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Integrating Philosophy and Practice in the Management of Collection Development

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to describe the means by which one institution attempts to integrate theory and practice in collection development, so that the second is shaped by, but also informs the first, and so that goals are widely understood and pursued in a consistent manner. This is necessarily the a manager's perspective, and I have no doubt that despite what I hope is a good training program and much communication, there are elements here which would surprise some of our bibliographers and perhaps generate disagreement.

Which comes first, philosophy or practice? Do we sit in isolation, define the ideal, write it down, and then bend all our practices to conform to our *a priori* concepts of perfection? Or is the situation really the opposite, with our stated philosophy merely a *post hoc* codification of and rationale for long-standing practice? This important question deserves a candid answer.

I think that answer is "both." In my own case, I came to collection development with a strong bias towards seeing the university, the collections, and our services as integrated wholes. My research on interdisciplinary use strengthened that initial bias. I came in also with a high value on efficiency and intra-library cooperation, a prejudice towards readily shared (i.e., electronic) formats, and impatience with the semantic hair-splitting that is endemic in collection development Each of these perspectives shaped our practices. Obviously our practices were also formed by many years of history. I had been the head of collection development for about six years before we wrote our policies. This statement of philosophy is in large part an effort to make explicit the goals we were already pursuing, and so it is in part a mere codification of practice. Yet to the degree that those practices evolved from a particular philosophy, it also true that the egg came first. So take your pick.

What follows is the overview I wrote in 1995 for our collections policies. The entire policy is available at http://www.lib.vt.edu/Facilities/colldev/coll_dev_policies/CONTENTS.html. Each paragraph is numbered. Commentary with matching numbers occurs at the end of the

Integrating Philosophy and Practice in the Management of Collection Development,
Paul Metz, *Library Philosophy and Practice,* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Fall 1998)

1

statement, for those paragraphs about which I thought I had something non-obvious to add. By and large my comments will deal with the means by which we attempt to fulfill each stated philosophical goal. I thought about interleaving the commentaries with the text of the policy overview, but that would break up the organic nature and holistic view of the statement which, if it has any strength, is it.

The Goals of Collection Development at the Virginia Tech University Libraries

1. Collection development in the Virginia Tech University Libraries serves several purposes. Much the most significant of these is to satisfy the university's current needs for information resources in any format which will support its primary missions of teaching, research, and service. Our collection-building efforts reflect as nearly as possible the programmatic goals of Virginia Tech.[1]

2. Other goals shaping our collection development efforts are to build collections which will support in at least a basic way future university programs or areas of specialty; to furnish some basic support for the needs of the university's non-academic units; to provide some materials in nearly all areas of knowledge partly as a basis for users' self-education; and to serve as an information resource for other, primarily in-state, libraries with whom we enjoy partnerships.

3. Within the context of these goals, the two stars which guide our efforts are the academic relevance and the quality of the materials we seek to add to our collections.[3]

4. Each statement in this compilation describes our goals for a given subject collection. Each statement begins with a description of the academic program being served by a given subject collection, and then moves on to describe our collecting goals along several dimensions including subject, language, age of materials, and format. Important information about how we collect materials in a given discipline or how those materials are used is given in subsequent sections of each statement. The appendices to this handbook cover an assortment of concerns which cut across disciplinary boundaries, including statements about various formats or kinds of publications, some of the gathering plans which automatically bring us materials matching certain specifications, and other miscellaneous concerns such as censorship or the treatment of gifts.

5. Our collection-building efforts are organized by discipline and rely on the work of subject experts. It only makes sense for this handbook to follow the same organizing principle. However, this should not obscure a central principle: we are building *a collection*, not a conglomerate of balkanized *collections*. This commitment to a global view of our collections (whose use we know empirically to be highly interdisciplinary) has many implications in practice. Budgets are negotiated on an annual basis among bibliographers who try to achieve a shared sense of how collections are being used and where current needs are greatest. New serial subscriptions are decided on collectively, and serials are not canceled without broad review. Bibliographers in related areas communicate to make sure that gaps between collections are avoided, and that subject

Integrating Philosophy and Practice in the Management of Collection Development,
Paul Metz, *Library Philosophy and Practice,* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Fall 1998)

