

The Grim Underpinnings of Collections Policies: “Your Mountain Is Waiting”

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Abstract

Many libraries continue to write and update collections policies and upload them to library websites for public consumption. It is assumed that these documents positively influence a variety of aspects of library work, such as building relevant collections, increasing patron understanding of library operations, and encouraging communication and cooperation within the librarian community. However, these policies may expose hidden agendas or even overt prejudice, either explicitly or implicitly. What less desirable qualities do library collections policies possess, and how are these grim underpinnings harmful to our patrons? A careful examination of three collections policies at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Canada, written or edited by the author in the past decade, reveals a need for closer scrutiny of the purpose, intent, and underlying messages conveyed when these documents are displayed to the public. The three policies in question are an overarching or main collections policy, a donations policy, and a specialized policy dedicated to collecting resources by, for, and about Indigenous peoples. This paper, based on a poster presented at Charleston 2022, will outline exactly whom collections policies are written for (other librarians), what their purpose is (justifying saying no to patrons), and what their most significant harm might be (perpetuating prejudice). Proposals for how the collections community can initiate change and improve upon the

traditional practice of engaging users via collections policies will be put forward.

Introduction

It is almost certain that collections librarians will be involved in writing or editing a collections policy at some point in their careers. It is helpful to establish and define exactly what is meant by a collections policy, followed by a brief note on how it is typically constructed. A collections policy is intended to be “a description of user needs, an overview of what is collected to meet those needs, and a detailed subject breakdown of the material regularly added to the collection” (Vickery, 2004, p. 337), essentially establishing the “ground rules” of collecting (Olaajo & Akewukereke, 2006, p. 1). In her seminal and highly cited monograph, Futas (1995) describes collections policy development in detail. This three-step process typically begins with a group of library staff designated to plan and investigate aspects of collections work that could potentially appear in the policy and to determine how the policy will be implemented—in other words, they are engaged in “planning the plan” (p. 5). After this step, it is crucial to gather information about the community affected by the plan, usually done in the form of a survey. The third and final part of the process is the actual writing of the document. Futas lists several vital components of a collections policy, such as mission statements, goals and objectives, information about selection criteria, special collections (if any), potential legal issues (including areas in which purchasing will not be sought), collection maintenance, consortia, and future revision. As library collections evolve, these sections may grow or change accordingly, and none is guaranteed to appear in all policies. What is fascinating, though, is that these general areas have hardly changed since Futas’s mid-1990s monograph.

Policies have been universally accepted and encouraged since their heyday in the late twentieth century. Before the 1970s, there was little need for policy writing when collections were fulsome, and library budgets were rarely under strain. The library literature addressing collections policies was fomented in the 1970s and

maintained a steady publication interest since then (Spohrer, 2003). What made it necessary for the large-scale creation of such documents from the 1970s onward? Scholars later discovered a correlation between the existence of collections policies and lean budgets. In one study, libraries without budgeting problems did not tend to have policies but those that did had “well-developed” ones (Snow, 1996, p. 191). However, much of the literature on policies maintains a positive spin, with only a handful of articles questioning their usefulness or desirability. In addition, many libraries still do not have collections policies (Hoffmann & Wood, 2005), calling into question their necessity. This poster narrative attempts to cast a realistic and questioning gaze upon the value of collections policies. What is their true purpose? Are they absolutely required in the twenty-first century? And, most critically, can any aspects of them cause harm or, at the very least, irritation to our patrons?

Areas of Concern

As a young librarian keen to make an impact at a newly established university (formerly a two-year college), I became engrossed in policymaking, writing the first draft of a donations policy, along with subject policies for anthropology and data services. In later years, I became involved in substantially editing the main collection development policy and writing the first draft of an Indigenous Resources Collections Policy. All of these were deemed valuable and necessary at the time to communicate our intentions to the university community (and, by extension, since they were published on our website, the academic library community). However, until recently, I had not engaged in critical thinking about policymaking within academic libraries and had never considered the implications.

