Who “Keeps” the Books?

By Alison Thor
Supervisor, Waldo Library Stacks

On any given day, a patron or staff member will not have far to go to spy a burgundy-vested student employee among the rows of book shelves on each of the four floors of Waldo Library. Day after day, a cohort of student assistants reshelves several hundred, sometimes thousands, of the three million books found in the General Stacks. These special assistants are the true “keepers” of the collection. Moreover, they are responsible for implementing preservation procedures, shifting materials, measuring shelf space, moving furniture, and constructing new shelves. These men and women also monitor, that is, read the shelves of the entire General Stacks collection to verify the correct placement of all classified materials. The Stacks Department consists of one full time staff member and between 12 to 20 part-time student employees and volunteers. These, then, are the personnel who are the key to finding “the book that you want, where you expect it to be, when you want to find it!”

Each volume in Waldo Library has its own unique call number that dictates its correct placement in the vast order of books on the shelves. The major responsibility of the Stacks Department staff is to make sure each volume in the General Stacks is placed in its exact call number sequence—no simple task when using the Library of Congress classification scheme that often has an alphabetic-numeric sequence of 9 to 20 letters and digits. Waldo Library also has two additional call number systems: Dewey Decimal (DDC) for the Children’s Literature Collection, and SuDocs for our U.S. government publications. The departments of Central Reference, Government Documents, Maps, Reserves, Science Reference, Special Collections, and the four branch libraries maintain their own collections.

Although the primary work of the Stacks staff is to reshelf volumes that have been removed from the shelves by library patrons or the Resource Sharing office, they also shelve new books and assist in moving sections of books from one location to another. There may be 3 to 10 student employees working throughout the day depending on their work schedules. A typical day would have the students complete three pick-ups on each of the four floors of Waldo: morning, mid-afternoon, and evening. A pick-up involves walking through all public areas of the library, “picking up” books that are left on tables and in book-drop bins. Two or three times a week, the pick-up extends literally to every aisle between all the stacks, as well as study areas. The aisle pick-up books often are reshelfed immediately since they are found near their permanent location. On average, the department picks up 250 books within the library per day. We refer to this count statistic as “in-house use.”

Books that are not shelved immediately during a pick-up are arranged by the LC call number on the “Sorting Shelves” that are located on each floor in the immediate vicinity of their associated General Stacks and are patron-accessible. Sorting Shelves are a temporary location, where books are rough-sorted by the first letters of their call number. Experience has shown that the rough sorting is a more efficient method since it moves the material quickly to a “findable/accessible” location.

Once Stack personnel finish their assigned pick-up from the stacks and reading areas, they begin to shelve the Sorting Shelves materials in the General Stacks. Referring to a sorting shelf “status” form, each student employee chooses the area where he/she will shelve books. Items are pulled from the Sorting Shelves, sorted by call numbers and placed on a book truck, counted, and then shelved.

From left to right: Back row: Diep Dao, Kashif Javed, Meenachi Raja Manickam, Nora Dung Dao, Nicole Novak. Front row: Yolonda Lavender, Alice Kropewnicki, Alexis Guzman, Supervisor Alison Thor, Ishrat Farooqui.

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in their proper order. Some student employees become extremely efficient at shelving books. The high average is 100 books per hour. This must be done, needless to say, with a high degree of accuracy since a misshelved book becomes a lost book in a large stack area!

The department strives for a 24-hour turn-around time from the time the book is placed on a sorting shelf until the time it is shelved in the General Stacks. This is routinely accomplished except during semester midterms and during the last week or two of the semester when thousands of items are returned to the library. In fiscal year 2002-2003, the Stacks Department shelved 318,822 books. The peak month was November, with 41,826 books shelved. The annual shelving count averages 26,568 books per month, and 932 books per day (based on the library being open 342 days out of 365 for that fiscal year). Of the 318,822 books shelved, 131,227 were from "in-house" use. The remainder were books that were returned by patrons and checked back in by Circulation, were used through the Resource Sharing Center for interlibrary loan, or were newly purchased. Carts of books come through the Stacks Department several times a day. New books for the General Stacks, processed by Technical Services, are brought to the Stacks Department for shelving in the General Stacks. WMU loans materials to other libraries and once that material is returned, the Stacks employees re-shelve those materials in the General Stacks.

