

# Weeding in Libraries Survey Report Sprouting Green Weeding Practices in Libraries Web-Based Training<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This survey report is for a survey conducted as part of an IMLS Sparks! Ignition Grant for Libraries project. This survey intended to find out about the current state of weeding practices in libraries. An informal discussion of the data is included with many direct quotes and word cloud graphics. Overall findings suggest there is an apparent disconnect between library acquisition and weeding and there appears to be an increasing interest in repurposing and reusing library material. Suggestions for future research are included.

## I. Introduction

Recycled Reads, the Austin Public Library's bookstore, was awarded an IMLS Sparks! Ignition Grant for Libraries in June 2013 and tasked with the job of creating four freely accessible online videos to start a conversation about responsible disposition practices and help libraries and their community partners get started with policy changes and green solutions that work in their own specific situations. In order to better understand the state of other libraries regarding sustainable collection development and weeding practices, a survey was devised to assess current practices, policies and procedures. This is summed up in the introduction to the survey:

*The Austin Public Library in Austin, Texas is gathering information about the state of weeding practices in libraries. Your responses will help document how libraries are currently addressing Collection Development, Weeding, Sustainability Issues, and Donation of Materials. Please have one representative from your institution fill out this survey by April 10, 2014. If you include your email address, we will gladly share the findings from this survey as well as information about our IMLS Sparks! Ignition Grant for Libraries project, Sprouting Green Weeding Practices in Libraries.*

The remainder of this report will include a description of the methodology as well as a discussion of the data. To conclude, the report will identify future research questions. Appendix A lists the listservs that received a link to the survey from Betsy Evans. An anonymized PDF of the raw data is available upon request.

## II. Methodology

The grant project team, Managing Librarian Mindy Reed, Grant Administrative Specialist Betsy Evans, Development Services Manager Sue Soy and members of the Austin Public Library's Office of Programs and Partnerships drafted the survey questions. The questions were vetted by the project team to facilitate understanding and special definitions were provided as needed.

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Using SurveyMonkey, a survey was built consisting of twenty questions broken into six sections: Introduction and Demographics, Collection Development, Weeding, Sustainability, “Green” Programming and Donations. Where possible, the answer fields were open response to provide the opportunity for a blank slate for responses. The Discussion will address the advantages and disadvantages associated with choosing to collect open response data.

Betsy Evans distributed the completed survey via listservs (Appendix A) and by word of mouth at the 2014 South by Southwest Interactive Conference in Austin, Texas; the Texas Library Association Annual Conference in San Antonio, Texas; as well as at an Austin, Texas Librarian Meet-Up, ATX Librarians Social Group. Sharing of the survey link was encouraged. The survey was open from March 1 to April 10, 2014.

### III. Discussion

The general information requested by Question 1 (Q1) was used to assess who was filling out the survey and from where. Over half of the respondents, 50 out of 73 (68%) identified themselves as a Librarian, Director of the Library or Head of the Library. 27 respondents identified as a Librarian and 23 as the Director or Head of the Library. The response of Title for the other 23 respondents varied.

Even though 68% of survey respondents identified as a Librarian, Director of the Library or Head of the Library, it is important to note with this anecdotal data that respondents were not necessarily issuing official responses from the libraries they were representing; it can only be assumed that respondents were speaking as individuals. Further, because listservs were used to attract survey respondents, personal biases regarding weeding practices and material disposition might have affected participation.

Just as there is room for personal bias when completing a survey meant to represent an entire institution, there is room for bias when informally analyzing anecdotal data. Even where the survey posed a Yes/No question, space was provided for explanation which led answers to fall across the wide spectrum of “yes” or “no.” The discussion points to whether respondents *indicated* yes or no, as well as indication of any other answers or comments. In many cases, direct quotes from survey questions have been included to illustrate the spectrum of responses.

