

Theme Two, Case One: DEACCESSIONING BY BELIEF

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Case Prompt:

You are the head of special collections at a nonsectarian institution located in the deep South. The institution had been founded by Baptists but it currently has no official affiliation to that church. One of your archivists is a Zoroastrian and worships a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, who requires good deeds for help in his cosmic struggle against the evil spirit Ahriman.

One day you discover when looking in a recycle bin that she has been throwing away certain items in archival collections. When you ask about your discovery, she says that the papers she threw away weren't pertinent. The materials include such things as images of nude Zulus in tribal gear taken by a famous anthropologist, files on convict appeals from an attorney's papers, and transcripts of interviews for a book by a faculty member who wrote about transexuality. After pressing the archivist on those reasons, she admits that she also viewed them as immoral and sought to effect her religious beliefs of doing good deeds by destroying evil content.

Questions Presented:

1. Should religious beliefs play a role in what archives keep? Would that depend on whether the archives was the archives of a religious institution?
2. De-accessioning usually happens after you've acquired the collection. Should the archives have guidelines about retaining sensitive materials that include nude images, criminal sexual activities, or sexuality in general? If so, what would you destroy, retain, and restrict access?
3. Would a clearly defined acquisitions policy help to avoid acquiring sensitive materials or collections getting into your possession in the first place?
4. What employment actions should be made with this employee? What instructions should she be given?

Response:

1. It might make sense for the archives of a religious institution to allow religious beliefs to shape its deaccessioning policies, since there is inevitably a relationship between the policies of the parent institution and those of the archive. But I don't believe archives employees should be applying their personal religious beliefs to professional decisions, especially when those contradict the explicit policies of their employer.

2. If the collections policy of the archives have changed such that these sensitive materials are no longer appropriate to the purpose of the collection, or if possessing the materials violate the laws of the jurisdiction where the archives is located, it would make sense to deaccession them by destroying or selling them, depending on the specific case. As for restricting access, I think it depends on the community of researchers served by the archives. If some users are likely to be sensitive to certain materials, but the materials still fit the collections policy, it might make sense to restrict access via some kind of warning or extra consent process.

3. Yes, a clearly defined acquisitions policy should help an archives avoid acquiring sensitive materials. It would make it easier to reject donations that do not fit the archives' mission. However, if there are older sensitive materials that predate the acquisitions policy, it would still be necessary to go through them and decide what to retain or get rid of.

4. I believe it is against federal law to discriminate against employees who need religious accommodations, unless providing the accommodation would represent an undue hardship to the employer's business. In this case, I do think allowing an employee to dispose of materials according to their own beliefs, in contradiction to the archives' collections policy, does constitute an undue hardship. I think the archives should confer with this employee to see if there is some compromise that can be made. Perhaps this archivist could be assigned to a different area that would not involve contact with the materials she considers evil.