



CONDUCTING A MAP COLLECTION REVIEW: A WORKBOOK TO HELP YOU ON THE JOURNEY

By Janet Reyes

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WHILE MOST READERS OF *Cartographic Perspectives* are well-aware of the decline in print maps, many may be surprised to learn about how many physical maps are discarded by academic libraries every year. While libraries remain the storehouse of our collective memory, many are increasingly conscious of the costs of maintaining “legacy” print collections. In addition to the money needed to acquire physical items and the labor of cataloging them, these materials incur perpetual, ongoing costs for physical storage (including building construction and maintenance, climate and pest control, shelving, etc.). From a budgetary perspective, print collections are costly, making many academic libraries eager to shed unneeded physical items whenever possible.

Map libraries are especially tempting and easy targets for deaccession, more officially called “collection review” projects. Physical maps take up an extensive amount of floor space and many map collections are not fully cataloged. Moreover, with the decline in usage of physical maps in the academy and in society at large, along with mass scanning projects at major map libraries, the reasons for maintaining a physical map collection have declined significantly. The cartographic holdings of many institutions often fall into one of two categories. The first, usually smallest, portion of the collection is comprised of maps of regional/local significance, heavily used maps, and rare map holdings. The bulk of the collection is often made up of maps that are duplicated by holdings in other map libraries (e.g., road maps, USGS topos, and Army Map

Service/Defense Mapping Agency maps), many of which may be readily available online. This second category often takes up significant space while seeing only limited use. Properly stewarding collections like these is a daunting task, and what Reyes seeks to do with this workbook is provide a straightforward approach for how to reassess one’s map collection.

This is an especially significant task—in recent years map librarian jobs have largely been converted to GIS librarian positions, and, increasingly, these employees are coming from non-library-science backgrounds. This often means that the GIS librarian—whose primary responsibility is GIS assistance—also has a secondary role in providing oversight for the physical map collections. There are significant learning curves when transitioning into a library, and there may not be time for new employees to “search the literature” for relevant information and best practices to guide a collection review process appropriately. Indeed, as Reyes notes in her biography, she, herself, falls into this category of a GIS/map librarian without formal library training. Appropriately then, her workbook addresses the needs of this audience and does so well, with easy-to-understand language and helpful tips scattered throughout. The workbook is organized into thirteen main sections which proceed chronologically through the entire review cycle—planning, execution, and conclusion—plus three appendices that provide examples of worksheets and best practices for organizing and executing a physical collection review.



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Reyes has smartly kept many instructions broad and simple, allowing workbook users to adapt these practices to their own needs, while ensuring that users understand the magnitude of the project they are undertaking. She does a good job of highlighting the “out-of-collection” pressures and sticking points in library administration and across campus that might hinder the progress of the collection review. For example, Section 2, entitled “Potential Partners,” helps readers understand which other library employees may need to be consulted (everyone from security to Human Resources). Other parts, such as Section 8 (“Project Planning”) help the reader think through how to plan and allocate staff time to complete the map review in great detail. These are important items to highlight, as map collections often require a significantly large amount of complex work. Map cases can hold—depending on a variety of factors such as map size, rarity, and condition—anywhere from 25–150 map sheets, so even a few map cases could hold thousands of maps, necessitating proper planning and time management. In addition, as Reyes notes, map libraries often have items in many other formats, such as CDs, aerial photos, globes, classroom maps, technical literature, and so on. These different collections require additional oversight to ensure that they, too, are reviewed properly.

As a workbook, Reyes provides useful questions, worksheets, and tables to help users document their local conditions and prompt critical thought about how to undertake the review. This is one of the key strengths of this publication—while there are other texts that delve more deeply into some of these subjects, Reyes provides an easy template through which a librarian can undertake and guide themselves through a map collection review. Moreover, the guide is written in such a way that a reader could utilize specific sections of the workbook without undertaking an entire collection review. While not designed as a primer to map librarianship, aspects of the workbook provide a good overview on how to familiarize oneself with map libraries, with the materials they often hold, and with some of the common processes for managing a physical map collection. It is also possible to use aspects of this workbook to help inform the planning for other major map library projects such as a retrospective cataloging project or the moving of a map library. As Reyes states on the “How to Use this Workbook” page: “Some content may be spot-on for your circumstances; in other sections you may need to modify the approach, or you can disregard what’s offered altogether” (vii).

