

2016

# Access to Physical Media in Academic Libraries: From Policy Review to Action Plan

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## Recommended Citation

King, R. P. (2016). Access to circulating videos in academic libraries: From policy review to action plan. *Collection Management*, 41(4), 209-220.

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## **Access to Physical Media in Academic Libraries: From Policy Review to Action Plan**

### **Running head: Access to physical media in academic libraries**

*Keywords: access policies, academic libraries, streaming video, closed stacks, open stacks, media, video recordings*

*Abstract: Streaming video is becoming the preferred means of viewing video for consumers, but physical formats do continue to offer libraries certain advantages: greater variety of choice for patrons at a lower cost. Many academic libraries have invested heavily in DVD collections, and these videos may be housed in closed stacks that satisfy some stakeholders but that discourage use and do not meet student needs or expectations. This article provides a framework for deciding whether or not to open up a closed collection, and uses the author's library's closed-stack collection as a case study.*

Decades after most academic libraries opened their book stacks to patrons, many academic library media collections continue to be held in closed stacks. Although the professional literature on library media policies is limited, what does exist suggests that completely closed-stack shelving practices may no longer satisfy contemporary user expectations.

Still the decision to eliminate closed stacks may be a fraught one for many libraries. On the one hand, there are good reasons to open up media collections in order to boost circulation during the waning years of the DVD. On the other hand, open stacks can lead to increased loss and damage—and, consequently, increased faculty-patron frustration—at a time when administrations may be less eager or able to pay the costs of replacement or duplicate copies of items that may appear to them to be on the cusp of obsolescence. The purpose of this article is not to advocate for a one-size-fits all solution that covers all libraries. Rather, it strives to encourage policy review and decision-making, empowering custodians of media collections to make the best access choices for their collections, address the arguments of skeptics and naysayers, and effectively make their case to important stakeholders. Most of all it is designed to help librarians make their collections as appealing as possible so that patrons (who have been

conditioned to expect ever-increasing convenience) will enjoy using them. At the same time, it acknowledges that this review process can be challenging as there are important conflicting interests to consider—that is, the simultaneous need for both access and preservation that Albitz has termed “the security-service quandary” (Albitz 2001, 5).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Albitz’s 2001 paper centered on the revision of access policies to allow video to circulate. In the intervening years, circulating media collections became the norm (Bergman 2010, 342). The focus of this article, then, is on a different media-access issue: the question of whether items—inexpensive popular feature films, in particular—should be held in closed or open stacks.

Media acquisitions differ from print, not just because of media’s dizzying variety of formats and playback equipment, but also the lack of emphasis on non-print materials in the professional literature and in library school curricula (Laskowski 2010). The fact that a single issue of *Library Trends*, published in the winter of 2010, has been relied upon so extensively in this paper is a reflection both of the importance of the papers it contains as well as the paucity of other recent contributions to the field. Obviously the shortage of published research and academic preparation has had a huge impact on librarians tasked with managing media collections. Having a rich body of professional literature to consult can help librarians improve service and to develop best practices. In the absence of such guidance, however, confusion and inertia can take hold. The result is that although most academic libraries abandoned closed stacks for their books long ago, media librarianship has not established a similar best practice regarding stack access, which leaves librarians somewhat adrift.

Recent publications on library media access, however, provide a reasonably clear picture of the value of academic library media collections that privilege the ease-of-access and user-friendliness of open stacks. Bergman (2010) notes the absence of resource sharing in the world of library media and suggests that academic libraries find ways to make media more freely available for the good of their patrons and the scholarly community as a whole. She says that the impulse to keep videos locked up and inaccessible may be rooted more in habit rather than need, and suggests that librarians may be “living in the past, still using policies that were appropriate for 16mm films, even though we’re now in a DVD world that is on the brink of online life” (Bergman 2010, 335). In 2009, she surveyed subscribers to VideoLib (<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/VideoLib/>), a discussion list used primarily by academic media librarians, about their shelving practices; about half of respondents reported keeping all or part of their collections in open stacks. Furthermore, according to her research, the trend (from 2004 to 2009) was moving *toward* rather than *away* from open stacks. She writes, “[s]helving of video collections is slowly shifting from exclusively closed stack arrangements to more openly accessible housing” (2010, 340).

Laskowski and Fennell (2006) note the inherent complexity of media access and collection development due to the variety of media formats and the rapidity with which they are becoming obsolete. Like Bergman, they imply that the quick turnover of media formats may result not in rapid and efficient evolution, but rather in stasis and paralysis. They say, “Keeping pace with changes in media services often feels like the proverbial herding of cats” (20). Like Bergman, they ask that librarians resist the impulse to throw up their hands and do nothing, stating that, “access to the collection (be it virtual or physical) should reflect the needs of the

current and future user populations rather than the economic or ideological realities of the past” (20).

