

# Books NOT for College Libraries: A singular proposal

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## ABSTRACT

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Most college librarians agree that weeding their collections is important, yet few do it -- time and potential faculty objections are the main reasons for such neglect. One way to help the situation would be to provide a carefully selected list of books that once were regarded as or even essential for a college library, but are now either outdated or superseded. The numbers of obsolescent titles in a few critical areas are given, and ways of compiling a list of titles to be considered for weeding are suggested.

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## Books Not for College Libraries: A singular proposal

I'm afraid the title of this presentation may have misled some that I'm going to suggest a list of prohibited, or banned books, an index librorum prohibitorum. That's not at all my intention. What I am going to suggest is that what just about every college librarian could use is a list of books that were once considered important or even essential, but are now outdated or superseded; books, in other words, that could be considered for discarding with only a minimal twinge of conscience. That is, instead of "Books NOT for College Libraries," the title more accurately should have been "Books Once Important for College Libraries, But Which Have Now Outlived Their Usefulness." Hardly catchy; not likely to attract an audience. . . and so the present title.

In visiting a number of college libraries as a consultant, one observation I frequently made and commented on was the number of outdated titles in the collection; sometimes that comment came in the context of evaluating the collection; sometimes it came in the context of needing more shelf space; often in the context of both. Frequently, then, I suggested weeding the collection--especially if expensive solutions like installing compact shelving or building an addition were out of the question. But even if those solutions were possible, weeding should still be done--for two reasons: it would not only provide additional shelf space, but would also remove from the collection titles which, to undergraduates, sound useful, but because they were outdated, or their conclusions superseded by more recent research, could well be misleading. Moreover, as Stanley Slote mentions in his book, *Weeding Library Collections* (1), weeding may help increase circulation. For these reasons not only I, but most librarians I know agree that weeding is an important activity for almost every college library. However, few college libraries do it regularly. Why don't they? First of all, it is time consuming; more importantly, perhaps, it has the potential for political repercussions from faculty who, for one reason or another (some valid, others simply perverse or at best idiosyncratic) are upset by the removal of particular titles.

In a talk to a group of college librarians one time, I described some procedural safeguards that could help obviate such repercussions, but then--half seriously--said that what would really make the process of weeding much easier would be an accredited listing of "Books NOT For College Libraries." Its function would be to provide the imprimatur, as it were, to a list of titles that could safely be removed from a collection, just as Books for College Libraries gave the stamp of approval for the acquisition of titles. Of course, a book's inclusion in such a list should not mean automatic discard; it would simply mean that expert opinion felt the title was no longer essential for an undergraduate collection, and that the individual library

(along with members of the teaching faculty) would have to make the final decision. The list would greatly simplify the task of weeding not only by obviating, or at least reducing, potential political repercussions, but by speeding up the process of selecting candidate titles for weeding. Later, reflecting on a notion that had been offered somewhat whimsically, I thought it made more and more sense. Since then, the many college librarians to whom I've mentioned it have thought it a fine idea which would be very helpful to them.

Let me repeat a sentence I said just a minute ago because it's too easy to misunderstand what I'm suggesting: a book's inclusion in such a list should not mean automatic discard; it would simply mean that some experts felt the title was no longer essential for an undergraduate collection, and that the staff members of the individual library (along with members of the teaching faculty) would have to make the final decision.

All of this seemed to me a fairly simple and straightforward suggestion. Like many simple and straightforward suggestions, however, the implementation was not nearly so simple. How would such a list be compiled? For those of you not familiar with earlier lists, just a few words on them. College libraries had long used standard lists of recommended titles to guide their acquisitions. While there have been many over the years, the most widely used were these: Charles B. Shaw's List of Books for College Libraries, published in 1931, and its supplement in 1940; the Catalogue of the Lamont Library, Harvard College, published in 1953; and then the several editions of Books for College Libraries--the first published in 1967, the second in 1975, the third and latest in 1988. Those lists were gratefully accepted by college librarians and widely used.

