

# How to Have a Conversation:

Values, Ethics, and Visibility in  
Shared Collection Building

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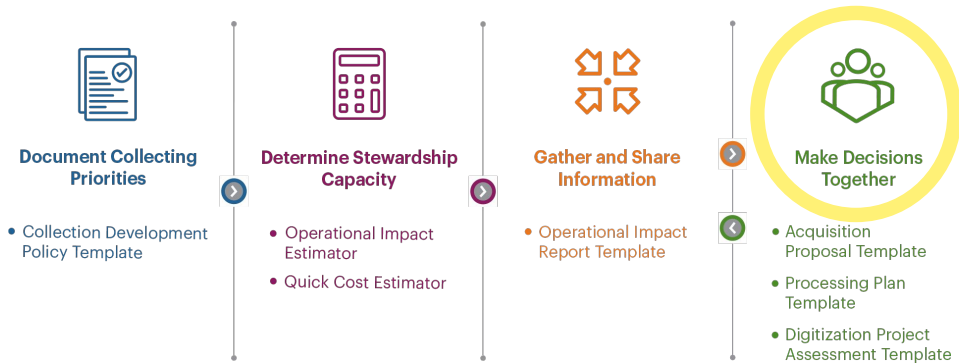


Hello, I'm Audra from UC Irvine, where I am the Head of Special Collections and Archives. The University of California, Irvine is located on the ancestral homelands of the Tongva and Acjachemen nations. I acknowledge and honor the original stewards of this land, who today continue to advocate for ecological sustainability as well as the protection of their sacred lands, waters, and cultures - including the work of the Sacred Places Institute for Indigenous Peoples. Donate at <http://www.sacredplacesinstitute.org/>.

I am a first-generation college student who was raised in a low-income household in the rural South of the US. I am also a white European American, cis-gender female with an educational background in the humanities from elite higher education institutions. I understand that I am part of a highly represented group in academic librarianship and that my identity carries with it significant privileges.

I acknowledge my privilege, my lived experience, and positionality today as an academic library manager speaking to you. I am someone who strives to take great care and practice empathy when introducing new approaches and tools to the work of my colleagues, and I wish to share some of these approaches with you.

## Total Cost of Stewardship Framework



Total cost of stewardship framework\* by [OCLC Research](https://doi.org/10.25333/zbh0-a044), from Total Cost of Stewardship: Responsible Collection Building in Archives and Special Collections (<https://doi.org/10.25333/zbh0-a044>), CC BY 4.0

Today I'll talk a bit about my perspective as a user of the Total Cost of Stewardship report and tools from a mid-sized academic library, one that has not implemented nor tested some of the tools available to us in the OCLC report. We do not know our annual stewardship capacity, but we do know our values, and we share a vision to make better decisions *together*.

How do you help your colleagues get from here...to there...making decisions together? In applying a feminist standpoint for the implementation of collection development policy changes, I want to explore how the Total Cost of Stewardship tools might take us forward toward even more collective decision-making.



I work to provide leadership and vision for a team of 9 librarians, archivists, curators, and staff, as well as a core group of student employees. This image is how we've been seeing one another for the past year-plus.

There are 5 librarians in UCI Special Collections & Archives with curatorial responsibilities, including myself, and we work to steward the appraisal, selection, and acquisition processes. I'm the collection development lead -- the person accountable for our collecting decisions -- and describe myself as a curator for large scale or high-impact collections/donors. Our university librarian signs off on every deed of gift.

My role is to help connect resources (grants, philanthropy, staff labor) with the needs of each collection. For monographs and serials, our library has an acquisitions and cataloging department; for archives and manuscripts, we have an archivists "team" that is working to centralize info about incoming/potential acquisitions using AirTable. Our manuscripts curators meet regularly with the archivists who have collection mgmt responsibilities for the collections they pursue, to foster transparency & manage expectations for access.

# UCI Libraries

## Special Collections & Archives



Verle & Elizabeth Annis Reading Room  
Jack Langson Library



Orange County & Southeast Asian Archive  
Center  
Libraries Gateway Study Center

**Care.** We operate from a care-based approach in the ways we work with patrons and collections. We value accountability, commitment to professional standards and ethics, a holistic approach to teaching and learning, stewardship of collections, and quality service to our users.