In fact, research on library media policies does suggest that closed-stack shelving’s inherent lack of browsability is a serious impediment for students wishing to borrow library media. Furthermore, Emanuel (2011) notes the difficulty scholars have in gaining access to audiovisual collections. In her experience both in the U.S. and abroad, closed stacks and non-circulating collections for media are commonplace. She points out that these restrictions to access are particularly onerous for those needing access to audiovisual resources since (unlike with print materials) copying is difficult both practically and legally, and interlibrary loan is rarely an option. Although the relative fragility of DVDs and the high cost of some educational media do provide a rationale for placing access restrictions on audiovisual materials, these practices also serve to discourage and depress the use of media collections. Furthermore, she notes that today students, faculty, and scholars in nearly every discipline need to use media as a scholarly and pedagogical tool. Voicing similar sentiments, Dimmock (2007) notes that mainstream movies are “important primary source material” with enormous educational potential. She writes of the purchase of popular films at the University of Rochester River Campus Libraries, “Perhaps the biggest change needed to accommodate this collection of popular culture materials, and the one that has been the longest in coming, has been philosophical: academic librarians and library administrations have historically viewed collections of popular materials as inappropriate, unsuitable to academia, and/or as ‘special’ collections in isolation from the collection as a whole” (141). Although special collections (full of, say, rare books) often have an exalted status, Dimmock identifies the treatment of media as a

kind of “special” collection (which includes the sequestering in closed stacks) as a marker of its inferior status within academic libraries.

Finally, given the importance of media for classroom use and research, it is worth noting that streaming video is not able to replace the rich diversity of offerings available via tangible media formats because the video databases on offer to academic libraries do not as yet provide the same diversity of offerings or the “stable inventory of films” required by teaching faculty for in-class use (King, 2014, 289). Therefore, there is a reason to continue to purchase media in physical formats such as DVD and Blu-ray.

#### OVERCOMING INERTIA

This article came into existence in a pragmatic way: tasked with overseeing a media collection at an academic library, the present author wanted to understand why academic libraries have such uniform print book collection access policies—with open stacks as the norm—but such wildly disparate media access policies. The value of book browsing is generally acknowledged; as a result, open stacks for books are ubiquitous while media-access practices vary greatly. (Laskowski & Bergman 2004, 91).

The collection the present author has inherited seems in many ways grounded in the needs and habits of the past. As the rest of the library changed over the years to become more responsive to user needs, the Media Center continued to reflect the practices of the last century: It serves as special collection rather than as a full-fledged part of the general circulating collection; even though many items circulate, the stacks remain closed, all checkout requires staff intervention, and patron browsing is not possible. More worryingly, the Media Center, located in an out-of-the-way corner of the top floor of the library, lacks patrons, feels

underutilized, and has less-than-robust circulation statistics. This lack of activity hardly seems like a good advertisement to patrons or administrators for the ongoing importance of a media collection.

In defense of the status quo, however, one should add that long after the book stacks were opened to patrons decades ago, a closed-stack arrangement continued to persist in the Media Center for a variety of reasons, many of which are in fact quite reasonable: Media is often used in a highly time sensitive way. Instructors want to use media in the classroom on a particular date stipulated in their syllabi. (By contrast, print collections are used independently by students and faculty outside of class time.) Keeping items in closed stacks has traditionally been viewed as the best way to ensure that items remain available for in-class use.

At the same time, it was obvious that there were, predictably, just as many if not more arguments *against* allowing restrictive policies to persist: They fail to encourage use of media for purposes other than classroom use, which means that they fail to encourage the use of media for research and/or intellectual development. Furthermore, since items can now be borrowed by students and do circulate outside the library, current library policy already acknowledges the importance of student borrowing which inevitably leads to the question: Shouldn't more be done to encourage it?

It's easy to answer yes on paper, but harder to effect that change; while video formats may change rapidly, libraries and universities are conservative institutions that move slowly and value continuity and stability. There are many factors that might make open stacks problematical if not infeasible at any given institution. Indeed, it is by no means a given that more up-to-date policies, no matter how patron-centered, will be welcomed by everyone. For example, some faculty patrons may actually *like* that closed stacks discourage use; rather than go to the trouble

of putting items on reserve, they may prefer an under-used collection, in which whatever they want to check out will always be available. On the other hand, another constituency, administrators, may wish to see tangible media (DVDs and videocassettes) replaced by video databases as quickly as possible; they may not want to invest in the necessary furniture or security systems or maintain the level of staffing that will ensure ongoing access to a collection that they would prefer to phase out. For them, the intermediate step of providing open stacks for browsing may seem unnecessary and inconvenient, and they may instead advocate for the quick jettisoning of physical collections in favor of streaming video.

