

Library Policies and Procedures

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THEOLOGICAL LIBRARIANS FACE MANY DECISIONS DURING THEIR COMPLEX work and often intellectually stretching activities. Policies and procedures come in to provide some order, logic, and predictability. Young institutions will place much less emphasis on policy writing and rather first experiment with various ideas and approaches before documenting successful processes into the form of a policy.¹ The need for policies arises more urgently when the number of staff and offered services grows—a one-person library that provides a few basic services will be less under pressure to spell out details in a written policy. While library policies and procedures in a theological school are important for quality services, to write, discuss and communicate them are often neglected tasks. They fall under the table when library staff is pressed to “get the job done.”

While policies explain the “why” of a service or activity, the procedures spell out the “how” in more detail. A policy will set out a framework, goals and objectives to guide decisions on a library service, and be supported, then, by one or several procedures that standardize repetitive tasks through further (practical) details. The collection development policy will, for example, be spelled out in more detail through several procedures, such as a procedure on selection (who selects/approves titles to be added to the collection and how), on acquisition (who acquires approved titles, when, and how), on weeding/deselection, on cataloging, on receiving and processing purchase suggestions (from faculty, students, other users), and many other details. While procedures need to be reviewed and adapted quite frequently, depending on changes in and around the library, policies are more stable defining documents.

Need for Policies in a Theological Library

Much can be said from a theological perspective to justify the need and explain the benefits of well-written policies. Stewardship is an important aspect in a usually under-resourced new library, especially in the majority world, and so policies help to prioritize time and financial expenditures. This is done with sober and mutual judgement; policies should be deliberated over and formulated in a team to prevent decisions made subjectively on the spur of the moment and with insufficient discernment. Policies call staff to integrity. They also demonstrate integrity to users through predictability, consistency, and transparency of processes as expectations and operating methods are disclosed and spelled out. The library creates policies in order to engage in clear and open communication while striving to comply with existing laws.

Policies present the legal framework of a library, including its values, priorities, reasons for decisions, and processes for conflict resolution. Library staff are empowered through policies to implement the mutually decided philosophy of service, to deal with confusing situations or even crises, and to speak with authority with “difficult” or advantage-taking users. While each library has many informal and unwritten policies, having them collect-

ed in writing can better ensure continuity and ease the entry for new staff and leadership who receive guidelines as they learn the ropes.²

Accreditation agencies place a high importance on policies, including library policies. They will look for correlations between the parent organization's and the library's mission and vision statement, analyze how the library's goals and objectives are reflected in the policies and procedures, and seek evidence of how library policies and their everyday implementation contribute to student learning and the achievement of program outcomes defined by the institution. In accreditation, the burden of proof is on the institution and library and so it needs to find sufficient evidence to demonstrate how it accomplishes its mission and objectives through having well-written policies that correlate with useful measurable implementation.

Purpose and Rationale of Policies and Procedures

The American Library Association summarizes the purpose of library policies as follows (ALA, 2019):

- define the values of the organization
- help managers and staff translate those values into services
- establish a standard for services that can be understood by users of the service and providers
- ensure equitable treatment for all
- provide a framework for delivery of services
- organize library operations in compliance with relevant local, regional, and state laws

Policies can be compared to scaffolding—a structure and a framework with the security and protection in which quality services can be offered. Policies, however, also mean limitations; as soon as something is explicitly stated, something else is excluded. If too many aspects of a library's operation are defined (possibly

in strict terms), users' access might be limited and staff might feel limited in how to respond equitably to ad hoc non-standard requests or unanticipated situations. If too few aspects are reflected in the policies or wording is vague and unclear, decisions need to be made spontaneously, possibly under pressure, and possibly reinventing the wheel for the umpteenth time. This might work well in a small library where it is easier to be flexible, negotiate needs and services, and quickly react to an arising situation in an unordinary way without limiting service for other users. Policies need to be as broad as possible (envisioning various scenarios and allowing effective functioning in unpredictable contexts) and as specific as necessary.

