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Article

# Evolving with the FDLP: A Case Study on Managing the Shift to Digital Government Documents

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**Abstract:** The Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) has long been a cornerstone of public access to government information, with depository libraries serving as custodians of essential physical documents. However, the FDLP's recent transition to an all-online distribution model—abruptly ending the regular delivery of physical materials to most depository libraries—has fundamentally altered the landscape. This shift raises the urgent and pressing question: What is the point of a depository program that no longer sends out deposits? This paper explores depository libraries' profound identity crisis as they grapple with a mission that is increasingly difficult to define without the tangible materials that once anchored their role. Through a detailed case study, we examine how one library is navigating this transition, exploring the future of FDLP participation and exploring the broader implications for public access and the role of libraries in a digital-first era.

**Keywords:** government documents; digitization; digital government; libraries; library deselection

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## Evolving with the FDLP: A Case Study on Managing the Shift to Digital Government Documents

The Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) has long been the backbone of public access to government information, with physical documents flowing steadily into libraries nationwide. However, the FDLP has recently completed its three-decade-long shift to an all-online distribution model, halting most distribution of physical print materials to its participating libraries. (Matheson, 2023)

For institutions that have, for decades, served as custodians of physical government documents, this decision raises existential questions: What does it mean to be a government depository library when there are no more tangible documents being deposited? What is the point of a government depository program that no longer sends deposits? Finally, how can libraries shift to providing digital documents in a way that fulfills their mission? The implications are profound, as libraries must now reconcile with a reality in which they are expected to maintain their status and function without the physical materials that once defined them.

The transition to an online-first model represents more than just a change in how information is disseminated; it marks a fundamental shift in the relationship between depository libraries and the government. For many years, depository libraries have taken pride in their role as custodians of physical government documents, with their identity closely tied to the stewardship of these tangible materials. However, the government's decision to adopt a digital-only format forces depository libraries to reassess their mission and purpose in this evolving landscape. As the emphasis shifts away from physical collections, these libraries must redefine what it means to fulfill their role without the tangible artifacts that once formed the core of their work. Although the transition has been gradual, the abrupt end of physical shipments has fundamentally changed the nature of our work in ways that are both profound and career-changing.

## Moving Forward

While the impact of this shift is significant, it also presents a clear need for practical action. One of the most pressing concerns for libraries is the need for comprehensive guidance or detailed protocols from the FDLP on effectively managing this transition. Without clear instructions, libraries are left to navigate this new landscape independently, developing their own strategies to ensure that they continue to fulfill their mission of providing public access to government information. In January 2022, the FDLP published guidelines for transitioning to digital selections, which are helpful. But they were created to opt *into* a digital framework, and now, with the recent changes, there is no way to opt *out*.

At the Armacost Library, our past processes heavily relied on the regular influx of physical documents, which were cataloged, shelved, and made accessible to the public in our government documents section. Since government documents have been available online for decades, and our university community generally prefers online access to resources, we have completed some weeding projects to replace print serials with online. This paper will outline our latest efforts, describe how our approach has shifted in the past year, and explain our future needs and plans.

## The Armacost Library

The Armacost Library at the University of Redlands, a private, non-profit liberal arts institution in Southern California, has been a selective federal depository library since 1933. As of 2012, the library's Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) selections and holdings covered basic legislative, administrative, and judicial documents, as well as volumes from the full range of federal subject areas. In addition to print materials, the library has holdings in maps, CD-ROMs, microfiche, and audiovisual formats. We also inherited several extended historical periodical runs from the California College Library in the first few decades of the twentieth century, even before our joining the FDLP. Government documents (GD) are shelved separately by SuDocs classification, while the general collection is shelved by the Library of Congress (LC) Classification. The GD collection is located at the "end" of the library, on the fourth floor, and as of 2012, the rest of the collection was housed on the second, third, and fourth floors.