This article, based on an examination of available research, proposes a framework that can be used by librarians to begin a review of access policies. It fleshes out what that review process might look like, what factors should be considered, and lays out a plan for assessing the feasibility of an open stack collection for academic library collections that are currently closed. This framework is designed to be useful for all academic libraries, but in particular those serving undergraduate populations.

The idea that book access and media access should be subject to the same philosophical principles is gaining currency within the profession (Association of College & Research Libraries 2012; Laskowski & Teper 2014, 56). It is the position of the present author that academic libraries with circulating book collections shouldn't marginalize their media collections by embracing a different philosophy for media access; if "[b]ooks are for use," as Ranganathan believed, then media should be available for use on similar terms (Simpson, 2008)

Even at this late date, well into the streaming video era, open stacks do not merely improve the patron experience; they tend to increase circulation as well. Macke and Sewell called their library's adoption of open stacks for media, "the driving factor for increased

circulation.” They noted that after moving the media collection of the Penrose Library at the University of Denver into open stacks during the 2007-2008 school year, DVD circulation increased by 323.67 percent over 2006-2007 (2011, 41) (The use of the legacy VHS collection remained flat, however.) Similarly, Wallis (2015) writes that the Sonoma State University Library saw media circulation increase 76 percent in year after that library’s media collection was moved into open stacks.

Finally, while DVD use is declining, this format may still be important, at least for the populations that academic libraries tend to serve. According to Smith (2015), many younger and non-white adults tend to be “smart-phone-dependent,” relying on smartphones for internet access. Although millennials often access the internet on their smartphones, many do not have broadband access at home, and watching streaming video on tiny smartphone screens is less than ideal. Having easy access to media via the university library, then, has the potential to enhance these students’ lives. For students without home broadband access, DVDs might be an attractive option since DVD players are inexpensive and many computers do come equipped with optical disc drives that can play DVDs. (Although that feature is less common in newer laptops and PCs.) For students without broadband at home or the money for a Netflix subscription, academic library media collections with plenty of popular feature films and documentaries can be a valuable resource, similar in purpose to a leisure reading collection.

#### CRITERIA FOR REVIEW

An examination of the relevant literature suggests that a variety of factors must be taken into consideration if changes in media-collection access are to be successful.

*Security.* Security is perhaps the first factor that comes to mind since the *raison d'être* for closed stacks is security. That said, there are a variety of possible ways to provide security for open stacks. One way is to make DVD cases available in an open stack arrangement while keeping the videos themselves in closed stacks. This may seem like an appealingly low-fuss option, but of course it cannot really be regarded as a true open-stack arrangement as it continues to require gatekeepers to retrieve discs and it will in no way be helpful in libraries that have tight space constraints since it increases the amount of space required by the collection. Wallis (2015) notes that her library chose not to use this low-tech solution. Her article offers a helpfully thorough discussion of the security system used at Sonoma State University Library, which describes the decision to invest in lockable DVD cases to secure videos, thereby eliminating the need for staff retrieval, and limiting the amount of staff-patron interaction to checkout only.

According to the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Guidelines (2012), the difficulty of securing audiovisual materials is not merely *a* reason to keep items in closed stacks but perhaps the *only* reason. The report acknowledges that “media resources present challenges to security,” and that these challenges often lead to the persistence of closed stack collections. At the same time, the document stresses the need for library instruction that promotes “the use of media resources for research,” a clear instruction to librarians that the use of media for classroom use is not to be privileged over use outside the classroom. Therefore, according to the Guidelines any justification for closed stacks can only be made if a viable solution to provide a reasonable level of security cannot be found. The desire of teaching faculty to maintain a collection designed for their convenience and intended primarily for classroom use is not, the document implies, a valid reason to maintain closed stacks since in the contemporary academic library non-classroom use of video is deemed to be of equal importance. Laskowski

and Teper (2014, 56) articulate this principle as it applies to their library, the University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign: “By adopting a philosophy of supporting media needs across the curriculum for patrons at all levels, and supporting the enrichment of student life and culture, the University Library took the position that the risk of loss was outweighed by the benefits of developing a collection that would bring more popular resources to constituents across campus.”