A by-product of having open stacks so the patrons can physically browse the collections is that some patrons, after looking at a title, place the volume back on the shelf in the wrong location. The Stacks Department, as a result, must constantly "shelf-read." Shelf reading is checking every single book on a given shelf to make sure it is in correct call number order. Shelf reading is time-consuming, tedious, and demands concentration since the classification systems in Waldo produce lengthy numbers and every item, even pamphlets in boxes, must be checked for accurate placement. If a book is out of order, it is pulled and placed where it belongs. The department manages to shelf-read the entire General Stacks collection, millions of items, as time permits, once each year.

Even though Waldo Library underwent a major reconstruction with added shelf space in the early 1990s, the collection has grown extensively or reorganized significantly as when the Physical Sciences branch collection was incorporated into Waldo in 1994. As a result, the Stacks Department is heavily involved in "shifting" whole shelves of books from one location to another. A classification or call number system requires that, as similar topic books are added, space must be found for them. Stack personnel shifts materials both backward and forward to make room so that the additions remain in correct call number order. Shifting may involve only a few shelves, or it may involve an entire section of the library. Large shifts (e.g., 9,264 shelves for the entire H through JZ collection were shifted in 2001) can take several weeks to complete. In the last ten years, all of the General Stacks have been shifted except for a small section on third floor.

As must be obvious by now, the work of the individuals who are "stacks assistants" is physically challenging, requires a high degree of concentration and attention to detail, and is absolutely essential to the effectiveness of the Libraries' services. Besides the responsibilities already noted, these dedicated students and staff

- design and complete special preservation studies such as the assessment of shelf adjustment to accommodate "taller" books so that they are not damaged when reshelved or moved;
- measure the collection, i.e., literally measure the linear feet of materials within each classification, to use as predictors for space needs and growth patterns;
- transport, set up, and take down seven-foot shelf frames, bases, base-ends, shelves, and shelf-ends that are held together with nuts and bolts, and secured at the top with "tie-down struts";
- pull books that need repair or new labels, deliver them to the Binding or Processing departments, and reshelve them once the damage is fixed;
- return books to all of the special departments, e.g., Central Reference, that are picked up in the General Stacks of the library;
- manage, along with Archives and Regional History Collections, the Remote Storage area on East Campus including the transport of the material to the storage facility on East Campus and, without an elevator, placing the books in call number order on six floors of the storage tower as well as in the compact shelving area;
- move furniture, e.g., chairs, study tables, etc. as offices or public areas are reorganized;
- plant and maintain the flowers on the 3rd floor roof garden in the summer months, and, finally,
- their mobility and familiarity with call numbers make them an excellent source for user information. When a patron comes to one of those workers in a burgundy vest, and says, "I can't find this book," "I've never been here before," or "This library is BIG," Stacks employees will do their best to assist them. They are there, above all, to "keep" the books in use.

The employees and volunteers of the Stacks Department are decision-makers as well as independent and detailed-oriented workers. No one tells them where to shelve books. They determine this on their own when they sign-in at a central communication and organization center on the lower level of Waldo. They check what needs to be done, formulate their task schedules, write down their plans and where they will be working, and manage their own time. Each one knows when and where it's appropriate to shelf-read. Each one knows what books need to be cleared out of Circulation. And, each one knows to do books that "appear" in the office. They keep watch over the library estate, and they simply do a marvelous job in accomplishing the work that needs to be done. "Who Keeps the Books?" They do!

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Gatherings is published biannually by the Friends of the University Libraries, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, 49008-5353. Contributors to this issue include: Brad Dennis, Assistant Professor and Librarian, Education Library; Lou Ann Morgan, Manager, Digitization Center; and Alison Thor, Supervisor, Waldo Library Stacks.

EDITOR & DESIGNER:
Laurel A. Grotzinger
Professor, Central Reference
[laurel.grotzinger@wmich.edu]

PHOTOS:
Galen Rike, Associate Professor, Central Reference
Paul Howell, Systems Manager, Libraries
The Roving Librarian

By Brad Dennis, Assistant Professor & Librarian, Education Library

Bradford W. Dennis came to WMU in mid-2002 as “one of our own” since he had earned his B.A. in History, cum laude, in 1990 from WMU along with a Michigan Provisional Teaching Certificate. In the next decade, he gained a breadth of experiences in college and secondary teaching, Waldo Library reference, the Libraries’ Special Collections, and, after 1994, as a reference librarian at the Kent District Library in Wyoming MI. By 2000, he had also completed the Library and Information Science master’s program offered by Wayne State University while honing his skills as a computer and media services expert. As Education Librarian, he is now the liaison with the departments of Educational Studies: Health, Physical Education and Recreation; and Teaching, Learning and Leadership, and provides reference service to all users of the Education Library.

