

Gift Management for Transportation Libraries: Observations and Recommendations¹

Roberto A. Sarmiento
Head, [Transportation Library](#)
Northwestern University

Introduction

This paper provides librarians with best practices for gift management procedures, guidelines for developing gift management policies, recommendations on how to plan for the processing of gifts into a library collection and, finally, how to bring the gift giving process to a beneficial conclusion.

Librarians need to approach all gift offers cautiously, but view them as an opportunity and not as a burden. The goal is to conclude the process in a win-win and joyous atmosphere. However, if the gift must be declined it is incumbent upon the librarian to attempt to leave the donor with as good a feeling as possible and hopefully, better off than before the process started.

Types of gifts

The majority of gifts offered to transportation libraries fall between one and several hundred items per gift. For the most part these gifts are relatively easy to handle, but still pose a processing challenge to a small or one-person library. Occasionally, gifts encompassing hundreds or even thousands of items are offered and accepted by libraries. A general rule of thumb is that the larger the gift the more complex the process will be and the longer it will take to process it into the collection. In fact, some large gifts may take years and a large amount of funding to incorporate into a library.

Very broadly, most gifts fall into three categories: archival materials, non-archival materials and other materials. It is important to note that how an item is categorized - archival, non-archival or other - may be library or librarian specific and cannot be generalized.

Archival materials may include the donor's personal or organizational papers, unpublished reports or reports not for public distribution, letters, memoranda, speeches, photographs, etc. Most of the items in this category may be considered as "gray literature" and because of their nature may require special care in storage, handling, cataloguing, accessing, etc. Some materials may have ownership and legal issues as well as access, copyright and reproduction challenges. Although minimal at this time, the number of future transportation archival materials in electronic format - bringing their own set of new and unique set of challenges - will increase.

¹ The article [Gifts management for transportation libraries: Observations and recommendations](#) by Roberto A. Sarmiento is available under a Creative Commons Attribution Noncommercial License <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>

Non-archival materials include what we would normally find in a typical library: books, published reports, journals, maps, etc. These are normally paper based, in a variety of physical conditions, perhaps requiring preservation treatment, covering a time period from the 17th century to the present. Some special cases may even include electronic databases, where the library assumes ownership and responsibility for the data/content as well as maintenance of its access and structure.

Other materials could include three-dimensional items: models, tools and instruments, art objects, music recordings, awards (plaques), archeological objects, etc. Some of these items may fall within the archival category or may be better suited for a museum or a historical society.

What motivates libraries to decline or accept a gift?

In reviewing a gift for a decision, librarians must weigh in a variety of factors, organizational plans and gut feelings to best benefit their library collections and, by extension, their users. Therefore, once a librarian starts considering space issues, collection development, research directions, strategic plans, budget, staffing, language, time periods, project priorities, etc...one realizes that there may be many reasons that may influence a librarian's decision to accept or decline a gift.

Among the many reasons for a gift to be declined we may include:

- Policy: The library simply does not accept material gifts.
- Space: The library may not have enough shelves or storage space to store the gift. Libraries must balance their space need between limited space for "historical" materials and future acquisitions.
- Duplicates: Gift may be duplicated in the collection or the material available through the web.
- Scope: The gift is out of scope for the collection.
- Condition: Gift items are in very poor physical conditions or requiring preservation treatment – treatment which can be expensive or unavailable.
- Language: Gift materials are not in English.
- Cost: The cost of accepting, processing and managing a large gift may be beyond the library's or the institution's financial resources.
- Format: The gift may arrive in an obsolete or hard to migrate from/to electronic format.
- Context: The gift might arrive without the necessary context to give it proper research and/or cultural/historical value.
- Terms and Conditions: Donor imposes too many special conditions on the gift that the library may be unable or unwilling to comply with.
- Relationship: Donor may not be associated or connected with the organization in any way.

The act of declining a gift should not end with the librarian informing the donor that the library is not interested on the gift and hanging up the telephone. Librarians should be sensitive to the fact that some of these collections represent life-long endeavors and that donors may have an emotional connection to each one of the pieces within the collection or to the collection as a whole. Thus, extreme care is needed to be polite, but firm, when rejecting the offer. Equally important is providing documented policies that clearly explain why a gift may be inappropriate for the collection.

