Implementing Collection Life Cycle Management

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Annie Bélanger, "Implementing Collection Life Cycle Management" (2015). *Proceedings of the Charleston Library Conference.*
http://dx.doi.org/10.5703/1288284316245

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Abstract

In a time of increasing physical collection space pressures and rapidly evolving higher education institutions, a holistic understanding of the collection life cycle, a strategic approach to collection development and retention, and increased stakeholder engagement is needed. Some librarians struggle with what materials to withdraw, especially if there is faculty opposition, and how to move forward collaboratively. This article will explore leveraging the experience of leading the local culture shift in a large Association of Research Library, the principles, policies and methods required to shift mental models towards what must be retained, facilitating withdrawal decisions, and connecting collection development with ongoing collection management.

Why Collection Life Cycle Management?

The last decade has been a time of reduction in stack space, for a wide range of reasons. Increasing pressure to ensure that precious square footage is focused on user needs has precipitated a reduction of stacks in many libraries. Off-site storage facilities are notoriously full, with some seemingly on life support. Increasingly, libraries are having to weed print collections, whether in the campus libraries or offsite storage. There has been a range of success based on stakeholder management and selector engagement.

Many struggle with what materials to withdraw, especially if there is faculty opposition. The just-in-case approach of collection building is set in direct conflict when there is discussion of withdrawal—"How do we know this won't be valuable in 10, 20, 50, 100 years?" The very essence of the definition of research libraries since the end of WWII is challenged by the need to withdraw beyond basic housekeeping. Evidence-based practices are challenged when so much emotion and the definition of a profession is tied into the collections.

A holistic understanding of the collection life cycle, along with a strategic approach to collection retention, assists a library in moving the conversation from one of loss to one of empowerment and proactive engagement. Collection life cycle management (CLM) shifts mental models towards what must be retained, facilitating withdrawal decisions and connecting collection development with ongoing collection management. Further, CLM allows us to enhance stakeholder engagement at the level of overarching principles and areas of focus, and not at the title level, which has been found to be an impediment to good process management.

It allows us to create multiple paths for material to move through, with a clear understanding of these paths and their associated intentions. It gives us permission to buy materials that have at most a midterm use and flag these for early withdrawal. It provides a cohesive framework to manage collections from the start to the end of their life cycle.

Exploring a Shift to a CLM Approach

The road to implementing CLM will vary among institutions, in part due to the selector model in place and its history. Here, I will attempt to breakdown what is often an organic model with overlap into a set of concrete steps. Any one institution may be starting at any one step, depending on their collection culture.

The first step, if there is such a concrete thing, will be to create buy-in for the concept. I suggest breaking this process down into manageable pieces. To begin, acquire a solid understanding of where your institution is and the gaps that need to be filled before a culture shift can occur. At

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Waterloo, a palpable difference in the approach in thinking to collections occurred after five years.

The second step, and one your institution may have completed, is to create collection development policies and, if possible, an overarching collection development strategy. Collection development policies clearly articulate what is being purchased, and why and by whom, defining the incoming materials. Sometimes, they provide a way to refuse requests for materials that do not fit the goals of the collection. The acceptance of donations should align with these policies to ensure a cohesive collection.

The third step in moving to CLM is to get buy-in for collection evaluation. This is commonly perceived as a task that requires a great deal of time; however, the benefits are profound. Collection evaluation

- Strengthens decisions regarding the life cycle of a collection
- Ensures that individual collections encompass materials that effectively meet the changing research needs of its users; gives opportunity to identify and remedy a collection's weaknesses; exhibits proactive engagement with a collection
- Helps maintain librarians' accountability to users, academic departments, and stakeholders

In critically asking questions, librarians will determine the unique facets and focal points of a collection, aiding them in the selection of evaluation methods to target key materials for retention. I will not explore collection evaluation methods in this paper, but rather the high-level questions that frame the evaluation.[1]

Librarians need to consider the following questions in direct relation to their collection:

- What are the collection's focal points or areas of concentration?
    - What are the objectives of the collection?
    - What kinds of materials are vital? Conversely, what kinds of materials are no longer vital?
- Is the collection strong and relevant? Conversely, what are its weaknesses?
    - Are collection materials meeting the research needs of its users?
- Are materials being used regularly by students, faculty, etc.?
    - In what ways are materials being used by students, faculty, etc.?
- Is the collection supporting or impacting other collections?
- Are certain material formats more desired than others?

