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Assignment 2: Collection Development Policy

Cornell University Library, Division of Rare & Manuscript Collections Collection Development Policy: <https://rare.library.cornell.edu/collections/policies>

For this assignment, I chose to examine the collection development policy for Cornell University Library’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collection (RMC). It is housed on the Library’s website, on a relatively plain page with very little frills or interactive elements. It is, however, extremely comprehensive, covering a wide range of topics while remaining concise and ultimately readable.

**Policy Description**

The page begins with the mission of the RMC, which aligns with the mission of the wider Cornell University Library: to “enrich the intellectual life of Cornell by fostering information discovery and intellectual growth, and partnering in the development and dissemination of new knowledge” (Collecting Policies, n.d.). This section also covers the scope of the RMC’s collection, which includes “rare books, manuscripts, archives, artifacts, media, and other materials in all formats to serve the research and teaching needs of Cornell University's faculty and students, and members of the public” (Collecting Policies, n.d.). The RMC’s collection is wide and varied, and this means their collection policy is somewhat vague as to what, specifically, the RMC collects.

According to the section Collecting, the RMC collects basically everything, with an emphasis on rare and unique items of “enduring historical and cultural value” (Collecting Policies, n.d.). Also covered in this section are how materials are acquired (donations and purchases) and how purchases are financed (“income from endowments and by donations”). The section is then further broken down into the following subsections: Scope and Priorities of the Collections, Gift Policies, Deposits, Deaccession Policy, Cooperative Agreements. Though the specifics of what items the RMC collects is vague, their policies on acquisitions, deaccession, and so on, are more specific and informational.

Acquisitions, cataloging, & technical processing are described in the next section. In this section, the collection policy explains how fast items are cataloged/accessed (as soon as possible), who catalogs/assesses items, standards followed for cataloging (American Library Association, its Rare Books and Manuscripts Section, and the Society of American Archivists), where the RMC’s catalog is available (online on Library website and OCLC WorldCat), and where finding aids available (online and in person). An interesting tidbit for this section is who catalogs/assesses items: the task is split between staff in the main library and RMC staff. According to the policy, “Library's Technical Services staff cover rare books, maps, and other printed items, as well as audiovisual materials and bound manuscript” while “RMC's technical processing staff accession, organize, and describe manuscript and archival collections, creating finding aids encoded for online access” (Collecting Policies, n.d.). Being so specific on who handles which items no doubt not only helps potential donors understand what’s to become of their donations, but would help RMC and library staff understand who’s in charge of which items, which should make processing go slightly faster.

The fourth major section is Preservation and Security, which includes information on whether the collection circulates (no) and where it is maintained (in closed stacks, split between two buildings). The RMC uses “temperature and humidity controlled environment and fire detection and suppression systems” to protect their collection from both natural elements and emergency situations like fires or floods (Collecting Policies, n.d.). This corresponds with the ACRL/RBMS “Guidelines Regarding Security and Theft in Special Collections” (2009) which says that libraries need to make security and safety arrangements so their collections remain secure from theft and damage. The policy does not go into greater detail regarding what, precisely, the RMC is doing exactly to keep their collection safe from theft, probably because to do so would make it that much easier for thieves to bypass their security measures.

The fifth section is on Research Access. RMC’s collection is available to all researchers, whether Cornell faculty, students, staff, or those not affiliated with the university at all. The policy then outlines the necessary steps researchers need to take in order to access the collection, and mentions that the Cornell community will receive priority during busy seasons.

The next section is Teaching and Public Programs, which details the various outreach programs that the RMC conducts, including classes, public lectures, presentations, tours, websites, and exhibitions. It should be noted that there are no links at all in this section, nor any mention of RMC’s social media. The RMC does have several social media accounts, including a Twitter account (@CornellRMC) which posts historical images, links to digital copies of manuscripts and texts, and amusing updates regarding the RMC’s holiday hours.