Perhaps the most obvious way of compiling a list of obsolete titles is to reverse the process used in compiling BCL and the earlier lists--that is, have faculty representing the many disciplines go through the titles in the various lists and recommend those no longer useful. That, however, would be a very expensive proposition. (And I can just picture the arguments.) Another possibility: have a group of college libraries list titles they have discarded or would like to discard and then compile a master list from those. Not difficult, but not very convincing either. Perhaps, for a beginning, a listing of titles that were in the earlier lists but not in the latest BCL could be compiled. There surely are other possible procedures, each with its advantages and disadvantages. My suggestion of a listing of titles that are in the first two editions of BCL but not in the 3d edition seemed to me a sensible start, so I did some sampling. I chose four very limited subject areas--limited because of the time I had--but also areas which I felt representative of most college libraries' collections: U.S. history, 1775-1789; economic theory; prose fiction, the novel; and educational psychology. Then I compared the three BCL editions' coverage in those areas. The accompanying charts [Figures 1-4] show the comparative coverage. Using U.S. History, 1775-1789 (LC classification E201 through E309) as the example, the first set of bars shows the number of titles in the 1st edition (195) and how many of those 195 are in the 3rd edition (44); the second set does the same for the 2nd and 3rd editions; the third set shows the number of titles in the 3d edition (135) and the number of those also in the 2nd edition (59) and the 3rd (44). The figures for educational psychology are even more striking: of the 62 titles in the 1st edition of BCL, only 11 are in the 3rd edition.

Does that mean that 51 of the educational psychology titles in the 1st edition, published in 1967, were no longer considered essential twenty years later? Perhaps, but it certainly means the 3rd edition's compilers didn't think of them as essential as the titles they selected. It may also be that the earlier titles were out of print at the time the 3rd edition was being compiled, and so not considered. In any case, the question is, Can they be discarded? Well, an offhand observation would be that they might at least be considered candidates for discard, but that the individual library should make the decision.

I mentioned earlier the Lamont list, the list of titles compiled by the Harvard faculty for founding the new (in 1953) Lamont undergraduate library. I thought it would be useful to see how it compared with later lists because it was so widely used as a guide in the 1950s and 1960s until the first edition of BCL appeared in 1967. Using the same subject areas as I did above, here are the comparative figures for it and the 3rd edition of BCL. For American history, 1775-1789, Lamont listed 66 titles, of which only 13 were in the 3rd edition of BCL; for educational psychology, the figures are 51 and 9; for the novel, 73 and 23; for economic theory, 123 and 45. And, finally, just for a couple of climactic figures, I used the AHA Guide to Historical Literature, the third edition of which was published by the Oxford University Press last year. Of those 66 history titles in the Lamont list, only 7 are in the AHA Guide; that's not too surprising -- after all, there are 43 years between the two lists (1953 and 1996). But a comparison between the AHA Guide and the third edition of BCL, where there are just eight years between publication dates, did surprise me: of the 135 titles in BCL, only 47 are in the AHA Guide. Some of that discrepancy is due to the different criteria for inclusion (e.g., the AHA Guide deliberately excludes most primary sources such as sets of Presidential papers and even many diaries or journals), but even if those were not included, the comparative figures would be 118 and 47.

I hope this provides enough material to warrant discussion. Would a list of outdated or obsolete titles encourage college libraries to weed their collections and help in the process? If so, is there some practical way of identifying titles that can at least be considered candidates for discard? I've suggested one possibility; what are some others? And if there is a practical way of compiling such a list, how then should it be made available?