In addition, librarians may wish to provide the names of other institutions that collect on the subject or that may be suitable candidates for the gift. However, librarians need to be realistic about the chances of the gift being accepted somewhere else. We must consider among the normal possible repositories for gifts: federal agency libraries, state DOT libraries, corporate or metropolitan agency libraries, university transportation libraries and among more far afield options: university science and engineering libraries, user groups (fan) collections, small historical groups and public libraries.

The user groups, small historical group or the public library options may not normally be the donor's first choice for housing their gifts and certainly may not be as glamorous as a university library or institutional archive. However, these may be the only institutions willing to accept the gift and, in some cases may represent the only home where the gift will be treasured and used, thus fulfilling its core mission: supporting future research.

Declining archival items

Archival collections are very different than library collections. However, donors sometimes do not comprehend the difference and insist in having archival collections included into library collections. Librarians and archivists understand that in order to properly maintain both collections these have to be kept separate.

Some broad reasons to keep the collections separate include:

- The library may be an unsecure location to store sensitive materials or three-dimensional items.
- Access to the material may have to be restricted and the library may not have the staff to support special needs.
- Archival items may require special training and handling or have conservation issues the library may not be able to provide or afford.

The best option for a librarian is to work with the donor and, if available, with the organization's archives to attempt to locate a suitable home for the gift. It is imperative for the librarian to talk to the archive's staff to learn about their gift policy, if one exists, and if not, to discuss the possibility of developing one to handle future offers.

Accepting gifts

From the first contact, librarians need to be positive and helpful and should attempt to gather as much information as possible as to the nature of the gift and whether or not - as a whole or in part - it will fit within the library's collection. If it is not a

good fit, inform the donor as soon as possible and if possible provide contacts of institutions that from your perspective may be interested in the gift.

However, if after the first impression the librarian perceives some value for the library, there are certain steps to take into consideration:

- Do not agree to accept anything right away. A cautious approach is required.
- Ask the donor to send a detailed list of the items (Microsoft's Excel works very well) with title, author, ISBN, edition, or as much information as the donor can provide. This is a key requirement. The librarian should use this list to check the items against the library's catalog thus avoiding duplication (if duplicate copies are not wanted, sometimes they are), but it also assures that items not wanted are not sent to the library. This list may be also used as a shipping list for the boxes, as an attachment to the thank you letter, as a record for the donor's taxes, etc.
- If the library is interested in only part of the gift, we recommend declining the gift and informing the donor that as a "whole" the gift may be more valuable to another institution. However, inform the donor that if no suitable institution is found for the whole gift and the decision is made to break up the gift, your library would be interested in accepting a particular part of the collection.
- The librarian must decide how far he/she is willing to go to acquire the gift. Some gifts have no strings attached, while others place the library in an untenable position. If the restrictions are too great, we recommend the gift be declined, since unusual restrictions create multiple problems later on and these are often difficult to fully honor.
- Communication is crucial. Both parties need to keep each other informed of all developments at all times in order to avoid confusion and misunderstandings. Keep notes and send emails summarizing telephone conversations, etc. Once the whole process is completed, all emails and documentation should be archived.

A librarian may be able to quickly identify the value and may require very few reasons to accept a gift into the library if the "right" items are being offered.

Some common reasons to accept a gift include:

- Political. The worst reason for accepting a gift: Management orders the library to accept a gift regardless of any logical reason. Since there is no fighting this one, we recommend waiting the three (3) years required by the IRS before de-accessing the items.
- Donor offers the gift and funding. The funding for processing, preservation, purchasing of equipment, digitization, etc. may well be the deciding factor.
- The gift may be large enough or its subject content strong enough to support research in a field in which the library did not have any materials or could not otherwise easily expand into.

- The gift fills in gaps within a pre-existing collection or strengthens a collection for better coverage.
- The gift provides value to a new or existing local/regional collection.
- The gift may help place the library in national/regional prominence.