A separate section for Exhibitions follows, which goes over the RMC’s policy on lending and borrowing items in slightly more detail. This section does have a link to the RMC’s online exhibition website, which includes many curated exhibitions on multiple topics, including people, places, and specific book genres.

The final section is Ongoing Review of Policies, which is perhaps the most vague of all the sections. It states that policies are “periodically reviewed,” but not in any specific time frame such as “every other year” or “every five years.” It furthermore states that policy updates are prompted by things like “annual reports, user surveys, Library and University budget information, faculty and graduate student interviews, changes in Cornell University's academic programming, and other relevant information” (Collecting Policies, n.d.). This suggests to me that the policy is only updated when data or a request from a staff member or patron prompts a change. I should also note that nowhere in this policy does it state when the last time such a revision occurred, or even when this policy itself was written.

Finally, the sidebar on the left portion of the policy page includes links to finding materials and finding aides, the library catalog, a “contact us” link and a link to a page for registering and requesting items. The sidebar also includes the hours of the RMC, as well as links to other RMC pages including digital collections and collection highlights.

**Analysis**

The RMC’s collection policy does a great job on not only reflecting the institution’s goals, but of educating visitors. It’s very comprehensive, covering almost all the major topics mentioned in Elaine Smyth’s “A Practical Approach to Writing a Collection Development Policy” (1999) and in good detail. Each major topic session has just enough information to be very informative, without going into over-detail and potentially clogging up the page with unnecessary information. The policy as it stands is also a good basis for “institutional continuity over time and through personnel changes” (Smyth 1999) as it’s not super-specific enough to need constant monitoring or changes and can work with a variety of different managing styles. It also covers enough of a variety of topics that it can be useful for “dealing with administration, patrons, donors, and other institutions” (Smyth 1999).

However, there are a few sections that could possibly benefit from expansion. For instance, the section that talks about how often policies are reviewed and updated does not have a specific time frame, nor who specifically designs the policy and/or approves it. I suppose this is because policies are only updated when they come into question from staff or RMC visitors, or when they become so outdated that they’re no longer applicable. One of the challenges of a collection development policy is no doubt finding the time, staff, and resources to keep it updated, so the fact that RMC’s policy is so thorough and well-structured is definitely a plus for the institution.

Lack of staff and/or time seems to be a common trends for libraries, as both can be limited, but a set policy review schedule might be beneficial as it would encourage RMC staff and patrons to really consider what policies are still needed, what can be changed, and if any new policies need to be added. A schedule would allow RMC staff to stay on top of any needed changes, instead of relying on requests or questions from outside sources.

If the RMC did want to add more details into their collection development policy, Smyth (1999) has some good suggestions that I think would work well within the policy already in existence. For instance, some information about the RMC’s present collecting level and procedures affecting the collecting policy might be useful to have in the policy. Is the RMC actively collecting new items, or are they backlogged with accessions and cataloging?

I was also disappointed by the policy not being more interactive. There didn’t seem to be enough links to other pages or resources on the website, even when a link would’ve been very helpful. There’s an entire section on how the RMC promotes its collection and programs, but there are no links to either past or present promotions, nor to any exhibits. There are a few links on the left sidebar, but having links directly in the policy itself would be easier for people to locate and/or use.

I ended up wanting to know more about several things mentioned in the collection policy, particularly the programs that the RMC hosts. I’d also like to know more about how they catalog/access their items, what steps they take to preserve their more worn items, and their plan for digitizing the collection and/or making it available online. These things don’t necessarily need to be described in the actual collection policy itself, of course, but I’d love to know more about them in some other form-- perhaps a video or behind-the-scenes tour.

On the whole, the RMC’s collection development policy is well-structured, well thought out, pretty thorough, and ultimately informative. It suffers a little from not including more links or interactive elements, and it needs a stronger timeline for policy revisions, but I think it’s a great policy overall.

Works Cited

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