## NOTES

1. Stanley J. Slote, *Weeding Library Collections* (Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1975), p. 10.

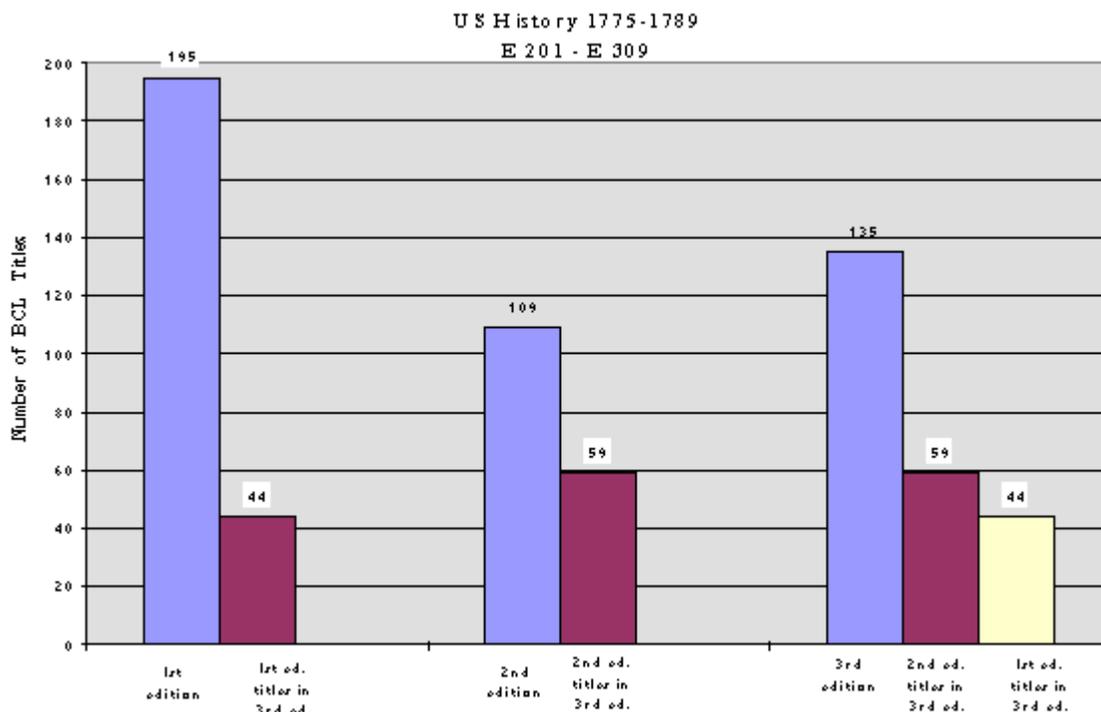


Figure 1

**Prose Fiction - The Novel**  
**PR 820 - PR 889**