#### A. Collection Development and Weeding Policies

Question 4 (Q4) asked whether the library maintained a collection development policy. In Q4, 58 out of 63 respondents (92%) answered or indicated that their library did maintain a collection development policy. 40 of those 58 responses (69% of the Yes responses) said yes without providing explanation, 11 respondents (19% of Yes responses) indicated that they were currently working on a collection development policy, six respondents (10% of Yes responses) included that their collection development policy included a section on disposition of material and one (2% of Yes Responses) said yes but indicated in the free response that their library used an unwritten policy. Two out of 63 respondents (3% of the total response) replied no and the remaining three respondents of the 63 (5% of the total response) replied no and indicated that they had no written policy. It can be inferred that it is common to have a written collection development policy.

62 people responded to Question 7 (Q7), “Does your library maintain a weeding policy? Please explain.” 34 of 62 respondents (55%) responded that their library maintained a weeding policy with 10 of those 34 (10 out of 62 answering respondents, or 16% of all respondents) indicating that the weeding policy was folded into the collection development policy. 14 of 62 responded to Q7 indicating that their library did not maintain a weeding policy. Four of 62 responses (23%)

indicated they are working on a policy, eight of 62 responses (13%) indicated there was an informal policy and the remaining two of 62 (3%) stated that their library did not maintain a weeding policy and indicated that their libraries were reluctant to weed.

While a majority (92%) of the respondents indicated that their library maintains a collection development policy, it must be recognized that these policies differ based on many variables. This analysis will not get into the further differentiation of policies except to suggest this as a topic for future study.

### **B. Understanding of “End of Life”**

Question 5 (Q5) asked, “Does your library consider end of life for materials at the point of purchasing new items for the library?” and went on to define “end of life,” as “the life of the object after it leaves the library’s shelves.” This question was meant to ask if, when choosing an item to be acquired for circulation, any thought was given to what will happen when that item is out of date, damaged from use or not used at all. In answering the question, 20 of 63 respondents (32%) indicated yes with three of those 20 respondents indicating with their comments that they understood the question and acted on “end of life.” 21 of 63 respondents (33%) indicated no consideration was made for “end of life” with two of those 21 identifying an understanding of the definition in the comments. In total, 8% of the respondents made comments to indicate that they understood what the question was asking. Another 5 out of 63 (8%) responded that they did not understand the question and 25% (16 out of 63) interpreted the question differently from what was intended. One respondent (2%) indicated that sometimes there was consideration for “end of life.” Below are some of the responses from this question (in the order responses were received):

- “Yes, in the sense that I choose to purchase books with library binding/plastic cover for longer shelf life and in other ways treat the material so that it will last longer (barcode on outside etc). The books can still be recycled (paper recycling). I also prioritize e-media, rather than paper products.”
- “[...] But certainly there is no thought at the beginning of acquisitions in regards to disposal.”
- “[...] We try to avoid buying too many trendy or fad titles.”
- “Yes, we try not to purchase books with many small parts.”
- “[Y]es, it has made me more hesitant to purchase books unless I am sure they will be used.”
- “If I understand this correctly, I do consider ‘end of life’ for materials. I’m aware that the item may not last very long or might not maintain its popularity. It does not change whether I buy it or not.”
- “Not really. Our weeding is separate from acquisitions.”

Question 9 (Q9) asked, “What guidance does your library utilize in deciding what to weed from the collection? Check all that apply.” 27 (43%) of the responses checked the CREW Method, 26 (41%) checked MUSTIE, 41 (65%) checked that they received guidance from automated systems and (27) checked “other,” specifying different modes in the comments. Below are some of the responses from this question (in the order responses were received):

- “I don’t really use any guidance other than common sense and trying to see the collection from a user standpoint – nobody likes garbage.”
- “Selector discretion.”

- “Do I really need 15 copies of this no-longer popular book?”
- “none”
- “We rely on our understanding of our users as well as of our preservation responsibilities.”