## Background and Rationale

Academic libraries, traditionally repositories of vast physical collections, make regular adjustments in response to changing user demands and institutional priorities. We face unique pressures to change space and shift collections due to evolving educational needs, technological advancements, and institutional demands (Walters, 2018; Way, 2012). As our patrons increasingly prioritize digital resources and remote access, libraries have adapted by reallocating physical space previously dedicated to print collections to accommodate collaborative learning environments, technology labs, and study areas that support modern pedagogical methods and student preferences (Ilako, 2020; Kennan et al., 2014; Panigrahi & Sangal, 2023; Williams et al., 2022). Furthermore, these changes are often driven by the university's need to maximize the utility of available space in response to fluctuating student enrollment, interdisciplinary research requirements, and strategic goals (Owusu-Ansah & Takyi, 2017). Consequently, academic libraries must balance the preservation of traditional resources with the integration of innovative services, all while responding to administrative directives and the diverse needs of their patrons.

The increasing availability of GD online has significantly influenced this shift. Since the GPO Electronic Information Access Enhancement Act came into effect in 1993, there has been a trend toward digitizing government publications, making them more accessible to a broader audience. This trend has accelerated in recent years, driven by advancements in digital technology, the growing demand for remote access to information, and the cost savings associated with online publishing. As early as 2013, the National Academy of Public Administration reported that approximately 97% of all federal documents were born digital (Administration (NAPA) et al., 2013).

Recently, the FDLP has been transitioning towards a predominantly digital model, with fewer physical copies being distributed across the nation (*Evolution of a Digital Federal Depository Library*

*Program: A Transition Timeline*, 2023). These changes are motivated primarily by cost considerations and the goal of enhancing public access to government information. As the FDLDP moves almost all publications online, selective FDLDP libraries must reassess their collections and adapt to this new paradigm.

The literature on library collection management and document withdrawal has extensively covered general strategies for deaccessioning physical materials and transitioning to digital resources. Much excellent work has been done on moving print collections to offsite repositories, high-density shelving, and collaborative print-sharing networks. However, there is a notable gap regarding specific strategies for the systematic withdrawal of GD in academic libraries. This is particularly true in the context of recent changes in federal publication practices that have significantly reduced the number of printed government books, shifting towards digitally created formats. This gap is critical, as academic libraries must navigate the complexities of ensuring long-term access, authenticity, and preservation of digital GD while also managing physical space effectively. Our project addresses this gap by proposing a clear, replicable process for strategically withdrawing physical copies. In addition, it examines the broader implications of the federal changes relating to library space utilization and collection management, providing a much-needed framework for other academic libraries facing similar challenges.

## Objectives

Our primary objective at Armacost was to optimize library space by withdrawing GD which had become available online. This process involved a careful evaluation of the GD collection to identify documents that could be replaced with digital versions. Doing so freed up valuable space within the library which has been repurposed to meet other institutional needs.

While the library had been planning to undertake a significant shift of the collection since 2015, it was waiting for the completion of several weeding projects and sufficient staffing. The GD department planned to participate by removing many long runs of serials and most of our census documents. The space gained from withdrawing physical GD helped us expand the general collection, reclassify and relocate reference materials, and create a more aesthetically pleasing environment for studying. The reorganization effort was designed to align with modern pedagogical methods and support our patrons' evolving educational and research needs.

One of the underlying reasons for the weeding process in our library is to maintain an orderly and aesthetically pleasing appearance on the shelves. Cluttered shelves filled with outdated or rarely used documents can create frustration and hinder efficient research. Moreover, a collection overflowing with seemingly obsolete materials can give the impression that the library is a repository for old and irrelevant resources. By systematically withdrawing GD that are available online and no longer in high demand, we ensure that the physical collection is relevant and accessible.

## Methodology

### *Criteria for Withdrawal*

The criteria used to determine which GD to withdraw centered on ensuring that the public retains access to necessary information. Since the items do not circulate, there are no usage statistics to consult; however, we reviewed reference transactions to ensure we were not inadvertently withdrawing items that had recently been used in a reference interview. By applying the following criteria, we aimed to balance the immediate spatial needs of the library with the long-term accessibility and integrity of government information, ensuring a smooth transition to a more digitally oriented collection.

We prioritized the withdrawal of long runs of serials to increase efficiency in the process. By focusing on serials, we freed up significant space more quickly, streamlining the reorganization of the general collection.

Next, we evaluated the availability of these documents online through the official Catalog of U.S. Government Publications (CGP). We did not consider databases such as Hathi Trust,



HeinOnline, or Internet Archive. But if no online version was available, the librarian considered withdrawing the periodical regardless. The factors considered in this decision were usage, relevance to the curriculum and research activity, and physical condition.