Of chief concern was the writing process of the Indigenous Resources Collections Policy. This policy describes how the library aims “to guide library selectors and others with respect to the acquisition of works by Indigenous authors, artists, musicians, filmmakers, creators, and academics. It also guides the selection

of works about Indigenous peoples in Canada. In addition, this document is an effort to respond to the Canadian Federation of Library Associations Truth and Reconciliation Report and Recommendations relating to library collections” (“Purpose,” John L. Haar Library, 2018). One of the critical components of reconciliation is consultation; as Blair and Wong state, “non-consultive decision making” is harmful (2017, p. 5). In writing the first draft, I failed to consult with Indigenous leaders at the institution. Only after library colleagues added to and edited later editions was a draft shared with staff at the university’s Indigenous center and its board of Elders.

Looking back, it would have been preferable to consult with Indigenous stakeholders in the very earliest conceptual stages, when the idea to write a policy was first thought of (Garstad, 2022; Stift & Garstad, 2021). Asking several probing questions could have gotten to the heart of the matter. Is it necessary to create such a policy? What effect might it have? What is the underlying, genuine reason for such a policy and what is its intent? In addition, in some cases, it may also be essential to consider the cultural background of the policy writer. In Canadian history, most policies affecting Indigenous peoples were written by white settlers, many of which had deleterious effects on Indigenous cultures and peoples. For instance, earlier versions of the Indian Act had a detrimental impact on Indigenous women, stripping them of certain rights or causing them loss of status within their communities (Lenon, 2000). It is incumbent, then, on library staff to be self-aware of historical forces and cultural history, therefore being considerate of the connotations of writing policies. As a white settler writing a policy affecting works by Indigenous peoples, the concern is how the cultural group perceives this—is it an act of prejudice to create and enact policies written by a member of the dominant cultural group? Could I have inadvertently contributed to the harm perpetuated by such actions? Such soul-searching is now necessary with collections work, particularly written pieces intended for public consumption. While there is no definitive answer, self-awareness,

the ability to apologize, humility, and promises to restore relationships can be valuable tools in repairing questionable actions.

It is not only relationships with particular cultural groups that policy writers must be aware of but also those with public patrons. The collections policies of academic libraries can serve to advertise how the library wishes to relate to its patrons—and, if uploaded to a website, also indicate relationships with members of the public. None is more relevant to members of the public than the donations policy. At MacEwan, most donations are obtained by members of the public, followed by former students or faculty or members of other educational institutions. In a way, donor negotiations with these groups can be regarded as a form of community relations. Often, this has been the only mode of interaction with non-MacEwan patrons. However, since writing the first draft of the donations policy (now guidelines) in the early aughts and revising it several times, I have noted that more restrictive language has been utilized over time. For instance, in earlier iterations, textbooks less than two years old were considered potential donations but, in the latest guidelines, were not considered at all. One of the most common questions asked by donors is whether a tax receipt can be issued. In previous iterations of the policy, the library, in conjunction with the office responsible for fund development at the university level, offered tax receipts for donations valued at over \$1000. The most current guidelines stipulate that tax receipts will only be issued under exceptional and rare circumstances.

Most reflective of the narrowing of donor services is that unsolicited donations given to staff at the service desk are no longer accepted. All potential donors must supply a spreadsheet of titles (along with author, year, and ISBN), which significantly hampers the desirability of donating materials to the library, as this often proves to be an arduous task (especially for executors of wills, who often have short timelines). Due to these increasing restrictions over time, it is more common to reject donations than to accept them. In a way, such a restrictive policy becomes a “defensive tool . . . [that repels] additional demands on selectors’ time” (Vickery, 2004, p.

