RECOMMENDATION TO DISCONTINUE COLLECTIONS FLOATING
SOLOMON BLAYLOCK
COLLECTIONS MANAGEMENT LIBRARY SUPERVISOR
16 AUGUST 2024 [updated 6 September 2024]

A. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GLAC currently employs a floating collection system in which items automatically change locations based on check-in. While intended to improve patron access and reduce delivery needs, the system has led to several challenges, including:

- **Inefficient space management:** Overcrowding, difficulty with weeding, and inability to accurately predict space needs
- **Collection integrity issues:** Disrupted sub-collections and unreliable collection data impacting patron services and Selector decision-making
- **Operational challenges:** Lack of data on system effectiveness and increased workload for staff

A literature review supports the findings that the benefits of floating collections are often overstated, and the drawbacks significant.

Recommendation: Discontinue the floating collections system, implement a transition plan, and establish updated procedures for collection management. This will improve space utilization, collection integrity, and overall library operations.

B. FLOATING COLLECTIONS AT GLAC

Currently the majority of GLAC collections (excepting those housed at Brand and Pacific Park) float, which is to say that items' locations in Sierra are automatically updated on check-in to the location of check-in, the items subsequently shelved at the same. The following information is derived from discussions on floating with GLAC Librarian Selectors, Supervisors, Branch Managers, and staff members.

Floating carries with it the ostensible benefits that 1) collections are 'self-sorted' by patrons, traveling naturally to accord with patron usage; 2) collections are constantly shifting at all locations, providing for patron browsing variety; and 3) deliveries between locations are minimized.

Assuming these benefits is problematic for several reasons. Patrons may return items to any convenient GLAC location, but this is not a benefit dependent on floating, nor does it necessarily indicate anything about localized patron material preferences. We do not currently collect data on checkouts resulting from in-person browsing vs. catalog search or known item request, nor do we administer regular patron surveys, so we currently have no structured way of determining patron browsing satisfaction. The current driving/delivery schedule already includes stops at all branch locations, five days a week; we do not currently collect data on delivery volume or have legacy data for comparison.

Floating carries with it the following drawbacks at GLAC: 1) locations periodically have more books than they have room for, occasioning either redirection or ad hoc weeding; 2) space planning, inventories, and shelf reading are rendered problematic or impossible; 3) sub-collections that should properly be maintained together are regularly broken up, including manga and DVD series.

Each of these issues has important negative implications for Collection Management. Weeding is necessary for properly housing robust, useful collections; to be so it must be undertaken in an organized and regular manner incorporating informed space planning and in consultation between Branch Managers, the Collection Management Library Supervisor, and the appropriate Selectors—deaccessioning as an emergency space-saving measure is both shortsighted and wasteful. The inability to undertake regular, coordinated inventories and shelf reading means that we are unable to identify missing or mis-shelved items until they pose a problem for patrons. (We currently have more than 12k items in Sierra with a status of "staff reported missing.") Selectors may be making collection development decisions based on faulty information, thinking that certain titles or collection areas are represented in a particular way when they are in fact not. Branch managers cannot accurately predict how much shelf space is available for shifting or acquisitions when the collection makeup is constantly in flux.

The general consensus among stakeholders as of August 2024 is that floating may provide some benefits, but these are far outweighed by the drawbacks.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research and scholarship on the practice of collections floating is thin on the ground, which is to say there is little critical consideration of it. The only book-length treatment of floating—W.K. Bartlett's *Floating collections: A collection development model for long-term success* (Libraries Unlimited, 2014)—is a slim volume (128 pages) with a six-entry reference list, effectively serving as a trade guide. A handful of articles and reports (even a small Reddit thread) have touched on the practice of floating over the years, but most that I have consulted[1] do not discuss any benefits or drawbacks outside the scope of Bartlett's coverage, or at any greater depth. There are two exceptions to this: a master's thesis by K.E. Weber (then at Chapel Hill) titled: *The benefits and drawbacks of working with floating collections: The perceptions of public librarians* (2014), and N. Rutherford's 2016 *Library Journal* article: "To float or not to float | Collection management."

Bartlett is an enthusiastic proponent of floating collections and devotes much more space in their book to potential benefits than drawbacks. This is natural for an implementation manual, but it is worth noting that advantages of floating are taken be self-evident and neither significant statistical nor anecdotal evidence is offered to back them up. The largest space devoted to potential drawbacks is a single paragraph towards the outset:

> *The single biggest reason not to float is that floating demands a constant rebalancing act in the 10 to 20 percent of the branches that are either "heavily*

---

[1] See: Canty, et al. (2012), Cessak-Obydzińska (2016), Clem (2023), Cress (2010), Duckworth (2017), MamaMoosicorn (2023), Marie Hedlund & Copeland (2013).

