

HOW TO WRITE A COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Derek Whitehead, State Library of Victoria

Paper delivered at "Collection Development Basics: a policy approach" seminar conducted by the ALIA Acquisitions Victorian Group on 22 November, 1989.

Introduction

The emphasis in this paper is practical. It will not discuss theoretical issues, and will take a highly practical look at how to get from the most common situation (an unwritten policy) to the less common but generally desirable situation: a written policy.

The following simple steps are outlined:

1. How to start the process.
2. What to write first.
3. What to put into it.
4. How to get one quick
5. What to call it.
6. How long should it be?

1. How the Start the Process

Like all significant enterprises in libraries, writing a collection development policy starts off with a committee: at least a committee of library staff, and maybe one with a wider membership.

Of course, it is a lot easier and quicker if one person writes it. If you plan for the committee to do the actual writing, the likelihood is either (a) you will never finish; or (b) you will end up with something rather odd.

Many people have a stake in a collection development policy, even if only staff are involved. The role of the committee should be to offer advice to the author or editor, support the process, ensure that the policy represents a reasonable level of consensus, and so on.

Including users on the committee is inevitably dangerous, because they may have their own viewpoints. It does have some potential benefits: widening support for the document, raising points library staff may not have considered, and providing backing for any library agitation for more funds.

In summary: a committee is unavoidable, but it is important that one person be delegated to actually write the policy.

2. What to Write First

A collection development policy usually reflects the general goals and purposes of libraries in general, and your library in particular, and also the role of the institution of which the library is a part.

Many policies therefore start off by setting a general context. With a bit of luck, this part will already have been written by someone else.

The first kind of general context is the world of libraries. For example, a public library policy should have at the beginning a general statement of principles, such as an international statement - the IFLA *Guidelines for Public Libraries*¹, or the *UNESCO Public Library Manifesto*². The manifesto, last revised in 1972, is an idealistic document, but it is important to state the high principles upon which we would all like to base our policies.

Some statements of principle are a bit over the top. My favourite was devised in happier days (1971) by the Public Library Research Group in Britain. The public library exists, it said:

To contribute to sustaining the quality of life in all its aspects - educational, economic, industrial, scientific and cultural, and promote the concept of a democratic society in which equal opportunity exists for all to develop into true citizens, with whole and balanced personalities leading to an increase in the sum total of man's happiness and awareness of himself, his fellow men - and his environment.

The main crime of that statement is not its sexist formulation but its unfashionably ambitious idealism.

This section might also include any policies on censorship or freedom to read, and will set out the library's commitment to providing as wide a range of opinions and thought as possible; this is most relevant in a public library policy, but also applies to other library types. A statement in the policy may prove useful to the library in the future, in defending its integrity.

There are two other kinds of general context for the policy: First, broad goal statements for the institution or agency of which the library is a part; and second, broad goal statements for the library as a whole.

3. What To Put Into It

The main part of this paper is on what to put into a policy. The literature on this subject is not unanimous, and different authors have different lists, with a total of about 25 possible components: Kennington (dealing with public libraries) fourteen, and Bartle and Brown³ add another ten elements to those.

What goes into the policy depends mainly on who the policy is for: ourselves, our users or our masters. Or put another way, internal or external use, or both.

The main kinds of information in a collection development policy for a smaller library are:

- (a) The policy context.
- (b) A statement about users.
- (c) Statements about formats.

- (d) A breakdown of collection policies by subject or library department or other aspect. This is the main part of the policy.
- (e) Statements about weeding and discard.
- (f) Statements about other collections and resources.
- (g) Something about how the policy will be amended.
- (h) Other possible elements.

(a) The Policy Context

In addition to statements of guiding principle and the relevant policies of the governing body, collection development statements need to include some statement of the overall goals of the library, and the legislative or administrative basis for the service, if any.

(b) A Statement about Users

A policy should always include a statement about who the collection is intended to serve: the geographical area, the educational institution, the company, or the department. This constitutes the market for the library's services. The library is also likely to have some priorities amongst the potential library needs of its users, and a policy should indicate these: it cannot serve everyone equally.

(c) Formats

Most policies include a brief statement about formats. Some policies detail the various formats and whether the library acquires material in these formats. A statement of this kind is most important where, for example, a public library does not collect in all appropriate formats.