340). From an insider's perspective, I concur that Vickery's comment certainly applies—it takes too much staff time to (a) go through vast quantities of books in boxes or (b) systematically determine each title's monetary worth to produce a tax receipt. It is much easier to say no. But saying no undermines the opportunity to create and maintain relationships (for donors often contact the library with more materials later on) or for word to spread about the library's attitudes towards donors. Whether you like it or not, it will be well known within the local library community whether donations are considered at your institution or if you consistently reject them. If it is just not possible, though, through lack of support at the administrative level, staffing concerns, philosophical reasons, or another issue, it would be worth considering the removal of donations information from a library's website.

It makes sense to remove policies that are not truly adhered to from the library's website. But so, too, should older policies or those incorporating outdated language. In some instances, the language used may be harmful. Library policies typically are housed in hidden corners of websites that patrons rarely access. For example, at MacEwan, the unique page view count for the main collection development policy was only 102 for a period of one month in fall 2022—compared to a popular web page on finding databases, which reached a total of 8,620 unique page views for the same time period. It would appear that patrons are not as interested in viewing our policies as they are in other areas of our website.

It is also well known from the literature that public-facing policies are often out-of-date and inflexible. They cannot change in time to meet the demands of a changing university environment; for instance, fields of study “may be added or dropped without little warning” and, on occasion, with little communication with the library (Snow, 1996, p. 193). Policies can sit on a library's website for years without being updated (Geer, 2010). For instance, the Indigenous Collections Policy has not been updated since 2018 and requires changes or enhancements to language, which is constantly evolving. For example, in the current policy, one of the key areas

to collect is “community-based gray literature.” However, it is no longer acceptable to refer to such publications as “gray literature,” even though that term was more in practice five years ago. For policies addressing particular cultures, librarians must be aware of constantly changing language use norms. In addition, an older donations policy was live on the website for many years and contained information about tax receipts. There were many awkward conversations with donors when we revealed that issuing tax receipts was no longer a common practice, so they should “ignore” our policy.

When policies remain visible but are outdated, what does that say about their actual value? It indicates they have no value or clout and may even be “false advertising” to patrons. If they are considered an essential communication tool, as Frank and colleagues (1993) indicated, then outdated ones are “old news.” However, there are some solutions offered in the literature. Vickery offers one obvious solution: a collections policy should be reviewed continually (2004). Snow concurs, writing how regular revision is “vitally important” (2012, p. 6) and that when service ideals or mission statements change, the policies must be updated to reflect the new norms and challenges. So, too, may university policy-writing norms alter over time. At MacEwan, the word “policy” recently shifted to refer to those documents that should be overseen by the General Faculties Council (part of the governance structure at the university). Hence, the newly revised donations policy was altered to donations “guidelines” to ensure that the library could maintain control over its authorship without having to be approved by a more encompassing governing body. Not having as much red tape would ensure more regular updates. Regardless of whether the document is a policy or a guideline, it is generally agreed that it should be kept “alive” (Frank et al., 1993) with updated language. It would be preferable to revise individual policy sections instead of tackling the entire document, should that prove too onerous (Douglas, 2011). Perhaps committing to steadily revising sections containing

contentious or evolving information may make the updating process more palatable.

Leaving older policies online has ramifications for the institution, its users, and the library community in general. One of the most common practices when engaging in new policy writing is to search for similar policies online, borrowing language whenever possible—sometimes with permission and sometimes without. As a new librarian tasked with writing a donations policy, I sought out examples online and readily used choice phrases. Similarly, one of the first tasks I set out to do when writing the Indigenous Collections Policy was to determine if any other libraries also had one available—and, once a first draft was written, how ours compared. The danger is that copied phrases—or even whole sections—based on other policies that are “reproduced blindly” may result in a policy that has “little relevance to local conditions” (Vickery, 2004, p. 339). Finding out what the local concerns are is essential on a much deeper level, however, as “readers need to see themselves reflected in what they read” (Jachimiak, 2021, p. 187). This is especially true for libraries engaged in decolonizing their collection. It means “ensuring representation of all people and their perspectives across all points in history and literature” (Jachimiak, 2021, p. 187). But the people represented in the collection, and its emphases, will change based on geography, so it makes little sense to incorporate fragments from libraries’ policies in other geographical locations. On the other hand, once the policy is written and the danger of language borrowing has passed, it is helpful to look at the policies of nearby institutions, especially those of fellow consortial members. If it is known what libraries of close geographical proximity are collecting, then perhaps it is not necessary to collect in the same areas (Vickery, 2004). This can be especially helpful in an era of budget constraints (Jachimiak, 2021). It is more a case of *when* these policies are consulted in the writing process—not *if* they are at all.

