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## **Donor Relations**

By Melissa Mannon

Our last newsletter discussed how we could explain the importance of records to their creators so that we can encourage them to properly care for their materials. This season we focus on how to encourage those creators to donate their valuable collections or share their information with our repositories. We discuss donations in the context of collaborative collection development to encourage appropriate collections to be donated to the proper repositories.

### **Considering Collections**

When archivists are active collectors, they seek materials that will fill gaps in their collection and educate the records' owners about their importance and their role in the documentation of local history. When word gets out that your repository is seeking family treasures, you will likely attract more donors.

When considering whether to accept a donation, use your collection development policy and those of your sister institutions as guides. When offered a collection that is better suited for a sister repository an institution is usually best-served to steer that donor to the other repository. This can be done gently, explaining why the collection is better suited for the other repository and how it will get more attention and use if it is donated to the appropriate place. Do not turn a donor away without suggesting alternative repositories for his donation. To build-up relationships with sister institutions, you may even help the potential donor contact the appropriate people at another repository. Of course, it is important for the archivist to gauge a donor's reaction based on personalities to accomplish a proper referral. It can be difficult to turn away a donor who insists that his collection belongs at your repository. Your willingness to refer donors elsewhere will be reciprocated by other cooperative repositories, reducing competition and making for stronger collections.

It is not to the benefit of the archives or history professions for an institution to accept a collection because of competitiveness, desire for monetary gain, or publicity, if the collection clearly falls outside the realm of the institution's focus. This is an ethical issue with which all archivists must struggle. If your institution is in need of monetary support and the collection offered is attached to a donor who can and is willing to provide that support, it would be extremely difficult to turn the donor away. Balance your needs with those of the profession and its researchers.

Politics often come into play as well when your parent organization may insist that you accept a collection to appease a donor, when you know that the collection would be more appropriately housed elsewhere. This can be especially true at universities seeking monetary donations from wealthy patrons who wish to house their personal records in your Archives. Make sure that your administrative is very familiar with your collection development policy. You may even ask the president of your institution, a trustee, or another higher up to sit in on collection development meetings or participate on a collections committee. At the very least, provide administrators with copies of your collection development policy and set up a meeting to discuss what the policy means for your institution. Just giving a document without some kind of follow-up will almost ensure that it will not be read. Keep lines of communication as open as possible.

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Accepting inappropriate items will not increase a museum's stature in the community. It will only perpetuate its reputation as a repository for everything unwanted in an attic or cellar. Such a museum wastes time and money on the care of artifacts which are outside its collection scope, sacrifices valuable storage space for redundant objects, and feels obligated to exhibit unrelated artifacts in a show.

From: MJ Davis. "Just Say No! Nicely" *Common Wealth* (Winter 1996-97) Bay State Historical League: 2

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Consider providing brochures to potential donors. The Society of American Archivists offers brochures describing the benefits a donor receives from donating their records to a repository.

See: <http://www.archivists.org/publications/donating-familyrecs.asp>