Short Subjects: Appraisal in Context

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Appraising while arranging is probably such a natural process that most never consider it appraisal. Yet, retention appraisal and arrangement work hand in hand during the progressive refinement of control over an accession. Each successive level of control more specifically identifies the records present. This changes the context for the appraisal and progressively narrows the focus of the retention decisions. Rather than a single step, weeding occurs bit by bit, depending on the information made available through arrangement.

Making retention decisions is not so much a matter of looking for certain types of materials as it is a matter of asking appropriate questions of the materials found:

1. Are these documents unique? Are there copies in archival custody? Extra copies of many items (typically multiple copies of mimeographs or ephemera) are prime candidates for disposal as a result of failing this question.

2. Do these documents contain valuable information about a person, corporate body, place, condition or event? Do they contain valuable evidence of transactions or interactions? Is the information...
or evidence available in other documents? Often daily reports can be discarded when weekly or monthly summaries are available.

3. Does anyone care about this information or evidence? For the records generator, is it needed for current administration; is it likely to be needed for future administrations? For researchers, has anyone worked on this type of topic; is anyone likely to do such work? Sometimes retention is warranted despite a current lack of scholarly interest because the topic documented is either intrinsically or potentially important. Yet, even though some value can be perceived in almost every item, most documents will never be used. To facilitate a reasonable amount of weeding, most archivists interpret the question to mean "Is anyone likely to care a great deal?"

These types of questions have been discussed at length in the general appraisal literature. Some archivists and records managers have even developed sophisticated systems for using the questions to assign retention rating factors to records. However, no matter how complex the scoring system, the answers to these questions depend not on some absolute standard of retention value but on the context in which the questions are asked. This context is set both by the level of the processing and by the external assumptions.

As the arrangement process moves progressively from the general to the specific so does appraisal. The questions asked are always the same, though they are geared to the appropriate level. For example, at the series level, whole series are appraised: is this series unique; does it present valuable information or evidence, etc.? Since appraisal moves progressively, retention standards initially appear to be relatively lax or conservative. Many folders and items are retained that will later be weeded out. They are accepted at earlier stages simply because they are not yet individually identified. As they are identified their relationship with other records
in the accession and the archives becomes clearer. Appraisal of the folders and items is then easier and more natural.

Refining an accession arrangement prompts reappraisal: what was an appropriate retention decision at one level may not be at the next. For example, when first accessioned (when no contents detail was known), the papers of Texas State Senator A. R. Schwartz all appeared to be of archival value. They were the central office files of a key state politician in the 1960s and 1970s. Among other attributes, several topics of extreme local interest—flood insurance and hurricane preparedness planning legislation—presumably documented by these papers were not well represented in area repositories. Through refinement of the accession arrangement to the series level, the papers were found to include general correspondence, newspaper clippings, legislative materials (bills and related documents), campaign materials and other assorted series. New retention decisions were needed. At this stage the clippings were discarded, since they gave only general information on actions taken and almost no information on the motive or processes behind the public actions. Discarding the clippings in this case was also routine because various repositories in the state keep and index the newspapers represented.

Later, when the individual folders in some of the series were put in order, still other materials were discarded. For instance, duplicate copies of bills and reports were removed from the legislative files. In this way the accession was pared down to the more valuable records. Even so, there would undoubtedly be reason for additional weeding should some of the remaining series be refined to the folder or item level.

The Schwartz papers are but one example of a familiar pattern. When negotiating for records or appraising on-site in preparation for transfer to the archives, the archivist is usually willing to accept any box that looks like it includes material possibly
of archival value. After the records have been transferred and while they are being arranged into subgroups and series, the various sets of folders identified are appraised together. If and when the processing moves to file unit level, the individual folders are appraised. Only if the processing descends to the item level are individual items intensively considered. While single items are discarded at every level, the basic pattern is to decide first whether the records in aggregate (the subgroup or series) are worth keeping before assessing the individual items separately. There are exceptions to this general rule. For example, processing the unorganized papers of a documentary pack rat may require sifting through the whole accession item by item or bundle by bundle to find the documents of archival value.

Through this processing sequence, from the general to the specific, the refinement of the arrangement leads to the ever more refined appraisal of the accession. The retention decisions, in turn, help to pinpoint segments of the accession worthy of further processing (since only the worthy materials are kept). This complementary relationship makes appraisal a facet of the arrangement process rather than a separate issue.

