

## ***Theological Librarians and Collection Management: Collaborative Policy Development***

by Robert J. Mayer

Five years ago, our theological library system confronted a hard reality. We had been so busy with library functions and services that we had had little time to reflect on key library policies, especially our collection management policy. Our accreditation renewal was two years away, and our current collection management policy, adopted in 1994, was twenty years old! On top of that Gordon-Conwell Seminary leadership wanted a new policy by the end of the academic year.

The ten-year period from 2005-2015 was difficult for seminaries, and Gordon-Conwell was no exception. For almost all institutions of higher education, the Great Recession of 2008-2009 dealt severe blows to enrollments, endowments, revenue, and staffing. In addition, developments in technology accelerated the pace of change facing colleges and universities. Libraries were now confronted with demands for distributed resources available online that would serve students at multiple locations. A collection development policy forged in the early 1990s would no longer cut it in this new environment.

### **Assumptions**

As senior librarian, I began by establishing assumptions for development of our completely new collection management policy. First, the policy would focus not simply on acquisitions (collection development) but on the depth and usability of the library collections for the Seminary community (collection management).

Second, the process would be collaborative and involve librarians from all four of our campus libraries. Since we instituted our policy in 1994, Gordon-Conwell had added two campuses in the southeastern United States and had expanded degree programs on its other campuses.

Third, librarians would interact with faculty and others at each of our campuses and seek their informal feedback.

Finally, we assumed that because Gordon-Conwell is not a research institution that offers the PhD, our libraries would focus on resources that supported the courses and degree programs we offer. We would match library resources and services to our educational mission and not attempt to be something that our school did not need.

### **A Collaborative Process**

Each month our combined library professional staff holds a conference where librarians from our four campuses meet via phone conference (and now by Zoom visual conferencing) to discuss how we can better collaborate in strengthening our library services and serving our campuses. Each member of the professional staff received a copy of the 1994 policy and asked to read it. We asked them to write down areas that needed to be addressed in the new policy and to list things in the old policy that needed to be eliminated, changed, or updated.

From there we discussed these issues as a group and concluded that our new policy must take into consideration resource sharing between our four campus libraries, priorities for electronic resource development, changes in print acquisition priorities, and the addition of a section addressing archival management. In addition, we reviewed the library standards for the two bodies that provide Gordon-Conwell with accreditation — the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and the New England Association of Colleges and Schools (NEASC). We decided that our policy would be framed in a way that addressed those standards and that we would include the standards as part of the policy.

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After several discussions in our meetings, it was time to write the draft. As Senior Librarian, I prepared the introduction and listed the sections that the policy should include:

1. Accreditation Standards
2. Purpose and Principles
3. Levels of Collecting
4. Types of Materials: Reference, print volumes, journals and databases, e-books, microforms and audiovisual.
5. Collection Management Procedures: standing orders, receipt and cataloging of gift books, de-accession and weeding
6. Archival and Special Collections (including rare books held within the library)

### **Core Principles and Collecting Levels**

Sections two and three were especially critical. We began by articulating our agreement as a professional staff regarding our library purpose:

The primary purpose of the collections at the Gordon-Conwell libraries is to support degree programs and courses offered at each Gordon-Conwell campus. The Gordon-Conwell curriculum is oriented toward graduate professional degrees designed to prepare its students for vocational Christian ministry in church, world missions, and para-church contexts, as well as professional practice in fields related to counseling and mental health. Library collections also support students enrolled in academic MA and ThM programs and provide support for faculty research and writing.

We then listed the five core principles that we agreed upon as a staff:

1. A commitment to equal access for all Gordon-Conwell students no matter their campus, degree program, or whether they are residential, distance, or commuter.
2. A pursuit of a coordinated approach to collection development among our four libraries in order to maximize cost effectiveness (but not maximizing it at the expense of good access to resources for our students, faculty, and seminary community).
3. A regular review of library policies by the library directors, the assistant librarian for acquisitions, the library professional staff, and the academic vice-president. Library collection management policies should be flexible in that they can be adjusted as educational circumstances and technologies change and develop.
4. An understanding that our collections primarily support the curriculum and degree programs of the institution, and secondarily the research needs of the faculty.
5. A commitment to transmission of the evangelical Christian heritage in which Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary was established, especially through our archival and special collections, while keeping in mind the Seminary's commitment to global Christianity.

Then, we established a framework regarding collecting levels designed to help us assess the depth of our current collections and the level of acquisition in each subject area that we needed to pursue. Our collecting levels should reflect the specific academic programs offered by the Seminary, the nature of Gordon-Conwell as a seminary in the evangelical Protestant tradition, and the nature of resources in the different fields of study offered in the curriculum. For purposes of this policy, we assessed collecting levels in five categories:

1. **Comprehensive:** Collect all significant recorded works in applicable forms and languages for a defined field.
2. **Research:** Collect major source materials required for theses and independent research, all important reference works, and a wide selection of specialized monographs and journals.
3. **Curriculum:** Collect materials adequate to maintain knowledge of a subject area: primary source collections

of major writers and selections of secondary writers, major reference and bibliographic tools, a wide range of monographs, and representative journals.