Finally, the rules for withdrawal in California's selective repositories stipulate that an item must be at least five years old before it can be considered for withdrawal. However, permission to withdraw the item is still required, even if an online version is available. Therefore, as we identified items and serials for withdrawal, they were included in an official spreadsheet for submission to the California State Library. Although the current guidelines do not provide any exceptions for census documents, in previous editions we were able to remove many census series without permission (*Disposal List Instructions - California State Library*, 2018).

After the California State Library claims copies or confirms it has no claims, we must offer the publications to the local FDL P Listserv, CalDoc-L. If no claims are made within 15 days, we are free to withdraw the items, which are marked out and discarded, and catalog holdings are removed.

## Withdrawal Process

Instead of working from printed shelf lists or removing items to a staging area, the GD Librarian used a mobile device to photograph GD, which she identified for possible withdrawal, along with digital notes for holdings. The research to determine their eligibility for withdrawal was conducted later by referring to these photos. Once confirmed, the items were added to the withdrawal list.

The decision was made to keep the items on the shelf in their normal location, as the withdrawal process as a whole typically takes approximately two months to complete, and there is insufficient temporary shelving to accommodate all items during this period. Additionally, keeping items on the shelves until the final stage prevents large gaps of empty space, which can be visually unappealing and may attract unwanted attention from other departments. We have kept "withdrawn" GD remaining on the shelves for years after being approved for withdrawal. This approach helps minimize disruption and guarantees that the library maintains a polished and organized look during periods of transition.

One of the library's long-term objectives is to remove some shelving units and replace them with seating and study areas. However, achieving this goal requires assistance from the university facilities maintenance department, which is also experiencing resource constraints. Despite these challenges, creating more seating and study areas remains a priority to enhance the library's role as a conducive environment for student learning and engagement.

## Transitioning Online

As part of our broader strategy to modernize and optimize our collection management, we had already begun transitioning our depository collection to a more digital-focused model. We recognized that many print volumes, particularly reference materials, were better suited to an online format due to their frequent updates and the ease of access digital versions provide. Accordingly, we started to disable print deliveries in the Depository Selection Information Management System (DSIMS) and replace them with online options whenever possible. This gradual shift aligned with the official guidelines provided by the FDL P (*Transitioning Depository Collection to an All Online Depository* | FDL P, n.d.).

Regarding the discoverability of digital GD, we selected the following collections in our discovery service, Primo: "*Freely Accessible Government Documents*," "*US Government Documents*," and FRASER publications. However, "*US Government Documents*" contains over 250,000 titles, causing too much noise in search results, and has therefore been disabled. A new approach to improving the discoverability of online GD is outlined below under Future Plans.

### *Reorganization Plan*

The space freed up by withdrawing and digitizing GD was repurposed to shift and, in some cases, reclassify our general collection, reference materials, and periodicals. Our colleagues in Public

Services developed a detailed plan to shift these sections. We started from the end ranges where the GD were located and worked backward, systematically providing additional space for the general collection. This minimized disruption and allowed for a smooth transition of materials.

The general collection was expanded by reclassifying some reference materials and integrating them into the general collection, ensuring that frequently used resources are more readily available to patrons. The remaining reference materials were relocated to a lower-traffic area with ample seating, natural light, and quiet study space. Periodicals were similarly weeded and relocated to lower-traffic areas, acknowledging that there will be very few additions to that section in the future.

## Results

In total, we have received permission to withdraw a total of 220 titles. This figure does not include census documents and prior editions of the U.S. Code, which did not require formal permission for withdrawal. The space reclaimed through these withdrawals has enabled us to shift a portion of the general collection, specifically the QH-SB sections, to the 4th floor, reallocating approximately 288 linear meters of shelving. Once the remaining volumes are removed, we anticipate freeing up an additional 244 linear meters. This reallocation of space not only optimizes our physical resources, but also enhances the accessibility and organization of the general collection, ultimately improving the overall user experience.

