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—authors, titles, keywords, URLs, publishers can change without any notice. As a result, what was correct yesterday becomes incorrect today.

Regardless, a past and continuing emphasis of the Libraries' bibliographic database is effective authority control. Complete, accurate bibliographic and item records are provided for materials held by the Libraries since complete access cannot be guaranteed unless access points (e.g., author, title, subject, etc.) are consistent, current, and correct throughout WestCat. As noted, with the addition of online links to sites, assuring that guarantee has become vastly more difficult. However, users are demanding such access, and the Catalog Department is responding as precisely as possible.

One timely example of the difficulty of providing authority control is found in the area of subject headings. Most searchers are not aware that official subject headings are suggested by the Library of Congress and used in common across all libraries. (Users are usually sent to keyword searching tools when they begin a search since such indexes use common language found in actual titles and descriptions.) The "real" subject heading is a powerful search tool, because all libraries use standardized terminology. Until recently, the official subject heading for books and other resources, originally describing Negroes or blacks, was AFRO-AMERICANS with appropriate subheadings or clarifications such as AFRO-AMERICANS—BIOGRAPHY or AFRO-AMERICAN TEACHERS. The change to AFRICAN AMERICAN as the official subject heading was made in December 2000—a change that required updating several thousand records in WestCat.

Some of the corrections could be initiated using a one-fell-swoop, automated global heading change feature that is built into our cataloging system, but this could be used only with the main heading. No longer phrase or subdivision could be corrected without a manual, in-house intervention so that AFRO-AMERICAN TEACHERS could become AFRICAN AMERICAN TEACHERS. Moreover, the word "AFRO-AMERICAN" was also embedded in other major headings such as UNITED STATES—HISTORY—CIVIL WAR, 1861-1865—AFRO-AMERICAN TROOPS. Traditional searches do not easily uncover text appearing far down the line in a subject-heading string. In this single example, the cataloging staff eventually located some 300 bibliographic records that required the substitution of AFRICAN AMERICAN for AFRO-AMERICAN. The bottom line is that without accurate and thorough authority control and database management, online library catalogs are not the useful, modern tool that they have the potential to be.

The University Libraries' WestCat is an amazing catalog or, if you will, search engine of the 21st century. This gateway links every searcher to a wide range of information resources including, at least: traditional holdings (books, periodicals, rare books, government documents, etc.); e-books and journals; images; sound recordings; course reserve materials; CD-ROMS; remotely accessible databases; and sites of the public WWW. The key to all of this information is held by the Cataloging Department that shapes and articulates the definition of WestCat for our user community. No matter how the nature of our collection and services changes, WestCat, in one form or another, the Libraries' online catalog, will remain the backbone and trusted companion to a world of information that is always there to support the educational, research, and public service mission of Western Michigan University.

The Trouble with the Library

By Allison Danforth

[Many students help to staff the University Libraries. Allison Danforth is a senior majoring in English and Spanish. She has become a talented Central Reference aide who has also observed shrewdly and drawn some conclusions about the WMLI Libraries.]

The patron enters the library to the sound of the heavy glass doors, crossed with steel, slamming behind him. He stands in the rotunda, feeling almost lost in the depths of a well, as three echoing stories of the library tower over him—topped by a glass dome. More steel bars across the dome (and dirty glass) cut the watery sunlight till it has no strength to warm the patron far below. Still, he forges ahead, and passes through the security gate that paradoxically has a sign that reads: "Welcome Students." If the patron glances back to the other set of gates, through which he will later escape, he is less welcomed by signs that warn: "Theft and Mutilation Will Be Prosecuted."

"Will Be Prosecuted" is in red letters. The patron, now made timid and self-conscious by the deathly quiet of the rotunda after the echoes of the banging doors have dissolved into silence, enters the belly of the library. Seeking help, he wends his way through the maze of computer stations, each with a patron staring into a glowing screen, to the reference desk hidden back and to the right of the main aisle. Behind a long, low, mahogany colored desk with a gray top reside the librarians who hold dominion over the four million books and other items that have been stamped as property of Western Michigan University—in purple ink.

Once at the desk, the only standup section is already taken, and the patron must get on his knees to see eye to eye with the librarian as she guides him through the research process. The woman skips from this page to that page of the Web-based catalog, clicking on this blue word and that button, and pointing out that he should take note of this, this, this, and that on a page—all done so quickly, as she is flying from screen to screen, that he doesn't even know where she started. She is flinging words around as fast as she is clicking and typing away: online catalog, research resources, abstract, citation, microform, general stacks, circulation, and permanent reserve. On and on, words cascade over his unhearing ears and links flash by his unseeing eyes. The librarian ends the crash course in research with a pleasant smile, a quick point at a two-sided, four-part map, and a gesture toward unknown locations: "Okay? Here's your call number. Come back if you can't find it."

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The patron is again left to wander amidst the four floors of general stacks, the towering shelves, and the rows upon rows of library stacks that hold a dull rainbow of books. Their spines are worn; threads stick out like gray hairs. Their gold and silver lettering has been rubbed away long ago by a thousand sweaty hands, leaving only a shadow of their former elegance. Smaller ones hide behind larger ones, some even slip behind the front runners. Each lurks, hidden amidst hundreds; each identified by 10 to 15 letters of the ubiquitous call number that is sometimes further hidden on the cover that is not visible. Each sits in mean silence while the patron searches for his needle in the haystack. Only after he has trekked a mile over the hard, gray carpet, stared blankly at the dozens of signs that all seem alike—PR3671.T85 to PR 6842.59—does he sigh, “I hate this library.” Slowly, without enthusiasm, he returns to his original nemesis, the librarian, and asks for help.

The librarian is calm, cool, and ever smiling in spite of his impatient and frustrated tone when he asks where his book is. She marches to and up a flight of stairs, oblivious that her heels send thunder rolling through the stairwell, and then goes down an aisle, up a row, around a corner and stops. Voilà… she pulls a book from the shelf disturbing a cloud of dust. The cloud hangs between the two. The patron’s bewildered gaze turns to elation for a moment, but in the next minute has darkened with self-reproach: “Why didn’t I find it if it was that easy?” His limp and humble posture betrays his frustration, and he wonders if he will be successful next time. And, the librarian’s smile has softened to sympathy because she understands that the library is an intimidating maze to the unpracticed.

“...A book ought to be like a man or a woman, with some individual character in it, though eccentric, yet its own; with some blood in its veins and speculation in its eyes and a way and will of its own.”

—John Mitchell