### C. Weeding Practices: When & Why, and Where Do the Books Go?

After asking libraries about their policies associated with collection development and weeding, questions were posed about weeding practices. Question 8 (Q8) asked how often weeding projects take place. Out of 62 responses, six respondents (9%) indicated annual weeding projects, 32 respondents (52%) indicated weeding is an ongoing project, 10 (16%) indicated regular weeding on top of scheduled annual projects, and the other 14 (22%) responses varied outside of those listed above. Below are some of the responses from this question (in the order responses were received):

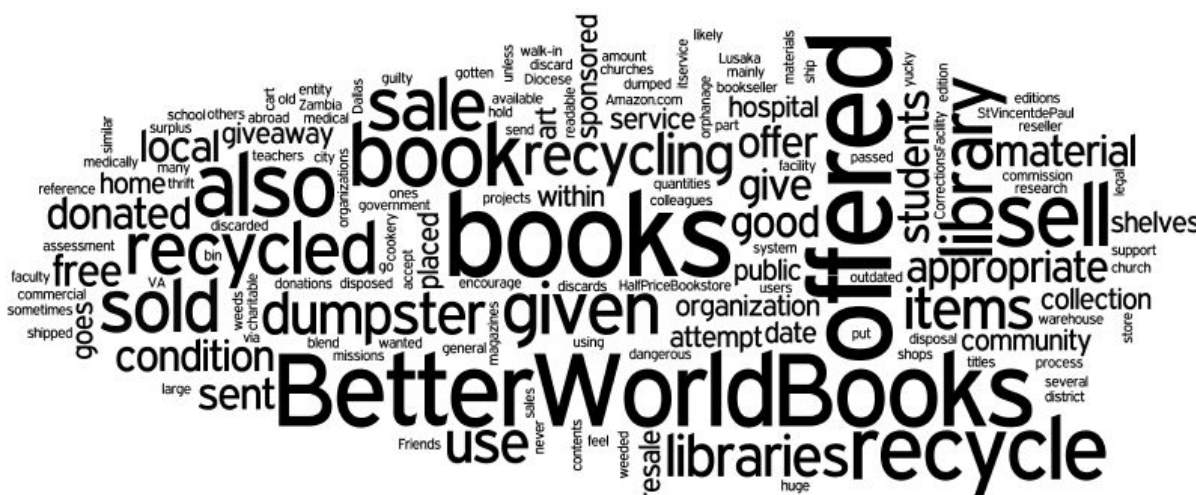
- “Have [j]ust completed first full-library weed in 10 years prior to installing RFID.”
- “When the principal tells me to do it, but try once a year.”
- “Throughout the year, it helps to make it more of a constant process.”
- “No specific times. Whenever the Director has the time.”
- “Not often enough to enable su[ff]icient room for new items coming in and to keep the collection looking ‘bright and shiny’.”
- “Continuously, as we are cramped for space.”
- “Unevenly—depends upon the selector. Often durin[g] the summer. [...]”
- “This library has not been weeded in 15 years prior to my arrival. [...]”
- “We have just started one [a weeding project] for the first time, as far as I know, ever.”

Question 10, “Currently, what is the most pressing need for weeding projects in your library? Check all that apply.” 26 respondents (41%) checked that materials were being removed to use space for other library services, 47 respondents (75%) checked that materials were being replaced with newly published or more current material, and 11 respondents (17%) checked other. Below are some of the responses from this question (in the order responses were received):

- “Making room on shelves.”
- “Reducing the size of the collection to a highly relevant patron driven collection [...]”
- “[...] We are discarding perfectly good items just based on lack of space.”
- “[...] These are items that were the gold standard in the subject prior to the Internet and those resources that nostalgic staff find difficult to part with.”
- “Moving collections around and trying to make them all fit.”
- “I have too much old material.”
- “We are simply trying to move outdated material off the shelves to declutter our patrons’ information-seeking experience.”
- “We weed more than we purchase. As stacks become empty, we consolidate and remove shelving. The extra space is used for additional study tables.”

- “Replacing paper with electronic resources to allow us to better serve remote patrons.”

