



World Library and Information Congress: 69th IFLA General Conference and Council

1-9 August 2003, Berlin

Code Number: 049-E
Meeting: 66. Acquisition and Collection Development
Simultaneous Interpretation: -

Handling gift books in U.S. libraries

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Abstract:

A review of gift book policies in the United States shows that guidelines for the public need to be in place and publicized so that potential donors have reasonable expectations. Gift book policies are part of library collection development policies, and these policies state that libraries accept books and other materials using the same criteria as if the library was purchasing the materials. Libraries also reject some donations that do not fit their collections.

Libraries include gift book policies in their collection development policies since the acceptance of gift books is intertwined with the library's collection development policy. Collection development policies are an important document for U.S. libraries. In these policies the library describes its collections and users and discusses its policies for each aspect of the collection. The kinds of materials collected are enumerated and the level of collecting in each discipline is described. It also describes the kinds of materials not collected by the library. This document provides a way to develop the library's collections in a consistent way and to communicate the library's policies to its users.

Library gift policies generally begin by saying that once materials are donated to the library they are the property of the library and the library has the right to dispose of them as it sees fit. Much depends on the condition of the donations and the needs of the library's collection. Gift policies state that donations that will be added to the library's

collection are accepted under the same policies as books purchased for the collection. This statement helps the library to avoid adding donations to the collection that are outside the scope of the library's collecting policies. For example, the public library might receive a collection of books on the history of mathematics. But the library simply does not have a public interested in the history of mathematics so there would be no use to add these materials to the collection. Libraries often state in their gift book policies that if a gift item becomes outdated, worn or no longer being used, it will be discarded in the same way as items the library has purchased. The library cannot guarantee that the gift will be a permanent part of the collection.

Even the largest of U.S. libraries have very specific guidelines for the receipt of gifts. The Branch Libraries of The New York Public Library provides the following guidelines for gifts: "most branches ask that you not bring newspapers, catalogs or journals, textbooks published before 1995; books that are broken, water-damaged, badly soiled, yellowed or crumbling; or those with extensive underlining or highlighting." The Research Library of The New York Public Library prefers to get a list of donations in advance of the donation to see if the donation will fit within the scope of the Library's collections as defined by their Collection Development Policy. Their web site states that "Many of The Research Libraries' most important books, manuscripts and other materials were received as donations. In general, a gift of books or manuscripts to the Library (if not written by or for the donor) produces a federal income tax deduction for the donor in an amount equal to the full fair market value of the donated property on the date of the contribution. All donations must be cleared through the Library's curatorial staff and legal counsel."

The Library of Congress states on its web site that "the Library welcomes inquiries about donations, but, cannot accept everything. Prospective donors should NOT send item(s), but instead, send gift offers identifying the item(s) to be donated." Contrary to popular opinion, the Library of Congress does not have a copy of every book published nor does it accept all gifts received. All gifts are, however, carefully reviewed for possible additions to the collection in light of the Library Collection Policy Statement. "The Library says that it usually rejects individual company sales manuals, advertisements, coloring books, elementary and high school textbooks (except in U.S. history), instructors' manuals, student workbooks and self-published books except for genealogies and local histories." Books that are not added to the collections are placed on shelves in a special area so that they can be examined and selected by federal agencies, school libraries and other non-profit organizations. The Library of Congress also has exchange arrangements with institutions outside the United States. For information about these arrangements, consult their web site: lcweb.loc.gov/acq/donatex.html.

Cost of donations

Libraries have come to realize that adding donations to the collection is a costly enterprise and thus the library must carefully consider whether the donation is worth the price of cataloging and processing it. If it is not on a subject of interest to the users of the library, no matter how fine the book may be, the library may decide not to add it to the

library's collection. The Cornell University Library's gift book policy recommends that the donor "consider giving a minimum of \$1,000 per 100 volumes donated to help expedite processing as well as defray costs of maintaining the material given to the Library." Most donors do not realize the cost of adding books or other materials to the collection. Many times valuable collection languish at a library because there is no money to catalog and process it. Although most libraries are not as specific as Cornell, its policy reflects an important reality.

Physical Condition

One of the difficult issues to deal with is the physical condition of the book. Donors often arrive with older titles that are in very bad condition. They think their books are valuable so they find it hard to understand why the library refuses to put the book in the collection. Sometimes even if the library adds the book to the collection, the donor is annoyed that the book has very little intrinsic value because it is not in excellent condition.

Disposition of gifts

Libraries have many ways of disposing of donated books. Some books are, of course, added to the library's collection. Some may simply be discarded due to their physical condition or due to the fact that book has dated material. Others may be duplicates or simply do not fit within the parameters of the library's collection. They may be sold at the library's book sale, donated to another library that collects in that area or donated to a local agency or organization.

Appraisals

Many donors want an appraisal of their donations for tax purposes. Libraries in the U.S. simply cannot do this because the U.S. Internal Revenue Service considers the Library to be an interested party, which precludes appraisals. All gifts over \$5,000 must be appraised by a "qualified appraiser" in order to claim a tax deduction. Libraries may, however, have a list of appraisers to recommend to donors.

Acknowledgement

Libraries do acknowledge all gifts. Many libraries have a standard form for materials that have no special value. If the library receives materials of more significance, the library may write a more elaborate acknowledgement instead of using the standard form. For example, the University of Texas at Austin states in their policy that gifts valued at \$500 or less are acknowledged by a form letter or a personal letter from the Library Director while gifts valued at more than \$500 and up to \$25,000 are acknowledged by the President of the University and gifts valued at more than \$25,000 require acceptance by the Regents. Libraries may also put bookplates in books donated.

Libraries also acknowledge donors in the catalog. This is a visible way of thanking donors who have given valuable materials to the library and providing a way to develop interest in future donations.

Communicating with the public

Some libraries publish brochures on gifts to alert the public to the procedures for donating gifts and what kinds of gifts the library will accept. For example, a library in Texas stated the following gift guidelines: no paperbacks, fiction in excellent condition with dust jackets and no more than 3 years old, non-fiction in excellent shape with no highlighting and no more than 5 years old. Libraries often state what formats they will accept. Other ideas for publicizing your gift policy include: information on your web site, articles in local papers, a donations hotline phone number, a poster in the library. In Santa Fe, New Mexico, the public library has the following message for its public: “Your gift will enrich the Santa Fe Public Library in one of two ways. When your gift book falls within the scope of the Materials Selection Policy of the Santa Fe Public Library and does not duplicate items already owned, it will be added to the library’s collection, and ...if a book is not selected by the library ‘s staff, it will then be sold in the Friends’ Bookstore or annual books sale. Funds from the sale of gift books are used to support library activities...”

Conclusion

Gift books can be a very helpful addition to a library’s collection but can also mean a great deal of work for very little return. Libraries have learned through the years that it is important to be specific about what kinds of donations are welcome and to be specific about what happens to donations.