This section can also include a statement about policies regarding paperback and hard cover editions, and might include reference to material types: e.g. textbooks, newspapers, or maps.

(d) Subject or Other Arrangement

The main body of most collection policy statements consists of a breakdown by subject. This is not the only possible way of subdividing the main part of the policy: for a library in an educational institution, a course, faculty or school basis can be used; for libraries with lots of different collections or constituents, these can be used as a basis; for example, the State Library policy⁴ uses a mixture of DDC-based subjects and special collections. However, the most common and most useful breakdown is by subject.

In looking at each individual subject, or group of subjects, or teaching units, or special collections, there will be several elements in the policy statement:

- (1) The level at which material is collected and other information about the collecting policy, including specific exclusions. It is essential that the conspectus collection levels be used: they will become the national standard language for collection description.
- (2) A general description of the existing collection,

mentioning in particular any strengths of the collection. The description could give quantitative information about the collection.

- (3) Any comments specifying peculiarities or unusual features of the collection.
- (4) Any comments about the role of the collection, such as its relationship to teaching or research programmes.
- (5) Comments about other relevant collections or sources of information.

Sometimes this section will include other bits and pieces, outside the basic subject outline, such as:

- statements on specific modes of acquisition, such as policies on donations and exchanges
- a statement on multiple copies
- a statement on access to databases
- policies relating to the reference collection
- something on recreational materials, in libraries other than public libraries

These are given as examples: other elements can be included too.

In the case of public libraries, the policy may include statements on subjects likely to be controversial. Examples from existing policies include religion, guns, genealogy, sex, medical books, and scientology. However, libraries should beware of being over-prescriptive. This example from a public library policy illustrates the point; it says that:

... books by sects, pressure groups or individuals seeking to exploit the library's channels of communication with the public are not normally accepted.

The statement involves a hard to define value judgement; presumably the library does not exclude the works of noted prosyletisers and communication-abusers like V.I. Lenin, Bob Hawke, Ivan Illich, Andrew Peacock, militant ecologists or militant Blaneyites.

(e) Weeding and Discards

Most policies include a brief statement of the library's policies on weeding or relegation. They can be factual and straightforward. It is important to include this in a policy because people have a right to know what happens to library stock acquired with their money, and they are often curious anyway. People often want to know how they can get hold of books the library doesn't want any more.

(f) Other Collections

Very few policies which I have examined had a section on the relationship of the collection to other collections, or even about its relationship to other sources of information. This is a pity, and a missed opportunity. Most libraries exist as part of a library network throughout the state and the country, and it is important that library users be made aware of the possibilities of using other collections and sources of information.

A collection policy will not only be seen by the users of the library issuing it: it will have a wider circulation. It may be useful to indicate something about the range of library services available in the state or district - including the services of the State Library of Victoria.

(g) Revision of the Policy

All policies should be reviewed and revised from time to time. Even if this never happens, it is important to intend that it happens, and to make provision for it in the policy. People reading the policy should also be told how they might have input to its revision.

(h) Criteria for Selection

An optional final possibility: many libraries include a statement about how they select, and what criteria they use in selecting materials for the collection. However, a public statement should be brief, and detailed statements of procedure should be limited to in-house manuals and training material. A section on criteria for selection might also include statements on the relevance of use as a factor.

4. How To Get One Quick

The State Library of Victoria spent about three years compiling and writing its selection policy, and the work involved scores of staff. State libraries are bigger and more complex, serve a more diffuse clientele, find it harder to define their purpose and role, and are older. No other library should take nearly as long to write a collection policy, and most libraries represented here should get the job done much more quickly.

There are three main ways to get from the start to the finish of a collection development policy.

1. The first is the way we used: starting from scratch. There were no adequate existing models, so we wrote our own rules. No-one should do that if it can possibly be avoided.
2. The second method is simple plagiarism. Works by Boyer and Easton⁵, and by Futas⁶, quote library collection policies. There are quite a few around in Victoria for smaller libraries too. You whiteout the name of the original library wherever it appears, and substitute the name of your own library.
3. The third method, which I recommend, is intelligent plagiarism. You cannot really just change the name at the top: all libraries are different. On the other hand, it is important to avoid starting from scratch: this is immensely confusing and time-consuming. Freely adapt the most appropriate-looking policy.

