Collection Policies and Requests for Reconsideration in Academic Libraries – a Kansas Perspective

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Abstract

Sound collections policy is essential for the efficient creation and management of any collection (Johnson, 2018). This is true in general from a purely practical viewpoint but becomes increasingly important philosophically in a time when there is a huge increase in challenges to specific library materials (ALA, 2024).

Academic libraries have traditionally considered their role to be to provide materials for study from a wide variety of viewpoints with often conflicting understandings, and although they have a long history of using collections policy to guide their acquisitions (Johnson, 2018) they have much less experience of requiring policy to fend off challenges to selected materials. Bell (2022), however, suggests that academic libraries need to be more prepared to face materials challenges in the light of emerging censorship trends occurring at the individual level as well as within state legislatures.

This paper explores the prevalence of collections policy in the public, four-year academic institutions in Kansas and, in particular, looked to see if there is policy information provided on requests for reconsideration of library materials. It also looked at how much of this policy is easily accessible online and therefore immediately available to members of the university and others. The paper concludes with suggestions for strengthening existing policy in this area as well as other preemptive actions that can be taken to ensure the integrity of library collections against threats of censorship.

Keywords
library policy, book challenges, request for reconsideration, academic libraries, Kansas libraries

INTRODUCTION

Sound collections policy is essential for the efficient creation and management of any collection (Johnson, 2018). This is true in general from a purely practical viewpoint but becomes increasingly important philosophically in a time when there is a huge increase in challenges to specific library materials (ALA, 2024).

Academic libraries have traditionally considered their role to be to provide materials for study from a wide variety of viewpoints with often conflicting understandings, and although they have a long history of using collections policy to guide their acquisitions (Johnson, 2018) they have much less experience of requiring policy to fend off challenges to selected materials. Bell (2022), however, suggests that academic libraries need to be more prepared to face materials challenges in the light of emerging censorship trends occurring at the individual level as well as within state legislatures.

Good policy, as characterized by Moran and Morner (2017), must include the following four characteristics: that the policy is written, that policy is consistent across all of an institution's operations, that policy is regularly revised or is flexible enough to allow adaptation to changing circumstances, and that policy documents are confined to policy rather than contain procedure. This ensures that the institution responds consistently in similar situations and increases operational efficiency as the policy provides the response to operational questions and eliminates the need to devise new responses to the same questions.

Podrygula's 1994 report on her academic library's experience with a book challenge demonstrates the importance of having adequate policy in place before any challenge occurs and also the benefits that accrued from having good policy supported at all levels of the institution.

This study set out to explore the prevalence of policy for collections in general and policies for reconsideration of materials in particular in the public, four-year academic institutions in Kansas.

METHOD

The websites of all 6 of the Kansas Board of Regents (BOR) institutions – Emporia State University, Fort Hays State University, Kansas State University, Pittsburgh State University, The University of Kansas, and Wichita State University - plus Washburn University (publicly funded, independently governed and state coordinated) were accessed using links from the BOR website. Once at the main page for each institution, a search was made for collection policy statements using the available search engine within each main page and with the following search terms or strings: library policy, library policies, collection policy, challenged materials, and request for reconsideration. The resulting policy pages were visited,

and policies copied into Word documents or policy documents downloaded. All available policy documents were then analyzed, and results tallied in an Excel spreadsheet.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations noted in this study as a result of the method employed and the nature of the inquiry in general and the searching protocol in particular, as well as each institution's decision as to which policies should be public and which private.

SEARCHING PROTOCOL

The protocol purposely used simple search terms featuring the most commonly used terminology for both collections policy documents and requests for reconsideration. Documents that used alternate language may not have been correctly identified by the search engines on each university's web page. The researcher made no attempt to seek out policy beyond designated policy pages (other than collection development policies or requests for reconsideration, which were searched for specifically.) Policy documents were not read in detail beyond the document title and headings, so unless specific policies were identified in the document title or a heading or subheading within the document, they were not retrieved successfully.

PUBLIC VS PRIVATE POLICY

Some institutions may consider policy such as collection development policy to be internal rather than external, so while the policy may exist, it is not available for public viewing, or at least not published on an outward-facing website. Other policy, such as a request for reconsideration, may exist but is not publicized so as not to promote challenges to items in the collection. No attempt was made to speak directly to library representatives to ascertain if policy existed but was kept private.

POLICY IN LARGER DOCUMENTS

Institutions may consider that issues of collections or requests for considerations are covered more generally in BOR policy documents or in individual University Policy Manuals, although the links provided to these types of documents tended to be generic links to a complete document, rather than links to a specific policy or place in a document.

POLICY LOCATION

All policy documents/statements affecting library collections or requests for reconsideration may not all be on a single policy page but may be scattered across an array of university webpages. Policy pages may also provide non-working links to other pages or documents or refer to non-existent documents or parts of documents, such as appendixes.

FINDINGS

Six of the seven institutions investigated had a webpage that was either devoted to or contained library policies. A variety of policies were discovered and the types of policies and the number of institutions that had those policies are listed in Table 1. Six institutions also had a collection development policy that was available online, although not all CDPs were accessible through the library policy page. Of these six policies, one referred only to special collections and another only to digital materials, so only four institutions had accessible CDPs that addressed the entirety of the institution's library collections. Only two institutions made public a policy for the reconsideration of materials.