*Storage.* Another, important consideration in the review process is: Where will the collection reside? Can it remain in its current location, or does making it accessible and appealing require that it be assigned a new home? Can current shelving or storage be repurposed? Do funds exist for the purchase of new furniture? Examination of the literature in fact suggests that retrofitted bookshelves are not ideal in the open-stack media collection. According to Lai and Chan (2010) mere browsability in open doesn’t suffice; they found that for their patrons, a truly user-friendly collection required dedicated media storage that allows DVD cases to be displayed face-out rather than spine-out.

*Cataloging.* Some libraries with closed stacks nevertheless have a practice of assigning call numbers to media; others may have simply organized closed-stack items using some other system. At Sonoma State, for example, DVDs had previously been shelved by accession number. When the stacks were opened up, DVDs had to be assigned call numbers. This allowed the library to devise a system for creating abbreviated call numbers that would fit easily on the slender spine of a DVD (Wallis 2015). The ACRL Guidelines insist that “[a]ll media resources will be cataloged in accordance with current national standards and practices, including full subject access and classification.” Therefore, whether or not a collection is held open stacks, items should be cataloged in such a way as to facilitate such a transition in the future and to enhance discoverability in the present.

*Replacements.* The level of funding and the amount of red tape and bureaucracy at an institution can affect a library's ability to replace lost and damaged items. For example, libraries can speed up replacement times for lost or damaged materials by having the flexibility to use credit cards rather than purchase orders. Furthermore, having access to credit cards may enable librarians to obtain out-of-print items from the same sites that consumers use for such purchases. It is hard to say how much of a role a quick turnaround time for replacing items and the ability to replace out-of-print items facilitates the adoption of open stack shelving. If there is a significant loss of DVDs as a result of open stack shelving, universities with cumbersome institutional purchase order systems may not be able to avoid long wait times and may not be able to purchase out-of-print items at all. If this is the case, faculty patrons requesting replacement items may become disgruntled. Some libraries may wish to begin purchasing two copies of each DVD so that a replacement copy is always on hand. However, any library that has not historically collected this way will have difficulty (both practically and financially) retroactively duplicating the entire collection. Circulation data, however, can be used to anticipate which movies may be most in demand, and those can be prioritized. In fact, articles about open stack media collections tend to pay little attention to the problem of replacing videos in general, and do not specifically address the issue of out-of-print video. This lacuna could be due to the fact librarians in charge of collections that have incurred a high level of theft may feel disinclined to publish papers about their negative experiences and perceived failures. Alternatively, it may be that the experiences of staff at the Penrose Library (Macke & Sewell 2011, 40) and Sonoma State (Wallis 2015) are typical. These authors report little change in the rate of video loss at their libraries after the transition; there were very few lost and stolen items both before and after the move to open stacks.

*Staffing.* While fewer staff members might be needed to retrieve and check out items once stacks have been opened up to patrons, keeping videos organized and findable requires shelf reading, and staff must continue to be available to assist patrons and order replacement DVDs. Open stack collections may very well require staff levels to remain stable. At Sonoma State, the opening of the media stacks allowed the library to provide better service apparently without needing to alter staffing levels (Wallis 2015).

At the University of Rochester River Campus libraries, additional student workers were hired at the time of transition since the move to open stacks was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the size of the collection and an elimination of other onerous borrowing restrictions; as anticipated, circulation skyrocketed, from 382 checkouts in September 2001 to 3,309 in September 2006. There was a downside, however, in that “full-time staff and long-term student employees were used to working in a much slower paced environment....Students who previously enjoyed doing schoolwork during their work time were generally unhappy and provided poor customer service” (Dimmock 2007, 148).

## THE DECISION

The review process at the author’s library took all of the above criteria into consideration:

*Security:* The book collection at the author’s library is transitioning to an RFID system; therefore, this system can be adopted for the media collection as well, which will require that RFID tags to be affixed to each item. Security for high cost (over \$150) and reserve items can be preserved by keeping them in closed stacks, similar to the restrictions that will continue to be imposed on reference- and reserve-books. RFID tags are not available for legacy media, but of

course there is very little reason to place videocassettes in open stacks since shelving an out-of-date format in open stacks dilutes the impact of and lessens the appeal of the DVD collection.

*Storage.* At the author's library, a recent massive book weeding freed up space in the general circulation area, making the move of the media collection into the book circulation area both feasible and logical. It was determined that bookshelves could easily be repurposed and used for media shelving. However, in keeping with the idea that browsability cannot be accomplished merely by moving a collection from open stacks to closed stacks, an investment in new furniture that facilitates the browsing of DVD covers has been deemed desirable once the pilot stage of the transition is complete.