Beside shortage of time and perceived (or real) inexperience, which are probably the strongest deterrents in policy writing, other objections are also brought forward. Some believe that the more rules exist, the more stressful the life of a librarian becomes because rules, once created, need to be consistently enforced, independently of time pressures and other (necessary and constructive) library work. Policies are accused of stifling natural processes and inhibiting innovations while enforcing the status quo. Theological schools that find themselves in non-welcoming or outright hostile environments hesitate to openly spell out details of their operations. Sometimes administrators will also be hesitant to say things too clearly in order not to lose support or students.³

While devising policies, a library will need to find a delicate balance, useful for its context and culture and suitable for the nature of its parent institution. A balance between too many and too few policies, between policies and user needs, between people-orientation and goal-orientation, between openness to an arising situation and predictable administrative governance. Policies should never be considered as weapons—neither instruments of power to be wielded over the user, nor instruments of defense against accusations and user complaints. Both aspects do arise, and policies can help solve these conflicts, but this is not the primary purpose for which they are created.

Writing and Revising Policies

Policy writing and revision is guided by considerations, such as

- meeting the users' academic and ministerial needs (usually students, faculty and staff)
- contributing to student learning
- correlating library operations with the mission, vision and values of the institution
- helping to achieve library objectives

When writing policies, it is helpful to start with the end in mind: Will this policy contribute to the mission of the library and institution, to student learning, and to the library functioning as an educational partner? The policy will need to be embedded into the overall culture of the library and institution, as well as considering relevant aspects arising from assessment. Assessment provides an evidence-based evaluation (a glimpse) of the current situation—what services run well, what needs to change. One would first consider whether a problem can be solved through adapting existing policies before creating an additional document. Sometimes, it is useful to prominently highlight an important issue by having a separate policy on it (for example, cellphones in the library).

Policies will be helpful only if they are known and owned by all relevant stakeholders. The person or body to whom the library is responsible will want to know and approve the contents of the policies. There may be a formal process for discussing and adopting (signing into law) a library policy. A library will also consider effective ways to inform and remind its users of the policy contents: a policy manual on display for users, pertinent signs, and/or a policies document on the library website and/or intranet.

Policies will be helpful only if they are relevant and current, meaning that they need to be regularly reviewed and adapted. Revisions might be required because of changes in the library itself, in the parent institution, in the surrounding environment or country laws. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused much soul-searching in 2020 concerning policies and much creative re-

thinking, without really having useful data at hand, in order to safely adapt library operations. Recommendations changed very quickly, and libraries translated them into policies, some short-lived and some that will remain longer because they have been proven as agents for innovation.

List of Important Policies

Basically, every service or library activity will need to be reflected in one of the existing policies or to receive its own. Some services and processes will possibly need an accompanying detailed procedure. A library might not want to have a flurry of documents—they are time-consuming to produce, follow and reinforce—but it is also not wise to include too many not-directly related aspects into one lengthy policy document.

Some policies will certainly be unique to the specific context of a library but, because many operations are similar in all libraries, it is useful to analyze policy samples from different theological schools on various continents. Many aspects have already been well-formulated elsewhere and can be adjusted and integrated into one's own policy, though certainly not without considering the different contexts, educational cultures, and environments in which a school and library operate.⁴

Important areas that require policies are listed below in no special sequence as they serve as examples and are not exhaustive; each library will need to discuss and decide which documents are required by law and are beneficial to guarantee well-functioning operations.

Collection Development

A collection development policy is probably not the first policy document that a library designs,⁵ but it is a very foundational one. It delineates the rationale behind selection and acquisition decisions for a library's print and electronic resources of all document types and who is involved in what role(s) in these decisions.⁶ The document will also include a gift and donation policy, a policy on weeding/deselection, and a policy that sets out how

objections/challenges to included materials will be handled.⁷ If the library is responsible for the institutional archives or special collections, this will be reflected here or in a separate document.⁸

Access to and Use of the Library

Policies in this area will need to be in place before a library starts allowing users access to and use of, including borrowing from, the library. A circulation policy can be part of it or a separate document. An access and use policy defines various user categories with their respective borrowing privileges. In a theological school, these would be faculty, students (resident, full-time, distance, online, from satellite locations), staff, possibly community/external users, students and faculty of neighboring institutions, and “guests” (one-time walk-in users). There might already exist unwritten practices and access terms for these categories, but it is important to spell out in detail what services each user category can expect and at what cost.

