Recent Cost-Cutting Measures at Harvard Libraries

The following trends in the collection and processing of books at Harvard libraries have been justified in recent years as more efficient, cost-cutting practices. Taken together, they have a serious impact on the quality of Harvard’s collections and their accessibility to patrons. Unless there is a clear demand to reverse them, they are likely to accelerate under the new library system.

APPROVAL PLANS
Harvard has shifted away from using highly educated, skilled language specialists to select titles for purchase, instead relying heavily on vendor-driven selection based on general parameters. This has resulted in a less rich, more cookie-cutter collection, as many of the same titles are shipped to research libraries across the country.

OUTSOURCING
Currently Harvard purchases some services from outside companies in lieu of using local staff. Much of the German- and Italian-language cataloging for Widener is now outsourced and then processed here by minimally trained, temporary staff with little or no language/cultural expertise to review the bibliographic information. Titles are generally shipped directly to the Depository.

UNCATALOGED MATERIALS SHIPPED TO HARVARD DEPOSITORY
More than 10,000 acquired titles for Widener’s collection (worth approximately $250-300,000) have been shipped out to the Depository without adequate cataloging. Many of these titles were received a few years ago and remain minimally accessible. Items that sit in HD without subject headings and without established headings for authors are more difficult to find and are effectively lost to users.

WIDENER SHELFLISTING ENDED / CALL NUMBERS
In 2009 Harvard College Library instructed Widener library workers to stop shelflisting. Shelflisting is the process of adjusting Library of Congress call numbers so that materials correctly interfile in our particular collection. This change in policy negatively impacts a user’s experience both in browsing the stacks and in database call number searches. Patrons can no longer assume that a visit to a particular section of the stacks will include a comprehensive view of our holdings in that subject area. They also can’t rely on online call number searches to pull up all relevant titles.

INTRODUCTION OF THE ABBREVIATED-LEVEL RECORD
Many libraries, Harvard included, are now introducing abbreviated-level cataloging. An abbreviated-level record has less information in it, which hinders searching. Subject headings, for example, are optional, as are index and bibliographical reference notes.

HIRING TEMPORARY WORKERS
Harvard has increased the number of temporary, minimally trained workers since a 20% reduction in 2009 of regular staff.

For a more complete version of this document, please visit libraryforum.wordpress.com. A more detailed summary will be posted soon.