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## Rearranging Library Collections: a New App

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### **Rearranging Library Collections; a New App**

Since its founding in the 1950s The Molesworth Institute has always sought to push the boundaries of the application of new technologies to issues of fundamental to the work of Our Profession. Some projects of note dealt with using computers to analyze library postcards, tracking umbrellas in libraries, robotic book return systems, and developing the world's first fully electronic libraries in France, Italy, Sweden, and the United States.

With the retirement of Norman D. Stevens, one of its founders, as Director in 2011, the Storrs based staff of the Institute decided to explore yet another area of where the newest technologies might be pushed to their limits. The initial emphasis was on identifying an area of library operations that has seen the least change in its management since 1876 or before. It was quickly determined that the arrangement and management of library collections offered the most fascinating opportunities. While a variety of arrangements have been used, virtually all have focused on keeping the library's books in some recognizable order. Indeed, librarians in Alexandria initiated the use of the alphabet as a means of arrangement. There have been a variety of mainly ill-fated attempts to handle the physical storage of a library's collections in terms of maximizing the use of space. Those range from Fremont Rider's decision at Wesleyan University to cut down and rebind virtually the entire collection, to the disastrous Randtriever in the Ohio State University Medical Library and later a similar compact storage system at the Cal State Northridge University Library that was demolished in the Northridge earthquake. All of the systems used or proposed, no matter how imaginative they may have seemed, have only addressed the most efficient use of space and not the needs of library users or the effective use of library personnel. A random sampling of available information revealed that the average academic library in the United States now makes at least one major shift in its collections a year, six to eight minor shifts, and employs the equivalent of from three to ten employees to resshelf materials. Some use of technology such as the marking of books with RfID (Radio Frequency Identification) Technology, self-charging checkout machines, and even robotic and/or conveyor belt book return systems has been implemented in recent years. That has been done, however, without real attention to the broader picture of efficient collection maintenance and access.

In virtually every library, maps and signs are posted – now both in physical and electronic locations - that have to be updated each time collections are shifted. Once users have found the book, or books, that they want in the library's catalog (most likely online), they typically must follow a series of signs and directions – not all of which may have been updated – designed to direct them to the exact location on a shelf. If the book is not there, even though the online catalog has indicated it is not charged out, users can only assume that it has been

misshelved, is waiting to be reshelved, may be in use somewhere in the library, or may even be lost. Frustration can quickly set in.

The staff of The Molesworth Institute decided to review the entire process and in doing so came up with a whole new approach, complete with the inevitable app, designed to save, time, space, and energy for the library staff and to provide a more effective and efficient way for users to easily locate and retrieve books. It is a simple approach. Our system has been in use for several months in a large departmental library in a major university and we anticipate that it may be extended to the entire library system in the fall of 2012. A high-powered RFID tracking device, which can be contacted at a greater distance, is inserted in each book. The books are then shelved in no particular order anywhere in the library where space is available, and are readily accessible no matter where they be. The user simply accesses the library catalog from her smart phone to determine the books that she wishes to find and our app then links those items to her phone's GPS system and directs her – without the need for any signage – to the book. If she is seeking more than one book, the app/gps system directs her to them in the most time effective sequence. If she wishes, to borrow a book, the app allows her to do that; otherwise the book can simply be left anywhere in the library where it is then immediately accessible to other uses. The RFID system automatically checks each person leaving the library to make sure that any book leaving the building is properly linked to the borrower's account. A similar check is made of users entering the building and books charged to the user are noted, and then discharged if they are no longer linked to her account when she leaves. We are now in the final stages of fine-tuning the system and making some minor changes before we begin beta testing in the main university library in the fall of 2012. We expect to make the Molesworth Institute Library Collection Management app available, without charge, by July 1, 2013.