One point of criticism of this workbook has to do with some of the implicit assumptions that Reyes seems to make. While Section 1 (“Getting Started”) explicitly asks the user to assess the motivation and desired outcomes of the collection review, much of the workbook is built around three unstated assumptions about the results of that assessment. The first—that the collection is being significantly downsized due to pressures for more space—and the second—that the collection will be physically moved to a new space—are broadly safe to make. There are only a few map libraries in the United States actively and significantly expanding their print collections and physical footprints, and collections are generally only reviewed after higher-level decisions are made about the future use of library spaces. Generally then, these decisions are ones that are likely to involve moving and/or discarding at least some maps.

However, her third assumption is that library administrators fully support and recognize the value of physical maps in libraries, and it is this assumption that is most concerning. Libraries, like any other workplace, have their own institutional politics—competing pressures within the library or on-campus may force the map collection to become the flotsam offered in exchange for less impactful cuts elsewhere. Thus, we cannot always assume that administrators have the best intentions for map collections in mind, or even that they have a good understanding of the value a physical map collection has in a digital world. As the workbook is written, the reader starts with a *fait accompli* that many maps will have to go—and the only question becomes one of how to dispose of them efficiently and properly. Even when there is consensus that the map collection needs to be downsized, the individual librarian will be constrained by the conditions under which the review takes place. If there will only be physical space for a third of the existing collection, one cannot save half of the current collection, no matter how valuable or potentially useful one may think it is.

Indeed, map librarians have acknowledged that collection reviews often come with political baggage about the value of physical maps and map-centered employees. Although many collection reviews lead to productive transformation (for example at Arizona State University, which has successfully married its physical collections to its GIS services), some reviews have been shelved or stalled by administrators due to other issues (for example at New Mexico State University, where budgetary constraints

have left a proposed transformation of the map collection in limbo; see Quinn 2022 for more information). There are also “horror stories” about abandoned collections or mass deaccessioning projects, where physical maps become a true afterthought with little direct supervision, use, or existence in a library collection. As universities continue to face budgetary and resource pressures, these neutral or negative outcomes are likely to remain possible. Unfortunately, this workbook provides little insight into how to build support for or justify the importance of a physical map collection in the face of ill-informed, apathetic, or hostile administrators.

Nonetheless, it is important to reaffirm that collection reviews are not always oppositional or prompted by cost-cutting; nor are they always negative—libraries have always reassessed and weeded collections to ensure that they remain useful to the patrons they serve. Undertaking a collection review may free resources to enhance the maps that are retained, and a collection review can be a generative exercise that helps reinvigorate how a map collection positions itself or the partnerships that it has. To this end, Reyes does a good job pointing to the various partners within the library and both on and off campus that can make a collection review a generative endeavor. As she notes, items no longer appropriate for the map collection may be transferred to other library departments, those that the library no longer wants can be offered to faculty studying that area or as gifts to other libraries, and those that no one wants can be offered as paper for the art department or as giveaways to the general community.

Reyes authored this workbook based on her own experience in successfully reviewing the map collection at the University of California, Riverside from 2018–2019, and to this end the workbook helps to provide an ideal model for what a map collection review can be. To her credit, the workbook provides an extensive amount of “tested” information to help the user execute the collection review with significant autonomy. For example, she highlights the numerous ways that one might construct retention criteria that assess the potential future use for a map based on institutional research interests, the map’s rarity, or other relevant features.

As a whole Reyes has made an important contribution to map librarianship through the creation of *Conducting a Map Collection Review: A Workbook to Help You on the Journey*. Chock-full of tips, useful prompts, and easy to understand language (along with being offered **online for free**), one imagines that this workbook will be used extensively by map librarians in academic settings in the coming years.

REFERENCE

Quinn, Todd. 2022. “Here Today, Here Tomorrow: A Case Study of Reviewing a Map Library with Eyes toward the Future.” *Journal of Map & Geography Libraries* 18 (3): 155–167 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15420353.2023.2219072>.