I realise that this appears to contradict some basic principles of the theory of planning, but so does life. The library still has to plan for itself and write its own policy: - but it is folly to ignore what others have done before you.

5. What To Call It

call an academic library policy: *Bolte University Library Collection Development Policy*. Academic libraries are like that - academic. However, if a policy is to be published and used as an information and promotional tool, it is worth giving it a name which is a bit more eye-catching than *Middleville Library Service: Collection Development Policy*. This means little to the non-librarian, and would be better as a subtitle in small print.

There is no need to go to extremes, with titles like *Facing the Future*, or *A Collection for the 1990s*; however, something along those lines, but more dignified, is worth considering.

6. How Long Should It Be?

Asking the question: How long should the policy be? might seem odd and rather prosaic, but it concerns everyone. The obvious answer is the correct one: it should be no longer than it needs to be to fulfil its purposes and communicate with its intended audience.

People look uneasily at blockbusters like ours, or that of the State Library of NSW, and quietly slip their own work into a bottom drawer.

However, I don't think that a policy needs to be over-long, for most libraries. The best public library policies I have seen range from about 12 to 25 typed pages. Lots of things can be put in a staff manual rather than a policy, if the main aim of the policy is to communicate outside the library. There is a good case for a brief, printed, glossy policy which informs users and promotes the library, as well as setting out some basic guidelines for the staff. If we do see collection development policies as a means of informing our users and our masters and promoting the library to them, then policies can provide a good return on the fairly modest effort needed to produce them.

7. And Finally

Finally, it is important that the policy be officially adopted by the authority to which the library reports: council, committee, institution, college, company, department. One of the aims of the policy is to ensure that library objectives and functions are understood and supported. For the same reasons, it is important that the policy be widely distributed.

I have emphasised two of the three possible user groups: library users and library masters. This need not be to the exclusion of our own use. A small or medium-sized library cannot afford a range of policy documents tailored to different groups which might want to use it. One policy will have to serve all.

I believe that it is quite possible for a library to produce a collection development policy which will meet its purposes cost-effectively. This outline has been a brief one, and rather flippant. Lots of books treat the matter in a great deal more detail, and much more seriously. What is important is to decide to do it, and to do it in the most efficient way possible. I am sure that everyone here can have an imaginatively-titled policy out by the

References

1. *Guidelines for public libraries* / compiled by A. Jones. Prepared for the IFLA Section of Public Libraries. 3rd ed. (IFLA publications, 36) Munchen: K.G. Saur, 1986.
2. *Unesco public library manifesto*. Paris: Unesco, 1978.
3. BARTLE, F.R. and BROWN, W.L., "Book selection policies for public libraries", *Australian library journal* 32(3) (1983) pp.5-13.
4. STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA. *Selection policy*. Melbourne: Library Council of Victoria, 1986.
5. BOYER, Calvin and EATON, Nancy L. (eds.), *Book selection policies in American libraries: an anthology of policies from college, public and school libraries*. Austin, Tex.: Armadillo Press, 1971.
6. FUTAS, Elizabeth, *Library acquisitions policies and procedures*. 2nd ed. Phoenix, Ariz.: Oryx Press, 1984.

Victorian Government Publications (VGP)

VGP is a comprehensive monthly listing of Victorian government (state and local) publications which tells you where to obtain the publication and how much it costs. The annual cumulation volume contains an author/title/subject index for easy reference.

Subscriptions for 1990 are:

Full Service (monthly and annual)	\$56
Monthly issues only	\$34
Annual only	\$28

Prepayments is required. Please forward a cheque for the appropriate amount to:

The Accountant
Council of the State Library of Victoria
328 Swanston Street
Melbourne Vic. 3000

Enquiries: Telephone: (03) 6999887
Facsimile: (03) 6631480

Blackwell North America

- A reliable source of North American books
- Competitive pricing
- Airfreight at no additional cost to the library
- High quality Standing Order Services
- A wide range of ancillary services, including Government Document supply, and out-of-print searches
- Local customer service office
- Local payment facility



Call us now on ☎ (02) 977 8355 (Sydney callers) or ☎ 008 251 699 toll free

Blackwell