2

collections are built so as to support use both by specialized insiders and by patrons from related disciplines.5

6. The new technologies which are transforming collection development require that we take a particularly broad view of our work. It has been our experience that once a data base is acquired and made available for remote access, use comes from all over the university in ways which often cannot be predicted on a disciplinary basis. As we move aggressively to underwrite online access to a variety of data bases, it is necessary that our budgeting reflect a global view, as many such services require significant financial investments which ultimately cannot be attributed to single disciplines.6

7. Our collection building enterprise does not take place in a vacuum. Even leaving aside national or state commitments, we operate first within a university context. Requests for materials from faculty or other users are always welcome, and we have set up a variety of mechanisms to make it easy to make requests. The great majority of requests for individual books are honored. Although we are not able to honor as high a percentage of requests for acquisitions in other formats, most videos are purchased as a consequence of faculty requests, and most of our serial subscriptions have somewhere in their history a faculty request. Serials are not ordinarily canceled without a prior notification and call for comments to all departments. The interest and commentary of our user community is always welcome, and we encourage it.

8. We also build collections within a library context. Our significant investment in reference materials is heavily shaped by reference librarians. Decisions about new data bases are made in consultation with staff in reference and automation so that we can provide the most transparent and network accessible services possible with the fewest unique interfaces. Decisions about the purchase of materials or acceptance of gifts and about how materials should be treated physically or bibliographically are made in consultation with technical services staff and with an understanding that resources are finite.8

9. Finally, our collection building efforts take place within the context of existing collections. Building to our strengths while filling in the gaps of our collections are in a sense opposite goals, but both at least deserve and receive attention. Increasingly the work of collection development involves the management of existing collections, and our staff spend significant time on decisions about retention, storage, discard, physical treatment, and bibliographic control of our holdings. These decisions are generally informed by the same philosophical perspectives towards future collections which this handbook articulates.9

10. Everyone understands that the world of scholarly and scientific communication is undergoing a tumultuous change. Faculty and students alike expect to have current, authenticated, and easily manipulated information in textual, graphical, and audio-visual media available at their workstations. Sometimes these goals are compatible, and

Integrating Philosophy and Practice in the Management of Collection Development,
Paul Metz, *Library Philosophy and Practice,* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Fall 1998)

3

sometimes they are not. Publishers are undertaking radical programs which will in many cases bring information to users without the intermediation of libraries or other parties.

11. We find these changes exciting and are committed to making as many as possible of our resources available to our users from remote locations. We recognize that the delivery of modern information resources will require cooperation with other units on campus and that very often it will not be apparent to users whose work or whose dollars have made possible their successful research. We also recognize however that our resources will never be sufficient to acquire all the knowledge and information sources that Virginia Tech's programs require. 11

12. The unique role, the added value, of academic librarians has always been to bring together an understanding both of the publishing world and the resources it makes available with an understanding of the academic enterprise and the local institution, and then to acquire relevant materials and make them available in a cost-effective manner using the most powerful means available. The new technologies do not change this basic nexus of academic information, but rather help to extend our reach. They do not remove, although they do complicate in interesting ways, the basic philosophical issues we must encounter, and for that reason a handbook such as this is all the more necessary in a new information age.

13. The purpose of this manual is to describe and document the goals we seek to meet in collection development. For more detailed information about policies and procedures, readers are referred to the *Virginia Tech University Libraries Bibliographer's Manual.* Comments on this handbook are welcome at any time, and we would be glad to furnish any other information about collection development that our users may require.

Paul Metz, Principal Bibliographer, May 1995

Commentary: Goals 1, 3, 5, 6, 8-9, 11

1. Obviously we cannot support the programmatic missions and priorities of the university unless we understand them very well. Our commitment to the Collegiate Librarian model stands far above our other, more typical, efforts to ensure good campus-library communications. We have assigned one or more librarians to each college. Collegiate librarians function as branch librarians without branches, serving the needs of their faculty and student clients for instruction, advanced reference, collection-building, and some computer assistance. Collegiate librarians split their time between the colleges, where they have offices, and the library.

