

Salvage Priorities: Collections

Setting priorities for salvaging collections is one of the most difficult but also one of the most important aspects of disaster planning. If an emergency occurs, there may be very little time to save collections. You will not want to waste valuable time deciding (or arguing about) what to save! A listing of priority collections will allow your institution to concentrate on the most important materials that are accessible for salvage.

As a first step, department heads or collection specialists should set priorities by department or by sections of the collection, with input from others within the department or area. Since it is most likely that an emergency will affect only a portion of the collections, these priorities are important in themselves. However, they will also serve as a basis for setting overall collection salvage priorities for the institution, which should be done by a committee made up of representatives from each department and/or area of the collections. The link below provides more detailed information on setting collection salvage priorities.

If the institution has an up-to-date collection development policy or retention/disposition schedules (in the case of archivists and records managers), these policies should be of some assistance in determining which collections are most important. As a general rule, do not try to set salvage priorities on an item-by-item basis. While there may be the occasional object of value that deserves to be considered on its own, it is much more practical to designate groups of items for salvage.

Following are some issues to consider when assigning salvage priorities:

- **Use** – Consider which materials within your collections are the most used by your patrons; these are often those that support the primary mission of the institution. Use must of course be weighed against other factors such as the availability of replacements, discussed below.
- **Uniqueness** – Materials in special collections (e.g., rare books, local history material, archival material, artwork) are often unique and irreplaceable, and thus will likely merit a high salvage priority.
- **Legal responsibility for retaining the records** – Archivists, town clerks, and records managers may be governed by retention and disposition schedules that establish how long records must be retained. Records designated as permanent will need to be a high priority.
- **Availability of replacements** – Even in a general circulating collection, many books may already be out of print. Consider whether newer editions are available, and whether or not a newer edition would be acceptable. It may be possible to buy copies of some materials in another format. For example, many periodicals and newspapers can be purchased on microfilm. If the institution holds positive copies of original microfilm, there may be a master negative stored off-site from which a new copy could be made. Also consider what materials could be accessed at other libraries or through interlibrary loan if they were not replaced. For unique materials, consider whether backup copies are available (such as microfilm of archival documents and manuscripts) and whether such copies would provide an acceptable alternative to the originals, allowing you to give the originals a lower priority for salvage.

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- **Cost of replacement vs. cost of salvage** – This is an important consideration, as the cost of replacement can be higher than the cost of salvage. Remember that replacement is not just a matter of paying the purchase price; you must also include the costs of ordering, shipping, cataloging, shelf preparation, etc. You obviously cannot know the costs of salvage ahead of time, but if you have a good idea of replacement availability and costs for various portions of your collection you will be better equipped to determine which is the best option when the time comes.
- **Monetary value** – Since most institutions do not anticipate selling collections, monetary value alone should not guarantee a high salvage priority. It may, however, be combined with other factors such as scholarly or artifactual value (see below).
- **Scholarly value** – When assigning salvage priorities, it is important to identify those materials that are truly of value for scholarly research. For example, local history collections that have been gradually accumulated over the years often include a “rare book collection” that contains many items that are old but not especially rare. It may be necessary to have a scholar or rare book dealer examine the collection to identify rare items. For general circulating or research collections, consider whether certain subjects or areas of the collection are particularly strong or comprehensive, and thus may deserve a higher priority.
- **Artifactual or associational value** – Some materials in special or local history collections may be valuable to the institution because they are associated with a particular person or event, or because they have value as objects and could not be replaced with copies. These may or may not be materials that have any particular scholarly or monetary value.
- **Formats that are particularly vulnerable to damage** – certain formats (e.g., original microfilm, photographs, videos, CDs, CD-ROMs, LPs) may merit a high salvage priority because they are particularly vulnerable to damage. Salvage of these materials will be more feasible if they are rescued quickly. Conversely, if action cannot be taken quickly to save these types of materials, they may have to be written off (see below).
- **Fragility of material** – As with special formats, any type of material that is very fragile may merit a high salvage priority, since quick action will make salvage more feasible.
- **Length of time in adverse conditions** – Some collections may need to be written off if they have spent significant time in adverse conditions. Exposure to fire can damage some formats (such as negatives and microfilm) so that salvage is impossible. Materials that have been wet for a long time may also be too badly damaged. If books with coated paper have been wet and begun to dry, their pages may block together, making them unsalvageable.
- **Materials on loan** – If collections are on loan from another institution, it may be necessary to place them high on the priority list. Be aware of your institution’s contractual responsibilities in caring for such materials.

A listing of the types of materials you indicated are present in your collections follows. Remember to consider all of these materials as you are setting your salvage priorities. Provide both a list of priorities for each department and an overall list of priorities for the institution.