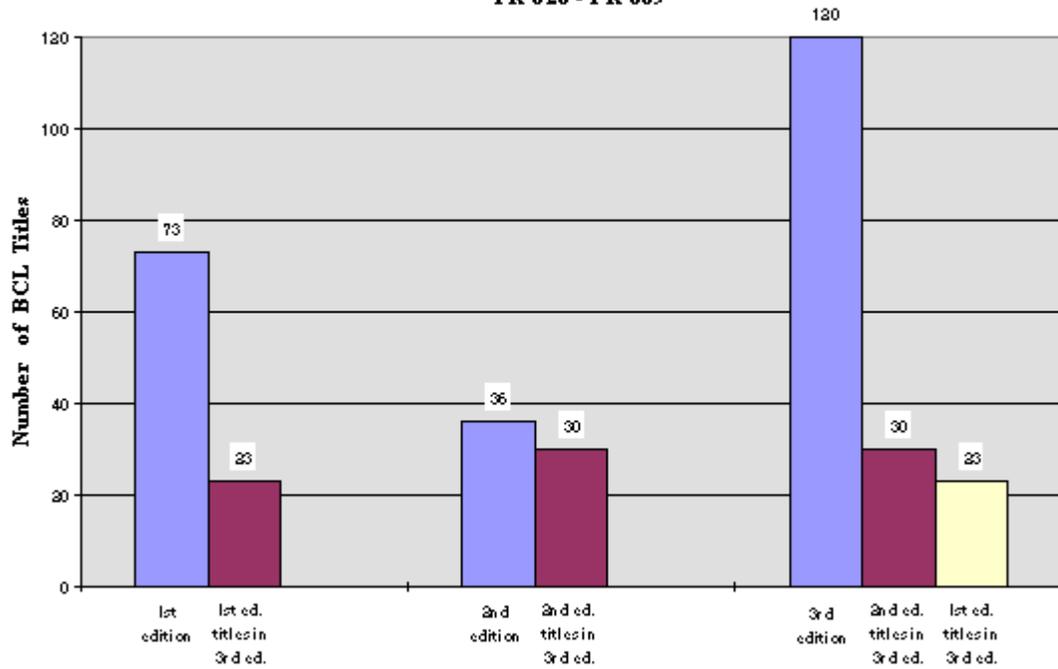


Figure 2

**Economic Theory**  
**HB 151 - 181**

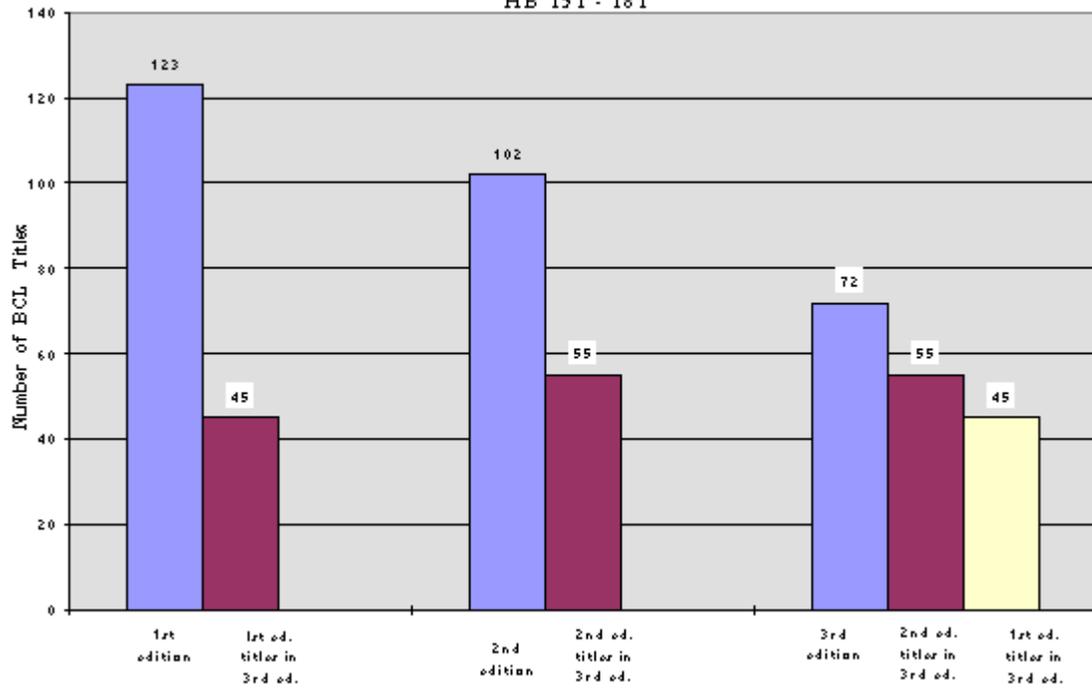


Figure 3

**Educational Psychology  
LB 1051 - LB 1091**

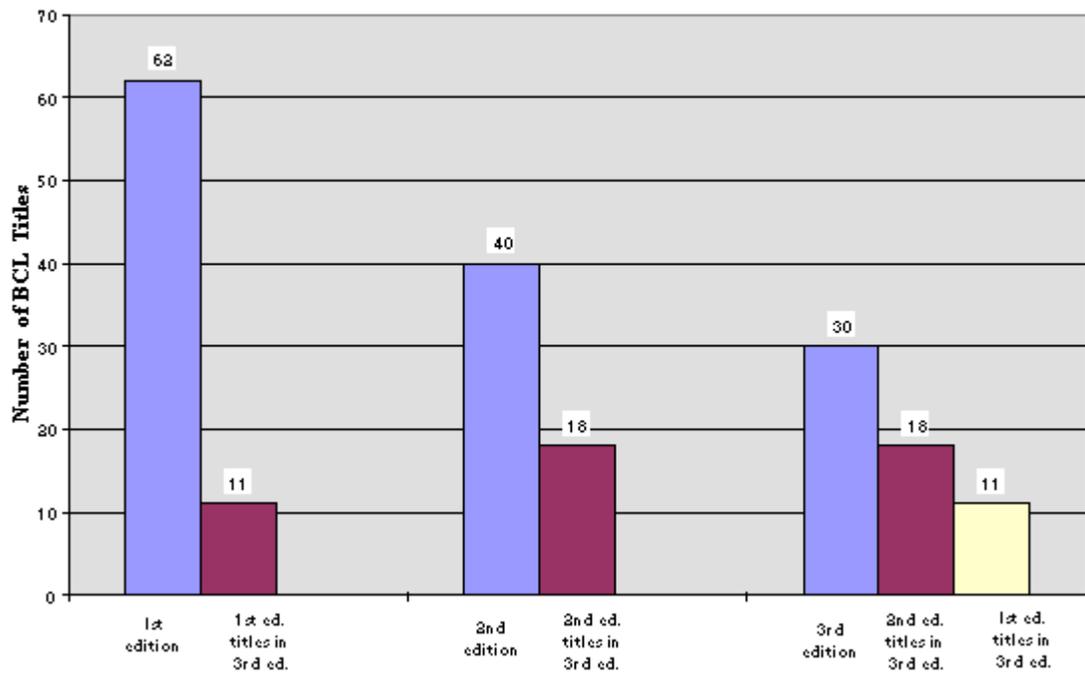


Figure 4