**Donation Policy and the Library’s Core Values**

Style Guide: APA

*Keywords*: Gift-in-kind, donation, policy, ethics

**Introduction**

In August 2014, a library assistant at the Kaimuki Public Library in Honolulu, Hawaii participated in a special news segment to make a plea to the public: stop bringing in your unwanted unusable books. This was in response to a photo sent in from a viewer wanting to know why they found several stacks of books in the trash just outside the library (KHON2). This public relations blunder highlights an ongoing issue many libraries face: library donation policies are either non-existent, unclear, or unimplemented for gift donations potentially causing a waste of resources. The economic and public relations problems these contributions can unintentionally create for libraries by stretching already thin library resources while potentially resulting in harmful environmental waste, compromising the American Library Association’s Core Values of preservation, social responsibility, and sustainability (2019).

Researching donation policies indicates a gulf between the written donation policy and the practical applications of it as evidenced by the public and internal pressures placed on librarians to compromise their core values. How do libraries communicate and implement donation policies (if at all)? What is the most effective way to do so? How do libraries process unwanted donations?Clearly articulated library donation policies can only achieve so much to ensure the library upholds its core values; the policies must also be understood by both the library staff and patrons and implemented correctly to uphold library core values and alleviate funding issues faced by many libraries (Greer, 2013, pg. 138; Rubin, 2016, pg. 543).If patrons of the library understand the policies of library donation, both their purpose and reasoning, unwanted library donations may be curbed. This will save time and effort of library staff, ultimately saving the library and its funders money, while also potentially conserving the environment.

**Literature Review**

Conducting a narrative literature review by researching articles on the concepts of donation policy, gift policy, and gift-in-kind in relation to library ethics revealed two major themes. Coupled with the textbook readings on library ethics, the literature review paints a picture of a potentially contentious dichotomy: library donation policy as theory versus in practice. Local library donation policies and official ALA guidance indicate a professional consensus of library donation that does not necessarily reflect the lived realties of librarians. Articles were selected for variety in their approach towards the topic; first person accounts relating to library donation were included along with survey studies, program evaluations, donation policy comparisons, the American Library Association’s official guidance, and a cost-benefit comparison case study.

**Findings**

According toGreer, Grover, & Fowler, a code of ethics and values are a cornerstone of any profession, and they summarize several for librarians (2013, pg. 159). Rubin also reflects on the Core Values of the American Library Association (ALA) and explicitly mentions serving the public good, preservation, and social responsibility (2016, pg. 543-544). The American Library Association’s Core Values and library donation policy intersect in the difficulties many kinds of libraries face in processing, managing, and disposing of gift-in-kind library donations and the economic and public relations problems these contributions can unintentionally create for libraries.

In theory, every library should have a clearly worded, readily available donation and gift policy. The ALA supplies a set of suggested policy tools for libraries and librarians including guidance drafting public policy for gifts and donations. They stress the importance of a clearly worded donation policy in order to alleviate any confusion for the donor and the library staff about what materials are accepted, how those materials may be integrated into the library’s collection, and what ultimately happens to those materials deemed unnecessary or unsuitable for the collection (*Gifts*, 2018). Johnson’s textbook *Fundamentals of Collection Development and Management* also make space to extoll the virtues of these policies in relation to collection management (2018, pg. 96).

Real world examples of donations policies are provided by the University of Missouri and Daniel Boone Regional Library. The University of Missouri Library provides an example of a real and current policy in an active academic library. While the university welcomes donations, it specifies what kind of materials the library is willing to accept and provides links to special departments that will handle certain materials while also clearly indicating those that cannot be accepted. They include terms of acceptance such as responsibility for transporting the materials and clarify that the items are the property of the library after donation and subject to the collection policy of the library. This site useful as a means to compare written gift policies for different institutions and the information they make readily available to the public (2019).