_____

hit" or "have-nots." Some branches get way too much, and the main library loses a percentage of its collection. The rebalancing act is frustrating and very time consuming for staff, an unfortunate reality of floating that simply never goes away. It is also a hidden cost. Yes, floating saves a lot of money, but there is a not-insubstantial hidden labor cost in the hours spent rebalancing by staff members in these branches—emailing, packing, checking in, and constantly "taking the temperature" of the health and size of branch collections. Because this work is usually done by librarians, it is more expensive than labor costs elsewhere. Is this cost substantial enough to make floating unprofitable? Not at all. But it does need to be acknowledged, and staffing may need to be adjusted in affected branches to make the necessary rebalancing practical and effective. (p. 7)

This is significant in acknowledging that a single disadvantage of a system thought to reduce non-professional labor and materials costs is permanently unresolvable and must be addressed by a greater draw on one of libraries' largest financial outlays: professional salaries.

Weber notes the gap in library literature about floating collections generally, and about librarian satisfaction with it specifically: "Little examination has been made of how librarians who work with floating collections feel about the advantages and challenges presented by the system" (p. 3). In an effort to address this, they distributed a Qualtrics survey via two large public library listservs, receiving 135 responses. General satisfaction with collections floating was about an even split, with negative responses focusing on problems with redistribution of materials, weeding, meeting patrons' needs with available materials, general knowledge of the collection, and getting materials to patrons in a timely fashion (pp. 25-27).

Rutherford's article is brief but significant in dealing with the Nashville Public Library System's decision to discontinue floating system-wide in 2014, two years after initiating the practice. This was the result of an organizational analysis of the effects of floating, finding "collections have generally not performed better with floating and that the process left branch collections unbalanced and understocked to meet demand for popular genres and subjects." Many of the factors that influenced NPL to discontinue floating are echoes of conversations I've had with GLAC Librarians:

Frequent pooling of titles at these busiest sites also resulted in the inadvisable removal of popular titles (even when no copies existed at other locations). Reports show that branches have weeded material based not on low circulation but on an excessive number of copies of the same title.

Because, under floating, material dropped off at locations other than the one at which it was checked out remains at the receiving branch, branches along travel routes to and from major job and commercial centers around Nashville often became overwhelmed by items their customers did not request and that did not meet their needs.

In an urban system with a central downtown and a digital divide, floating… redistributes material based on factors outside of those implied by the original

_____

> *loan (such as convenience of a drop-off location) and places a heavy workload on library staff to adjust imbalances.*[2]

While the purpose of this brief literature review is not to weigh in on the theoretical viability of floating as a general practice, it does demonstrate that its sustained viability and utility are very much open questions, and the problems we have experienced with the practice at GLAC are neither unique to our system nor easily resolved.

D. PROPOSAL AND NEXT STEPS

[See section G: APPENDIX for an expanded version of the following section.]

In view of the foregoing, I recommend we begin the formal process of discontinuing floating and pursue the following steps:

1. Secure administrative approval to move forward
2. Call a stakeholder meeting to present proposal for discontinuation, discuss implications, and, as needed, modify the timeline below

Proposed timeline

- Immediately:
    - o Begin tracking daily delivery volume[3]
- Date TBD (no less than two weeks or more than one month out):
    - o Discontinue floating system-wide
    - o Lock permanent locations where they stand in Sierra[4]
    - o Continue deliveries between branches and tracking as usual
- Within one month of "Date TBD":
    - o CMLS will create a list to which Selectors and Branch Managers will add items requested for permanent location update, focusing on series and established sub-collections. CMLS will review, address any conflicts with the stakeholders, and submit a finalized list to Tech Svcs for updating.
- Within two months of "Date TBD":
    - o CMLS will convene Selectors, Branch Managers, and Heads of Circulation and Technical Services to discuss workload impacts and troubleshoot.
- Going forward, collection stewardship will be undertaken within the framework established by the updated Collection Development Policy

E. CONCLUSION

Discontinuing GLAC collections floating will occasion some immediate disruption, but thoughtful implementation will minimize discomfort and extra work, both of which should quickly give way to smoother operations and enhanced collection management for all stakeholders. Selectors and Branch Managers will be empowered by an updated

---

[2] It is worth noting at this point a serious lacuna in the literature dealing with collections floating: justification for the correlation of return location with patron demand.

[3] In consultation with Head of Circulation, Nancy Park.

[4] In consultation with Head of Technical Services, Robert McHugh.

_____

Collection Management Policy to work collaboratively on building and maintaining robust collections tailored to the needs of the communities they serve. In this they will be informed by regular, reliable, location-specific data on space availability, missing/lost materials, high-use items, and internal/external system requests. We will be managing our collections in a responsive, data-driven way, facilitating internal transparency and the external communication of value to community stakeholders.

F. WORKS CITED

Bartlett, W.K. (2014). *Floating collections: A collection development model for long-term success.* Libraries Unlimited.