What is undoubtedly evident is that language matters. In the case of collections policies, one of the concerns is the heavy use

of library jargon, much of which is reiterated and recast through borrowing language. Library jargon, or trade language, is consistently utilized in library policies (Spohrer, 2003). For instance, examining the main collections policy at MacEwan for library-specific language, would patrons understand such phrases as “demand-driven acquisitions” or “COUNTER-compliant,” or even words such as “deselection,” “monographs,” or “serials”? These are undoubtedly useful to librarians but perhaps not as much to patrons; in fact, it is acknowledged in the literature that this jargon is not comprehensible to most readers (Vickery, 2004). If a policy is meant to be available to the public and used as a potential communication tool, then the desirability of including such terms can be called into question.

Along with wording, the complexity and length of policies tend to increase over time (Vickery, 2004). In one iteration of the main collections policy at MacEwan, new sections on intellectual freedom and open access were added, and new areas of concern and investigation for the library were previously unaddressed. As the library community accepts new directions and incorporates hot topics and buzzwords, the danger is that policies like this will become infinitely long as librarians scramble to write supportive statements. One solution to the jargon problem is to create a collections procedures document intended for internal audiences only, allowing (and even encouraging) trade language.

Along with creating procedural documents to enhance and support public-facing policies, there are alternatives to collections policies that could be considered. There is a certain pressure to write and display policies, which could emanate from various sources, such as the profession, the institution, the library, or even colleagues. Even back in 1996, Snow suggested replacing a collections policy with the approval plan, as it is a detailed plan on what to acquire and what not to acquire—essentially what a collections policy purports to be—but, unlike the plan, it is more of a living document. At MacEwan, the approval plan is closely examined more often than the collections policies are rewritten, sometimes

even once a year for specific subject areas. In partnership with the vendor, changes are usually made the same day problems appear. Such swift change rarely occurs with written documentation within libraries. Suppose administrators or organizations insist that a collections policy is necessary. In that case, one solution is to include in the document a “broad statement of purpose and a flexible, continually-revised description of the library’s aims” (Vickery, 2004, p. 340). Another consideration, if policies are a must, is to regard them as archival documents or theoretical rather than practical (Snow, 1996). However, collections librarians should be willing to argue vociferously for adopting alternatives. Vickery (2004) writes that policies cannot address the real problems within libraries—that is, decreasing budgets amid increasing publications.

Conclusion

The literature and the library community are full of anecdotal evidence of the value of collections policies; both tend to take an overly optimistic bent toward them. However, with the responsibility of writing policies meant for public readership comes a new critical stance—redefining and rearticulating their usefulness. Since many of the papers cited here are from previous decades, it is incumbent upon collections librarians to examine why the issues surrounding collections policies have not changed. We are still grappling with the old problems, and they are seemingly unsolvable. Why do we deem collections policies to be necessary? Why do we place such professional pressure on ourselves to write them, as if, once written, we have “proven” ourselves as worthy collections stewards? It may be time for a change, a new direction, and time to think outside the box. That may mean looking to other library-related products, such as approval plans, as a replacement for outdated, potentially harmful documents. We must think deeply about the more significant connotations, the implications of policies published online, and the type of communication we want to engage with our patrons. We must acknowledge that language use has significant meaning and is key to a successful decolonization

process; much work on this is being done in libraries today. In the ever-changing library environment, questioning long-standing behaviors and practices will be vital to staying relevant to our patrons.

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