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Collection Development and Weeding a la Versace: Fashioning a Policy for Your Library

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Collection Development and Weeding à la Versace

Fashioning a Policy for Your Library

Professional Perspectives — Tools and Techniques of the Trade. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Lori Hedstrom at 651/687-5891 or lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com.

A library's collection development policy isn't very different from something we all are familiar with: buying or discarding clothes. We consider many of the same factors when choosing clothes or library materials. (Unlike a library's collection development policy, which should be in writing, hopefully few of us have a written wardrobe development policy.) Ultimately the power behind what stays and what goes lies in the subjective hands of those who make acquisition and retention decisions.

Yet there are common traits that guide most collection development policies. Such policy criteria dictate canceling subscriptions, whether to retain or discard materials no longer updated, and general collection "weeding." Whether they are official guidelines or unspoken rules, the basic building blocks of collection development policies are inherent to most libraries.

To Acquire or Discard? That Is the Question

There are at least six reasons why former Philippines First Lady Imelda Marcos had many shoes: (1) She had unlimited resources. (2) Someone else maintained and polished them. (3) She had a huge closet. (4) She didn't want to wear the same pair twice. (5) She enjoyed having a huge shoe collection. (6) And her husband certainly wasn't going to tell Imelda what to do. These six factors — resources, maintenance and preservation, space, multiple use, status and outside pressure — are common to the development of library or wardrobe collections. Intrigued? Read on. Not? Go shopping.

Resources. No need for much discussion here. If the money is available, anyone can buy almost anything wanted, or at least needed. Of course, we ought not spend our money too early in the year. In a law library, where 80 percent or more of the materials budget may be allocated to update what is already owned, running out of money three months before the end of a fiscal year is not wise. At home, you don't want to run out of cash before purchasing your winter wardrobe, and no

one wants to pay interest on a five-figure credit card debt.

Maintenance and Preservation. When I buy clothes, I consider not only the actual cost of buying the item but also upkeep. I buy wash-and-wear slacks and shirts; I don't like to iron, and I don't want a weekly dry cleaning bill. I only buy cotton sweaters; moths prefer wool over cotton. Rain can harm silk, and linen wrinkles easily. Some library materials — looseleaf services and CD-ROMs, for example — also are "high maintenance." Many libraries instead choose low-maintenance Web-based products.

Any discussion of digital products necessarily brings up the own-versus-rent issue. We typically purchase the clothes we wear. But sometimes we rent clothes we need only rarely, such as a tuxedo for a wedding.

For more than 2,000 years, libraries owned their collections. When a library cancels a subscription to a print journal, it may retain the volumes it earlier acquired. Today more and more of the information in "collections" is licensed and leased, rather than purchased and owned. Law firms and corporations began the "rent-a-tux" approach to legal information years ago. Similar to the rented tuxedo that must be returned after the prom, when a subscription to digital information expires, generally the library has nothing to show for the money it spent.

Multiple Use. When my wife and I buy day-to-day clothes for our eldest son, we don't consider whether they'll fit his younger brother in a few years; chances are good that the fabric will be stained and/or ripped. But we often consider secondary uses when buying *expensive* clothes a child will wear only for a handful of special events. A sport jacket can be handed down to a younger son, nephew or a friend's child. Adults certainly consider multiple uses for their clothes. Can I wear this tie with several of my suits or sport jackets? Will this jacket match other skirts or slacks I already own?

Similarly, we consider multiple access when buying library materials. The books on our shelves can be borrowed over and over again. Items in heavy demand are placed on reserve; they may be borrowed only for short time periods to maximize access. When we acquire digital products, we insist on licenses that permit multiple, simultaneous use.

Space. Often the most important factor that determines what we acquire — and what we discard — is space. At home, it's our closets and dressers that determine the size of our wardrobe. At the library, for the most part, the size of our library, particularly shelving capacity, influences the collection. We may get rid of worn or infrequently used clothes because there's simply no more closet space. We may withdraw and discard books because the shelves are full. We have four options when there's no space for new books or clothes: get rid of the old to make space for the new; find a way to put more objects in the existing footprint; use a space-saving format (such as microfiche); or find additional space off-site.

We can get more usable space in our closets without expanding the footprint. Some custom closet companies claim that they can reorganize closets so that you can nearly double the amount of clothes that can be stuffed into a closet without wrinkling the clothes. A library can nearly double its shelf space by using mobile compact shelving, hopefully also without wrinkling either books or patrons.

As for remote storage, my wife rotates her spring/summer and fall/winter clothes. In-season clothes are within arms' reach in the bedroom; off-season clothes are in a downstairs trunk, which also serves as a sofa side table. Many keep older clothes on the off chance they may come back in style. Watergate co-conspirator Bob Haldeman's thin, solid color ties, "out" for more than two decades, are now "in." Someone who kept the tie (and looks like Brad Pitt) gets to appear in *GQ*.

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

Many law libraries — particularly law school libraries, it seems — store lesser-used materials off-site. Although this may not be the best way to provide ready access to their collections, it may be preferable to getting rid of the books. Of course, a library that moves materials to remote storage can return them to the main collection if they prove to be in greater demand than anticipated.

A word about special needs for special collections. My mother moved from Detroit to Florida 20 years ago. She could not part with her mink coat, which is kept in cold storage at a cleaning establishment. (The fact that she won't travel north between October and March and hasn't worn the coat in years, is, of course, irrelevant.) Like my mother's coat, libraries usually store their rare book collections in a climate-controlled environment.