**Curiosity.** We are open to new ideas and are experimental in our endeavors in the preservation of and access to our materials, providing creative and innovative leadership in digital initiatives, collection management and descriptive practice, outreach, and open access to our collections.

**Community.** As a highly collaborative team, we foster a culture of respect and continual improvement. We value accessibility, inclusivity, and equity in the partnerships we seek to sustain on campus, in the community, and around the world.

Our three primary values are care, curiosity, and community. These values feed into our vision, which is to be at the heart of the global scholarly endeavor through community-centered partnerships, robust research support, and creative teaching and learning resources.

I'm really proud of the work my colleagues and I put into shaping our core values, mission, and vision. These statements are independent from but follow directly from the stated strategic mission, values, and goals of the larger library system we're part of and the campus itself. It has served us well to return to these ideas again and again whenever we need to make a difficult decision or implement our goals. Being rooted in these values has kept me focused on the shared course.

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Our collection development  
decisions have manifold  
ethical implications, embedded  
in our responsibilities  
to diverse constituents.

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On page 4 of the Total Cost of Stewardship report, it states “We owe it to our researchers to preserve and describe collections within a reasonable timeframe. We owe it to collection creators and donors to speak in realistic terms about our capacities for processing, preservation, storage, and access. And we owe it to our administrators to use real data to convey our capacities, or lack thereof, when planning for future operations.” End quote. And, we also owe it to our own colleagues, the people performing the work under the tip of the stewardship iceberg, to consider the weight and impact of decisions being made.

CORE VALUE:

## Community-Centered Archives

*In a community-centered archives partnership, academic institutions are:*

- **Attentive** to historical inequities reflected in archives
- **Responsive** to the community's needs
- **Collaborative** through shared authority
- **Cognizant** of the divergent priorities of communities

<https://ocseaa.lib.uci.edu/partnership>

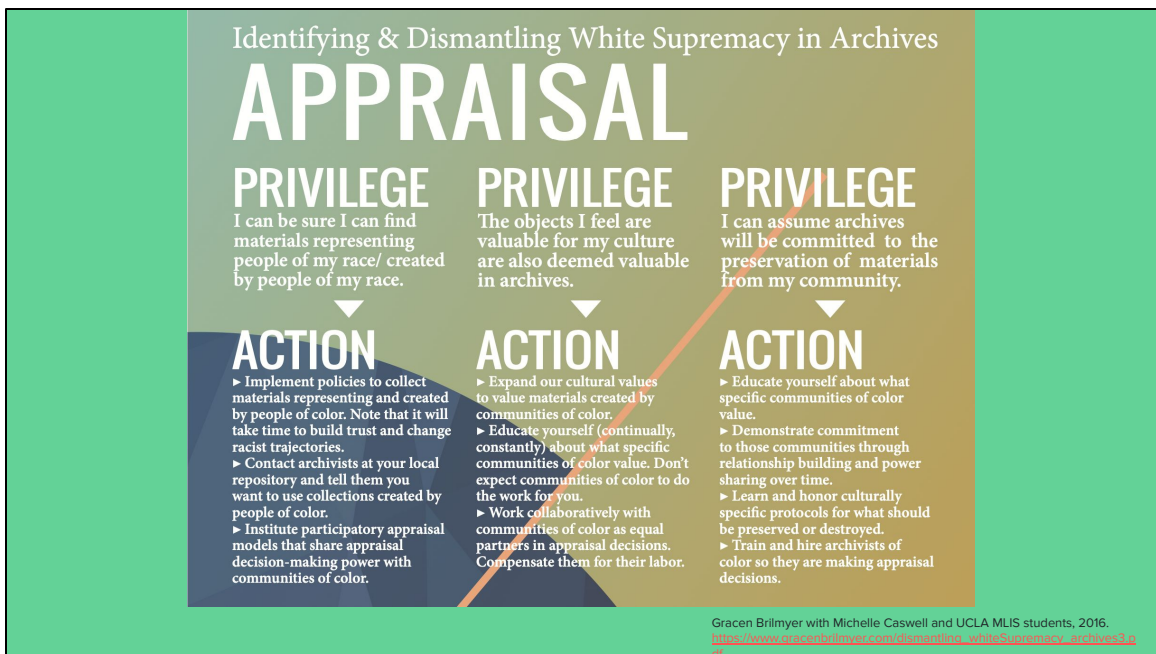
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For over five years, UCI special collections students learn about how archives are incomplete and often missing the perspectives of marginalized groups. We have trained and PAID several cohorts of students to implement strategies in working with community partners that would empower folks to preserve their own histories and share them on their own terms. Here are the four primary principles of our approach.