*Cataloging.* Although media has always been shelved alphabetically in closed stacks, items have already been cataloged in accordance with the ACRL Guidelines. Call numbers exist for the collection, fortunately, but labels would need to be generated for thousands of items.

*Replacements.* At the author's institution, snail mail delivery of mainstream popular and educational titles generally takes 2-4 weeks. Some items (such as manufactured on demand [MOD] discs and other unusual items) have a wait time well over 4 weeks due to supply issues. Wait times during the summer can be longer due to staff vacations and the absence of money at end of the fiscal year. Given these factors, outreach would be an important part of smoothing the transition to open stacks. Teaching faculty would need to be encouraged to put items on reserve at the beginning of each semester. This would allow staff to safeguard DVDs that are intended for in-class use and order items that are missing (or damaged) well before they are needed for class.

It should be noted that materials budgets may be strained by an increased need for replacement copies. However, this library's media budget, while not enormous, has always been sufficient for collection needs, and is expected to remain so.

*Staffing.* Circulation staff levels are currently adequate and are expected not to change. Levels of student staffing, on the other hand, may decrease, but since students were primarily employed in video retrieval (which will be for the most part eliminated by open stacks) and checkout (for the most part replaced by self-checkout) this staffing change is not expected to affect service negatively. Students will continue to work in the department, with shelf-reading expected to become a more important part of their duties. Difficulty in retaining student employees who may be given more work and more responsibility could be mitigated by better screening of student hires, better training, and more attentive supervision. Since there will not be a dramatic increase in the size of the collection, it is not expected that (as happened at the University of Rochester) there will need to be an increase in the number of student employees. (Dimmock 2007).

The verdict? After reviewing these criteria, the decision was made at the author's institution to move media into open stacks. Although the idea to open the stacks had been batted about inconclusively for years, once each of these areas was examined in depth the decision to open the stacks almost wrote itself (as the language in the above paragraphs may suggest).

## CONCLUSION

Open stack media storage is clearly desirable for student patrons and is in keeping with the student-centered focus of the contemporary learning commons. Offering students the opportunity to browse and check out DVDs without staff intervention appears to increase DVD

checkouts even at a moment when streaming video has become the ascendant consumer format (Wallis 2015). Allowing students to browse is more user-friendly, but the advantages of open stacks go beyond simply mimicking the consumer experience (as important as that might be given the expectations of today's students): Browsing provides students exposure to information-organization concepts, hones their ability to understand, interrogate, and question the taxonomies that are used to bring order to libraries—and these taxonomies are indeed different for media than they are for print resources (Association of College & Research Libraries 2012). The fact that these information-literacy concepts—so integral to academic library instruction efforts—are generally absent from discussions of media access, even as discussions of “metaliteracy” expand within librarianship (Mackey and Jacobson 2011) is example of “printism,” that is, the habitual tendency to privilege print over non-print items in library collections (Widzinski 2010, 358).

Opening up the media stacks may not, however, please teaching faculty who require reliable access to media for classroom use. Historically, most academic libraries have prioritized the in-class use of media over the independent use of media outside the classroom (Laskowski & Bergman 2004). The potentially negative impact of open stacks on faculty who use media in the classroom can be mitigated but may require greater financial investment in the media collection—support that might not be forthcoming at many colleges and universities in the current economic environment. If there is no plan for quickly replacing damaged or missing items, transitioning to open stacks has the potential to alienate faculty. Opening media collections requires the formulation of a plan that addresses these concerns and can mitigate any harm to instructors who depend on media for classroom use. Any plan for opening up media stacks should ensure sufficient staffing and adequate funds for replacing videos.

The lack of a robust literature within the field of media librarianship may reflect both the small number of librarians who focus primarily on non-print audiovisual collections as well as the fact that, according to Handman “print and video resources still do not have equal academic valence in most curricula” (2010, 332) Searches of the VideoLib archive tend to confirm the case studies and reports cited herein: over and over again librarians report that carefully-planned transitions to open stacks result in increased circulation without a concurrent increase in the number of lost discs. (The VideoLib archives reveal that questions about open stacks are a perennial topic of the listserv, spanning from the turn of the millennium up to the present day.) As valuable as these informal listserv discussions are, however, the field of media librarianship needs more formal research that will allow media librarians and other stewards of academic media collections the opportunity to develop best practices within the field. At this critical juncture in the evolution of library collections, such research is essential and long overdue.

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