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ATG SPECIAL REPORTS

Collection Development Section — Guest Editor, Gary Geer

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 But if you unearth a long out-of-date policy tucked away in a file drawer, perhaps the best thing to do is put it back and think about it for awhile.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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scale of one to five (one being most important and five being least important). The categories were derived from LC call number headings, resulting in awkward phrases like "Police — Detectives — Constabulary." At any rate, the responses fit my expectations, such as a desire for more online full-text access to current journals. Also, the respondents asked for more materials to support their individual research interests. One professor suggested a book series about situational crime prevention, which was her main area of research. I felt I could have easily gleaned much of this information from online faculty bios.

For the second measure, I compared holdings of criminal justice materials to standard lists. I compared journal holdings to the serials source list from **Criminal Justice Abstracts**. Our libraries subscribed to 68% of the journals on the list, many in electronic format. I compared holdings of criminal justice books to the list from *The Best Books for Academic Libraries – Social Sciences*.⁷ (Unfortunately, the 2002 edition was the most recent one I had available). I was pleased that 75% of the recommended books were in the collection. Also, the list checking revealed some surprising gaps in the areas of terrorism, gangs, and capital punishment.

I had hoped to find a subject-specific bibliography to compare with library holdings. However, the most recent list of criminal justice books I could find was published in the early 1980's. I felt I needed to strengthen my evaluation, so I looked at the 1981 evaluation for ideas. It referred to a study by **David Fabianic**⁸ that ranked 37 criminal justice journals "high," "medium," or "low" in terms of scholarship quality and readership. The rankings were determined by a survey of law enforcement specialists and scholars. The journal titles were then compared to **WSU Libraries** holdings. Fortunately, most of the highest-ranked journals were in the collection, and most of the lowest ranked ones were not. I decided to do a new comparison and found that the same held true in 2007. Even better, almost all of the available journals were in electronic format. I constructed a detailed chart comparing the findings from 1981 and 2007.

After assembling all of my findings, including the fancy chart, it was time to state my conclusions about the criminal justice collection. My conclusions were generally positive about **WSU Libraries**' holdings. For instance, subscribing to 68% of the journals listed in **Criminal Justice Abstracts** seemed like a good number to me. However, I had no idea if that percentage was considered low, high, or in-between. I found it difficult to make concrete recommendations. Many of my points included the phrase "more books may be needed in this subject area."

Next, it was time to revise the collection development policy. Since this was my first time writing a subject policy, I looked at ones written by my colleagues for guidance. Although the writing style varied from librarian to librarian, much of the content was the same. I could summarize several of these policies, in

subjects as diverse as business, art and design, and biology, thus: "This collection supports bachelors and masters programs; contains books, journals, and databases; has a growing number of online resources; has few non-scholarly works and textbooks; focuses on the U.S. (especially Kansas) in the current time period; and contains mostly English-language materials published in the U.S."

The most difficult part of writing the new policy was assigning collecting-level codes to about twenty criminal justice subject areas, broken down by LC class. I had to determine the present collecting level and the desired collecting level of each area. I did not calculate the acquisitions commitment or the preservation commitment of each subject area, since those measures were optional. I could only make educated guesses about how extensive the collections were. I gave almost all of the subject areas a "C1" (Advanced Study Level) rating, since the criminal justice department offered bachelors and masters degrees (but no doctorates). Even after all this effort, the process was frustratingly subjective.

I have since completed an evaluation and policy revision for our ethnic studies collection and found the process to be as vague as the first time. I once again had to pull teeth to get faculty to respond to a survey, even though I shortened it to ten questions and sent it through email. My revised policies are posted on the library's Website, though a reader would have to be vigilant to find them.⁹ My assessment reports are in a notebook somewhere with those written by other librarians.

Now that I have been through this process, I do feel more of a visceral connection to these subject collections. It was good to learn that **WSU Libraries**' holdings are strong in comparison to those of peer institutions. It was also worthwhile to discover some collection gaps so I could adjust my book purchasing accordingly.

However, considering the amount of work that I put into these evaluations and policy revisions, I feel the value is small. For one thing, my revised policies have not significantly changed the way I purchase books or videos. The library uses an approval plan for many of our monograph purchases. The approval plan draws on carefully-established profiles that are rarely changed. This fits with **Snow's** argument that the approval plan is the same thing as a collection development policy, except that it "translates intellectual endeavor into practical action."¹⁰ I have never referred to my collection development policies when making purchases from direct funds. Instead, I usually select from lists of currently published titles. I also go by recommendations from faculty and students and from bibliographies of recommended titles.

Another issue bothered me about this project. If these evaluations and revisions were so important, why had the criminal justice policy not been updated since 1979? For that matter, why were so many of the other policies out-of-date? One colleague confided that she had several outdated subject policies, but, since she had more pressing issues to deal with, was keeping this fact to herself.

For a librarian on the tenure-track, complet-

ing such a large task as a collection assessment and a policy revision is supposedly a good thing to have in one's tenure file. Nonetheless, being non-tenured faculty means more than merely accepting the status quo of librarianship. Assessments and policies based on the **Conspectus** are still widely accepted in our field. However, they pre-date the mass availability of affordable personal computers with Internet access.

Also, I have my doubts that such a report would score many points with a university-level tenure and promotion committee. Teaching faculty have little understanding of what librarians do as it is. The considerable time and effort put into such projects (especially if the expectation is one evaluation and revision per year) would be better spent on research and publication. Getting published in an academic journal is bound to get more respect from scholars outside the field of librarianship, compared with an inscrutable document that is never published and has dubious value.

This current climate of budget cuts and staffing shortages is an opportunity for librarians to reflect on what activities are the most important for meeting the changing needs of our library users. It is harder than ever to justify the time and effort put into this type of collection assessment and policy revision. Our efforts may be better spent on outreach, instruction, and evaluating the use of expensive online resources. 🌿

Endnotes

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