Once the library decides it wants a gift, the process for the librarian becomes a "gift management issue" and the tone of the questions changes accordingly:

- How do we make the gift process happen the fastest and most economical way?
- What can we do to make the donor happy about his/her decision?
- How can we promote this gift internally and/or externally to develop library brand recognition?
- What else can we do with the gift? The librarian must think of ways to generate additional value from a gift: exhibits, digitization projects, publications, interviews, marketing, etc.

This is a crucial stage. The librarian needs to portray the library as the best home for the gift, present the donor with unique added value, politely discourage the donor from continuing to look at other institutions as possible homes for the gift, and finally reach a verbal commitment.

What may libraries do to prepare for gifts?

We recommend that all libraries prepare a gift policy statement and include it within their library's collection development policy. This statement should be discussed and vetted by the library's parent organization.

In broad terms, the policy documents how the library will handle gift offers, what kind of materials may or may not be appropriate gifts, how to contact the library, etc. The policy may be as simple as: "We will not accept unsolicited gifts of any kind" or a detailed document. Finally, this document should be posted to the library's website.

The librarian may also consult with the institution's general counsel to determine what the library may or may not be able to do for donors such as providing lists of professional appraisers, conducting appraisals, and discussing who will be authorized, on behalf of the organization, to sign acknowledgement letters or legal documents the donor may present.

It is important to make sure the donor is aware that once the gift is received by the library, it becomes library property and the library can do with the materials as it see fit. This should be clearly stated (preferably emails) before the items are shipped to the library. Librarians must work hard at documenting and communicating all contacts with the donor in order to avoid misunderstandings before the gift transfer.

An often neglected or poorly planned step before a gift is accepted is the planning of how the gift will be processed and incorporated into the library's collection. It

does not benefit the library if a gift is accepted and then sent to storage to languish for years.

If it is a large gift some planning and questions need to be addressed before the gift is accepted:

- Will the library have enough shelving once the gift is catalogued?
- Will substantial shifting of the current collections be required in order to shelve the gift items within the collection?
- Is there a secure area within the building to temporarily store the gift boxes?
- Is there a secure location to open the gift boxes and process them within the library?
- Will new training and skills be required to effectively process and maintain the gift?
- When will the process be started and how long will it take to process the whole gift or parts of it?
- What other project(s) already scheduled and prioritized will need to be re-scheduled or postponed in order to process the gift?
- Will the gift be the first of (many) subsequent donations of the same materials that the library will need to account for on a continuing basis?
- Will gift items require preservation treatment?
- How will duplicate items be handled?

Librarians need to be realistic and acknowledge that gifts, and especially large gifts, will disrupt library operations (and space) and need to be prepared to change priorities and schedules.

An issue related to duplicates is that if the gift is professionally appraised and if IRS form 8283 is used by the donor to claim a deduction on his/her income taxes, the library is required by law to retain all gift items for three (3) years before it can dispose of any items. It is recommended that librarians and donors seek professional advice regarding the use of gifts as tax deductions.

What to do after the gift is received by the library?

There are some steps that need to be taken once the gift is received by the library. Generally, when dealing with a small gift, the most efficient way to complete the gift giving process is to send a gift acknowledgement letter (thank you letter) to the donor as soon as the boxes arrive and its contents determined to be in order. For most cases, this would be the end of the gift-giving process.

However, when dealing with larger or more complex gift offers, additional steps may be required:

- When the gift boxes arrive, the librarian should inform the donor of reception and note any out of the ordinary conditions. As in all communications during the gift process, this should be through an email.
- If a packing list is available, boxes must be opened at the earliest opportunity and checked against the list. Discrepancies must be noted and this information should be provided to donor.
- Once the gift is fully inventoried, a gift acknowledgement letter is sent to donor. This letter is either signed by the librarian or an authorized institutional representative.
- If the processing of the gift is taking a long time, a periodic email to the donor may be in order to let him/her know where things stand or any other information related to the gift.
- If nothing else, the librarian should inform the donor when all the gift items have been fully processed and incorporated into the library's collection and thank the donor once again for the gift.
- For almost all cases, this last communication will complete the gift giving process.