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Current Serial Records—An Experiment

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IN SEPTEMBER 1951 an experiment in housing of current serial records was undertaken in the Department of Agriculture Library. Until this time, all of the records were housed in visible files set up on swivels, two files to a swivel, making a total of twenty files on ten swivels, and using forty-three linear feet of floor space. The desks on which the files were placed were in an unbroken row, allowing no aisle space between checkers. For some time, the staff had been concerned with whether the visible files were the most efficient type of files for the work. The problems, other than floor space, which brought up the questions were: accessibility to the files by assistants other than the periodical checkers, constant interruption to the checkers by these assistants, efficiency of the files from the checkers' viewpoint, and overcrowding of the visible file units.

At the Department Library, the Current Serial Record consists of all serial titles for which a piece published 1949 or later has been received. The term serial is interpreted broadly to include any title issued in parts which is incomplete in the library collection, thus periodicals, annuals, biennials, and even incomplete works-in-parts are considered serials. The checking cards are standard catalog card size, and are arranged alphabetically by latest form of catalog entry. Each card shows call number, author, title, publisher and address, frequency of publication, whether the title is purchased, and binding decision if more than one copy is to be bound. For publications issued semi-monthly or less frequently, one card is used to record holdings for three years; for publications issued more often, a card is used for each year. The record is kept on a three to six year basis and at the end of every third year, the checking record for the earliest three years is transferred to the permanent holdings records. At the time of transfer, all closed or suspended titles, and those titles for which no piece published in the last three years has been recorded, are removed from the current record. At the present time, there are over 22,700 titles in the current file and it is estimated that this number will increase to approximately 25,000 titles before another transfer of records takes place.

The periodical checkers handle over one-half million pieces a year, adding to the collection those pieces that are needed, and disposing of duplicate pieces. In addition to their checking duties, they are responsible for claiming all missing issues, notifying the Acquisition Section when a missing issue is out of print or a third claim for missing issues goes unanswered, notifying the Bindery when all issues of a volume have been received so that the issues can be picked up from the shelves for binding, sending unrequested non-cataloged titles to the Acquisition Section for possible selection for the collection, and sending pre-selected new titles and changes of issuing offices and titles to the catalogers. The mail sorting is handled by one assistant, and the work

outlined above by six assistants and half-time of one reviser.

The current files are in constant use not only by the periodical checkers, but also by the permanent serial records assistants who answer all requests for information on holdings, by Acquisition Section assistants for searching purposes, and by Division of Bibliography assistants for information of value in the preparation of new bibliographies. The permanent serial records assistants alone account for about 2000 uses a month. With the visible files, every time someone other than the checker consults the file, the complete file is turned away from the checker to face the user.

Prior to the beginning of the experiment, investigations into all types of new equipment, both library and business, were carried on. These revealed nothing that would supply the answer to all of the problems. In thinking back over older types of equipment, it seemed that the catalog tray to hold standard 3 × 5 cards furnished the best possibilities and the experiment was begun with one of these trays. The result of one day's checking, using the cards set up in the 3 × 5 tray for half the day and the visible files for the other half, were so promising that all of one checker's entries were removed from the visible files and put into 3 × 5 trays. Careful production records were kept and improvement in efficiency was so marked that a special case and trays were designed and built to carry on the experiment.

In planning the new cabinet and trays, certain objectives were kept in mind. The trays had to be easily available to users of the records other than the checker, with minimum disturbance to the checker. They had to be within normal arm's reach, and light in weight to lessen fatigue. The shelves had to be so spaced that the checker could replace easily those trays which had been withdrawn and so that there would be no binding of guide cards. The experimental cabinet was built to measure 20½ inches high, and is open both front and back so that trays can be withdrawn from either side. The shelves are spaced 3¾ inches apart, the lowest shelf is two inches above the desk, and there are no vertical separations on the shelves. The trays have an inside capacity of 16 inches and are 5 inches wide and 3¼ inches deep, with label holders and pulls on the back and front of each tray. There are five trays on a shelf, and four shelves in the cabinet. The front, back and sides of each tray are made of light weight wood and the bottom is composition board.

The checking records were transferred from the standard catalog trays to the new trays after each set of cards for a title was hinged with plastic. It was found that 15 trays, leaving adequate space for expansion in each tray, replaced 108 visible file trays, or that one of the new trays, allowing space for future growth, replaces 7.2 visible file trays. It was decided to use a plastic to hinge each set of cards because paper clips catch on other cards, staples prevent cards from being opened flat for certain routines, and tapes would present problems in transferring cards to the permanent serial record. Third cut guide cards were inserted at frequent intervals to make for fast location of a specific title. The cards face the checker and the tray labels on that side are white, those on the back are orange.