To ensure that we are making good decisions together with our community, we must follow these principles. And in revising and re-envisioning our collection stewardship, we have to do the same. Be attentive to inequities, be responsive, share authority, and recognize divergent priorities -- among your own colleagues.

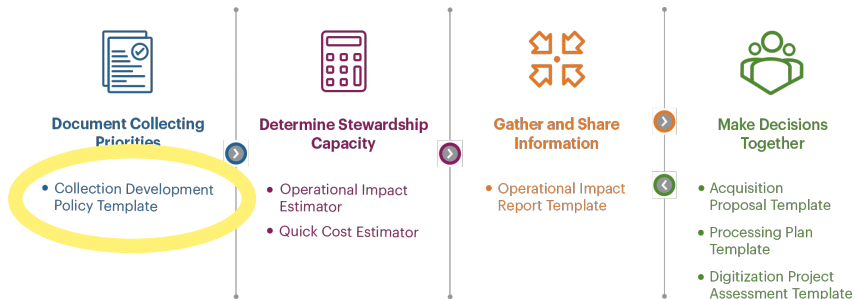
We want everyone to have a shared understanding. I COULD "put my foot down," in the interest of efficiency or urgency -- but that is what reinforces the structures that prevent us from truly collaborative decision-making. A feminist approach to collection stewardship means practicing empathy, seeing each other's skills and strengths, and moving at the speed of trust.



Our discussions are underpinned by the research and ideas from our colleagues in the LIS and archival studies fields. The literature can provide us with language and a way to confront “the way things are” in critical ways. There is not a road map. But - this graphic, the first in the “Dismantling White Supremacy in Archives” resource, is a useful tool for those of us from dominant groups to recognize our privilege and consider actionable steps to take. Appraisal as a practice is due for a major revision. And we need to talk about -- how few curators, selectors, or other “decision-makers” actually do appraisal.

Michelle Caswell asks, as she proposes a new “feminist standpoint appraisal,” “Why, when it comes to the dominant canon of appraisal theory, are we stuck on disembodied notions of value, a focus on institutional priorities, and, most liberally, documenting bureaucratic functions as reflections of society—all of which often fail to acknowledge, let alone celebrate, the marginalized positionalities of some of us doing the appraising? Why hasn’t the dominant canon of appraisal theory changed in the past decade in response to the demands of critical archival studies?” Total Cost of Stewardship relates to the ways in which we assign value to what we collect, as well as the positionalities of those of us doing the selecting and appraising, to say nothing of cost of collection management.

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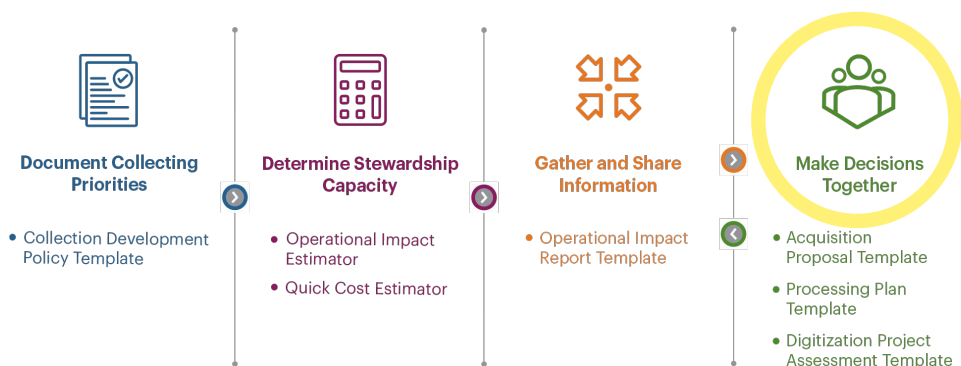
UC Irvine Special Collections & Archives  
Collection Development Strategy



