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Collection Development 2009: Making the Cut, part I

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While preparing to write my first collection development column, I sought advice from several colleagues and friends. I asked them which topics I should tackle and what kinds of policies and practices I should explore. I wanted to choose a topic that was timely, relevant and interesting, yet still reflected the knowledge and experience I have gained in my years as a librarian. Their responses were unanimous: write about what you know. This sage advice was just what I needed, and that's exactly what I plan to do throughout this series of articles.

If there is one aspect of collection development I know best at this moment, it is the art of developing the collection during a period of reduced acquisition budgets. Not only have we been working through this process in my own library, but I have also spent the last year talking to other librarians across the country about their experiences with this difficult task. Many of us are like the financial planners for our libraries who have seen our traditional models for maximizing growth for our valuable portfolio (our collections) tossed out the window by current economic conditions. We must now work collectively (pardon the pun) if we want to devise the best practices to protect the yield on our portfolio in these uncertain and difficult economic times. When I recommended that this year's Collection Development Roundtable at the AALL Annual Meeting focus on this issue, I was stunned at the number of enthusiastic and supportive responses I received. It has become abundantly clear to me that I am not the only collection development librarian grappling with this situation—not by a long shot.

I want to inaugurate this series of columns by talking about the beginning of my library's journey to balancing the highest standards of excellence in service with the challenges of achieving a sizeable reduction in expenditures. The Mabee Legal Information Center (MLIC) at the University of Tulsa has a collection of approximately 410,000 volumes and serves a law faculty of 38 and a student body of 416. We are part of a private university with a total student body of about 4,200. We have nine librarians who also teach and assume some administrative responsibilities, six permanent staff members, and a mix of temporary and student staff that, among other duties, help to cover our 113 hours of operation per week during the academic year. I provide these demographics to give you a sense of who we are so that you can have some organizational context as I describe the policies, practices and innovations that we are implementing. Over the next year, I hope to use this column to share not only the MLIC's efforts but also the suggestions and solutions communicated to me by other collection development librarians in academic law libraries. If ever there was a time to share our strategies for the greater good, now is certainly that time.

You might notice that I use the words "we" and "our" throughout my narrative. I cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of involving our entire team of librarians in this effort. Some of our librarians serve as selectors for particular subject areas in our collection. The overarching decisions we make about changes to our collection development practices have to become part of their decision-making process as well. Our librarians and staff members in technical services and interlibrary loan will also be impacted by the collection development decisions we make. Reference librarians have to be aware of the format changes that are taking place in some frequently-used reference sources, and their input is critical in the decision to retain or cut certain titles. As we set out on this journey together, I realized for the first time how truly interdependent each department of the library is.

After discovering that our budget would be decreased in the next fiscal year, and would likely decrease again in the following year, we formed a steering committee to do the detailed work of a title-by-title review of all continuations and electronic resources in our collection. The director, assistant director for reference and research, acquisitions librarian and I decided to meet weekly, summarizing the results of each meeting and disseminating those results to the rest of the librarians and technical services staff. The first and most critical task faced by this group involved organizational introspection. We had to ask questions that we had not examined in depth in recent fiscal years. Who are we as a law library? Whom do we serve and how do we provide that service? Are we advancing our mission? How can we assure that our process of making cancellations is as attentive, well-reasoned and thoughtful as our process of selecting new resources? With fewer resources to manage, the careful allocation of those precious resources would rest on our answers to those questions.

For guidance, we turned to our library mission statement. This carefully crafted document identifies the primary users of our facility and the most essential services we provide. No matter how many difficult questions we face, it is this core understanding of who we are and what we do that must guide our answers. I also spent some time reflecting on our existing collection development policy. I wanted to make sure that the elements of the policy were in line with our mission and

that we didn't need to revisit any major areas of the policy before beginning our work. Because our mission statement was thoroughly reviewed, revised and approved only a few years ago, we were able to glean a clear sense of purpose and direction from it. Additionally, our collection development policy undergoes a comprehensive review every year, so its provisions accurately reflect our current library practices. Together, these two documents provide us a basis for making well-reasoned and consistent decisions. Moreover, we can trace our decisions to stated policies, a fact that gives me a real sense of comfort when we face some of our more difficult choices.

Though my experiences come directly from my position in academic law librarianship, I think the basic principles of our approach to collection development in the face of a shrinking acquisitions budget can be applied in a number of settings. First, know your mission. Understand the most fundamental services your library offers and identify the groups or individuals to whom those services are provided. Second, review your existing policies. Whether you have a written collection development policy, a general policy and procedure manual or something less formal, evaluating the guiding principles of your collection development decisions can make the difficult choices ahead easier to handle. Third, think about which members of your staff need to be kept in the loop. For a smaller library like ours, keeping everyone in the loop is ideal. In larger organizations, it may be easier to work in small groups first or to maintain one primary contact in each department.

I want to close with one final recommendation. Don't go through this process alone. This isn't the first time library budgets have been reduced. It isn't the first time librarians have been asked to make difficult decisions about the development of their collections. Learn from the experiences of those around you. Ask questions—lots of them. If you are a solo librarian, use the AALL discussion lists or law-lib to connect with others in similar situations. Be ready to share ideas and be sure to take good notes. We are all in this together, and I may be calling you for advice soon.
