

## Indiana Public Libraries' Selection Policies: The "Why" and The "How"

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True selection of library materials takes place in a positive intellectual environment. Selections are made to supply the library's clientele with materials. A comprehensive analysis of the community identifies subjects of interest to segments of the community. Ongoing analysis monitors the community, noting change so that selection can change in appropriate ways.

The conclusions drawn from a community analysis form the foundation on which to build a selection policy. The policy serves to record the general principles guiding selection. Details of this document relate the logic governing selection. It is the framework within which the selection process takes place.<sup>1</sup>

When formulated in a positive atmosphere like this, the rationale for the selection policy loses its threatening aspect. Make no mistake about it, some see a threat in this subject, for it involves opening the library to evaluation. Libraries should welcome interest from the public and prepare for it by having selection policies and other written policies available for public inspection. Many people become

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concerned to the point of involving themselves in the library and evaluating it. They want evidence that the budget is being spent according to a predetermined plan, that the responsibility for selection is being carried out in a legal way, and that the community as a whole has participated in developing the plan and is aware of why the library selects the books it selects. The process of drawing up the selection policy and the policy itself, taken together, fulfill these needs.

Legally, a public library (in Indiana) is a municipally incorporated corporation with many of the rights of an individual. Though the state exercises control over how it is done, public libraries in Indiana have a large degree of latitude in how they obtain and spend their funds. Taxes supply the bulk of funds. In essence, the state allows the library to exist for the purposes specified in its articles of incorporation. Those articles provide for the formation of a board of library trustees to whom all the legal rights of the library are entrusted. The board then hires librarians and other staff to perform the functions stated and implied in the articles of incorporation.

One part of the selection policy should describe at length the source of authority for selection, how it is delegated, and who is ultimately responsible for selection. In effect, it shows the chain along which the authority for selection is passed in that particular library.

The budget of any tax supported organization is public knowledge. Libraries traditionally spend a significant percentage of their budget on books. Sometimes we forget this under the press of large increases in personnel, fuel, and other costs. The selection policy should explain the positive criteria that the library uses to select its books.

In short, because public libraries and those who work in them have legal responsibility for selecting books, and because no library budget is infinite, choices have to be made. The basis for those choices must be the criteria outlined in the selection policy.

A written policy is a great public relations tool. Every librarian must continually work to make the public aware of the library and the services available through it, and what better way than to explain the criteria used in performing this basic service?

Communication must take place between the library and the community it serves. Numerous opportunities to aid this communication arise during the adoption process. The community analysis process, the discussion formulating the policy contents, and the repartee among and between all parties to the policy all provide such occasions. Good public relations are built from energetic communi-

cation of logical thinking. Logical thinking should be evident from the wording of the criteria the library decides upon to use in this area.

### Accountability

A catchword we hear a lot today is "accountability." One positive connotation of accountability is understanding, and that is the fundamental rationale for drawing up a selection policy. The library staff and the public the library serves must understand the criteria used to select materials for incorporation into the collection. Community analysis will show the library staff whom they have to communicate with to foster this understanding. The community's reactions during the analysis will show the staff how to reach the various segments of the library clientele. As communication continues, understanding grows and real accountability is served. The primary responsibility for adoption of a selection policy must reside with one person or department of the library from start to finish. Dividing the task among too many persons or departments can bog it down and seriously jeopardize its future. This individual or department must energetically oversee the process.

The selection procedure must be described. The document that does this will outline the steps followed and tell who performs the tasks. The smaller the staff, the simpler the procedure description, so that smaller libraries might prefer to append it directly to the policy. Most likely, in a large library the procedure description would be a separate document. The rationale for the procedure (legal, budgetary, etc.) should be apparent. References from the procedure section to the policy sections involved should further clarify the rationale.

Having a clearly understandable and widely publicized selection policy will prove invaluable when questions are raised about materials in the library collection. Once raised, questions must be answered positively. The good public relations developed during the process of formulating and adopting the policy provides the strength needed to respond to these questions. The practice the library staff has had in thinking through and analyzing the selection criteria in order to set them down on paper will have strengthened their convictions and shown ways to answer possible criticism.

Positive thinking must be the rule in writing the policy. At no time is this more important than at the time a selection decision or policy is questioned. Many times questioning of policy will be expressed negatively. "Why don't you have . . .?" or "Why can't you . . .?" are common. The best way of answering this sort of criticism is to refrain from becoming negative in response. Thus, "We don't have that book because . . ." becomes "We have this (these) books

you might use." "You don't know . . ." becomes "Our information indicates . . ." Of course, this may prove an insufficient response to some people. The situation may call for an individual conference with the person.

One key element of the selection policy must be a detailed procedure for handling complaints. This should include a final stage at which the complainant is required to commit the complaint to writing, and thus focus the complaint.

The absence of a written complaint opens the whole incident to a wider range of misinterpretations. The whole affair can become a matter of hearsay. Using a written complaint form shows that the library is a businesslike operation which takes the complainant and his complaint seriously.

