

Junli Diao

# Cataloging backlogs

## Perennials, seaweeds, or others?

Cataloging backlogs are a perennial part of cataloging work, but they differ from library to library. In some libraries, cataloging backlogs are temporary imbalances between the fast growth of new acquisitions and shrinking of cataloging personnel and support. In other libraries, cataloging backlogs are simply those materials that go beyond the regular scope of bibliographical management. No matter the type of cataloging backlog, they are bulky, substantial, and visible. Some might even use them as an advantage to contribute to their job security. However, when cataloging backlogs sneak into a library's bibliographic system and build up there for years, they are not perennials any more. They become like seaweeds in the ocean: you know they are there, and you can even have a glance at their tips provocatively bouncing along with the waves; but if you really want to grasp them and dig out their roots, you will have to dive in deep.

A metaphor is a metaphor, but it gives some sense of the real situation that I was facing when I started my substitute position as the head of cataloging at the York College Library-City University of New York (CUNY) in March 2016. At first, I was deeply impressed by how neat and well-organized the cataloging department was: newly arrived, shelf-ready books from Coutts were resting on the shelves, awaiting processing; nice, shining book trucks were lined up next to boxes of toner supplies; well-preserved shelf-list files lined the hallway and those golden handles on the drawers glimmered when sunlight flicked through the blinds and illuminated the whole room. Only occasionally could I hear the rhythm of therapeutic keystrokes from a keyboard break the tranquility.

The profound serenity around me almost deceived my eyes, and my vision of work here nearly went astray. Soon after I started cataloging music scores, I realized there were serious cataloging backlogs—not on the shelves or in boxes, but in the bibliographic database. A miscalculation in barcode printing a decade or more ago resulted in thousands of books carrying duplicate barcodes. Some barcodes were overlaid by white labels as a simple remedy, resulting in the problem being covered up, but not fixed. Some older books that had migrated from the old NOTIS system had spine labels with call numbers, but did not have corresponding bibliographical records or barcodes in the system, which forced student workers at the circulation desk to generate brief records on the spot when users needed to check them out.

What's worse, there was no way for catalogers to trace when those books were returned to the library so that the brief records could be promptly updated. Once shelved again, those books remain inactive and inaccessible to the public through the online catalog.

System migrations, retrospective conversions, and personnel shortages could all be factors contributing to the creation and growth of backlogs. But is there any point for me to ask why they happened instead of how they should be solved? While stories of cataloging backlogs might be different, the solutions largely remain the same: employ more staff and/or change the workflow. So what's next became simple, but not easy. Kevin

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Collins, systems librarian at the CUNY Central Office of Library Services, generated a new list of 2,112 duplicate barcodes, and Njoki Kinyatti, chief librarian, assigned Lesly Previl, CUNY office assistant, to specifically work with me on the cleanup. Previl went to the stacks and pulled out books according to the list. I fixed item records and upgraded bibliographical records in the system. After resolving the duplicate barcodes, we gathered our strength to pick out those books without barcodes, which requires ongoing attention to every book on the shelves.

Backlogs are creatures of darkness and silhouettes of the amorphous. They thrive in the valley of ignorance and hesitation but vanish in the heights of exposing and trying. Without dealing with all sorts of backlogs, my career as a cataloging librarian would not be complete. Without working in this substitute position, I would not know what backlogs I myself had in the chambers of my heart.

CUNY librarians have held faculty status since 1946 and faculty ranks since 1965.<sup>1</sup> At CUNY, all faculty are evaluated in three areas: teaching, service, and scholarship. At York, all librarians participate in active reference and information literacy programs. Thus, in addition to regular cataloging work, the cataloging librarian is required to undertake the responsibilities of providing reference services and teaching information literacy classes.

With almost zero experience in these areas, I wasn't sure whether I had ignored them in the past because I thought I couldn't manage to do them, or if I could do them but failed to explore my potential. Ever since I started my library school education, I fell into the trap of negative stereotypes about cataloging librarians: they are not "people persons," and they can't do good reference work or teach. Apparently I wasn't immune from these influences and, subconsciously, I inclined to fit myself within this "model." In my first article, "Passion of a young cataloger," I even wrote cynically "I don't want to spend my time sitting at the front desk and being asked ten times a day the same question, 'Where is the library's washroom?'"

When the York College Library offered me a chance to make a difference, I took it and tried. More than half a year passed, and one day I received an email from a professor saying that my name would be added to the acknowledg-

ments of her forthcoming book because I had helped her find the full citation information needed by the publisher—and at that moment, I realized I cleaned up some backlogs hiding in the corner of my heart. When I was stopped by a student on the stairs who told me how much he appreciated my information literacy class, which had helped him successfully complete his assignments, I realized I had already gotten away from the dark shadow that had attempted to hunt me down.

Defeating the backlogs in my heart is no different from fighting against cataloging backlogs: one relies on help from outside to change from within. What's next is simple, but not easy. At York library, there are senior colleagues who do an excellent job in reference work and information literacy, for instance John Drobnicki, Di Su, and Scott Sheidlower. I observed their work both at the reference desk and in the classroom. Christina Miller, head of reference, arranged for me to work at the reference desk with a partner until I felt comfortable with myself and confident in what I was doing. I explored these new territories and made adjustments. Although I went through some turbulence and a little thunder, they were necessary and valuable assets leading me toward a magnificent view of a rainbow.

The cleanup of backlogs in my work is just a regular task, but cleaning up backlogs in the chambers of my heart is a path of contemplation and reflection, which might possibly point to a new direction of understanding myself. If work is an extension of our minds and bodies, then taking care of backlogs in our work is actually an act of diagnosing the neglected areas of our souls. An intimate and daring action vis-à-vis backlogs offers us ways to explore our souls that are otherwise blocked by what we assume right and proper, and by who we are told we are and told what we can (and cannot) do. Backlogs are the opportunities to make room for new possibilities to grow. Possibility produces hope. Hope calls for action. Action will not let us down.

## Note

1. John A. Drobnicki, "CUNY librarians and faculty status: Past, present, and future," *Urban Library Journal* 20(1). 