Each library has the right to limit library use to certain persons or categories but needs to specify when and why (on what basis) restrictions come into effect (for example, unpaid overdue fees, disregard of existing policies, non-compliance with copyright and download restrictions, etc.). There might be restrictions for external users: in religious institutions, for example, it might be important to justify why a (new or small) library can serve only a limited faith-based or denominationally-related clientele.⁹

If a library is charged with serving distance and online students, access and services for them are spelled out in detail either in this policy or in a separate document.¹⁰

The use of printers/copiers located in a library, reservation of study space/cabins in the library can be part of the policy or receive special mention in a separate document.

This policy will also need to reflect various aspects of responsible conduct in a library (food and drink, personal belongings, noise, use of cellphones, child safety/unattended children in the library, etc.). Especially in 2020, many hygiene prescriptions were added for staff and users (hand sanitizing, social distancing, use of community computers and study desks, book quarantines after return, high-touch surfaces etc.).

Circulation/Borrowing

A detailed circulation policy spells out the borrowing terms for internal and external users. As mentioned above, different categories of users might receive different privileges and fines, so overdue fines and how they are enforced will be addressed here. Libraries tend to allow longer loan periods for faculty, sometimes also differentiate between several categories of students. External/community users might have specific terms. Sometimes there are variations in loan length during the semester, summer/winter breaks, exam periods, or other special times. Variations also occur for the length of time different types of materials (DVDs, journals, etc.) circulate. As mentioned above, the more variations, the more there is to remember and enforce, so these need to be justified and contribute to the equity of use for all patrons.

Beside study resources, a library might decide to make available various devices, such as laptops, iPads, Kindles with e-books, USB drives, and other items. The loan terms for these might be part of the general circulation policy but receive a separate procedural document.

Resource Sharing

No library is self-sufficient, and so agreements with accompanying policies and procedures will be required for interlibrary loan, document delivery, and collaborative collection development in a consortium.¹¹ Some of these aspects might be part of collection development (Collaborative CD), the circulation policy (for example, ILL), or be stand-alone documents. The resource-sharing processes, negotiated between the libraries, will require clearly stated guidelines and demarcations of responsibilities, consideration of legal restrictions, and the allocation of necessary finances in the budget. Each process may require a detailed procedure.

Information Competence Training

Policies in this domain of library work might have different names, such as information literacy policy, library instruction,

and user training. They are often devised together with the teaching faculty and read more like an educational framework (with mission, goals and objectives, content, various levels of intervention, and dates of instruction). Each activity/intervention might need a separate policy and procedure, for example, new students' library orientation, various library workshops, course-embedded library instruction, personal instruction/tour of library, and others.¹²

Technological Infrastructure

This is an umbrella term for technological processes for which the library is responsible, such as automation (Integrated Library System), library computers, electronic resources, information security (management of passwords), library website, social media activities, digitization activities, and/or a possible institutional repository operated by the library. The titles of the policies and procedures will vary accordingly. Policies in this area will be devised in cooperation with information technology (IT) and/or other departments. They will reflect the library's section while being correlated with the overall IT policy of the parent institution.

Integrity Issues

The question of academic integrity and copyright infringement will need to be addressed in one of the policies. Possibly there already is an institutional "Academic Integrity Policy" in place that also specifies the library's contribution in addressing the problem.¹³ It doesn't hurt, however, to additionally emphasize these aspects in other documents.

Another important aspect in this category is the confidentiality and security of patron records. Regulated in various ways in each country, the library will need to comply with the laws and inform patrons of its efforts in this.

Clarifying decent treatment of human resources, a library might consider writing a policy on how it handles student staff and/or volunteers or how professional development for its staff is organized.

Safety and Security Issues

Safety and security issues in a library mainly concern the protection of people (users and staff), of holdings and facilities/equipment, and Internet-related aspects. These might already be covered in other important library or institutional documents, such as a library access and use policy, campus safety policy, or IT policy. A library would then need to develop a procedure on the basis of these documents for steps of action or routines to follow in case of incidents and emergencies on its premises. The procedure would include safety resources, such as contact details of responsible personnel, police and ambulance phone numbers, evacuation routes, and other important details.