As well, collection evaluation should be done in the context of the library's specific goals regarding user needs and research outcomes. As such, knowledge of the local institution policies is key. Further, librarians should keep in mind academic departmental research and teaching needs in the short- and long-term. Librarians can refer to academic departmental documentation and correspondence, such as:

- Minutes from academic departmental meetings
- Undergraduate and graduate affairs reports presented to faculty councils

[1] Information on evaluation methods is in the CLM toolkit: http://subjectguides.uwaterloo.ca/collection life cyclemanagement.

- Recent changes made to program or course descriptions
- Recent consultations with department and faculty

The fourth step is to begin working on collection retention policies to support each of these recognized benefits and lead to effective and responsible decision making in the form of strategic withdrawal action. Strategic retention ensures that collections remain relevant by explicitly identifying necessary materials to be retained over the long-term.

Collection retention policies are a critical component of shifting the conversation from one of loss to an empowered discussion of material that is both valuable and of value to the institution's constituency. Retention policies will foremost institute an efficient, streamlined collection evaluation process that can be carried out on a regular basis, in a manageable manner, by all librarians. Focusing on retention will help to efficiently structure the withdrawal review process by promoting a proactive approach to collection retention and withdrawal that facilitates continuous review rather than a reactionary and defensive "crisis management" approach when required. The policies directly address the often unique long-term research needs particular of individual collections, saving librarians considerable time and effort in identifying fit and assuring that their collections are perpetually relevant to the students and faculty using them. Last, they improve communication with faculty members in regard to collection maintenance.

Each collection retention policy must include specific statements that speak to the collection areas that will generally be retained, such as specialized topics that support the specific department; primary sources (this might include print sources such as diaries and correspondence, as well as electronic sources such as raw datasets); works published by university students and faculty (books, conference proceedings, etc.); materials collected by other departments that are deemed no longer relevant but which have research value for a specific department; and classic retrospective works that contribute to the strength of the collection (seminal works, core titles, standards, patents, etc.). This list of collection retention areas is not exhaustive. Because each collection has a unique focus, librarians may need to create further retention statements. Similarly, they may feel the need to modify existing retention categories. Librarians should ensure that they remain at a high enough level that no one title is mentioned. If such detail is wanted, it should be a follow-on to the policy in term of LC class and title-level retention rules that can be used by the collection maintenance and cataloging teams.

Keep in mind that the collection retention policies are meant to reaffirm the principles and key areas in collection development policies. The retention policies should not contradict these policies; however, they may not include all areas of the policies since the retention policies are meant to identify materials that need to be kept over the long-term, whereas the development policies include short-, mid-, and long-term needs.

The last step is to create a collection philosophy.

Implementing CLM at Waterloo

In this section I explore Waterloo's experience of moving to a CLM approach starting with piloting a retention policy to living with proactive, ongoing collection stewardship.

In 2008, Waterloo desperately needed to withdraw material, yet mired in a sense of loss, it was essentially paralyzed. Both main libraries were over 90% capacity, with some floors close to 98%. The long-term storage facility had only several years of transfer left, at a limited pace. The collection maintenance unit was desperately aware of the situation, as each collection shift had created a growing workload due to the stack capacities, quadrupling of the cost of these shifts. During this time, over 30,000 monographs and many print serials titles were being received.

After moving into a crisis management mode to draw down a floor that had received a fire warden warning because aisles were encroached by book trucks filled with materials, I started exploring ways to think about the issue over the long-term. As a newer member of the library, my first step was to understand what had been done in the past, what a successful management of the collection might look like from a different vantage point, and what was different now that made something we tried in the past not possible.

