

Managing a Shared Collection in a Changing World

by Matthew Revitt

Print collections remain an important part of libraries' identity, even in this digital age. However, the ability to provide patrons with ongoing access to print materials is a challenge in the face of reduced budgets and shrinking physical storage spaces. In an effort to address these challenges, eight of the largest libraries in the state (University of Maine, University of Southern Maine, Maine State Library, Bates College, Bowdoin College, Colby College, Bangor Public Library, and Portland Public Library) founded the Maine Shared Collections Cooperative (MSCC) in 2013. This effort was supported by a leadership grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and in-kind support from the founding libraries. The goals of MSCC are to ensure that legacy print collections remain accessible and that responsibility for print preservation is distributed across the state. Since 2013, MSCC members have gone through two major collection analysis projects that resulted in the libraries committing to keeping approximately 1.5 million print books and serials in their collections for at least 15 years. These materials were selected for retention based on their rarity in Maine and in the United States, their circulation history, and their connections to Maine.

The past decade has seen MSCC membership quadruple, with a total of 40 member libraries spread across the state from Fort Kent to Wells taking part in the preservation effort. A 2021 blog post from OCLC listed MSCC as the

fourth largest shared print program in the United States and the largest state program for numbers of titles committed (Whitehair 2021). MSCC's growth also reflects a wider growth in shared print; in 2022 the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) named among its top trends in academic libraries collaborative collections and the rapidly expanding shared print community.

By creating a collaborative collection, which 'elevates the concept of a library collection to scale above a single institution'...[shared print] programs help research libraries to fulfill their mission to preserve the scholarly record in an era of changing usage, limited funding, and space constraints. (RPRC 2022: 2)

Today, there are over 300 academic and research libraries in the United States and Canada participating in a shared print program. These libraries collectively retain tens of millions of monographs and hundreds of thousands of serial and journal print titles. The trend over the past decade has been to expand from statewide initiative like MSCC to regional programs that cross multiple state lines, like those of the some of the largest monograph shared collections the Eastern Academic Scholars' Trust (EAST), HathiTrust, and Statewide California Electronic Library Consortium (SCELC).¹

There is potential for further growth in share print by increasing the

diversity of membership. Shared print participants tend to be well-resourced institutions located on the East and West Coasts. To increase the diversity of shared print programs, the EAST and SCELC programs are working together on an IMLS-funded project to expand minority serving institution (MSI) participation in shared print programs by understanding and communicating the value proposition of shared print programs for MSIs as well as by designing solutions for overcoming barriers to participation. Due to this effort Virginia Union University, a private, historically black college, has joined EAST. There is still a long way to go, however, before we see real diversity across shared print, in terms of both its membership and the geographical distribution of members across the country. Public libraries are also largely not participating in shared print; MSCC is the only shared print program to include a mixture of academic and public libraries. While the MSCC's inclusion of public libraries reflects a strength in collaboration across the state, balancing the needs of different library types can be a challenge, particularly when it comes to developing criteria for deciding which titles are retained.

While the efforts of individual programs to commit content have been impressive, increasing the corpus of print titles being committed takes more structure and coordination at the national and even international level. With this in mind, first the Rosemont Shared Print Alliance in 2015 (focused on print serials and journals) and then the Partnership for Shared Book Collections in 2018 (focused on print monographs) were established by library consortial and shared print leaders in an effort to form deeper collaboration between

shared print programs (as of July 2024, they have merged into the Shared Print Partnership).² The partnership's notable achievements to date are a shared print toolkit featuring best practices and guidance for new and emerging shared print programs and a model and associated tool for determining the optimal numbers of monograph copies for preservation in shared print collections. Partnership representatives have also been working with OCLC—the global library organization that provides shared technology services, original research, and community programs—to investigate gaps in the collection of titles being retained by programs. It's hoped the partnership can assist programs like MSCC by making retention data available across different programs. Currently retention data is siloed in individual library catalogs and collection analysis tools. Access to this data would be particularly beneficial for MSCC; as MSCC looks to downsize its commitments, it could consider focusing retention efforts on titles not held by the larger programs like EAST.

Over time as libraries worked on retention commitments in their libraries, members called for greater flexibility in local collection management decision-making. Other similar programs are also beginning to experience these calls, but as a pioneer in shared collections MSCC is facing these challenges first. The initial retention period expiration (summer of 2028) is fast approaching. In preparation, MSCC undertook a program assessment and planning review in 2023 and distributed a survey to the membership. Based on the results of the review, it's clear that overall members are very satisfied with the MSCC program and the goals of preservation of and access to print monograph collections remain

important to members. However, the current levels of books committed to being retained by libraries are no longer sustainable due to changing needs for space and services as well as the growth in new materials added to libraries' collections. So, members are looking for MSCC to be more discerning about what libraries are expected to retain and for an increased effort in identifying and eliminating material that is not necessary to retain for the long term. While attempts were made to eliminate material such as outdated textbooks, guides, manuals, and juvenile fiction and non-fiction, in hindsight a closer review of the retention lists would have flagged more of this content and decreased the burden on libraries.

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The MSCC program assessment and planning survey clearly showed that the presence of an MSCC commitment for print books at another library has facilitated judicious local deaccessioning work, which has greatly benefited Maine libraries by allowing them to refresh their local collections while still providing library users with access to the content through Maine's interlibrary loan system. Many libraries, however, are increasingly being asked to go deeper with their deaccessioning projects and remove entire collection areas to facilitate building renovations or office space for departments moving into the library. Maine libraries are collaborative by nature, but when shifting local collection priorities don't align with the titles libraries are being asked to retain

for MSCC, retention commitments can be frustrating. In response to these challenges, MSCC increasingly looks at whether content is still relevant and being used by library patrons when deciding whether a title should be retained. In a recent major change to MSCC retention policy, libraries can remove commitments on titles that haven't circulated in their history, which gives libraries the option to deaccession these titles. Efforts are already underway to help libraries identify this material and other content that members have collectively agreed does not need to be retained for the long term. This change will benefit all our library types, but will particularly help public libraries where circulation levels are a major consideration as they manage their limited collection spaces. It's hoped that this policy change will ensure MSCC remains sustainable into the future, as libraries can feel more confident that the titles they are being asked to retain are actually important to them and the wider library community.

Over the past few years, there have been unprecedented numbers of leadership changes at MSCC member libraries, with none of the original directors and deans who founded MSCC still in post. New leadership comes with fresh ideas and shifting priorities that have resulted in MSCC having to reassert its goals and work through transitions to ensure there is still institutional buy-in.

MSCC needs to do more work in reviewing commitments to ensure that we find the right size for member libraries' retention commitments. As we get closer to the initial commitment expiration in 2028, it's reassuring that most members are willing to extend at least some of their retention commitments beyond this date. MSCC will

spend the next few years looking at what that commitment will look like. Looking further into the future, because the current MSCC commitments only comprise titles added to libraries' collections before 2013, MSCC will also need to discuss whether to analyze and make commitments on newer titles and what sorts of criteria we might use to base retention decisions on. Here's to the next phase of MSCC!

NOTES

- 1 <https://eastlibraries.org/>; <https://www.hathitrust.org/>; <https://www.scelc.org/home>
- 2 For more information see <https://sharedprint.org/>. The toolkit is available here: <https://toolkit.sharedprint.org/>.

REFERENCES

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