It's important to note that the project described in this case study took place before the FDLP's recent shift to an all-digital distribution model. At that time, our library was already proactively transitioning some of our government document collections to digital formats. We understood the practical advantages of digital formats and were committed to ensuring our collections remained relevant and accessible to our patrons. However, despite our willingness to embrace this digital evolution, the recent and more abrupt shift to a completely digital model has raised new concerns. While we acknowledge the efficiencies gained, we grapple with the loss of tangible government documents and the implications this has for our identity as a depository library. The transition has forced us to reconsider our role and the balance between embracing digital progress and preserving the historical and symbolic value of physical collections.

## Staffing Challenges and Their Impact on Library Services and Collections

Changes and understaffing in all areas of the Armacost Library—professional, paraprofessional, and student employment—have frequently halted the project over the years. Modern staffing challenges in libraries, such as budget constraints, hiring freezes, and the increasing need for specialized skills, significantly impact the ability to maintain consistent and high-quality services (Heady et al., 2020). The turnover rates in both professional and paraprofessional positions often result in gaps in institutional knowledge and disruptions in ongoing projects (Michalak & Rysavy, 2023). Student employment, which many libraries rely on for support, is also subject to fluctuations based on budgets, academic schedules, and availability.

As mentioned above, the items scheduled for withdrawal were left in their designated places on the shelf until final approval to remove them was obtained. This approach proved to be advantageous in terms of time management, as it minimized the time spent rearranging books. It also proved to be essential due to the unpredictable staffing levels, allowing for greater flexibility in executing the project. This method ensured that despite the staffing challenges, progress could be made gradually, without compromising the quality of work or the organization of the collection.

## Future Plans

We have identified several areas within our GD collection that require further attention to optimize their utility and organization. First, it is imperative to review the FDLP lists, Core and Core+ (formerly called Academic Core) to ensure that all essential materials are properly cataloged and accessible. These will be activated in our discovery service, Primo, and we will consider creating Primo Collections or LibGuides for them, as well (Hall, 2024; Mazzia & Chan, 2022).

In addition, we need to review our electronic GD resources in Primo. We initially selected a wide array of government titles, but it would be beneficial to curate this collection more effectively. Without proper curation, the excess GD selections can lead to larger result sets, increasing confusion, reducing search accuracy, and leading to information overload (Riermaier et al., 2021; Shahrzadi et al., 2024).

The Maps Room has been identified as an ideal location to convert into study rooms, and the majority of our maps are GD. While maps are withdrawn in the same manner as regular items, they are more time-consuming to process. Therefore, careful consideration and planning are required to repurpose this space effectively.

Microfiche are not a priority for removal, as these materials take up little physical space. They can be discarded unless they are part of a long run or have specific relevance to California, in which case they must follow standard withdrawal procedures. Each microfiche must be reviewed individually to determine its relevance. Fortunately, those that do not meet the state's preservation criteria can skip the standard withdrawal process.

Lastly, integrating GD digital finding aids with online legal and business resources in our LibGuides will enhance accessibility and usability, providing a more cohesive and comprehensive resource for our patrons (Cheney, 2006). Moreover, the university has approved a new Data Science minor, and the library can promote official government data sources in our outreach to these students and faculty.

By addressing these areas, we can improve the organization and functionality of our GD collection, ensuring it meets the evolving needs of our users.

## Concerns

The transition to digital GD introduces a range of concerns that, while paralleling issues inherent in electronic documents and archives, also present unique challenges (Brazier, 2013; Drmacich et al., 2022; Slater, 2001; Sproles & Clemons, 2009). Despite the FDLP's commitment to its mandate, the program is not immune to potential failures in online preservation. Some of the challenges that are unique to preserving digital GD are examined below.

### "The Man" vs the Machine

A significant and concerning risk associated with born-digital GD is the potential for government entities to remove or otherwise cause the disappearance of information deemed "inconvenient" or politically sensitive. This risk highlights the importance of stringent measures to safeguard the integrity and availability of government records (Althaus & Leetaru, 2008; Mart, 2005). The ease with which digital records can be modified or deleted exacerbates this risk, making it crucial to implement protections against such actions.

Furthermore, ongoing government funding plays a crucial role in the preservation of born-digital documents. Consistent and adequate funding is necessary to support the technological infrastructure and human resources required for effective digital preservation. Without sustained financial support, efforts to maintain and preserve digital records may falter, jeopardizing the longevity and accessibility of these important documents.

