

Collection Development Revisited

by Melissa Mannon

In my opinion, the linchpin of any repository housing archival records is the collection development policy. Of course, it is important to have a well-written mission statement and goals. A long-range plan is also a must for steering an organization. But the collection development policy is the backbone of what we do. The policy defines who we are in great detail. Our writing of the policy allows us to take an in-depth look at our role and the direction we want to take our institution. People looking at our collection development policy can understand our sense of purpose. Researchers know if we are the right repository for their search. Donors know if we are the right place to deposit

their records. The policy formalizes our sense of being and development, so there are fewer misunderstandings. With a policy, everyone within an institution works with a shared sense of purpose and a realistic sense of identity.

Ideally, an organization will write its policy with a thorough understanding of their own institution and with a good understanding of the collecting roles of “sister institutions.” As a consultant, I always emphasize the importance of collaboration. The collection development policy is no exception, and indeed, forming collaborative collection development

plans can be the impetus for further collaborative projects.

In short, the goal of cooperative collection development is to enable an institution to establish a specific focus that does not compete with others, and to eliminate competitiveness among collecting institutions. Cooperation enables institutions to fill a specific documentation gap so that the history of a particular subject is adequately preserved.

Many managers of repositories believe that just having a vague idea of what their repository should be collecting is good enough to move ahead with acquisitions. They feel

When writing your collection development policy, consider the following:

- If you are starting with a collection, develop a thorough understanding of your holdings. Perform a survey of your collections seeking to understand your strengths and weaknesses. If you do not have a collection, fully define (on paper!) what you would like to collect and why.
- Using your survey or outline as a guide, list what collections you have, where your gaps are, what you would like to have and why.
- Do research and ask questions to determine what other local collectors have. Identify institutions that are similar to yours and set out to understand their collecting goals.
- Define a niche for your self in the collecting community. Be sure to specify how your collection is similar to others and how it differs. Identify your strengths and weakness AND make this information available to others.
- When writing your collection development policy, make it specific enough so that you understand what you are all about, but broad enough to make room for unexpected treasures.
- Your policy should include: mission statement, collection scope, collecting goals and objectives with acquisition priorities, likely audience, statement of authority (who approves collections,) “sister institutions”

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that their focus is obvious enough that a general idea of their collecting strategy is all that is required. However, committing specific strategies to paper ensures that the obvious is obvious to everyone. It also helps us realize what may not be so apparent and what needs to be more clearly defined.

One well-known way of "collecting" documents in many institutions is when they are dropped on the front stoop of the repository (literally and figuratively.) Without planning, organizations often accept any material offered to them. Fearful that if they turn away potential materials the documents will be destroyed,

organizations sometimes accept inappropriate items. Sometimes organizations are equally fearful that they will not get further donations if they turn away any. Other times, without knowing the extent of available materials, institutions request items from those in their circle or from well-known characters in town, taking whatever is given by them and not looking beyond that which is offered. A working collection development policy should eliminate these problems and fears.

To develop valuable collections that do not leave gaps in the historical record, an archivist must be an active participant in collecting resources that are interpretive of society rather than just a passive

collector of any documents offered. The collection development policy will kick your institution into high gear, refining your focus and increasing your efficiency.

For more on collection development, see our Winter 2001-2002 issue online at: <http://www.archivesinfo.com/newletter/Winter2001.pdf>

Need some tools to help you get started? See my *Forms Manual for Archives Management* available through Amazon.com



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For more information about her work and for access to past issues of this newsletter see www.archivesinfo.com

"You [the record keepers] contribute value to your communities by listening well to people's concerns, assuring that adequate records are kept of history-making events and of the acts spoken by history-makers, and doing that in a way that allows you to be effective partners for history-makers as they re-member the past and invent the future."

- Chauncey Bell. *Organizational Change and the Role of the Archivist*. Keynote Speech at California Society of Archivists meeting. Pasadena California: 1998.

Begin your collaboration by forming a solid historical foundation in your community. The initial tangible steps for a successful archives collaborative should focus first on collecting. These steps include:

- Create a team to create an historic timeline of your town's history. Make first steps to decide what should be documented about your town's history based on this document.
- Figure out who has what through archival surveys. Determine what documentation about your history is missing from repositories.
- Create Collection Development Policies. Determine who should be collecting what.
- Reach out to those outside of repositories who may hold desirable records. Seek to garner new materials from citizens, local associations, and other record creators. Aim to fill documentation gaps.