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# Honesty is the Best Policy: Collection Development Policy Revisions in an Era of Change

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## Honesty is the Best Policy: Collection Development Policy Revisions in an Era of Change

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As I prepared to write this column, my last as the contributing author for collection development for *TSLL*, I revisited both the journey I have taken over the last two years, and the writing I have completed as a result of it. Thinking about each collection development project, I reviewed my own observations, methods and guiding principles. In both the lessons I have learned and the ways in which I have tried to convey those lessons, I have taken one vital element of my work for granted. I have not highlighted the vitally important task of collection development policy revision.

One of the most important functions of the regular review of a collection development policy is the opportunity to revisit the fundamentals of collection development. Regardless of whether we are public, private or academic entities, the basic considerations in creating and maintaining a collection development policy remain the same. We start with the library mission. Whom do we serve, and why? Knowing the focus and purpose of our service is important, but translating that knowledge into timely and relevant policies that inform our decisions is absolutely critical to excellence in service-oriented librarianship. And there is an even greater value in asking these questions as our organizations experience rapid and pervasive change. When the answers to these questions change, our policies should take those changes into account. What we do and how we do it should be derived from whom we serve and why. When one changes, it is incumbent on us to reconsider the other.

Policy revisions also provide an opportunity to review legacy practices in our organizations. “Why are we doing this?”—can be a powerful question in times of change. Reviewing the rationale behind our policies and practices gives us an opportunity to transition away from decisions and methods that don’t meet our needs toward other practices that are more responsive to our most important constituencies, our users. Moreover, in times of increased constraints on space and resources, our greatest assets will be our creativity and flexibility in finding new ways to achieve our objectives. What better way to reevaluate the way we develop our collections than to revisit the guidelines we have created for that work?

Beyond changes in the organizational mission, structure and resources we have at our disposal, we also find ourselves in a time of rapid change in the way that information is gathered, stored and shared. While we are each keenly aware of the changes taking place around us, there are few guideposts for translating some of those changes into concrete guidelines for a new era of collection development. For example, some law school faculty have begun to take part in new publishing initiatives designed to re-envision the way in which law school casebooks are written, sold and accessed. E-casebook projects like CALI’s eLangdell<sup>1</sup> have begun to reach a wider audience, and as such they require new ways of thinking. Existing models of collecting faculty publications primarily focus on the physical information containers that hold faculty writing. Most academic libraries have clear directions for how faculty authored print monographs or article reprints should be handled. But how should we treat a chapter in an e-casebook? The chapter could be printed if there are no copyright restrictions, but is that the best option? The answer lies in review of the existing collection development policy, with an eye toward the mission and purpose of the library and attention both to the changes at hand and those that are likely to follow.

Another change that impacts public, private and academic libraries alike is the slow but steady move toward the authentication of online sources for primary legal materials. The AALL Government Relations Committee has been committed to the cause of increasing free public access to authenticated primary authorities in digital format for a number of years, and it remains one of the stated goals in the most current iteration of the committee’s action plan.<sup>2</sup>

As those striving for freely available authenticated government information find success, those of us charged with the collection and dissemination of that information should reevaluate what we will collect and how it is provided to our users. Once a publication is both official and authenticated online, how much of our limited resources should we spend to maintain a duplicative print set of the material in our collections? What if our most limited resource is space rather than funding? And what if the resource in question is still not official when accessed online? The answers will vary from library to library, but the questions are critically important to ask.

A further fundamental element of our work guided by the collection development policy is weeding, or deaccessioning of materials. Some of the sagest advice I have been given to date with respect to this endeavor is to constantly strive to remove materials from the library with the same level of thoughtfulness and care that I give to the addition of new materials. In

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fact, weeding some collections requires an even more acute attitude of reflection and consideration than the addition of new items based on the fragile, fleeting or unique nature of the collections. The policies that guide these decisions must be as carefully crafted and regularly reviewed as those that direct new acquisitions.

What I present here is not so much a call to arms or action as it is a call to reflection. We make our best decisions when we have given time and consideration to our guiding principles, then let those principles help to steer our course. As I move into a new chapter of my professional career, this is one of the essential lessons I will carry with me. The policies I help craft must mirror and complement the people my library serves, including both the reason and ways in which we serve them. At the same time, they must be realistic and forward-looking, taking into account the resources at our disposal and the changes in our future. To continue the good work in which we are already engaged, we must look honestly at each of these things. Ultimately, this honesty will guide us in crafting the best policies.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.cali.org/elangdell>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.aallnet.org/main-menu/Leadership-Governance/committee/actionplancmtes/2009-10/govrelations.pdf>

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