Possibly the institution will already have a disaster and emergency plan that pays attention to library specifics, though this is not a given. Even though no one wishes for such tragedies to happen, it is not uncommon that natural and human-made catastrophes damage library holdings and jeopardize people's lives, and so it is vital to have a disaster response and recovery plan in place before the calamity strikes.

Conclusion

Usually policy documents, together with the more detailed procedures, will be combined into a library's policy manual (or a library operations manual) for everyday referral by all stakeholders. Possibly two policy manuals are necessary, one for users and a more extensive one for library staff.

For a new library, the best advice is to start such a manual as soon as possible with the most foundational and urgent policies and keep adding to it. For an already existing library, it is a very worthwhile, though time-consuming, task to bring all written and unwritten policies and procedures together in one place to collaboratively examine what already exists, where the gaps are, where contradictions are observed in different policies, and whether procedures and actual operations correlate with the policies. Policies can positively affect institutional culture if they

reflect and integrate the values, traditions and practices of the library.

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Notes

- 1 Many majority-world theological schools, especially in oral cultures, have only very few written library policies, usually for foundational everyday services. Other policies are transmitted orally and can be quickly adapted. There might also be some fear of becoming “locked in” through writing.
- 2 Written collections/manuals of policies are very important in times of staff changes and during introductions of new staff. They offer a one-stop place to become acquainted with the status quo in order to ensure a smooth transition and predictable continuation of services. They also provide the foundation for refining and reviewing existing policies and procedures against changing contexts.
- 3 For example (real case), a multi-denominational theological school in Ukraine that has to carefully watch its standing with different denominations will avoid including all-too-clear statements in its collection development policy about the denominational alignment of its resources. By necessity, wording will be vague so that if materials are challenged there is nothing on paper that would cause bad publicity and jeopardize support. A Christian theological school in Central Asia will write down as little as possible about its collection and not display it in an online catalog so as not to raise flags for government officials.
- 4 Helpful advice, samples, and legal guidance can often be found on websites of library associations, national and international, from university and theological libraries. The national library of a country and the ministry of education (or culture) will be useful resources. There are also sample policies in books on librarianship or library guides on the Internet, for example, <https://libguides.ala.org/librarypolicy> or guides.library.illinois.edu/writing-library-policies.
- 5 In a recent discussion with several librarians from majority-world theological libraries, we realized that none of us had a written collection development policy. But all of these libraries had well balanced collections and provided more or less sufficient resources to support the curriculum. When trying to establish the reasons for their success with a functioning collection, created without a policy, several markers stood out as significant: well-established communication

with each department, committed involvement of faculty in the selection of sources, and long-term continuity in acquisitions because the lead librarians were part of the institution for over fifteen years.

- 6 See some guidance from IFLA in several languages: <https://www.ifla.org/publications/guidelines-for-a-collection-development-policy-using-the-conspectus-model>.
- 7 This topic will be discussed in much more detail in the third volume of the *Theological Librarian's Handbook*, forthcoming in 2022.
- 8 See a helpful description of the revision process of a CD policy in Robert J. Mayer (2018).
- 9 See a helpful discussion starter with a literature review and various current policies and practices on faith-based institutions serving unaffiliated patrons in Sweeney (2020).
- 10 Many worthwhile materials have been published in the last 10–15 years on this topic. See also several entries in *Theological Librarianship*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2020), where authors reflect on their special services for distance students in general and how they coped with the COVID-19 pandemic, where all students were suddenly online students.
- 11 Consortial agreements might necessitate the creation of additional policies. While the agreement regulates the relationship(s), the area, and the process of mutual cooperation, the implementation and use of consortial benefits might need to be spelled out for local staff in an additional policy. Alternatively, already existing policies can be expanded to include relevant references to consequences from a consortial agreement.
- 12 See the very useful volume from Atla Open Press on *Information Literacy and Theological Librarianship*, edited by Bobby Smiley (2019).
- 13 As John Jaeger underlines, the purpose of such policies is not to threaten students or prevent plagiarism by fear of being caught and punished. They should rather serve an educational purpose and emphasize formation toward a Christian worldview and values, such as wholeness, honesty and integrity, responsibility and creativity, and desire for the development of qualitative new knowledge (Jaeger 2003).