Direction in executing the policy loosens gradually over time as trust is built up. A very specific and restrictive selection policy and procedure may be necessary at first, because the basis for trust among all parties in the process must be built. Over time, as the library staff and the board's relationship develops, mutual respect and trust build, and a more general statement will probably be sufficient. As this happens, both the board and the library staff become more at ease; monitoring of the selection process and adherence to the policy may slip.

At this point, an assault on a selection or the selection policy can be devastating. A formal protest may be lodged, and the library staff may not be mindful of applicable policy or procedure. When this happens, the library faces a huge task in rebuilding credibility, public relations, and the trust and confidence of the board.

Once policies and procedures are in place, a constant program of re-examination and re-evaluation must continue.<sup>2</sup> Nothing can be allowed to interfere with this, for the library risks losing direction if this happens. Here again, it is important to designate one individual or department responsible. The public image of the library must be one of direction toward well stated and well understood goals and objectives. Periodic reviews are absolutely essential to that effort.

### Intellectual Freedom

One of the most difficult parts of any selection policy is that of outlining the library's stance toward intellectual freedom issues. The American tradition of freedom, best exemplified by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, guarantees freedom. We all know, however, that those guarantees are only as good as the effort we invest in protecting and defending them.

History provides a long narrative of repression, and the American experience of freedom of thought, word and deed is the exception rather than the rule. Censorship has exhibited an "evolution from heresy to treason to obscenity" from the Middle Ages to today.<sup>3</sup>

The "modern" focus on obscenity caps a long history which began in the Middle Ages. One early censorship effort was the publication by the Vatican of the *Index Liborum Prohibitorum* in 1559. Coming at a time when only a limited number of books were available to the very small group of persons who were literate, this vehicle was designed to defend the church from heretical attacks.

As nations stabilized, with more powerful governments, they became concerned about anti-government attacks. Printing had developed substantially, and more people could read, greatly increasing the influence of the printed word. Whereas blacklisting by the church had been sufficient to control the flow of ideas, more powerful means became necessary. The rise of the printers' guilds gave governments what they sought. The king exerted prior restraint by revoking monopolies of guilds which published "unacceptable" political pamphlets. Under this system, printing could only be done by licensed printers, and the king was the only person who could issue a license. Political censorship was in full swing.

The French and American Revolutions of the late 1700s mark a great turning point. Political and religious repression had existed side by side. The revolutionaries in France and America were intent upon minimizing the influence of the church. Their more restrictive ideas about erotic material sharply differed from those of the church. Conditions were right for developing censorship of erotic materials.

America has seen censorship of books on the basis of sex, national security, political content, religion, and other topics. Periodically certain public figures have tried, by sponsoring legislation or by conducting vigorous personal campaigns, to impose their views on the whole of American society. Beginning with the Alien and Sedition Acts and continuing through today's Moral Majority, we can trace a long line of persons and organizations whose conception of our constitutional guarantees is/was limited. From the Civil War on, the evolution of the communications media made it possible to coordinate national campaigns. One of the first of these was that by Anthony Comstock and the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice. In 1865 their efforts succeeded in gaining the passage of a federal law banning the sending of obscene matter through the mails.<sup>4</sup>

One repressive influence we see today comes from the Moral Majority. They resolve to protect children and the sanctity of life. The post World War II baby boom generation is now in the process

of developing family groups and having children. Their former concerns, as expressed during the Vietnam War, for a more radical approach to government and to the conduct of life in general, have changed as they have aged and taken on family responsibilities. The fact that they make up such a large segment of the population guarantees that their concerns will be brought before the public forum more often. Whether one is a politician looking for votes, a deodorant manufacturer who wants to sell a product, or a television show host who wants high Nielsen ratings, the concerns expressed as those of the largest segment of the public play an important role.

The Moral Majority's expressed concern for protecting children and its position on right-to-life issues has brought it support from young family people. Many who might disagree with the organization on other issues support these areas. Thus, the censorship strength of the Moral Majority is greater than its outright membership suggests. The Moral Majority focuses concern on a narrow spectrum of issues to build its strength.<sup>5</sup>

Battles concerning intellectual freedom issues generally are fought over one issue or over the inclusion or exclusion of a particular book. The emotionalism which generally arises in these battles can obscure all real issues during the battles. Restoring reason to these situations requires balance. At this point, a well formulated and well followed selection policy is essential. It constitutes clear evidence that thought has been put into developing the collection, and that the community's expressed wishes have been taken into account during the formulation and with the execution of the policy.<sup>6</sup>

Librarianship has been characterized as being peopled by "passive communicators."<sup>7</sup> Librarians need to assume an active stance in controlling the development of the library collection. All other intellectual freedom issues must receive active consideration and energetic commitment.

The public library staff, in consultation with its community and its board, must be in control of collection development. The formulation and adoption of a selection policy is one way to do this. It is important to stay committed to the task of developing a policy statement until it is done, since the process can raise many questions. The temptation to solve all selection problems at once must be avoided. In drawing up and adopting a selection policy, the library comes to grips with many of the basic issues governing the operation of the library. Each success in dealing with an issue helps build a foundation for dealing with other issues.