3. When the typical firm order is for a monograph about which nothing is known but the abbreviated cataloging record of an ABPR entry or a slip, both the academic relevance of publications and their quality are hard to assess. In training new bibliographers or talking to experienced ones, I frequently visit the topic of how one makes intelligent guesses in this area. The desire to get our arms around this topic in a semi-objective manner led me

and John Stemmer to conduct the research reported in, "A Reputational Study of Academic Publishers," *College & Research Libraries* 57 (May 1996): 234-47.

5. It is easier and more natural for us to think of our collections globally than it is for many other research libraries. We are younger as a research library than many of our peers, but more importantly we have far fewer branches (only Art & Architecture, Veterinary Medicine, and Geological Sciences on the main campus). Until the 1980's we did maintain separate departments, each with its own collections budget, head librarian, and reference desk, for humanities, social sciences, and sci/tech, but we have been more integrated since then. A slow but quite visible trend towards thinking of the libraries as a unity began as soon as those were merged. So far at least the Collegiate Librarian trend has not reintroduced negative centrifugal forces and competing loyalties, but that is a risk.

We know both experientially and empirically (see my *The Landscape of Literatures: Use of Subject Collections in a University Library*, Chicago: American Library Association, 1983) that the use of our collections is highly interdisciplinary. In order to maintain our emphasis on a global view this necessitates, we have fairly regular meetings of bibliographers. Major projects such as shelfload reduction are done as collection-wide jobs, with everyone involved and problems shared. New serials are approved in meetings that bring librarians together for shared commentary and discussion. Often a bibliographer will endorse another's recommended title on the grounds of anticipated use in his or her own area.

Our too-frequent serials cancellations are also treated as a group responsibility. Though individual bibliographers are given initial financial quotas for identifying possible cancellations, many cancellations are discussed as a group. The final percentage cut is not uniform among disciplines, but varies according to our priorities, perceived imbalances, and the amount of support for nominated titles expressed by any constituency, regardless of whether it is from the fund-coded discipline of the title (see my "Thirteen Steps to Avoiding Bad Luck in a Serials Cancellation Project," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 18 (May 1992): 76-82. Special groups are assigned to identify potential savings in reference serials and databases, which are a shared resource for librarians both in their reference role and as college-based specialists.

6. Although we code truly discipline-specific databases such as ERIC to their disciplinary funds, we pay for large general purpose resources such as Dow Jones, Lexis-Nexis, CARL Reveal, or Dialog's CIP program "off the top." We also recognize that the highly volatile information marketplace of the 90's requires a certain degree of opportunism. When Web of Science became available. we committed whatever funds we could bring together, regardless of their disciplinary source. Cancellation of a resource in one area that has become non-competitively priced does not necessarily mean that recovered funds will be spent in the same area.

Integrating Philosophy and Practice in the Management of Collection Development, Paul Metz, *Library Philosophy and Practice,* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Fall 1998)

5

8. This statement is largely self-explanatory. We have increasingly stressed that collection development cannot treat the technical services consequences of its decisions as what environmental economists would call an "externality." Decisions about gifts, discards, or product trials must consider the costs to acquisitions and cataloging. More than ever, we partner with our colleagues in technical services and automation, because the most cost-effective decisions about which electronic resources to acquire must reflect an integrated weighing of content and delivery mechanism, wine and bottle.

9. Collection management work such as deselection should reflect the same standards as inform selection. We have removed nearly 3,000 volumes per week from our stacks for over two years, with as many as a dozen bibliographers involved at once. Similarly, we try to make sure that cancellation decisions and decisions about new serials (and we are determined always to cancel enough to have some room for new titles; we will never have a total freeze on new journals) reflect the same criteria.

11. Since the policy overview was written, the Virtual Library of Virginia (VIVA) has become a much more prominent consideration in all our deliberations. To some degree our local acquisition of electronic databases could be described as a means of complementing, in ways that match Virginia Tech's programs, the baseline resources furnished by our consortium.

Integrating Philosophy and Practice in the Management of Collection Development, Paul Metz, *Library Philosophy and Practice,* Vol. 1 No. 1 (Fall 1998)

6