Accentuate the Positive

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The Ottenheimer Library at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock (UALR) is one academic library that is rewriting and revising its collection development policy. Important factors in the decision to resurrect its policy include: restructuring of the acquisitions and collection development departments, the decentralization of selection responsibilities, and recommendations emerging from strategic planning discussions and projects. The existing document, written 14 years ago, did not address guidelines for collecting electronic resources or for collecting in subject areas. At that time, the library selected few electronic resources and the University catered primarily to undergraduates. Changes in the university’s mission and the publishing landscape, along with strategic planning by the library and the university have ignited interest in revisiting the collection development policy. Moreover, the library subscribes to the view that collection development policies “are an effective communication tool for summarizing collection priorities, initiatives, goals, and cooperative agreements” (Pickett, 2011 p. 166).

In November 2011, the library dean appointed the collection development policy group, a subcommittee of four librarians and one paraprofessional from cataloguing, collection development, acquisitions, and reference. The group’s charge was to develop a series of guidelines that would

- Indicate priorities and establish selection criteria for subject collections,
- Serve as a planning tool,
- Serve as a guide to selectors,
- Serve as a communication tool for internal and external audiences.

The decision to rename the collection development documents from policy to guidelines was a result of the University of Arkansas mandate to reserve use of the word policy for official university documents. The group has worked for the last year reviewing the literature on collection development policies, collecting data on the university’s degrees and programs, and reviewing other library’s policies/guidelines. General themes emerging from the review of the literature include the need to write guidelines that are flexible, will be continuously updated, and that strike a balance between being overly detailed and too general (Johnson, 2009).

Based on the articles read and the sample policies/guidelines identified, the group has drafted seven sections, each addressing a significant aspect of collection development. Prior to writing these policies/guidelines the group engaged in considerable discussion of language, terminology, and the most effective way of communicating collection development activities to library and university faculty, staff, and students. These newly created policies/guidelines are brief, employ a minimum of library lingo, and outline clearly the library’s authority and responsibilities for collections. They are designed to be web documents interlinked and easily updated. To view the documents go to http://ualr.edu/library/cd-guidelines/overview.

The next steps will be constructing subject guidelines for departments based on information gathered from UALR’s Office of Institutional Research, college catalogs, and other campus documents. So far the group is developing a sample template which selectors will use to create their own subject profiles. Selectors will begin their work in early 2013.
There have been challenges in developing the policies/guidelines. The project is taking longer than expected. Writing the documents has been time consuming, and as with any project there is a delicate balancing act between doing project work and job-related activities.

So far, benefits from the process include:

- Development of an effective, cohesive team from different units in the library;
- Creation of current written CD policy/guidelines for current and future librarians and faculty liaisons;
- Increased knowledge of existing library collections and best practices of other libraries.

In summary, the Ottenheimer Library is firmly in the camp of those libraries that will continue to write policies/guidelines to guide our collection building and inform internal and external users. The task ahead is challenging because the library must continually review and update these documents. Failure to do so will mean that the library has wasted not just words but also time. This is unlikely to happen as the current library administration sees the development and maintenance of these documents as a viable option for librarians to inform each other and the communities they serve of the library’s responsibilities and intentions in developing collection.

References


