

Group Therapy: Screening of Donations

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QUESTION:

Submitted by **David Ettinger** (International Affairs and Political Science Librarian, Gelman Library, and Assistant Professorial Lecturer, Elliott School of International Affairs, George Washington University)

In an attempt to streamline and expedite our gift book processing procedures, we are considering the possibility of doing some kind of preliminary screening or filtering of prospective donations. Does anyone have any experience doing this and, if so, what are the criteria you use?

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Helen Anderson** (Head, Collection Development, River Campus Libraries, University of Rochester)

An endless source of pain and pleasure, the constant stream of incoming gift books can get out of control. Like Mickey Mouse in the Walt Disney rendition of the Sorcerer's Apprentice, we wish for a magic broom to keep things moving.

Let donors know up front what types of materials your library does not accept. Our list includes encyclopedias, magazines, and mildewed, or otherwise damaged books. At the same time, accept that no matter what you tell people, they will still donate these materials. Trust that your list will at least reduce the amount.

Work on just saying no if you don't think a gift will contain a substantial number of volumes that you'll add to your collections. Have a list of alternatives on hand such as donating to the Friends of the Library book sale. Accept that you will receive such collections anyway despite your best attempts to educate staff and administrators on fielding inquiries. Sooner or later an influential person will clean out his or her office and the contents will appear on your doorstep, the chaff with the wheat.

Once a gift collection has arrived in the library, there are criteria that can be applied to immediately eliminate unsuitable volumes and reduce the amount that collection development specialists will have to review. This makes the entire process more manageable.

I start by focusing on the visually obvious: brittle volumes, mass market paperbacks, Reader's Digest condensed books, Time-Life series, book club editions and so on - all the things that I asked people not to donate plus more. Out they go. The next category is books in subject areas that I know we don't collect as well as those titles that we all know that appear again and again in gifts. All these go immediately to our Friends group for their sale, or to Better World Books or yes - I will say it – some even go to the trash!

My best recommendation is to assign the responsibility for reviewing incoming gifts to one person. The ability to review gifts efficiently can be learned through practice, though it helps if the person is curious and energetic to begin with. It also helps to be decisive. The trick is not to get bogged down. Train the person by having them work side by side with someone experienced and familiar with your collections and policies. The basic criteria will quickly become clear and over time he or she will learn the finer points of the process. In this way, you will develop the confidence that cannot be gotten from simply reviewing a list of criteria handed on from the last person on the job or from reading collections policies that may be out of date. Above all - just do it.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Danielle Kwock** (Library Manager, Fresh Start Women's Foundation, Phoenix, AZ)

I work in a non-profit special library. Our 9,000 item collection is comprised of women's self-help books and audiovisual materials. About 80-90% of our collection comes from donations. Since our scope is very narrow, we must thoroughly screen each donation to ensure that it supports our library's mission.

When I first began work at the library, I was amazed at how many donations came in. While I was grateful for the donations, most did not fit in to our collection, so I had to come up with very clear parameters. First, all books must fit in to at least one of our 14 categories. These include Healthy Woman, Personal Growth, Women's Studies, etc. Second, the books must be in good physical condition, with no visible tears, stains, water damage, or binding problems. Third, books that have been published must have a publication date no earlier than 5 years from the current year. Books that are older must be very relevant or considered classics.

When potential donors call, we ask them specifically what kinds of books/audiovisual materials they are thinking about donating. We then explain to them our parameters and that any materials we cannot add to our collection will go in the "Book Exchange" pile or may be donated to other organizations. This preliminary screening has helped cut down on the number of donations we get that we cannot use.

Also, to help get the word out, our Library Committee created a "Top Ten" books wish list bookmark, which we distribute to all patrons and potential donors. It outlines what kinds of books we would like donated. This is very helpful and is also a great publicity tool.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Tracie Ballock** (Collection Management Librarian, Duquesne University)

Here at the Gumberg Library we look upon gifts as important additions to the library's collection. Over the years many significant items have been acquired through gift donations and have become valuable resources for our users. On the other hand it is still very important for us to remember that gift books do cost libraries money. Unfortunately donors do not realize that in reality gift materials are not "free" due to the cost of processing these items. Therefore we cannot afford to have large amounts of unsolicited, dated, moldy, highlighted materials left on our doorsteps. For these reasons we created our Donor Agreement Form which is summarized below.

- The library will accept gift books, journals (selectively), and non-print items if judged to be potentially significant additions to our collections. We seek gifts that can support the University's curriculum, faculty research and newly developed programs.
- Due to the library's limited resources to handle items requiring special treatment we will only accept items in good to excellent condition. Books that are brittle, written in or highlighted will not be added.
- If a list of donated material is not received from the donor, the library will not be responsible for creating a list when sending out the gift acknowledgement.
- The library will determine the classification, housing and circulation policies of all gift items. Gift collections will not be kept "intact" but will be integrated into the library's existing collections.
- The library retains the right to dispose of duplicates and unneeded materials. At the donor's request these items will be returned at the donor's expense.
- The library staff is not authorized under IRS regulations to appraise gifts or to provide a signature to any document that applies a monetary value to said gifts for income tax purposes.

We do ask all donors to read over and sign the Donor Agreement Form prior to the delivery of the donation.

RESPONSE:

Submitted by **Kristin Gerhard** (Collections Cataloger, Iowa State University)

I can't speak to our absolutely current policies, having left the collections program nine months ago, but I can tell you what we were doing (and might still be).

We have a bibliographer with many years of collections experience, a wide-ranging curiosity, and a broad understanding of the wide scope of our collection. (Let's call the person Ged). When we get large loads of gift books that are undifferentiated and did not come directly from a specific faculty member through the librarian for his/her department., we set Ged loose to do the preliminary screen. Because of Ged's background, s/he is a good decision-maker and works through these collections pretty fast.

We have a support staff member who will search our catalog, WorldCat and occasionally the Web for anything Ged thinks is borderline and more information is needed in order to make a good decision. Then we sort what remains by subject and put it out for bibliographer review.

The process saves time for the bibliographers, allows us to manage donations within limited shelf and storage space, and generally keeps materials moving through appropriate work flows. Of course, this is a very specific solution – not every library will have one person with the appropriate breadth and width of knowledge and experience to do this sorting well – but it's worked well for us.