What do you do when you need help finding something in big room or building full of merchandise? Do you wander aimlessly about looking for signs that will give you some clues as to location of particular items? Do you look for someone to help you or try to find an information kiosk or courtesy desk? Do you frequent places that provide excellent customer service or places that make help readily available by “roving” personnel who walk around the establishment asking “Are you finding what you need?”

My own choice of help varies. When shopping for home improvement supplies, I normally frequent hardware stores that provide knowledgeable staff walking around the store answering home improvement questions. However, when shopping for clothing or other apparel, once I find the men’s clothing section, I prefer to be left alone until I have looked around, examined some choices, and have a specific question—perhaps about colors or sizes. I will then look for an associate who will be able to answer my question. At the same time, if someone were to ask me a slightly different kind of question, “Are you finding what you need?”—without intruding

—I would be pleased to know whom to ask if I do have questions in the future.

But in these instances, I’m talking about matching a specific product to a specific need or interest. When asking the same question of a service provider such as a librarian, information, or media specialist, a different set of factors comes into play. Libraries are not marketing a manufactured product such as a new car or type of food. They are providing a special service to users who are searching for information or answers to particular questions. Regardless, what kind of and how much service is needed to “help the patron” is not clear in many libraries and information centers of the 21st century.

The bottom line questions include:

• Do library patrons prefer to be “left alone” until they have a question?
• Would users appreciate a librarian “roving” throughout the library asking, “Are you finding what you need?”
• Would patrons visit the library more often if they knew a “roving reference” librarian would be available to help them?

To answer these and related questions, I began, in the summer of 2003, to design and implement a research study to be conducted in the WMU Libraries.

The Study

In order to serve the students, faculty, and staff of the University more effectively, we need to learn more about the types of service that users prefer. More specifically, the proposed research study involved a type of proactive user service called “roving reference.” The idea behind roving reference is that the librarian walks around the library and asks students or faculty “if they are finding what they need,” rather than waiting for them to approach the reference desk with a question. The data that are being compiled from this survey should indicate where users prefer reference service provided, i.e., at a reference desk, e-mail, chat reference (an interactive, online service), or by a librarian who approaches the user and assists the user where he or she is working within the library. The data, when analyzed, should tell us if any library users find roving librarians intrusive, bothersome, or not helpful in any way. We should also learn if users prefer librarians to “rove” within particular locations, as, for example, only in areas close to a reference desk or, more widespread, such as where pods of terminals are located throughout the building or area.

The study was conducted during one week periods in the Fall 2003 semester and the Spring 2004 semester when a survey was individually administered to a sample of 713 WMU undergraduate and graduate students, staff, and faculty participants. I attempted to obtain a universal sample by handing out surveys to every individual working in the Libraries (excluding the Libraries’ faculty, staff, and custodians) within a given time period. Various users at different locations in Waldo Library, the Education Library, the Music and Dance Library, the Archives and Regional History Collections, and the Visual Resources Library were surveyed using an Human Subjects Institutional Research Board approved questionnaire. The survey consisted of sixteen questions that asked demographic information and information about the participants’ reference service preferences. Five hundred surveys were returned of the 713 given out, thus achieving a return rate of 70.12%. At the present time, I am using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to analyze the data and determine the correlation among variables.

Hypotheses & Probable Conclusions

The literature indicates that there are good reasons why roving reference should be an integral part of any proactive reference service provided to a group of library users. Roving reference:

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The Roving Librarian

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- is user or person-centered not desk or place oriented;
- increases the number, quality, and sophistication of questions asked since a search is already in progress that is not working;
- provides us with an opportunity to teach or instruct customers at the point of need;
- allows us to monitor how resources are used from the unique perspective of the user; and
- shows librarians as available, approachable, and helpful.

We know from current studies and older studies dating back to the 1970s that about 40% of the customers in any library have a question, but are unwilling to ask for assistance. Part of this reluctance to ask a question has to do with customers not wanting to interrupt a librarian who looks busy and/or unapproachable, or is hidden behind a desk in a spotlighted area. Others feel that their question is “too simple, obvious, or otherwise not worthy” of an answer. Some, sad to say, have had bad experiences with librarians in the past. Moreover, some users simply don’t know how to ask the question and don’t want to appear dumb. The bottom line is that walking up to most service points in libraries takes more than a modicum of assertive behavior.

