1. Hello and a virtual welcome. My name is Mallory Walker and my pronouns are she/her/hers and they/them/theirs. I am an Access Services Supervisor and Inter-Library Loan Assistant at the Loyola Notre Dame Library here in Baltimore, MD. I’ve also included my email as well if you have questions.
2. As a Library we serve both Loyola University Maryland and Notre Dame of Maryland University. We are home to over 300,000 volumes across four levels. The Weeding project started in the Fall of 2019 and we have withdrawn 66,675 items from the collection.
3. I immediately began taking stock of the state of our shelves my first week on the job. Spoiler alert – things weren’t looking great. Signs were inaccurate and sometimes missing. Dust was everywhere. Books crowded on some shelves while others held only a handful of thin volumes. Call numbers P-Z are on the lower level, but R is on the third floor. Some of the larger items have been segregated into an oversize collection while others hang precariously over the shelf. So, how do we tackle more than 300,000 disorganized volumes that are stored on uneven, crowded, dusty shelves?
4. We know it took more than a few years for the stacks to get into this condition; it’s going to take more than a few years to set it right. To undertake large-scale stacks maintenance plans, I knew I needed to first gain a deeper understanding of the current state of the stacks. As a new employee, gaining this knowledge was even more imperative; I was new to the building and needed to understand what our collection had been through over the years.
5. Enter the Summer 2022 Stacks Maintenance Plan. This plan focuses on four project areas: shelf-reading, shifting, stacks signage/wayfinding, and general maintenance. As of the recording of this presentation, we’ve completed just about three of the four projects. And, of course, this plan could not be completed without the assistance of the Library’s three summer student workers. They’re the ones on the ground, collecting data, dusting shelves, and moving books around.
6. The first and most time consuming of these projects is Project 1: Shelf Reading. We’re testing out three individual methods of shelf-reading to determine which method to adopt in this coming school year. Method 1 is our current workflow and perhaps the simplest; students note the range they’re reading, correct out-of-order items as they are found, and make note of the number of errors found. Materials that are very out of order are returned to the Help Desk to ensure they haven’t been marked lost. Method 2 only differs from Method 1 in one way; students do not correct miss-shelved books until they have completed shelf-reading an entire range. It’s my hope that with this slight alteration, we may see quicker more efficient shelf-reading.
7. Method 3 is the most complex. Borrowing from the automated workflow adopted by Notre Dame University of Lebanon. This method utilizes an inventory of a specific range and a barcode scanner. The inventory is placed into an Excel spreadsheet, which when formulated correctly, will notify the student shelf-reading when a book is scanned in incorrect order. Students will then remove this book from the shelf and continue scanning. Once scanning is complete, removed materials will be returned to their correct place on the shelf. Though perhaps the most difficult to implement, I feel this method will result in faster, more accurate shelf-reading.
8. As of July 20th, student workers have begun shelf-reading Method 1. Each method will be tested three times in three different call number ranges. Once complete, the methods will be assessed based on the ease of implementation, accuracy, and efficiency. We’ll use the data collected to make this assessment as well as conversations with our student workers. Once a winning method is selected, student workers in Fall 2022 will be fully retrained in shelf-reading.
9. The second project focuses on stacks signage. The issues regarding our stacks wayfinding is twofold. First, our current signage is flush against the shelves, making it difficult for patrons to identify stacks organization from a distance. Additionally, many signs are inaccurate or have fallen from the shelves completely. With the help of student workers, we’ve completed a survey of our stacks signage to determine just how many signs need to be corrected and/or re-affixed. I’ll share the results of this survey in a slide or two.
10. In addition to noting inaccurate or missing signage, our survey also included aspects of general stacks maintenance which is the third project in the summer plan. Dust and damage are a major issue for our stacks and one that must be addressed before we move forward with additional projects. Over the course of 20 hours, one of our exceptional student workers noted every signage inaccuracy, every uneven shelf height, and every instance of shelf crowding.
11. The results of this survey are far from surprising. 98% of our shelves are in need of dusting. It’s lucky that our Archives and Special Collections is letting us borrow their lightweight HEPA filtered vacuum to fix that very pressing problem. Thankfully, only 2% of our signage is actually missing, though a little over a fourth of the signage is inaccurate. All in all, the results of this survey will help us to prioritize specific projects over others in order to prepare our stacks for large-scale organizational and wayfinding projects.
12. Finally, our last summer projects is a small-scale shifting project. Our survey showed that a little over half of our stacks are overcrowded, with no room for additional materials. Eventually, shifting will need to take place across the entire library, especially as weeding projects are completed. For now, we wanted to get an idea of what shifting would look like at LNDL. Currently, a student worker is doing a timed shift of a single range to answer some of our pressing questions: How much empty space can we realistically have on each shelf? How long will it take a single person to shift a single range?
13. Please enjoy my homemade Princess Diaries stacks maintenance meme while I go over the results of the shifting project. Shifting this range took a total of 5 hours and 19 minutes to complete. This time did include some readjusting our parameters; we hoped to have a whopping 14-18inches of empty space on each shelf. In the end, we allowed for only 6inches. Future shifting projects may allow for more room, but to have a range in the chronically overcrowded literature section spaces neatly and evenly is a win.
14. We’re spending this summer collecting data, testing out methods, and determining the best way to move forward. But what will we do once it’s all done? Some of this work has already begun. Our students have begun dusting and will continue to do so throughout the remainder of the summer. We’ll also begin corrected inaccurate stacks signage throughout the library. And soon we’ll approach the issue of uneven shelf heights. Ultimately, however, a lot of this work will help us determine how to approach projects in the future. In my librarian mind, I see this as the research we conduct before we begin to write the paper. Come next summer, I’ll have a new laundry list of projects to be completed. We’ll shift our collection to more comfortably fit the shelves – not to mention being organized across floor levels in a more intuitive way.
15. My biggest takeaway thus far is simple – keep up with stacks maintenance! I know LNDL is not alone in this issue; our materials have been neglected in the past few years. And as we reopen our doors as COVID moves from pandemic to endemic, stacks maintenance is a great way to ensure patrons return. Those of us who work in Access Services know that clean, organized, and accessible shelves increase discoverability, which in turns leads to greater patron satisfaction, increased ease in material retrieval for staff, and few lost items.