On the Prospect of Removing Books from Alderman Library

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December 3, 2015

Any renovation of Alderman Library should provide for the open shelving of at least as many books as are currently present. Alternative arrangements such as discarding some books, storing books offsite, rotating the collections, or replacing the books with digitizations of them not only lack the benefits of free access but also will create fresh problems.

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All artifacts are important as the principal class of evidence for reconstructing what human beings were doing and thinking in the past. The fullest understanding requires access to as many artifacts as possible, and books, as the most common surviving objects from the past five hundred years, provide one of the richest possible resources for such insight. But the question "Have you read this book?" highlights that *book* has two common senses: an abstract work made of language, and a physical object. The meanings are intertwined; although people sometimes think of books only in the first way, the ability to interpret physical features is equally crucial in understanding communications from the past.

The physical objects we call books are the means by which abstract works of language are embodied and conveyed to readers, who use not only the arrangements of ink in alphabetical symbols but also other material features (including elements such as layout, paper, and binding) to decode the messages being transmitted. That is, the act of reading consists of interpreting physical evidence. Different physical features convey different messages, even if the sequence of symbols is the same. Historically, then, elements of a book's physical design can be significant indicators of how the text thus displayed was regarded by its producers as well as how it was interpreted by its readers and how it shaped their responses. The physical evidence of a book also reveals facts about *how* it was produced – details that can in turn lead to the discovery of textual anomalies and contribute to a knowledge of everyday human activity in the past as manifested in contemporary textual, printing, and publishing practices. Physical books therefore remain significant even if their verbal content is judged to be outdated, even if they are little used, even if they have the same title as other books but are of different editions, or even if they are multiple copies of the same edition.

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Anyone who pursues curiosity is conducting research. This investigation is most identifiable in focused academic work, and UVA's Cornerstone Plan has re-emphasized that the University strives to be a preeminent research institution. Alderman Library is at the core of much of the university's research, first of all by its internationally recognized faculty. At a time of widespread hiring in American universities, a broad, deep, and readily accessible library collection is crucial to the competitive recruitment and retention of distinguished faculty, who expect ready access to scholarly resources in all forms. Convenient access to standard sources is a sine qua non for these scholars, and many competing schools provide such tools. A distinguishing feature of a major research library, however, is the ready availability of little-used and esoteric materials. The special accessibility of Alderman Library's strong holdings gives UVA a comparative advantage among universities that endeavor to be serious research institutions. These resources are vital not only for faculty in sustaining work that has generated world renown but also for graduate students, whom senior scholars are training to be the leaders of a new generation.

Moreover Alderman Library has long been crucial to a special kind of book research in which UVA is an international leader. From the mid-twentieth century the name of the University has been a symbol

world-wide for the analysis of books as physical objects, the study of the transmission of texts, and the preparation of scholarly editions. These activities were instigated largely by the Bibliographical Society of UVA, founded in 1947, especially through its journal *Studies in Bibliography*. The addition of Rare Book School in 1991 further strengthened this reputation. At a time when many lesser libraries are rapidly reducing access to books, UVA can stand out as a conspicuous national leader by resisting this contemporary trend and demonstrating a regard for these objects.

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But the pursuit of understanding is not the interest of advanced researchers alone. It extends as well to first-year undergraduates and to non-academic citizens of the Commonwealth, who with all users are the beneficiaries of one of the great contributions to learning in the past century: open stacks. They, or (in the minds of those who are prone to overlook these stakeholders) even they, recognize the cultural stature of the vast hoard of books in the Alderman stacks. They are able to see for themselves the numerous editions of *Alice in Wonderland* on the shelves and to ponder why the library has so many copies, and why they are different from each other, and what that means. They too can profit from the capacity of books not only to offer answers but, when they are present, to provoke questions. They too can benefit from the highly developed technology of a book that enables quick browsing, simultaneous consultation of different sections, and the easy examination of multiple volumes together. They too can experience serendipity as they discover that the book they want is often next to the one they thought they wanted, can be relieved of the parochialism of the present by witnessing that books have not always looked the same, can detect the interplay of minds across decades or centuries by observing books from different eras shelved together, can witness traces of other people who have touched the same books through those years, and do all of this free from the concern that every request they make for an item from closed stacks would be preserved in administrative records.

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Buzzwords and unexamined assumptions do not serve as viable arguments for depleting the Alderman stacks and eroding the permanent collection. "**Code**" can be honored, even if the building does not have soaring ceilings. The "**budget**" is not an irresistible fiat but rather a statement of priorities. Although "**cost**" for making books available in perpetuity is real (but perhaps not as great as the yet unknown expense of creating and maintaining electronic texts), all existence has costs, which are assumed in accord with a society's values. "**Safety**" is unchallengeable, but it is a consideration in achieving a goal, not an end in itself. "**Collaboration**" can take place across any table, but in the open stacks of a permanent collection it also occurs through interaction with people of other times and places through the books they have left. The greater the "**flexibility**" in a library, the greater the risk of forfeiting space to the pressures of needs unrelated to the library's mission. Engaging "**many voices**" is noble but, as in designing a chemistry laboratory, some voices are more relevant than others. And the "**wider picture**" is meaningful only if it takes particulars into account.

The books now in Alderman constitute a unique collection of historical importance, created in part through gifts of alumni and other benefactors nationwide after the disastrous fire of 1895. The collection's components, cultural objects produced across centuries, also express the character and foresight of the residents of Virginia in particular. These books ultimately belong not to the University's current administrators and governors or to the librarians who for the moment have been entrusted with their care but rather to society at large. Those owners extend beyond the present – both into the past, whose inhabitants developed the collection as part of our ongoing human enterprise, and into the future, whose salient characteristics are that it and the uses to which existing books will be applied are not yet known. As such, the collection itself requires historical preservation, both to resist the devastations of time and to protect it from those who would arrogate the power to determine what coming generations may see. Jefferson did not create the Dome Room of the Rotunda as a Potemkin shell. Its symbolism and utility were inseparable; the books housed in the most important room of the most important building of the University were, in both senses, at the center of the institution. What he established is now recognized by the United Nations as the heritage of the entire world. It behooves each present generation

to perpetuate that legacy, both by retaining the books themselves and by keeping them at the heart of the university. The whole world is watching.