From experience, I have readily observed that students and other users generally “love it” when librarians walk around and help them at the point of need. In fact, after answering one person’s question, it is often the case that several others ask for help because you have just physically demonstrated that you are interested in helping them find what they are seeking. Even if a person does not need assistance at the time, you have just broken the “body language barrier” and identified yourself as a helpful librarian. This person will seek you out if he/she has a question later. As studies have shown, many users relate best to someone of their own sex, cultural appearance, age, and other factors that are perceived as welcoming. However, when the librarian of any age or appearance comes to you, most users are open to asking for help.

The bottom line is that roving reference could be a powerful means by which to improve the image of the library itself. Roving reference should break down the old (and new) stereotype of the unfriendly, desk-bound librarian who is more interested in keeping the library quiet than in assisting the users. Roving reference also provides an opportunity to discover what types of problems students and other users are having. Studies have also shown that by the time a question reaches the reference desk, it is, more often than not, only a directional or locational question. If we ask, “Are you finding what you need?” earlier in the search process, we may be able to help our customers with a more difficult question and, in turn, create more value in our service. We also discover if the Libraries’ Web pages are as clear as we thought they might be, and if our site language is helpful or confusing as the user navigates our home pages.

Roving has been shown to be a highly productive technique that can also be applied to the classroom. Much of our bibliographic instruction is taught to multiple students during a single, introductory session. I normally conduct an interactive presentation in which library tools such as the library catalog and a journal index are introduced and then the students practice what they have just learned. Typical sessions are between one half hour to one hour and fifteen minutes depending on the class. Because of this time limitation, interactive, individual feedback is not always possible with every student.

However, I have taught many two to three hour research methods courses in which the instructor and I help students begin research on their topic after the presentation. The instructor and I “rove” around the classroom and help students individually. This is extremely productive and the students learn how to conduct research and how to use the information is present. That is why librarians at Western Michigan University highly recommend that the instruction occur in coordination with an assignment. There is then a reason for the student to put the instruction to practice.

As thousands of students and other users access our University Libraries, we want to ensure that our “wealth of resources” isn’t lost to those who enter our physical and electronic doors. “What is it?” needs to become an historical phrase as our library faculty and staff reach out physically and intellectually to patrons far from our service desks. Our motto for the future may well be “To rove is to respond; to reach out is to serve.”

WMU Digitization Center

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- Historical materials for the Niles library centennial celebration (Niles District Library);
- A large regional obituary collection covering a five county area (Van Buren District Library, Decatur);
- A regional history photography collection (Cass District Library, Cassopolis);
- Selections from a late 19th century newspaper (Thornapple Kellogg School and Community Library, Middleville);
- A collection of aerial photographs of west Michigan (Portage District Library); and
- The history of a paper industry “company town” (Parchment Community Library).

In addition, as noted earlier, the Digitization Center is also intended as a special service to support research at the University. The Ward Morgan Photograph Collection that was described in the last issue of Gatherings is being digitized for The Making of Modern Michigan (MMM). Many of its 26,000 images are being scanned through the Regional Digitization Center. Newly added to the collections that will be available in the online image database are parts of the Caroline Bartlett Crane collection, a notable woman activist of the 1800s, from the WMU Archives and Regional History Collections. In addition, the Special Collections department of the University Libraries is making high resolution digital files of rare books useful for research. The initiative includes a book from 1567 and one in which the first printing of Old English appears. This effort will initiate a long-term collaborative project contributing to research in Medieval Studies.

In brief, the WMU Regional Digitization Center is organized to serve two major purposes: the University’s research mission and The Making of Modern Michigan. The digitized collections are scheduled to be available online beginning in the summer of this year, 2004. Further information can be provided by the Manager of the Digitization Center, Lou Ann Morgan, at 269 387-5093. Key Web sites for the digitization projects are:

- Equipment/systems list: http://www.wmich.edu/library/digi/equip/
WMU Digitization Center: Open and Online

By Lou Ann Morgan, Digitization Center Manager

The University Libraries celebrated the establishment of its new Digitization Center with informational open houses in March and April to introduce the library staff, the University community, and regional libraries and historical societies to the capabilities and services available to preserve and/or publish unique resources. Located in three newly constructed rooms on the lower level of Waldo Library, the Regional Digitization Center, funded in part by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS), is part of an ongoing initiative to support the research efforts of the University with expertise and specialized technology. The Fall 2003 issue of Gatherings describes the statewide The Making of Modern Michigan project that provided the incentive for the WMU regional center.