In the end, then, the formulation and adoption of a selection policy can be the beginning of an all out effort directed toward better library services for the patron. Within librarianship, service must remain most important, and collections must be built which best fulfill service goals.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Merritt, LeRoy Charles. *Book Selection and Intellectual Freedom*. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1970, 24-32. Much of the first part of this discussion is adapted from Chapter 2 of this book.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>3</sup> Ernst, M. L., and William Sengle. *To the Pure: a Study of Obscenity and the Censor*. New York: The Viking Press, 1928, 140.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, L. J. "Conservatism in America." *Harper's*, Oct. 1980, 21.

<sup>6</sup> Merritt. *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Kister, Kenneth. "A Unique Course on Intellectual Freedom and Censorship." *Book Selection and Censorship in the Sixties*, ed. Eric Moon, New York: R. R. Bowker Company, 1969, 397.

*Further Readings*

Asheim, Lester. "Not Censorship but Selection." *Wilson Library Bulletin*, September, 1953.

This article makes the best, most coherent, and eloquent statement for a positive philosophy of selection. A classic.

Bonk, Wallace John and Rose Mary Magrill. *Building Library Collections*. Fifth Edition. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1979.

This is a basic text which provides a very good comprehensive introduction to the issues involved in collection building. The extensive bibliographies at the end of each chapter provide ample resources for further reading.

Carter, Mary Duncan, et. al. *Building Library Collections*. Fourth Edition. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1974.

This earlier edition of the Bonk work cited above was the last for which Carter was directly responsible. She died in 1978. Especially good is inclusion of the Lester Asheim article "Not Censorship but Selection," cited above.

Ernst, M. L. and William Sengle. *To the Pure: a Study of Obscenity and the Censor*. New York: The Viking Press, 1928.

This book summarizes and surveys the development of official censorship from early times through the 19th century.

Ernst, M. L. and Alexander Lindey. *The Censor Marches On: Recent Milestones in the Administration of the Obscenity Law in the United States*. New York: Doubleday, 1940.

This continues the work cited above, providing an indepth look at the litigation considered by the Supreme Court and others between 1910 and the date of publication.

Gaver, Mary Virginia. *Background Readings in Building Library Collections*. Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Incorporated, 1969. (2 volumes)

Especially good in these volumes is one essay, "The Library in Our Town," by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, which appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* of October, 1946, pp. 127-30. It describes how books were selected in the Vermont town Fisher lived in. A very entertaining piece which repays careful reading. Community analysis, intellectual freedom, and public relations are all there.

Haines, Helen Elizabeth. *Living with Books: the Art of Book Selection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950.

This book was characterized by one sixties author as expousing the "I-love-books" line. Be that as it may, this is an essential book to read as part of a core of titles to learn the skill of positive book selection. Each section provides positive criteria one can use based on the genre and/or subject matter of the works being selected.

Katz, William A. *Collection Development: the Selection of Materials for Libraries*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1980.

This volume is a very comprehensive, up-to-date treatment of collection development. A final section is devoted to censorship. The text and the references provide access to a great deal of the best of the present and past literature.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Magazine Selection: How to Build a Community-oriented Collection*. New York: R. R. Bowker, 1971.

"One man's view of magazines," this volume is valuable for its Chapter 3,



entitled "Art of Selection." Several key questions to be answered in selecting public library periodicals are listed. Written in 1971, the technical portions of the book provide good treatment of the aids included. Katz also discusses then current practice in collection-building in relation to intellectual freedom issues.

Lane, Alfred H. *Gifts and Exchange Manual*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980.

"A handbook of procedures" which provides guidance in carrying out a gifts and exchange program. Lane concentrates on academic libraries, but much of his ideas could be applied to the public library situation as well.

Merritt, LeRoy Charles. *Book Selection and Intellectual Freedom*. New York: H. W. Wilson Company, 1970.

This shorter work provides the basics of the impact of intellectual freedom and book selection. Chapter Two: "Writing a Selection Policy" is a very good treatment of how to proceed.

Moon, Eric, ed. *Book Selection and Censorship in the Sixties*. New York: R. R. Bowker, 1969.

Most articles here appeared in *Library Journal* during the 1960s. Remarkably relevant to intellectual freedom concerns are two particular articles: "A Unique Course in Intellectual Freedom and Censorship," by Kenneth Kister, pp. 395-415; and "The Falacy of 'Balance' in Public Library Book Selection," by Ronald A. Landor, pp. 37-40.

Van Orden, Phyllis and Edith B. Phillips. *Background Readings in Building Library Collections*. Second Edition.

This work is one which presents a carefully balanced view of library collection building. The authors avoid taking a position; rather they expose the reader to all possible aspects of the subjects discussed. Sections of the work cover collection development, selection policies, the selection process, evaluation, publishers' and producers' roles, and recent trends. Each section lists further reading under "Recommended Readings."