The website for the Daniel Boone Regional Library, a local public library of the Columbia, Missouri area features a page devoted to its donations and gift policy titled “Give to Your Library.” The page, however, also features a breakdown of the donation policy, in the form of a graph, for several other branch libraries in the neighboring areas of Daniel Boone Regional Library, the Daniel Boone Regional Library Foundation, and local Library Friends organizations, which follow different donation policies. Notably, the Daniel Boone Regional Library does not accept books or art while Library Friends for Callaway County does. The site also provides a copy of the library’s official gift policy, which clearly explains the ethical obligations inherent in the acceptance of gifts and donations while also providing to the potential donor an exact description of the process behind their donating and the library’s acceptance of their gift and the rational explaining the eventual dispensation of their gift, setting better expectations for the donor (2020). These donations policies are made readily available to any of the public with access to a computer and an internet connection. They should theoretically deter unwanted donations.

**Donation Policies in Practice**

However, donation policy and practice are not always in accordance with each other. There are several reasons that libraries may be conflicted in accepting donations, as occasionally they can be advantageous. Ballestro and Howze (2006) conducted a cost-benefit case study of collection management and gift donation in their article “When a Gift is Not a Gift.” After the Economics Department of Southern Illinois University of Carbondale decided to donate their department library to the university library, librarians selected appropriate works for their collection and then compared the cost of processing those against the cost buying them outright. This cost-benefit analysis was useful in illustrating the potential expenses of accepting a gift donation, while also providing an example of a gift supplying useful materials to the library collection. It is notable, however, that there is still the potential for the donation to cost the library more than it is deemed worth, leading to the dilemma many librarians face of refusing donations.

This dilemma is explained in Douglas’s article “The Library (Usually) Doesn’t Want Your Used Books” (2017). Written for the lay person, the article clarifies unsolicited gifts create extra work and cost money to make useable in the collection, and potentially disrespect the library by ignoring its stated gifts policy. The implication of his explanation is that the reader (a potential donor) would be confused and a little offended that their gift could be turned down and unappreciated. Furthermore, the author feels the need to explain to the audience that there is a donation policy to begin with, highlighting that many patrons are not aware of its existence. This points to another issue: donation policies are either unclear or absent all together.

Examples of this can be seen in the article “Gifts in Policy and Practice” by Drummond, Hollman, Monroe, and Stephens (1999), who conducted a phone survey of gift policies and practices of 29 voluntary librarians and found that *most* responding libraries had gift policies, but that not every library had a designated individual or department to handle donations. Written policy and practice were generally in line with each other, however, some libraries either failed to mention certain requirements in their policy, followed a very generalized policy that allowed for broad interpretation, or caved to outsized pressure from donors. They concluded that a gift and donation program is helpful for a library by maintaining positive relations with the public if not for collection development. These policies are not just for the public, but for the staff as well, who also require clarification for their expected behavior towards donations.

In order to draft a donation policy for their university’s library, Empey (2018) conducted a survey of gift and donation policy webpages of 21 members of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries in order to compare and contrast the information made readily available to the public. The study revealed certain common practices such as clearly indicated contact information and explanations of the screening process, but also revealed several ways that policies differed such as explaining what kind of materials were preferred or who would pay for shipping. Every library drafts its own donation policy to match its collection development goals, and with that there are several policies that contradict with those of other libraries.

Andrews and Richey argue that libraries must handle donation scenarios with caution as the donor of unwanted materials can feel slighted and damage the community’s good will to the library. Their solution to alleviate this issue is a concise and clear donation policy for both the employee and lay person. The authors stress the donations do not come unattached, and can often be used to further agendas of certain groups or belief systems, but these donations should still be considered within the framework of the stated gift policy and collection management (2020). Cox notes that donors are often attached to their proposed donations and would be hurt by their dismissal. These potential public relations may not prove that problematic in the small scale of donations from individuals, when donations are large or conditional, they can prove to be major ethical difficulties for libraries. One the one hand, a library may refuse a gift and incur potential repercussions from the donor; on the other hand, they can accept a donation that doesn’t fit into their collection and takes up needed space (2004). Karel also recounts several instances of compromised ethics in accepting donations from generous donors that University Development did not wish to offend (2012).