The Digitization Center brings to the University the technology and structures needed for planning digitization projects including the specialized equipment and expertise for high quality projects from small film scanning such as 35 millimeter slides to large and 3D objects digitization on many different systems. Also available is assistance with metadata planning and creation for online document retrieval and copyright permission submissions. The staff of the Center will complete several collaborative projects for the University and the greater west Michigan community during the summer and fall of 2004.

The Technologies

Nine systems of varied technologies are among the technologies demonstrated during the open houses. In the computer laboratory, large capacity Macintosh systems digitize film positives and negatives up to 8 x 10 inches. Thirty-five millimeter slides are digitized through use of a high capacity slide-stacker scanner. A system for oversized original reflective materials demonstrates how easily posters, maps, and other graphics can be digitized. There is also a system for long text paper documents to be efficiently scanned into an optical character recognition system and used as editable and searchable documents.

Next door, in the Digitization Studio, large maps and 3D objects can be digitized with high-resolution digital cameras utilizing a “magnetic wall,” 4 by 10 feet, and a special hybrid copy stand. The “magnetic wall” secures, without hanging damage, large items such as maps and architectural drawings by use of flat magnet strips that adhere to metal infused paint. This allows the originals to be properly lit and digitally photographed with greater ease. The copy stand system’s capabilities. Also available through the Center are sound digitization capabilities for recordings.

Some of the equipment for the functions just described was funded by the Friends of the University Libraries. Their gift includes a Nikon 4000ED/SF 2002 Slide Scanner System, work tables, Luna Insight server agreement upgrade, and a Canon 550 Digital Camera and accessories to support digitization projects.

The Current Projects

As one of six regional centers in Michigan involved in The Making of Modern Michigan program, the Center provides training, expertise, and facilities to 11 libraries, “mini-grantees,” in the west Michigan region. A primary goal is to empower small and medium-sized public libraries throughout the state by developing staff skills in digitization at the local level. As a result, these individuals will be able to contribute to and create an online digital collection about key events in the history of Michigan. Among the regional digitization projects that the WMU Regional Digitization Center is currently assisting are:

- Cemetery records including maps for wider accessibility, searchability, and cross referencing (Buchanan District Library);
- “The Making of Modern Michigan Through the Eyes of Dutch Americans,” photographs (Hekman Library, Calvin College, Grand Rapids);
- The Grand Mere Association Collection of documents and maps that helped preserve the dunes and lakes of the area by the establishment of a state park (Lincoln Township Public Library, Stevensville);
- Unique local history materials of the Grand Haven area comprising over 1000 photographs of the tri-cities area, cemetery records, hotel guests registers, oral histories, log mark records, and more (Loutit District Library, Grand Haven);
- The Silver Beach Amusement Park collection of photos, postcards, and documents (Maud Preston Palenske Memorial Library, St. Joseph);

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Friends Update

The Friends of the University Libraries have had an active year since April of 2003 when David Kohrman, a student of Public History at WMU, made a presentation illustrated by archival and rare photographs of 19th and 20th century Kalamazoo. During the intervening months until the April 21, 2004 annual meeting, the Friends held a successful November, 2003, book sale in Waldo Library, provided travel and development funding for several of the Libraries’ staff, purchased special equipment for the new WMU Regional Digitization Center, and hosted President Judith Bailey’s talk at the fall meeting of the Friends. President Bailey entertained the Friends and guests with her commentary on “Lifetime Influence: Libraries and Literature,” a delightful overview of her lifelong reading and library experiences. At the April, 2004, annual meeting, Dr. Grace Tiffany, Professor of English and Shakespearian scholar at the University, enticed her audience with a discussion of and readings from her two novels—My Father Has a Daughter and Will—both, of course, based on the life of William Shakespeare.

President Combs presents Grace Tiffany with “flowers purple, blue, and white…”

The annual election of officers at the annual meeting produced the following roster:

- Dr. William W. Combs, President, 2003-2004
- Ms. Phyllis R. Buskirk, Vice President, 2004-2005
- Ms. Aedin N. Clements, Secretary, 2004-2006
- Mr. Norman O. Jung, Board Member, 2004-2007
- Ms. Aedin N. Clements, Board Member, 2004-2007
- Mr. David H. McKee, Board Member, 2004-2006

Continuing Officers include Ms. Donna M. Ring, Treasurer, 2003-2005; Dr. Mary Anne Sydlik, Board Member, 2002-2005; and Dr. Charles V. Spaniolo, Board Member, 2003-2006.

Western Michigan University

Dwight B. Waldo Library
Kalamazoo, Michigan 49008-5353