UCI's collecting strategy closely follows the recommendations mapped out in the Total Cost of Stewardship Communication Tools. Our collection strategy identifies areas where we are actively expanding, historic/passively collected areas, and areas where we are no longer collecting. The process of revising our strategy moved from a single voice (the head of special collections) to a curator group; I led our curatorial team through a systematic review of each collecting area. This process took several months of discussion and included time for archivist review and feedback.



## Total Cost of Stewardship Framework

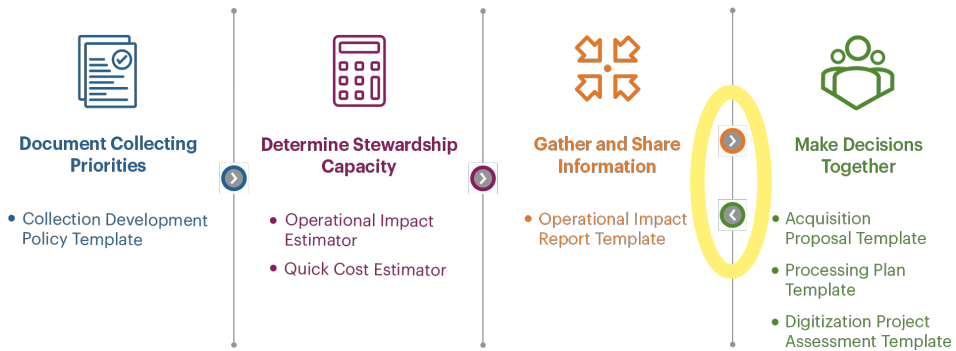


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I am interested in finding ways to convey collecting impact to resource allocators in a way that supports staff labor, fosters collaboration, and builds trust with our users and donors. But asking questions up front about our values, and then defining them -- feeds into understanding our capacity in a more practical sense...and helps make the invisible, visible to our colleagues and our stakeholders. Elisa J. Rodrigues notes that technical services work may “seem magical and thus invisible, but a lot of work and knowledge goes into making a seamless machine.” The work of collection management is often invisible to users and colleagues alike, except when used as a blunt tool during intake and accessioning.

Community engagement does feel urgent, and you can damage relationships if you don't act. Sometimes it seems like “urgencies” can be at odds with each other...if there's money from a wealthy donor versus marginalized communities lacking financial resources. But we have to look clearly at acknowledging the social and political stratifications, the continual tipping of scales around specific forms of labor, and the push for “efficiency” that inevitably impacts junior, less powerful staff. I've learned to foster patience among the highly-driven members of a team, because we have to build together. Ultimately, we have to agree that “urgency” is not going to make us better than shared decision-making will.

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I want to point out that these arrows are pointing to each other: Gather and Share Information and Make Decisions Together are interdependent...and intermingled. So I'd say the greatest area of potential for us at UC Irvine is in the pre-custodial aspect of collecting. Recordkeeping practices around donor stewardship, communication about goals and managing expectations, and centralization of that information to ensure transparency and build trust... will lead my colleagues and I to a more holistic, "make decisions together" approach.

The challenge I see is how to design and plan discussions in groups to move ourselves toward these shared goals. I'm glad to have the resources of the report and tools now as a point of reference, and a codification of concepts, from which I can frame ongoing conversations and foster change. I'm really excited to continue.

“We recognize that this work is iterative and ongoing, inherently risky, and messy, but entirely necessary.”

Tennant, E., Hanff, P., Miller, K., Eagle Yun, A., Jackson, A. N, Lin, E. S., et al. (2021). Statement on Inclusion and Equity in Special Collections, Archives, and Distinctive Collections in the University of California Libraries. UC Office of the President: University of California Systemwide Libraries. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4qs4483j>

I leave you with this quote from the University of California Heads of Special Collections. Moving toward shared decision-making is time-intensive and we’re going to make mistakes. But a holistic, values-centered approach to collection stewardship is the ethical way forward.

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Thank you.