Table 1: Policy Type and Number of Institutions

Policy	Number of Institutions
Collection Development Policy	6*
Archives and Special Collections	4
Conduct	4
Reproduction and Permissions	4
Room use	4
Building use	3
Computer/Technology/Network Access	3
Computer/Technology Checkout	3
Electronic Resources Access	2
Inter-Library Loan (ILL)	2
Privacy	2
Request for Reconsideration	2
Circulation	1
Preservation, Digital	1
Unattended Minors	1

- Only 4 policies covered the entire library collection

POLICY AGE, AUTHORIZATION AND FORMAT

All policy documents were checked to ascertain the date on which each policy was enacted. The oldest policy document was dated 2008 while the most current policy was enacted in 2024. Other policy documents displayed a variety of publication dates within this range, some documenting every policy change or reauthorization since first enacted and others simply listing the most recent date of authorization, as well as the authorizing authority. Sixteen policy documents were not dated and no easily attributable date information was provided in the source webpages. In addition, many documents did not provide any attribution of the authority for their creation. The inclusion of authority statements in addition to dates allows readers to understand who is responsible for a particular policy and therefore who has the responsibility for ensuring its timeliness and accuracy.

Policy documents were provided in a variety of formats, including html webpages, pdf files embedded in web pages and pdf files linked from policy web pages. Some policy pages offered documents in all three modes and some policy documents covered multiple policy areas within a single document. The variety of formats and locations made it difficult to peruse all policy relating to a single institution, and the use of the pdf and embedded pdf formats was also problematic from the point of view of accessibility and the use of screen readers, so that not only was policy often difficult to locate, but it could be inaccessible even when identified and located.

DISCUSSION

The lack of policy, especially regarding the creation and maintenance of library collections can leave institutions' administration, staff and patrons vulnerable (Johnson, 2018). With the expected rise in materials challenges in academic libraries to mirror that in public libraries, it is imperative that libraries are prepared with strong policy that is adequate to protect collections, librarians, and library users (Bell, 2022.)

No library should be identifying its lack of collections policy or the robustness of its reconsideration policy after a complaint has been made, for crisis policy development is stressful and often leads to poor policy decisions, especially if policy is based on single cases and developed in a hurry, rather than being thoughtfully considered and developed with input from all appropriate stakeholders.

There is also the potential for bad publicity if the library or institution is seen not to be properly prepared to explain or defend their collections process, or if there is no designated procedure to handle complaints. This may result in the library's

reputation being damaged internally within the institution or externally with the institution's reputation called into question as well as that specifically of the library.

The fact that only two of the seven libraries investigated mentioned policy on requests for reconsideration suggests that these public institutions are not well prepared to deal with challenges to library materials, especially those of the types now being seen in many public libraries across the United States.

MOVING FORWARD

Although it can be daunting to confront policy deficits, there are some simple steps that can help institutions move forward quickly and efficiently to bolster any policy weaknesses.

One of the first steps is simply to conduct a policy audit and determine which policies a library already has, and which may be missing. As part of the audit is it also essential to determine how old the policies are and if they are still fit for purpose. For example, does a collections policy make any provision for electronic materials, or still reference obsolete formats? Do the policy documents comply with current university policy?

Next a priority needs to be established to edit or create policy. Essentials should be addressed first – legally-required policy, essential policy and then desirable policy. A reasonable timeframe should be created, such as addressing one policy per library faculty meeting, or alternatively, a policy subcommittee can be charged with drafting policy for approval by the larger faculty and appropriate university authorities.

It is also helpful to establish a policy review plan. Simply create a review calendar that ensures that each policy is reviewed periodically – every three years is a reasonable timeframe and ensures that all library policy is current. Any policy can be reviewed earlier, but a regular review is usually sufficient to keep policy fit for purpose. Remember that a review of library policy does not necessitate change. A simple reauthorization may be sufficient if the policy is still appropriate to the library's situation.

Make a habit of adding policy review to regular faculty meetings as this keeps policy to the forefront of library activities and also serves to remind library faculty of policy and educate any new faculty as to current library policy. Note it is also important to ensure that all other library workers, including student workers, as well as the general university faculty and administration are aware of library policy and can explain this to patrons as necessary.

If policy needs to be created or revised it is best to keep the process simple. Consider using a policy sub-committee to draft policy statements rather than starting from scratch in a full faculty meeting. It is also helpful for those drafting policy to seek input from appropriate library stakeholders including librarians,

other library staff and student workers, as well as the university's students, faculty and administration. The university's legal staff should also be involved in the process to help ensure that library policy is in line with all other university requirements.

Make sure your policy documents contain only policy and not procedure. Procedures may need to change more frequently than policy, so create separate procedures documents that can be updated as required without going through the formal policy approval process.

Address one policy at a time to avoid getting bogged down in protracted and complex discussions, although all library policy should be consistent, and it is essential to check that changes to one policy do not impinge on another. Take the time to create sound policy that meets the needs of the library and review and rework as necessary. Use language thoughtfully to the benefit of the library and its personnel, for example by using the non-confrontational terminology of a request for reconsideration rather than a book challenge or objection to materials. Above all remember that it is your policy and you can change it as needed to serve the needs of the library, its staff, administration and patrons to best advantage.

CONCLUSION

Good policy provides protection for library administration, staff and patrons and ensures the smooth provision of library services. In the current climate of increased challenges to library materials in all types of libraries it is essential that libraries are prepared with strong policy that protects the integrity of their collections and the access to materials by all library users. The results of this study suggest that not all Kansas BOR four-year institutions are adequately prepared, due to the apparent lack of collection development policies or policy to cope with requests for reconsideration of library materials. The process of addressing policy deficits need not be overwhelming if the process is broken down into stages and addressed in a systematic way. Taking action now before problems arise will put libraries in a stronger position to defend our traditional values of equitable access to information for all.

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