There were 63 responses to Question 11 (Q11) which asked, “What happens to the material weeded from your library’s collection? Check all that apply and provide more information if necessary.” 24 respondents (38%) checked “Given to Friends’ Group for book sale”, 20 respondents (32%) checked, “Sold in Book Sale Directly from Library,” 24 respondents (38%) checked “put in dumpster,” 27 respondents (43%) checked that books are “picked up/dropped off as part of a partnership with a third party,” and 28 respondents (44%) checked other and provided more information. Below is a Word Cloud created using [Wordle](#) based on the frequency of words in the open responses:



Out of the 63 responses to this Q11, 45 respondents (71%) checked a combination of options for what happens to material weeded from the collection. 14 (22%) indicated that they were given away or donated, using the language “given,” “offered,” “free,” and “donated” in the comments. Seven (11%) mentioned a partnership specifically with Better World Books. One (2%) mentioned a partnership with Half Price Books, One (2%) mentioned selling media on Amazon.com, One (2%) mentioned a partnership specifically with St. Vincent de Paul Thrift Store, and 11 (17%) mentioned that books are locally recycled.

24 out of 63 respondents (38%) checked that books are put in dumpster, but in each of these cases, putting books in the dumpster was one of a combination of possibilities. One comment succinctly and specifically stated that books are not put in the dumpster: “never the dumpster.”

#### D. Green Programming at Your Library

Question 16 (Q16) asked if libraries participating in the survey “engage[d] in book art (using discarded books as a medium for arts and crafts).” 17 out of 60 (28%) responded yes, and 43 out of 60 (72%) responded that their library did not participate in green programming. 21 participants added comments. Some of those comments are below:

- “The school uses items discarded from us in their programs. We are also looking to do this in our adult programming this summer.”



Still, there is no doubt that much good information was collected. This survey report is being shared to increase awareness both of the Sprouting Green Weeding Practices Web-Based Training for Libraries as well as to start a conversation about sustainability and environmental issues in libraries. A library's job does not end when materials are removed from circulation. Libraries must consider the life of materials from acquisition to de-accession (i.e., womb to tomb)—in developing, managing and weeding collections.

#### **V. Future Research Questions**

It is the hope of the project team that this survey report and the Sprouting Green Weeding Practices Web-Based Training will affect policy change in the library and information science world and beyond. As more library staff become aware of how libraries are evolving to fit our future needs, including the impact of technology, more data should be collected to work toward best practices and standards of disposal methods. Related areas of future interest include collecting more information about best practices for collection development and weeding policies; library Friend groups and foundations; and building more opportunities for libraries to collaborate online.

## APPENDIX A: Listservs contacted

- 'ensulib@infoserv.inist.fr' Environmental Sustainability and Libraries Special Interest Group of the IFLA
- 'alcts-eforum-request@ala.org' E-forum for the ALA Association for Library Collections and Technical Services
- 'libunlimited@listserv.unt.edu' Communication for all librarians and library school students in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex
- 'slis-announce-l@unt.edu' University of North Texas School of Library and Information Sciences listserv
- 'uls-l-request@ala.org' ALA University Libraries List
- 'cjc-l-request@ala.org' Discussion group dedicated to issues relating to community and two year college libraries and learning centers
- 'create@cvl-lists.org' A place to share ideas, information, resources and questions regarding creation and makerspaces in libraries
- 'sustainrt-l@ala.org' Listserv for ALA Sustainability Round Table



## **APPENDIX B: Text of email for further interest**

To all who added an email address with interest in the Weeding in Libraries Survey Report and more information on our IMLS Sparks! Ignition Grant for Libraries Project, *Sprouting Green Weeding Practices in Libraries: Web-Based Training*, thank you for your interest.

This report provides an introduction to our project and gives insight into the purpose and methodology of the survey. A discussion of the informal data analysis is included and suggestions for future research are posed.

We end with a follow-up question: Has your awareness of this project affected your daily life at home or at work? Please respond to this email (reply to just [betsy.evans@austintexas.gov](mailto:betsy.evans@austintexas.gov), if you will), with a few words about how you feel after having completed this survey. Our project's main goal is to start a conversation with other libraries. With that in mind, if you are a Twitter user, please feel free to follow and engage in our conversation using the hashtag #AmongTheWeeds.

On behalf of our project team, I thank you for your time and willingness to share!

Betsy