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No time for Collection Development Policies

by **Gary Geer** (Collection Development Librarian, University of South Carolina) <geer@sc.edu>


Collection Development policies are a long standing part of librarianship training. Many of us (of a certain age) were taught that policies are needed for accreditation or may be an institutional requirement, or they are needed to effectively guide collection building. Also, so the training went, a well-written policy could explain to library users the strengths of a collection or can serve to introduce a new librarian to collection work. But collection development is rarely taught as a separate course in library science programs. Most new librarians learn collection work on the job. So when presented with a policy that hasn't been updated in 15 years, what will the new librarian think about the importance of collection policies?

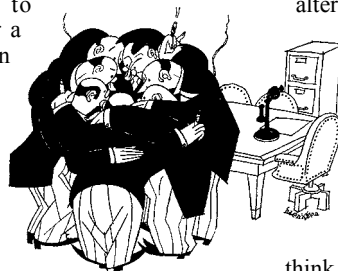
A lot has happened in the 16 years since I finished my first comprehensive collection

policy, and we are still in a period of great change and redefinition. **Blackwell Book Services** lists 342 recent books with some variation of the word "redefinition" in the title. It seems everything is being redefined: the self, success, Ireland, literacy, leadership, feminism, democracy, beauty, and gender. Since I first wrote this, **Blackwell** itself has been "redefined." Trying to identify collection needs for a policy is pretty difficult when the needs have been redefined before the bytes are fixed to your hard drive.

The articles in this special report section describe some challenges to the relevance of the collection policy. **Margaret Foote**

and **Marna Hostetler's** pieces describe how libraries are letting users have more of a voice in what is collected. **Cindy Craig** and **Matthew Landau** each describe challenges for new librarians faced with collection policy and assessment assignments. **Patrick Scott** critiques the conventional Special Collections policy of "building to strength" and recommends some alternative approaches.

I hope these articles will lead to more thought and discussion of policies, and perhaps to a re-imagined kind of policy. But if you unearth a long out-of-date policy tucked away in a file drawer, perhaps the best thing to do is put it back and think about it for awhile. 



Collection Assessment: A Dubious Investment

by **Cindy Craig** (Social Sciences Librarian, Wichita State University) <cindy.craig@wichita.edu>

Does your academic library still evaluate subject collections? Do you have several collection development policies that haven't been updated since the mid-1980s? Do you refer to any policies when you order books? Your answer to these questions may help determine if collection assessments and policy revisions are still worthwhile.

A considerable number of articles have been written about collection assessments and policies, some in *Against the Grain*. Overall, the authors are supportive of the process. According to **Anne Langley**,¹ collection assessments provide librarians with information that can be used for "budget requests, external reviews, promotional materials, etc."² In order for librarians to gain a "strong visceral connection"³ to their subject collections, she recommends visiting the stacks to get an overall impression.

Paul Streby⁴ felt his first assessment project was a success (and a way to make his mark in his tenure-track position). However, he admits that the **WLN Conspectus** may not be the best measurement tool for electronic resources. For instance, should free online journals linked from a library's Website be



counted as part of the permanent collection? The **Conspectus** does not address such ambiguous issues. **Streby** also found the numerical standards in a former edition of the **Conspectus** to be too vague to properly measure the depth of a collection. (He was able to develop his own statistical measure, though.)

One author who is decidedly not a fan of collection development policies is **Richard Snow**.⁵ In his article "Wasted Words," **Snow** blasts the assessment process as being confusing, subjective, and prone to librarian bias. He criticizes collection development policies for becoming outdated as soon as they are written and for being out of step with actual practice.

Before I share my opinion of assessing collections and revising policies in an academic library, I want to detail for you my personal experience with the process.

I undertook my first collection evaluation and policy revision in 2007, during my first year as a tenure-track librarian. The project was part of a department-wide undertaking to revise all subject policies. The goal was for each subject librarian to revise one policy per year in their subject areas. This project was one of my professional goals for the year.

I was to revise the subject policy for the criminal justice collection. The policy was written in 1979 and had not been revised since then. The last assessment report was done in 1981.

According to our collection development webpage, our policies were to serve as: guides to library collections and resources; descriptions of academic interests and programmatic needs; indicators of collection priorities, strengths, weaknesses, and past collecting practices; planning documents for future collecting; and useful tools in resource-sharing and in cooperative ventures with other libraries.⁶

Since several librarians were new on the tenure track that year, this would be the first policy revision for us. We received instruction from tenured librarians about the **WLN Conspectus** method, as well as ways to gather information for our evaluations. During the workshop, we were advised to use at least three evaluation measures. One measure was to survey our subject faculty about their preferences for library materials and services. The preferred survey format was several pages long and asked about teaching and research interests, emerging trends, peer institutions, preferred materials formats (e.g., textbooks, online journals), and what subject areas were considered "core."

I sent the survey to ten criminal justice faculty and received three completed responses. I was disappointed in the poor response rate. Perhaps the survey was too long or contained confusing questions. One section asked faculty to rate a series of criminal justice subjects on a

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