In 2005-2006, the library had moved to a more standardized approach for collection development policies. These were created in consultation with the relevant academic departments and were to align with higher level collection policies, such as the statement on the purchase of textbooks. In the same timeframe, the local consortia, the Tri-University Group of Libraries (TUG) had created a Preservation of TUG Last Copy Agreement,[2] which had preceded a significant deduplication effort of the shared long-term storage facility.

In listening to the librarians and the collection maintenance unit,[3] a few concepts came into focus. The first was that the term "weeding" was used to represent (1) shifting to the long-term storage and (2) withdrawal outright, with the first meaning the most frequently applied. Second, for many, tonnage was still foremost in defining what it meant to be an ARL-level research library. Third, there was a concern that withdrawing a book meant we were not trusting earlier collection decisions and potentially short-changing future researchers.

Waterloo needed a way to both validate those concerns and mitigate the risks by a strategic approach to drawing down the size of its collections. Coming from a varied background, I started to think about the life cycle of print materials along with the policies, procedures, and practices that ruled their existence within the library. I developed two simple flowcharts, one with an overlay of these policies and procedures (Figure 1) and another with their role (Figure 2), to illuminate the situation.

Using a project management approach, a pilot was developed as a way to test out these ideas in a collaborative, engaged way. The pilot created collection retention policies so the collection could be evaluated in tangible ways on a consistent basis. Therefore, collection evaluation would become an ongoing task for librarians as

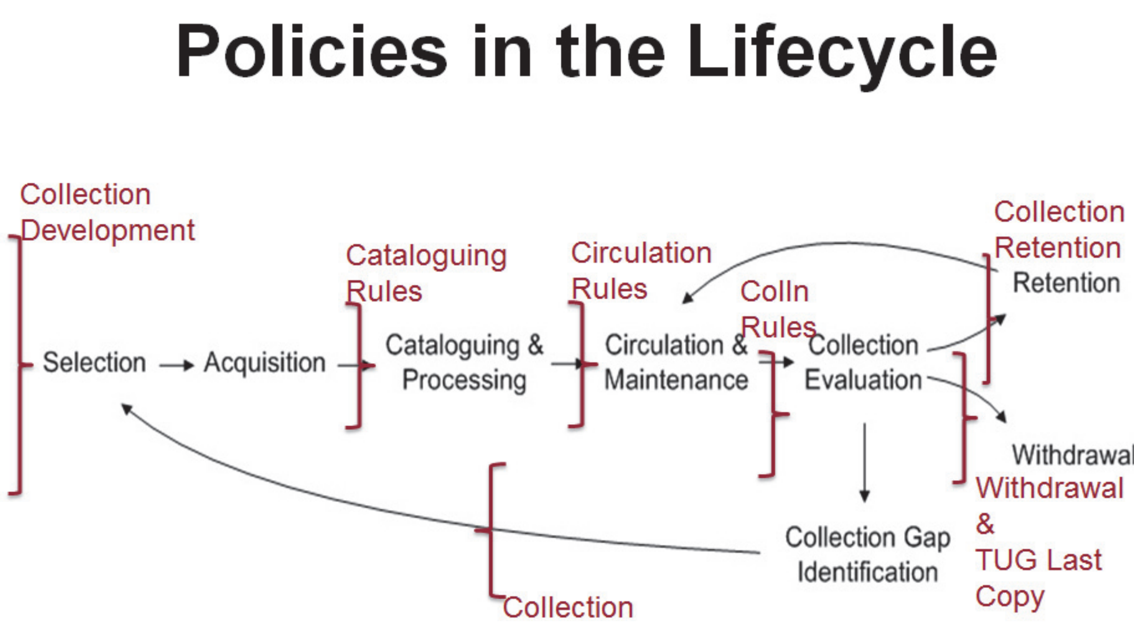

Figure 1. Policies in the life cycle.

[2] The Preservation of TUG Last Copy Agreement is at: http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/staff/irmc/last_copy_agreement_sept06.html.

