and listed by a librarian; boxed by clerical workers or student assistants; and finally, stored in the library until they are taken away by maintenance staff. The more times that the discards are handled, the more expensive to the school they become. School leaders have an obvious long-term interest in seeing that processing them should take as little staff time as possible. In light of their poor performance at auction compared with the cost of staff labor in gathering, boxing, documenting, and transporting them, it is not out of place for us to suppose that an administrative policy of auctioning discarded library books out of hand could easily cost the school money.

If the reader still suspects that discarded library books can routinely bring anything approaching a cash value that would offset their expense, he or she should look to the actions of people who trade in used books, either for their living, or as a hobby. Book dealers and collectors, for instance, know that library discards, with their property stamps, labels, marginal scribbles, and typically worn condition, have little resale value. Dealers, who must see a profit from the books they buy, have little incentive to buy them at all, much less in

bulk, which is what must happen at an auction. They are not prized as collectibles, either, because of their condition, and so collectors avoid them.

Also, the secondary market for used textbooks applies only to used books in their current revision. As the weeded texts would, by definition, be older revisions, they have no other value than as information-only copies for remarkably disadvantaged readers. As it happens, it is just these readers that Rotary International's "Books for the World" program benefits.

### **Giving to Receive**

At this point, we can understand the attraction to the school of donating the books directly to a charity with a track record of placing discarded books in the hands of people with a strong need for them. This agency would pick the books up at the library, taking the school's maintenance people out of the picture. The books do not need to be listed, either, saving library staff labor. The school thereby keeps up a cordial relationship with its auctioneer, by not consistently submitting items that are unlikely to be sold.

As an academic library director, I am interested in disposing of discarded library books in the easiest appropriate way possible, consistent with keeping them out of a landfill. I spoke with the school's administrator responsible for surplus material about this. I mentioned that I had heard about a local Rotary Club that would take the books from us and ship them to schools and libraries in Africa. She said that this could work under the state regulations that governed the disposal process, but that for the sake of due diligence the entity we gave our discards to must have the familiar 501(c)(3) status that the Internal Revenue Service awards to qualified public charities.

Good fortune brought me into contact soon after with a Rotary member who knew about the Books for the World program. After sharing our stories, I found out that the program was indeed able to accept our discarded books as a 501(c)(3) charity.

The program will benefit any school that uses it. For one, it cements the school's relationship with a powerful and valuable external partner—in this instance, Rotary International, but other charities that are bringing books to impoverished readers might be found after a short Google search. The Rotary program, however, has important advantages. Rotary is nearly everywhere; any town that supports a college campus will also likely have a Rotary club meeting in or near it. Its members tend to be civic leaders with strong altruistic motives. The school's active part in the Books for the World program will provide favorable exposure of the school to them. This good-will could be invaluable to the school the next time it puts a bond issue before the voters in its service area. Also, it is a good bet that at least some of the school's highest administrators will be Rotary members and would be pleased to see the school take part in this beneficial program.

This program adds to the credibility of library leadership. It shows that college libraries are being prudent custodians of state property, and that they are reaching out to less advantaged colleagues in a distant land. Each book brings a message of friendship along with whatever message is between its covers.

This program will be a challenge only in its initial phases, when the librarian or administrator responsible for it will need to negotiate with the school's administrator responsible for surplus material for his or her blessing on the endeavor. The person urging this beneficial program to the administrator should remember to stress that even in cases where the books are accepted by an auctioneer, the doing of it already has a cost to the school that can easily exceed any money the books bring in.

After the initial administrative chores are finished, the program will take little staff time, and may be run by one person. The benefits to the school's library and to the school's image in the community will more than make up for the time spent on it.

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