As for collection development and retention issues, the question is *why* collect or keep books that aren't used any more frequently than my mother's coat? A book or a collection may be unique and/or have special meaning for an institution. For example, the John Marshall family bible, inscribed with Marshall's family history notes, is showcased at the College of William & Mary School of Law library.

Librarians sometimes find it hard to cancel a longstanding subscription because the library "invested" in the set for decades — although there is enough dust on the volumes to give every Arizona Diamondback fan an allergy attack. For instance, a decade ago I found it difficult to cancel subscriptions to a few Canadian reporter series, even though the "dust test" indicated they probably were never looked at. The sets were complete, and over several decades our library had invested tens of thousands of dollars in them. Push came to shove three years ago. Because the volumes were rarely, if ever, used, and the decisions are available on Lexis, WESTLAW, the Web, or via interlibrary loan, we finally got rid of them.

External Pressure. Sometimes forces outside the library exert pressure on

librarians to discard — but sometimes to retain — print materials. Has your spouse or roommate ever asked, "Can't you get rid of those jeans you haven't worn since Woodstock?" or "That t-shirt may have looked good when you were in law school, dear, but you're pushing 50 now."

Many firm libraries and some court or county libraries are pressured by partners or governing boards to get rid of their old books in favor of a hipper, digital collection that takes up much less space. On the other hand, a law school library may be pressed to keep unnecessary materials, whether it wants to or not. An American Bar Association annual survey still asks how many volumes academic libraries have, and some deans feel they need to keep up with the Vanderbilts and the Dukes.

What do we do with clothes we no longer want? Some we give to family, neighbors or the Salvation Army. Others we might sell or consign to a used clothes store. Some we toss. We have similar options for books we no longer want. Give them to a new law school that has just opened; it's no threat, for it will be decades before a new law school breathes down your back in the *U.S. News and World Report* annual law school rankings. Sell or consign them to used book dealers if they'll take them. Have a contest for that second copy of *Corpus Juris Secundum*; a young lawyer needs something for his or her office shelves. And of course, they can always be tossed into the dumpster.

Multiple Formats. We all have different "versions" of the same type of clothing item. Despite what former Vice President Spiro Agnew said, when you've seen one tie or one suit, you haven't seen them all. Our clothes come in different colors, patterns and fabrics. Our collections are much the same. Periodical indexes are available in print, on the Web, and through LexisNexis™ and WESTLAW databases. There are questions we should consider before we decide to cancel a print subscription in favor of an electronic version: If we do, we also need to decide whether to discard the soon-to-be outdated books. What if the network goes

down? How long will the print indexes retain research value if they're no longer kept current? Do we have space to keep them around? Is there risk that an unsophisticated user won't look beyond the outdated volumes on the shelf? Will the digital version be around forever? Does my license provide continued access to the part of the licensed materials published and paid for during the subscription period should we ever decide to cancel the online subscription?

Many print materials have marginal or no research value if not kept current. When the law library at the College of William & Mary canceled most of our print Shepards Citators, we tossed the print volumes. As far as I was concerned, they were like worn clothes you don't even want to hand down to anyone else.

Updating and Retaining or Discarding Non-Updated Materials. Styles change. Some clothes can be updated, others can't. You can hem that mid-calf skirt, put a stylish border on the jeans your teenage daughter outgrew, or add cuffs (but not pleats) to slacks. Law books also go out of style if the library chooses not to keep its set current. The decision to update books and keep its out-of-date predecessors requires more thought than hemming.

As a general policy, books at the College of William & Mary law library are kept up-to-date with publisher supplements. I feel — and I know some of my colleagues disagree — that materials accessible to our patrons ought to be current. (We do make some exceptions, such as certain form books and some reference materials where currency is not critical.) If the library decides to discontinue its investment in a title — if it opts not to update it — it's because the library thinks it's no longer needed. And when a new edition of an updated treatise is published, the library treats it as if it's a new publication offered for sale and makes a decision whether to purchase and subscribe to the new edition. If it chooses not to get the new edition, then the library also must decide whether to retain any prior outdated editions. The library often does keep the older editions, adding a cautionary

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message for unsuspecting users. But usually this is not the case for books designed primarily for practicing attorneys. If I choose not to buy the most recent edition of a practice-oriented book — one with little long-term “scholarly” value — the library withdraws prior edition(s) from our collection.

Different Libraries, Same Factors

A library’s policy on acquiring, retaining or discarding materials should be part of its overall collection development policy. The collection development policy of the College of William & Mary’s law library states that judicious and systematic

discarding of certain materials is important for the maintenance and utility of the collection. That we have little space at W&M is certainly a factor, but I probably would have the same upkeep, retention and discard policies even if we doubled our space.

William & Mary’s policies and practices are undoubtedly more similar to other law school libraries than court or other public law libraries, and certainly very different from firm libraries. But all law school libraries neither serve the same constituencies nor have the same mission. The same is true for clothes. They’re all clothes, but Versace, Armani and Levis are all somewhat different animals.

Collection and wardrobe development policies and practices are unique to the library and to the person in charge of collection development. But we all consider similar factors when we make decisions to acquire or discard clothes or books: resources, maintenance, available space, how the materials are used, status and outside pressure. Identify your customers, pick your designers, consider the above factors and go.

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