[3] Liaison Librarians at Waterloo

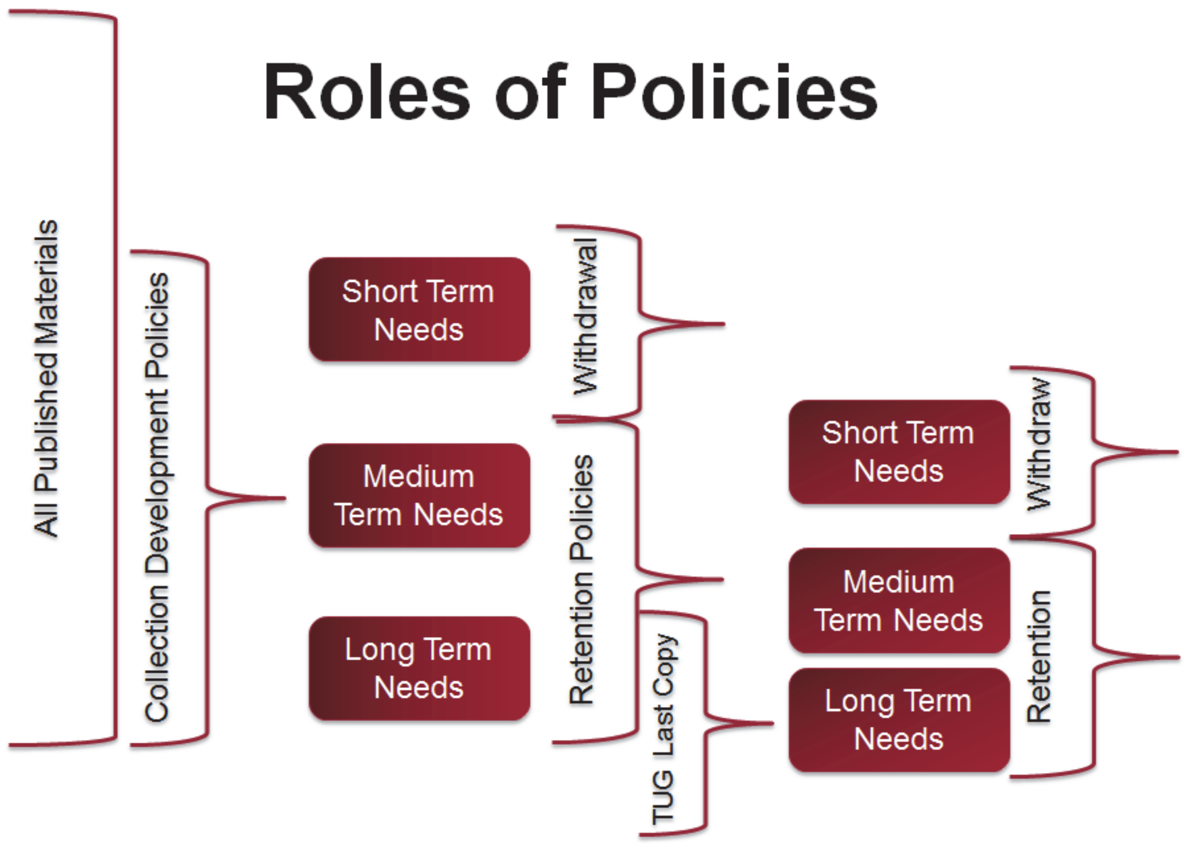

Figure 2. Roles of policies.

opposed to a task which is completed in crisis mode when print collections need to be withdrawn due to space issues. Continuous collection evaluation would allow librarians to examine the weaknesses and strengths of their collection and ensure that collections remain relevant to users.

The pilot began in 2010, with two librarians drafting retention policies and providing feedback on the toolkit as well as training needs. In early 2011, librarians received training, enabling them to evaluate their collections and draft retention policies. Over the following year and a half, librarians drafted their collection retention policies with support from an MLIS intern.