Just as the level of processing affects appraisal decisions, so do external factors. The most important of these is the quality of the documentation already collected. Some apparently routine records—for example, ancient storehouse lists—convey much valuable information simply because so little other documentation of the subject or period exists. However, where basic records have been preserved, there is usually little need for the more peripheral records. Modern records are often characterized as presenting too much information, not too little. Thus, appraisal is frequently used to reduce the bulk of an accession without significantly altering the quality of the information in it. For example, constituent problems dealt with by an elected official may vary in some details, yet fall
into general patterns. The complaint letters, though individually unique, are collectively similar. Since a fair sample can adequately represent all the information in such files, there is no need to keep all the items.

The quality of documentation cannot be strictly measured. The sense of adequacy instead is based on an estimate of the research interest in the topic documented. Assessments of the research interest usually involve anticipating the type of researcher and the method of research. Sometimes it is useful to keep many items of small information or evidential value because collectively they can provide raw data for quantitative studies. Similarly, when a biography is anticipated, it is necessary to keep more of a person's notes and rough drafts in order to document processes as well as results. In scientific and literary papers notes that reflect the intellectual processes are sometimes as valuable for researchers as documents that present the final product.

Breadth can be as important as depth. For example, the weeding of the Schwartz papers has so far been relatively conservative, since there is a fair chance researchers will want to study Schwartz himself or his role in the state senate. No one but a biographer would want to know the full range of Schwartz's activities; yet, in anticipation of such a researcher all of the legislative files have been kept, including those on relatively trivial matters. If in time there appears to be little interest in Schwartz, the papers can be reappraised and many of the legislative files discarded. Considering these various external factors does not alter the questions that need to be asked, it just changes the acceptable answers: are these notes and drafts of interest? Yes, to the biographer; no, to the quantitatively oriented social historian.

General appraisal plans drawn up before processing begins are useful for identifying the external assumptions that will govern the appraisal. Such plans help give coherence to the retention
decisions that are made. Some archivists actually write out a plan, while others simply make mental notes. Yet, whatever its form, an appraisal plan is but a tentative sketch of the weeding to be done. It is not a substitute for the questioning during processing.

Appraisal is not a one-shot task. Since the underlying premises can change, reappraisal is necessary. As mentioned above, most reappraisal occurs naturally as accessions are arranged in more detail. If the progressive arrangement occurs in steps separated by several years, any changes in the premises will automatically be reflected in the retention decisions. Leonard Rapport has also identified the need to reappraise at previously arranged levels. Such reappraisal weeds out whole accessions or large segments of accessions that have proven useless or have already received their fullest possible use. Just as processing prompts reappraisal, reappraisal prompts reprocessing (or discarding).

The complementary relationship between arrangement and appraisal is not often fully expressed in general discussions of either topic. That relationship is nevertheless an important aspect of progressively refined processing and deserves more explicit attention. Archivists generally agree on the need for better appraisal guidelines in many areas. For such guidelines to be most workable they must clearly place appraisal within the context of the processing workflow.

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NOTES

1 For example, see two of the basic works on appraisal: Maynard J. Brichford, Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977) and Theodore R. Schellenberg, "The Appraisal of Modern Public Records," National Archives Bulletin, no. 8 (1956). Neither refers to arrangement when presenting appraisal tech-
niques. It is also interesting to note that the word appraisal is not even mentioned in Schellenberg's Management of Archives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), a work that concentrates on arrangement and description.


COLLECTING AT THE 1982 WORLD'S FAIR

When the World's Fair came to Tennessee (1 May-31 October 1982), it brought an opportunity for the staff of the McClung Historical Collection of the Knoxville-Knox County Public Library to collect small, ephemeral fair-related items. There is a scarcity of such items from the city's early exposition experiences—the Appalachian Expositions of 1910 and 1911 and the National Conservation Exposition twenty years later. This led to thoughts on the needs of future researchers and how easily similar requests might be met with relatively little effort in the present.

With our 1982 World's Fair collecting, we were working with a low-to-no budget, which certainly helped define our collecting policies. Fortunately, a good many ephemeral items were free. Our staff was alerted to look for anything with the World's Fair red flame logo. Good taste and discrimination were not factors—price was. We operated on the theory that unsuitable material, as well as duplicates, could be weeded and discarded at a later date.

There was an official everything for the fair, and we collected product containers and advertisements as much as possible. J.F.G. coffee bags, Flavor-Rich milk cartons, empty Coca-Cola cans, even Smoky Mountain Market hot dog wrappers all found