The results of the first checker's work were reported in detail before the Serials Round Table of the American Library Association on June 30, 1952,[1] and at that time, it was stressed that further experimentation must go on before any final conclusions could be reached. Since that time, two other checkers have been assigned to the experimental file. One of these was a

[1] Shachtman, Bella E. "Simplification of Serial Records Work." *Serial Slants*, 3:6-13, July 1952.

fairly new checker, and the other was the most experienced checker in the section. Production records were available for each of the assistants for the time they had worked with visible files and similar statistics were kept while they worked with the experimental file. When each checker returned to work with the visible files, her production records on those files were kept for comparative purposes. Below are shown the comparative average production figures for each checker for a period of several months work with each kind of file. The third assistant to work with the 3 × 5 files has not yet begun working again with visible files and therefore no figures are available for her in the third category.

	Visible file	3 × 5 file	Visible file
1st checker	85%	109%	103%
2nd checker	95%	98%	99%
3rd checker	110%	118%	

The evidence shows that although there is a gain in production in each case when the 3 × 5 files were used, over the production in using the visible files, a comparable drop is not shown upon returning to use of the visible files, and in fact, production may continue to show an upward trend. The old management principle seems to be proven anew—motivation and training play the most important part in producing high worker efficiency regardless of the equipment used. The motivation in this experiment came from the enthusiasm of each checker in participating in the experiment and her interest in the results. Further motivation came from each checker's desire to stop working with visible files from which she has to pull out and return so many trays in comparison to the number worked with in the experimental file. Training is a continuous operation in the section and went on in all cases before, during and after each assistant's period of work with the new file.

Although the production of the checkers will not increase as much as was indicated by the figures of the first checker, the Department Library plans to discontinue the use of visible files for the Current Serial Record. Space is one important factor. Twenty visible files comprising ten units will be replaced by six 3 × 5 units; eight desks by six. Aside from gaining space, more important advantages expected are:

1. Handling of fewer trays by the checker, thereby lessening fatigue.
2. Accessibility of most of the file to the checker while part of the file is being used by another assistant.
3. Easy insertion of new titles with no need for shifting.
4. Use of guide cards at ¼-½ inch intervals will avoid the necessity of preparing an insert for each title.
5. Informational letters may be interfiled with the cards temporarily.
6. Better morale by improvement in the appearance of the section.

The experimental file has shown that the new cabinets will not have to be as large as the original model. It is planned to have five additional cases built, each to be 16 inches in height and to contain 15 trays on three shelves, making the trays even more easily available to the checker than they are at present. Except for height, the new cabinets will be the same as the experimental cabinet. The trays will also be the same but will be cut in length to an inside capacity of 14 inches.

A relatively inexperienced assistant carried on the first part of the experiment and showed a substantial increase in production when using the 3 × 5 file. This rate of increase did not hold true for the most experienced checker who was apparently handling about as many pieces as one person can handle, regardless of the type of equipment used. It is noteworthy that without regard to the length of experience each

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most disappeared and is no longer a serious problem. Difficulties still exist in science and technology but are gradually being overcome through centralization of general science materials, provision of a centralized service by librarians trained in science, provision of laboratory or office libraries where necessary and/or the consolidation of science collections into two large groupings contiguous to the departments served.

Future developments in science and in library techniques indicate that even more centralization will take place and that the rapid transmission of printed material through new electronic devices will eliminate the necessity for outlying groups of library materials. The use of microcards, microprint and microfilm will make the central collections more compact. The overlapping of all branches of knowledge, the unitary principle of science, will eventually make large separate collections on the periphery of the campus both inefficient and antiquated.

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checker had prior to the experiment, each one showed an increase in production when she changed to the 3 × 5 file, and in not a single case was there a decrease. Since the 3 × 5 files are considerably cheaper and require less space than the visible files, it seems that the burden of proof of efficiency should be placed on the more expensive method rather than on the more economical method. This is equally true of tub files, rotary files and other types of serial record files. According to this experiment, the 3 × 5 file is at least as efficient, when properly applied, as any other type of file, offers a number of advantages over other types of files, and costs a great deal less in money, space, and human effort. Until there is clear evidence that other types of files can supply advantages which would justify their additional cost and space, the USDA Library will use old-fashioned 3 × 5 card files for its Current Serial Records.