Strategic partnerships with organizations committed to digital preservation play a significant role in the overall preservation ecosystem. The Government Publishing Office (GPO) has established several such partnerships to enhance the preservation and accessibility of government publications (FDLP, 2021). These partnerships involve organizations that commit to preserving GD in their libraries permanently, ensuring they are accessible to the public for free. In addition, some organizations contribute digital content to the GPO for inclusion in GovInfo, the government's official digital repository. These collaborations broaden the scope and redundancy of digital preservation initiatives, promoting a cooperative effort to protect public information.

## Print Backups vs Digital Backups

One of the key advantages of the print distribution model was the inherent redundancy it provided: multiple copies of GD were distributed across the country, ensuring that these materials were preserved and accessible, even if one or more copies were lost or damaged. This decentralized approach created a natural safeguard against the loss of information.

As the FDLP transitions to a digital program, the need for a strong digital preservation strategy becomes increasingly important. This includes ensuring digital backups, redundancy, and protection against technological failures or cyber threats. While the FDLP should develop comprehensive strategies to replicate or back up digital government documents across multiple locations, participating libraries can also take on this role independently.

Another consideration is the physical space being exchanged for digital space. Libraries could be asked to contribute server space or other resources to host digital backups, thereby distributing both the responsibility and the cost of preserving these essential government documents across the network of depository libraries.

## Fugitive Publications

The issue of "fugitive" publications poses a significant challenge for born-digital government documents (GD). These are documents not captured or made accessible through official channels like the FDLP, often due to agencies publishing outside traditional pathways. This can happen due to a lack of awareness or adherence to dissemination requirements, the use of agency-specific websites that are not systematically archived, or the publication of documents in formats that are not easily captured by archiving systems. The transient nature of websites and the frequent restructuring of government web content exacerbate this problem, leading to the potential loss of valuable information. (Baldwin, 2003; Jacobs, 2017)

To address these challenges, the FDLP and its libraries must adopt a multifaceted approach that includes proactively identifying and archiving fugitive documents, using persistent identifiers like PURLs to maintain stable access, and fostering collaborations with government agencies and other libraries to ensure a more comprehensive capture of government publications. Additionally, advocating for better archiving practices and standardized dissemination formats within government agencies is essential to reduce the likelihood of documents becoming fugitive. By integrating these strategies, libraries can help preserve the integrity and accessibility of government information in a digital environment.

## Future Studies

Future studies should explore strategies for academic libraries to strengthen partnerships with the FDLP to enhance the preservation and accessibility of digital GD. Collaborative efforts could focus on developing shared best practices for digital archiving, metadata management, and ensuring the long-term integrity of born-digital materials. In addition, outreach initiatives should be investigated to improve user engagement with digital GD, such as creating targeted information literacy programs and integrating digital documents more effectively into the library's discovery tools and research guides. Finally, there should be an examination of the potential implications and outcomes for libraries considering a departure from the FDLP program. This research would need to assess the risks and benefits of this approach, such as its impact on access to government information and the resources required to maintain a robust independent digital collection. Understanding these factors will be crucial for libraries as they navigate their roles in a digital-first information landscape.

## Conclusion

Our experience as a case study illustrates that while the transition away from physical documents has been challenging, it has also driven a necessary evolution. The shift to an all-digital Federal Depository Library Program (FDLP) requires us to reassess our role as depository libraries



in the absence of the tangible materials that once defined our purpose. This change is not merely logistical; it reflects a broader transformation in the values and practices that shape our responsibilities as stewards of public information.

The Armacost Library's strategic initiative to withdraw and transition government documents to digital formats reflects broader trends within academic libraries towards modernization and optimized space utilization. By carefully evaluating digital availability and aligning our withdrawals with institutional needs, we have maintained a relevant and accessible collection while also repurposing valuable space to enhance the overall learning environment.

As we continue to refine our digital collection and improve discoverability and access, the library is well-positioned to meet the future demands of our patrons. The transition to an all-online depository reflects not only a necessary adaptation to technological changes but also a forward-looking approach that will sustain our relevance and utility for years to come.

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