Canty, A.B., Frolek, L.C., Thornley, R.P., Andriats, C.J., Bombak, L.K., Lay, C.R., & Dell, M. (2012). Floating collections at Edmonton Public Library. *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice, 7*(1), 65-69. https://doi.org/10.18438/B8SC93

Cessak-Obydzińska, B.A. (2016). Floating collections – An alternative concept in library collection management. *Folia Bibliologica, 63*, 119-134. https://doi.org/10.17951/fb.2016.58.119

Clem, C. (2023). *Still lending you the world: The Toledo Lucas County Public Library in the 21st century*. Bowling Green State University Honors Projects. https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects/913

Cress, A. (2010). The Latest Wave. *Library Journal*. https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/the-latest-wave

Duckworth, P. (2017). *Floating collections*. Librarian to Librarian. https://librariantolibrarian.wordpress.com/2017/09/08/floating-collections/

MamaMoosicorn. (2023). *Anyone else have a floating collection?* [Online forum post.] Reddit. https://www.reddit.com/r/Libraries/comments/154u6s5/anyone_else_have_a_floating_collection/

Marie Hedlund, O., & Copeland, A. (2013). Collection management and the budget crunch: Are we adequately preparing library students for current practices? *Collection Building, 32*(4), 128-132. https://doi.org/10.1108/CB-03-2013-0012

Rutherford, N. (2016). To float or not to float | Collection management. *Library Journal*. https://www.libraryjournal.com/story/to-float-or-not-to-float-collection-management

Weber, K.E. (2014). *The benefits and drawbacks of working with floating collections: The perceptions of public librarians.* [Master's paper, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. https://doi.org/10.17615/yjdh-8626

_____

G. APPENDIX

Section D: PROPOSAL AND NEXT STEPS, expanded (as of 6 September 2024). Additions in red.

In view of the foregoing, I recommend we begin the formal process of discontinuing floating and pursue the following steps:

1. Secure administrative approval to move forward
    Recommendation was submitted to Michael Hahn on 16 August 2024. On 22 Aug M. Hahn gave the go-ahead for a meeting between S. Blaylock, N. Park, R. McHugh, and M. Hahn on next steps. That meeting took place on 29 Aug., at which all parties voice their support for the recommendation and discussed the logistics of Circulation- and Technical Services-related items below.
2. Call a stakeholder meeting to present proposal for discontinuation, discuss implications, and, as needed, modify the timeline below
    This meeting is currently scheduled for Wed, 11 Sept.

Proposed timeline
*   Immediately:
    o   Begin tracking daily delivery volume
        The details of this were shorn up between N. Park and S. Blaylock between 29 Aug and 5 Sept. Tracking is set to begin on Mon, 9 Sept. A physical tally sheet will be used by delivery drivers to note the number of incoming and outgoing bins for each location, M-F. When the delivery route is completed on Fridays, the sheet will be given to S. Blaylock who will log it in the DeliveryTracking_2024-2025.xlsx spreadsheet in Teams > Collection Management > Files > Stats > Intra-system delivery volume.
*   Date TBD (no less than two weeks or more than one month out):
    This timeframe is suggested in an effort to prevent undue haste or unnecessary delay. However, it may make sense to tie this intentionally to the November 23 Youth Space re-opening.
    o   Discontinue floating system-wide
    o   Lock permanent locations where they stand in Sierra
        R. McHugh confirmed at the 29 Aug meeting that the two items above comprise the straightforward matter of 'turning floating off' in Sierra and may be effected immediately.
    o   Continue deliveries between branches and tracking as usual
*   Within one month of "Date TBD":
    o   CMLS will create a list to which Selectors and Branch Managers will add items requested for permanent location update, focusing on series and established sub-collections. CMLS will review, address any conflicts with the stakeholders, and submit a finalized list to Tech Svcs for updating.
        After series have been 'reunited,' the system above will be modified to accommodate ongoing requests for specific items to 'live' at specific locations, which will be resolved in consultation with the appropriate Branch Manager and Selector. Some cases may warrant a location update, while others may call for purchase of additional item copies.

- Within two months of "Date TBD":
  - o CMLS will convene Selectors, Branch Managers, and Heads of Circulation and Technical Services to discuss workload impacts and troubleshoot.

Going forward, collection stewardship will be undertaken within the framework established by the updated Collection Development Policy

Some high-level guiding principles:
- Materials budget allocations will be formulated in preparation for each new FY employing a data-driven model incorporating stakeholder requests and discussions with CMLS.
- Selectors will work with Branch Managers to undertake regular weeding and location-specific acquisitions based on available space
- Regular inventories and shelf-checks will be undertaken to ensure an accurate ongoing picture of collections and to enable efficient space planning
- Uncatalogued circulating items will need to be addressed in a way that addresses both the logistical collection issues and the patron/branch needs that contribute to the ongoing presence of these items.