



A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO WRITING A COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT POLICY

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Little has been written recently concerning collection development policies for special collections. In literature directed more broadly to the field of librarianship, recent articles in favor of having written policies have been mostly hortatory in nature, asserting that the benefits are obvious.¹ In the most vehement dissenting article, “Wasted Words: The Written Collection Development Policy and the Academic Library,” Richard Snow challenges the assumption that written collection development policies are necessary and worthwhile:

Along with a commitment to service and resistance to censorship, the necessity of the written collection development policy is part of the creed of librarianship. Unfortunately, as with many creeds, this one is honored as much in the breach as the observance. . . . One difficulty is that writing the policy involves one of the librarian’s most challenging and confusing tasks: collection evaluation. . . . Evaluation, however, because of its difficulty, expense, and continuous nature, discourages writing a useful policy. . . . Another weakness is the written policy’s inflexibility, its unresponsiveness to changes that occur in the college or university. . . . Inflexibility and waste are the written policy’s biggest flaws, but several other problems detract from its usefulness. . . . When budgets for new materials cease to exist, or become so paltry as to be meaningless, poli-

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cies resemble pointless exercises, a costly endeavor to build a world of fantasy.... The written policy represents a significant investment in its creation and maintenance.... If the document is neglected, it loses the questionable value that led to its creation in the first place. Unless a policy is almost continuously updated to reflect the changes at a college or university, the document retains only its archival value, becoming the occupant of the last folder in the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet.²

Although using “archival” as a disparaging term may raise hackles among special collections librarians, Snow’s arguments are well-founded in many regards. Collection evaluation is a daunting and time-consuming task that can be of little practical value if funds are limited to remedy identified lacunae. Moreover, tinkering endlessly with the specifics of a written policy that describes, more or less accurately, what a collection already comprises is obviously a waste of time, if it provides no practical guidance for further development. However, Snow errs in focusing on these self-defeating aspects of written collection development policies, while discounting their potential usefulness as tools for management, planning, and development activities.

In the special collections setting, a written collection development policy may not be essential to good professional practice, but it certainly can be helpful. The process of articulating a policy in written form helps to clarify in the mind of the writer policy that was previously acted upon but unwritten. It provides a forum for limited and specific conversations with faculty members (or the comparable constituency in a non-academic setting) that can be fruitful in getting them to articulate specific needs without putting the curator in a promise-making mode concerning acquisitions.

A written policy can also provide a basis for institutional continuity over time and through personnel changes. Having an honest statement of a predecessor’s collecting policy and intentions can be valuable to a new curator looking for the quickest ways into learning and continuing to build a collection.

Although a written collection development policy that is out of date due to changing budgets and priorities may be useless, a policy that is regularly reviewed and updated can help the curator weather the vicissitudes of budget woes—and even the joys of budget windfalls—and steer a steadier course despite the changing winds of institutional priorities, all to the long-term benefit of the collection. Curators with inadequate or non-existent acquisitions budgets can still make use of a written collection development policy as a tool in dealing with donors. No gift is free. Space and staff to process and care for materials are important constraints as well.

A collection development policy that is “archived” in the back of the bottom drawer of the filing cabinet may be easily ignored, but one that is negotiated and discussed with the library administration can be a powerful asset in protecting a curator’s decisions and decision-making prerogative. Conversely, when dealing with the administration, faculty (or other constituents), dealers, donors, or other insti-

tutions, it is very hard to claim prior administrative support for an unarticulated collection development policy.

For all these reasons, writing a collection development policy is not necessarily a waste of words. The key to creating a workable policy lies in preparing one that is specific enough to be useful without being cumbersome to prepare; is honest and realistic in regard to monetary and other resources; lays out a practical guide for allotting those resources; and is easily updated. The most useful policy will also cover not only the basics—collection strengths and weaknesses, and guidelines for new acquisitions—but also a variety of topics and issues that will make it useful as a tool for dealing with administration, patrons, donors, and other institutions.

An excellent model for such a document was proposed in 1995 by Faye Phillips in her book *Local History Collections in Libraries*.³ She lays out a simple template that works well for local history collections but can also be adapted easily to accommodate collections of various types.

- I. Statement of purpose of the institution and/or collection
- II. Types of programs supported by the collection
 - A. Research
 - B. Exhibits
 - C. Community outreach
 - D. Publications
 - E. Others (specify)
- III. Clientele served by the collection
 - A. Scholars and other professionals
 - B. Graduate students
 - C. Undergraduates
 - D. General public
 - E. Other (specify)
- IV. Priorities and limitations of the collection
 - A. Present identified strengths
 - B. Present collecting level
 - C. Present identified weaknesses
 - D. Desired level of collection to meet program needs and collecting guidelines
 - E. Geographic areas collected
 - F. Chronological periods collected
 - G. Subject areas collected
 - H. Languages collected
 - I. Forms of materials collected
 - J. Exclusions
- V. Cooperative agreements affecting the collecting policy
- VI. Resource sharing policy

VII. Deaccessioning policy

VIII. Procedures affecting the collecting policy

IX. Procedures for reviewing the policy and its implementation⁴

The statement of purpose should be a succinct declaration that locates and explains the role of the specific collection within the larger institutional context. Articulating the types of programs supported can be especially important when dealing with private foundations and other potential funding sources. "Programs" is meant in the most general sense and can include statements regarding the importance and necessity of preservation and security, as well as research and outreach activities.

If the collection development policy is to be useful, it is essential that the information given under "Priorities and limitations" be as honest as the writer can make it. The language can be diplomatic, but the content must be accurate. If no in-depth evaluation of the collection has been done, perceptions of the strength and weaknesses of the collection can still be stated with the appropriate caveats, for even a record of these perceptions places subsequent acquisitions decisions in context.

In section IV. D., the collecting guidelines will not necessarily lead to achieving desired levels of collecting when funds are limited, but should move the collection in the preferred direction. The guidelines can be stated in terms of absolutes that may not be reached if, as in the case of a local history collection, the desired level of collecting is to acquire everything pertaining to the locale; or they may express percentages of expenditures to be made from available funds if a collection has diverse aims to support diverse programs.

Finally, anyone wishing to create a collection development policy may find that the "cookbook" approach encouraged by using the template will help to get one past the fear of the blank page that can induce unproductive preoccupation with the great imponderables of collection development. Examples of how the template has been applied are available at <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/colldev/policies/mccoll.html>, <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/colldev/policies/louisianalowmis.html>, and <http://www.lib.lsu.edu/colldev/policies/rarecollection.html>. A written collection development policy will not solve all the problems of curatorial decision-making, but it can be one more useful device in the curator's kit of management tools.

Notes

1. For example, Bonita Bryant, "Collection Development Policies in Medium-Sized Academic Libraries," *Collection Building* 2-3 (1980/81): 6-26; Mary J. Bostic, "A Written Collection Development Policy: To have or Have Not," *Collection Management* 10 (1988): 90; and Karen Svenningsson and Lois Cherepon, "Revisiting Library Mission Statements in the Era of Technology," *Collection Building* 17:1 (1998) 16-19.

2. Richard Snow, "Wasted Words: The Written Collection Development Policy and the Academic Library," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 22:3 (May 1996): 191-93.

3. Faye Phillips, *Local History Collections in Libraries* (Englewood, Colo.: Libraries Unlimited, 1995), 11-12.

4. This template has been very slightly modified from the version originally published. In the original, point IV., D. lacks "and collecting guidelines" and point VIII. reads "Procedures enforcing the collecting policy."