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Managing Archival Collections

Collaborative Collection Development

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As an archival repository, the most important tool your organization will create to promote cooperation with similar institutions is a collection development policy. Such policies enable Archives to focus their collecting goals and to define their role in the archival world. By understanding what others collect and identifying the collecting gaps, an institution can work together with others to achieve comprehensive documentation of history. This newsletter briefly discusses the purpose of a policy and describes how you can use the process of developing a policy to create collaborative partnerships with other organizations.

The Elements of a Policy

In addition to focusing your collection, a policy shows the museum board and public that collection development is thoughtful and properly managed. It allows everyone to understand the purpose of the collections and to work to achieve common goals. A clear policy helps you actively seek collections, turn down inappropriate donations, properly allocate funds to unique materials that don't duplicate others around the country, and work in a planned direction rather than evaluating individual collections on a case-by-case basis.

A collection development policy should include:

- A mission statement
- A definition of the scope of the collection— identifying the collection's current strengths and weaknesses and types of materials that do not fit within the collection scope
- A list of collecting goals and objectives—stating acquisition priorities including particular subjects, geographical regions, eras, types of materials (such as photographs, documents and other appropriate documents) - Be as specific as you can. If you are collecting records of a particular person, name the individual
- A list of types of researchers and programs - exhibitions or outreach - to be served by your collection
- A statement describing the authority responsible for acquiring and approving collections

- A description of similar collections held by your collecting partners to assist both those partners and the researchers trying to find them.

Creating Partnerships

“...sporadic, unplanned, competitive and overlapping manuscript collecting has led to the growth of poor collection of marginal value.”¹ The goal of cooperative collection development is to enable institutions to establish a specific focus in order that they may play a particular collecting role in the archival community. Cooperation enables institutions to fill a specific documentation gap so that the history of a particular subject is adequately preserved. Organizations that try to collect in the same areas can compete for collections and wind up with incomplete sources for research and program development. Without a policy for collecting, an institution will try to collect in too broad an area leaving gaps in their own collections and in the historical record. It is the archive repository’s responsibility to make sure no one is getting left out of history due to the absence of a collecting strategy.

Every collection overlaps with another. It is important to stay informed about others with similar collections so that you can avoid overlapping as much as possible. Meet with your colleagues to find out what your other institutions in your geographic region are collecting. If you have not already established some sort of collaborative group or network as discussed in our summer 2001 newsletter, developing your collection policy provides you the perfect opportunity to do so. Make contacts with government repositories, record agencies (businesses and universities), and special collections that you may not have considered as partners, but who may still be collecting similar records. Do some research to figure out what other organizations outside of your region are collecting. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (<http://lcweb.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/nucmc.html>) is a good starting source to determine what others are collecting in your focus area. Communicate with others around the country or around the world with similar collections so that you may work together to develop your collections, guide donors to more appropriate facilities, assist researchers, and perhaps even develop cooperative programs.

Work to develop a concept of a networked repository. If you are already collecting, consider your institution—what you have and what you think you would like to have. Ideally, policies should precede active collecting, but for an already established collection a formal collecting policy should be put in place if one does not already exist. Consider how your organization fits in with other similar collections and begin to define your niche in the network. One should expect some changes as a clear role is defined for the institution, but these changes will enable the organization to run more effectively through focused goals and strategies.

Suggested Reading on the Elements of a Collection Policy

American Archivist. Winter 1984 edition. Volume 47 number 1.

The American Archivist is the journal of the Society of American Archivists. It is released

quarterly and contains useful information for professional and archivists at diverse institutions and with diverse backgrounds. For more information about SAA visit <http://www.archivists.org>. Request back issues of the American Archivist through the interlibrary loan department at your local library.

(Quotation in “creating Partnerships” on the reserve page is from Faye Phillips. “Developing Collecting Policies for Manuscript Collections” in Winter 1984 issue of the American Archivist.)

American Association for State and Local History. Technical Report 1. “Current Thoughts on Collection Policy”

AASLH provides technical reports for all aspects of museum management. Not specifically aimed at archives repositories, this leaflet is useful for historical societies and other museums organizations.

To order their technical leaflets see: <http://www.aaslh.org/tlvideo.htm#technical2>

Bruce Dearstyne. Chapter 5 “Selection of Historical Records,” in *Managing Historical Records Programs: A Guide for Historical Agencies*. Walnut Creek, CA:Altamira Press, 2000.

This book is an excellent beginners’ source of information for everyone working with archives. It is available from AASLH and from major booksellers.