4. **Basic:** Collect materials which introduce and define a subject: major reference works and historical surveys, important bibliographies, and a few major periodicals.
5. **Minimal:** Collect principal reference tools.

The library professional staff agreed that given our curriculum, our library budgets, and our institutional context, the Gordon-Conwell libraries should collect at the curricular level for the courses and various degree programs offered on each campus. We should collect at the basic level in subject areas that impact the theological and counseling disciplines. We should also collect principal reference works in marginally related fields.

Given that we are not a research institution, we also agreed that we do not need to collect at the research or comprehensive levels for the subject areas in which we offer courses and degree programs. The only place where we would attempt to collect at the research/comprehensive levels was in the study of American evangelicalism, especially in New England and the Southeast (where our campuses are located).

One of the challenges of collection management is the ever-changing balance between print and electronic resources. With book and journal costs escalating at an average of six percent per year, theological librarians face the challenge of adding electronic database and e-book acquisitions to already stretched budgets.

In 2007, we spent almost all of our acquisitions monies on print resources. By 2012, we spent over a third of our budget were spent on electronic databases, and by now well over half of our budget goes toward electronic resource purchases including e-books. Hence, we realized that our collection management policy would have to allow for flexibility and provide strong justification — especially for our Seminary administration and faculty — regarding this changing dynamic.

## Acquisitions, Management, and Evaluation

Now it was time to figure out the nuts and bolts of our acquisitions. Here we relied on our Goddard Library acquisitions librarian Pamela Gore, our library technologist Matthew Wasielewski, and our library directors in South Hamilton and Boston, Jim Darlack and Mark Thomas to lead us through the decision-making process. Our print acquisitions would vary in each of our libraries — with Goddard Library, our main library located at our South Hamilton, MA campus, needing to support our three smaller campus libraries with their existing collection depth. Our policy would call for a more robust Interlibrary Loan (ILL) policy serving all four campuses and managed by a library staff member at Goddard. This would allow our libraries to move closer to our goal of equal access to library resources for all of our students no matter their location.

At the same time, we desired to significantly increase electronic holdings that all of our students could access through our library webpage. Electronic resource purchases would offer them ample access to electronic databases and e-books that would serve their research needs, no matter where they lived. The library professional staff agreed that we needed a policy that would allow for us to shift the print/electronic balance as needed.

That is exactly what has happened since we approved the policy. In 2014, we were still heavily invested in print, both for books and journals. Four years later, that balance has shifted. Our journal purchases are now mostly in the form of electronic databases. We are also implementing a book purchase policy where print purchases will be mostly for reference and for specific subject areas where the library professional staff agrees that print purchases are necessary.

With the new policy, we ceased acquisitions of materials in outdated formats such as microfiche, cassette, and videotape. In the future, we will decide whether we need to keep materials in those formats that we already own (especially as much of it becomes available electronically). In addition, development of the new policy demonstrated the need for a major renovation of Goddard Library, and the library professional staff followed up with development of a first draft of a comprehensive renovation proposal.

Perhaps the most important realization is that our collection management policy is a “living” document subject to regular review and revision. During the 2018-19 academic year, we will conduct a detailed review and make necessary changes and updates. This review of policies will be all the more important given our investment in the Digital Theological Library and its advantages to developing our electronic collections.<sup>1</sup> We will once again invite feedback from faculty and students through a qualitative evaluation process. We will also continue to align our staffing and our budgeting with our mission of research support.

## Conclusion

This was a challenging yet rewarding process for our library staff. Our work was well-received by our administration and provided a framework for us to talk with the accreditation team that visited each of our campuses in 2015. The accreditors asked us to address several things, but our policy provides the flexibility to deal with their recommendations.

For readers who are looking at revising their collection management policy, there are five essential points. First, you need a clear understanding of your Seminary, its mission and purpose, its degree programs and course offerings, and its students and faculty.

Second, you must collaborate with your staff. Good leaders lead, but good leaders listen as well. Good leaders also know how to engage their staff so that they make meaningful contributions.

Third, librarians must engage stakeholders — students, faculty, administration. Check with whoever is responsible for assessments research, and ask to review their recent data. Discuss with your academic dean and faculty the research expectations that they have for students. Talk with students about their use of print and electronic resources.

Fourth, do not be afraid to change longstanding practices if evidence demonstrates that you need to do so. Finally, recognize that good policies need regular review and updating. You can begin now simply by asking your library staff to read your current collection development policy and discuss where it needs to be updated and changed.

Policies exist to channel how we serve our academic and theological communities. Writing them also gives us opportunity to engage our library professionals in ways that build teamwork and grasp their vital role in theological education.

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<sup>1</sup>The Open Access Digital Theological Library, at <https://oadtl.org/>, is open to everyone. The larger Digital Theological Library co-owned collection is found at: <http://libguides.thedtl.org/home>, and is available only to members who participate in the DTLs co-ownership model.