

Staying CARM about shrinking space

In an economic downturn, cost-cutting begins to look like high policy, but how is a librarian to respond responsibly to the calls for more savings in the budget? Due to the high cost of conventional storage space, attention typically turns to reducing the print collection through withdrawal and disposal of low-use items held primarily for research.

The greatest risk that librarians – and academic librarians in particular – face in this scenario is the risk of discarding the last copy of a publication of significance to scholars, perhaps in the belief that the item is fully available in digital form or that other libraries still hold a copy. The hard reality is that copyright will preclude full-text accessibility for the majority of digitised publications and those other libraries may already be discarding the same item in the belief that *your* library holds a copy.

'Do nothing' is not an option. With or without a heightened need to cut costs, academic libraries are already struggling with a large unmet demand for storage. Net growth in non-serial volumes in Australian academic libraries was about 5.5 million volumes in the 10 years to 2006, and the dwindling capacity to store these volumes has been exacerbated by a trend to re-purpose library space as discussion and learning areas.

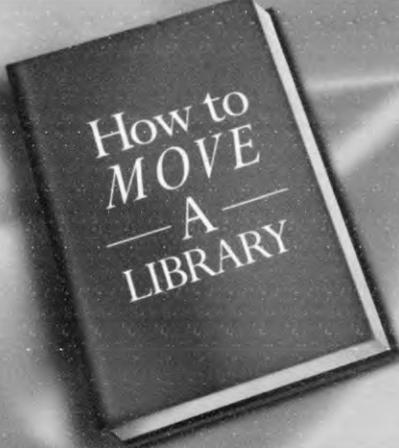
The books have to go somewhere, but where is best? A 2007 study commissioned by the CAVAL library consortium examined several options. These included the digitisation of all low-use items (and disposal of the print originals), the creation of on-site stores, contracting to a commercial storage provider and ceding ownership of low-use items to a collaboratively-owned print repository such as Finland's National Repository Library (NRL) or the CARM centre, managed by CAVAL in Melbourne. The study concluded that, among these options, the collaborative storage model offered the lowest risk for the storage of low-use research materials.

The NRL, owned by the Finnish Ministry of Education, holds about three million volumes. Established in 1996, the CARM Centre is owned by CAVAL on behalf of 11 university libraries in Victoria, NSW, and Tasmania. It currently holds more than 850 000 volumes and work has begun recently on a major expansion so that it will eventually house 3.5 million volumes, making the repository larger than any university library in Australia. An advantage of this kind of facility is that it offers a coordinated approach to the withdrawal of texts from library shelves, aiding the elimination of unneeded duplicates and safeguarding against the loss of intellectual heritage.

Collaborative off-site print repositories are an increasingly accepted solution to declining on-site library storage space, but do they save money? The answer is a resounding yes. According to its director, Pentti Vattulainen, the Finnish NRL cost about 1.35 million Euros a year to operate in 2007 but saved the contributing libraries in excess of 3.5 million Euros in storage costs. Here in Australia, CAVAL's Chief Information Officer, Cathie Jilovsky, estimates the cost of storing a book conventionally in an academic library at about seven times the cost of storing it in an off-site repository.

For more information about the CARM centre and off-site library storage, visit <http://www.caval.edu.au>.

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