When a donation cannot be refused, for reasons of social pressure or otherwise, librarians are left with the task of determining what items will fit into the collection. This task can consume a lot of time and staff have turned to a variety of management tools. Emanuel evaluates the usage of the program Getting It Started Toolkit’s Gifts and Deselection Manager in the University of Mississippi’s Libraries. Libraries often do not or cannot have staff dedicated to gifts and donations or space to house those donations before or after selection. They decided to use the GIST Gifts and Deselection Manager program to assess their donations by weighing the cost of a newly purchased copy of a book with a donated one while also searching library records to determine if a copy was already in the collection. Emanuel concluded that the system was a success for her institution (2014).

Once the donation has been assessed by staff, there is the issue of what happens to the materials deemed unsuitable. The special interest piece by KHON2 concerning the unwanted donations of books made to a local library, illustrated a real-world example of the continued difficulties that library staff face explaining donation policies to the public. Donors do not understand that donations are not always welcome or needed, and libraries struggle to maintain goodwill if they turn down those donations (2014). Johnson also notes that gift donations in poor condition could cause damage to the rest of the collection through mold (2018, p. 224). *Libguides*, a webpage provided by the ALA, details several alternative sites for media donation beyond the library. While this website only offers a cursory examination of the reasons these sites might be a better recipient for donations, it goes a long way in explaining, in a simple manner for the casual reader, why appraisal of a donation cannot be completed by the library for reasons of potential fraud, helpfully clarifying the ethical issue (2019).

O’Hare and Smith (2011) make note of the ethical issues created by selling off unwanted or unkeepable items in their article “Gifts Nobody Wants: The State of the Art in Dealing with Unwanted Donations”, such as artwork or rare books, and the public relations difficulties that stem from those sales. The proceeds from these sales may be tied up in restrictions for their use and institutions may not be able to divert them to keeping solvent, or the collection may not be property of the library at all if the donation policy and paperwork do not support this. They clarify, with valuable historical examples, the necessity of clearly worded gift and donations policies to serve as legal protection in cases such as donor fraud or misunderstanding. Sturges and Gastinger (2012) consider two cases of libraries in France and Germany declining large donations from the Church of Scientology. The authors consider IFLA’s Freedom of Access to Information and Freedom of Expression in relation to the library policy on donations and they conclude these libraries either failed to uphold the commitment to freedom of expression by denying works based on prejudice or failed to adequately explain the otherwise valid reasons to decline the donation.

**Arguments**

Lived experiences of librarians suggest donations cause several issues for libraries. They often cannot physically house donations or financially support the effort it takes to process them, though there are programs that potentially help alleviate the financial burden of processing (Emanuel, 2014). Several sources indicate that the public does not understand library donation policies (Douglas, 2017) or the potential environmental and financial consequences of unwanted or damaged donations (KHON2, 2014; Johnson, 2018). There are also indications that librarians themselves do not always understand or know of the policy for their library (Drummond et al., 1999) and sometimes there is no policy at all (Drummond et al., 1999; Empey, 2018). Donations can also be unacceptable due to the requests made by donors for their acceptance or by the donation’s provenance (Johnson, 2018; Karel, 2012; O’Hare & Smith, 2011).

Other studies note that donation policies are often ignored or compromised in order to maintain positive relations with high powered donors (Andrews & Richey, 2012; Cox, 2004; Karel, 2012). When a cost-benefit study was conducted by Bellestro and Howze (2006), they found the donation useful, but noted casual donations are not generally welcome. Overall, libraries discouraging donations appears to be a theme (Daniel Boone Regional Library, 2020; Douglas, 2017; KHON2 News, 2014; O’Hare & Smith, 2011), but there are cases where poorly worded donation policy or under clarified donation refusal could indicate other ethical quandaries such as censorship (Sturges & Gastinger, 2012). Libraries should draft clear and precise donation policies that they consistently uphold by training staff in their written policy and proper donor relations. Furthermore, those policies should be made readily available to the public both on the web and in person.

**Conclusion**

Donation and gift policies can be an excellent way to communicate, both to the public and library staff, the ethical implications of donations to a library. However, studies indicate these policies are not always clear or strictly followed and that the public does not truly understand them even when they are. Libraries would be well served to train staff in donation policies and implementation while also finding ways to clarify to their patrons and public the specifics of their donation policies and providing alternative donation sites or repositories for unwanted donations. Perhaps by doing so, we can avoid angry patrons ranting to news stations about books wasting away in the garbage.

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