A large part of this project required the intern to provide support to the librarians when they were creating their collection retention policies. The answers to their questions were established by critical judgement and impressionistic analysis and thus used the knowledge they possess in their subject field. In addition, other evaluation tools and methods used usage data and user statistics. In many cases, an MLIS intern collected the necessary statistics by running various reports. The collected data, often displayed on excel file sheets, was then presented to the liaison librarian so that he or she could make appropriate retention decisions.

The arts and humanities librarians completed their policies first, while the science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) librarians were to do so in the second phase. The collection retention policies for the STEM librarians posed a different challenge. The wording associated with the collection retention policies was much more congruent to the arts and humanities fields. The STEM library has a different concentration with regards to its collection, which focuses much more on recent publications and current development with little classic retrospective works being retained. This meant that the wording for the policies had to be reworked as well as the approach to the development of the collection retention policy.

To identify classic retrospective works for STEM subject areas, an MLIS intern identified core older titles by generating book citations in Scopus that are specifically related to the Waterloo faculty. Additionally, STEM librarians requested that the research areas pertinent to their subject fields be mapped to Library of Congress subject headings and Library of Congress classification numbers, allowing librarians to identify the appropriate subject headings that correspond directly to research areas in their subject field. I supposed that the arts and humanities librarians were generally more aware of the LC class since the monograph is still a dominant purchase.

Once the policies were drafted, the withdrawal exercises became swifter and smoother. In late 2012, the Arts & Humanities Library undertook its first visual inspection to identify duplicates and noncritical superseded editions. Every duplicate and previous edition was brought to the appropriate librarians for review and decision making: retain, shift to long-term storage, or withdraw. In approximately six months, the stacks were brought to 80% capacity from 96% capacity, with very few titles being lost. The plan was to repeat the exercise in the STEM Library immediately, but a consortia project overtook this, and the exercise is now planned for next year.

In 2012, the TUG libraries (University of Guelph, University of Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University) undertook a project to complete a large-scale print monograph deduplication of low-use items across our main libraries and shared storage facility. Though there was mild discomfort among the librarians about using a metrics-based approach, the assurance of retention LC classes and a review by special collections for valuable books allowed us to move forward. The retention classes were drawn directly from the retention policies.

Most recently, in 2014, the library undertook the subscription collection review (SCR), reviewing every ongoing subscription, which accounted for over CAD8.5M in yearly expenditures. The principle of strategic retention and curation underpinned the exercise, which is still ongoing and likely to become the way the library operates in terms of renewals.

Over these past five years, there have been many lessons learned from challenges in implementation. The following section will outline some of the key challenges and the accompanying glimmer of wisdom. Before proceeding though, it is key to emphasize that an active champion has been critical in the continued progress and dedication to an approach that requires more planning.

The first challenge concerned the expected relationship between the collection development and retention policies: were they to be different or to refer to each other. We worked on emphasizing the relationship between the two. The reality is that the first dictates what is added to the collection and the other is used to decide what should be retained, and therefore withdrawn. Thes two policies are then closed by the withdrawal policy and the TUG Preservation of Last Copy Agreement.

The second challenge was that a wide range of evaluation approaches could be used, including the order in which people undertook projects. For example, some librarians drafted their policies first and evaluated the collection to validate and revise. Others dug deeply into evaluation and stakeholder engagement to ensure the policy was in line with ongoing needs. Similar outcomes arrived with retention projects. The key was to let them use collection knowledge and ensure that while a framework was provided, you don’t oversteer.

The third challenge was the power of faculty influence. Many librarians felt pressured to keep everything, thus finding it difficult to make retention decisions when they felt they needed to report back on each decision. We were in many cases able to engage them through the collection development and retention policies to give input at a higher level, allowing them the ability to act independently at the title level.

The fourth challenge was in many ways hesitance. Collection maintenance is often seen as a low priority, regularly put off since there is no time or because it can be an overwhelming, intimidating exercise. Getting rid of materials does not always sit well. The key lesson is that shifting a mental model not easy. We approached this by building trust, an unwavering champion who demonstrated its need at regular meetings.