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Book Reviews

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BOOK REVIEWS

ARCHIVES PROCEDURAL MANUAL. (St. Louis: Washington University School of Medicine Library, 1974. Pp. v + 118. Appendices. $5.00)


The archival profession is faced with what may appear to be an insurmountable task, that is, the proper handling of the vast number of papers and other archival material presently being created. Not only is the profession witnessing what has been termed an "explosion" in the creation of records, but, fortunately, it is also seeing an increase in the number of repositories established to collect and preserve contemporary records.

As new archival agencies have been formed, it has become even more evident, than in the past, that each agency needs to develop procedures to be followed in carrying out its program. Given the wide variety of types of material collected, subject areas covered, staff sizes, and other differences, a comprehensive procedures manual for the entire profession may be impractical. Each depository, however, can, and should, develop its own manual. This is particularly true as more and more agencies turn to part time, temporary staff for assistance.

Though each program must devise its own methods, manuals describing the experience and practice of other archival agencies will be of great assistance in establishing standard procedures. Two such manuals are those written by the staffs of the School of Medicine Library at Washington University and the Cornell University Libraries.

The Archives Procedural Manual of Washington University's Medical Library is a compilation of the forms, flow charts, and directives pertinent to the program. In 118 pages it covers the gamut of archival work from acquiring new collections to providing copies for patrons. It may be because this is an archives concerned with the sciences that there are so many forms. I, however, find the large number to be overwhelming. One wonders if some
could not be combined or eliminated. The functions of forms should be to aid in the performance of a task. When one is "drowned" in procedures, the task may become more complicated, rather than eased.

On the other hand, it is this vast number of forms and other items that make this manual of value to other institutions. There are enough examples to cover nearly every need. Topics covered that may be of interest to others include acquiring new donations, assigning collection numbers, establishing control, processing, finding aids, picture indexing, use of collections, oral history and microfilming.

The Manual of Manuscript Processing Procedures for the Cornell University Libraries is more of an internal operating document than is the Washington University manual. Nevertheless, other repositories may find sections useful to their programs.

The Cornell manual also is written more for the student assistant or volunteer helper who has had no archival training. The early sections of the manual deal with topics such as respect de fonds and maintaining the original order, subjects in which most beginning archivists, hopefully, are well versed. The manual also is well sprinkled with admonitions for the processor to seek out the supervisor when in doubt.

Unlike the Washington University publication, the Cornell work is a manual of procedures rather than a compilation of forms. It takes a new archival processor step-by-step through Cornell's method of arranging and describing collections.

One feature of the manual that other institutions should strive to emulate is a bibliography of references relevant to Cornell's particular subject areas. Other depositories would do well to compile similar listings for their subject areas. Another bibliography in the Cornell manual contains books and articles that may be consulted on archival and manuscript practices.

Through the use of a glossary and a list of approved abbreviations the compilers of this manual have attempted to resolve the standardization of descriptive terms, a problem which continually arises in the
description of papers.

The major gap in both manuals, in this writer's opinion, is the lack of guidelines on appraisal standards. Despite preliminary decisions by archival staffs as to what should be collected, it is often the task of the processors of collections to apply appraisal standards as they proceed with the arrangement and description. It is unfortunate that such guidelines have not been included.

The Washington University and Cornell manuals are important, not only because they reflect an important professional trend towards standardization of archival procedures, but also because they make literature on the topic readily available to the profession as a whole.

Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs Warren Pflug Wayne State University


This booklet was originally prepared for the use of the author's Holy Family College Library, and "it has been revised and changed in part to serve as a useful guide for practically all college libraries which are collecting archives" (Foreword by Maurice F. Tauber, p.v.). It has been written for librarians with little or no training who have responsibility for manuscripts.

The manual is not very long (87 pages, 8½ X 11 format, typed, double-spaced), but it contains much practical material. Pages 1-32 contain step-by-step directions for accessioning, arranging, etc. Then there are sixteen pages of samples of finding aids: registers, catalog cards, inventories, shelf lists and printed guides. Pages 49-50 contain a "Sample of a Record Groups Classification for Archives," and pages 50-63 contain sample forms. There are appendices with bibliographies, a page of "useful abbreviations," a list of vendors of supplies and equipment, a glossary and an index.

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It is difficult, if not impossible, to write a manual for beginners. Inexperienced people do not have the requisite knowledge, and experienced people have lost the beginner's perspective. Sister Menzenska has partially succeeded but has tried to do too much. Invoking the Reviewer's License (the assumption that the work will soon be revised and the author wants advice), I suggest: eliminate the material on rare books, and refer readers to more extensive guides; move the lists on pages 4-6 to an appendix, lest they discourage people; reduce the number of terms in the glossary to allow better definitions of a few terms; and provide a few simple drawings in the section on processing.

My suggestions for improvement should not obscure the fact that this is a very useful guide. The author has gathered in one volume instructions, hints, directions, and references that were widely scattered. Her writing was prompted by the realization that many college libraries are acquiring manuscripts and are entrusting the care of them to people whose education and experience have been with library materials. There is no lengthy discussion in this manual of library versus archives procedures or of the principles of archival organization, but there is an appreciation of the different requirements of "special collections" materials and some very good advice on handling them.

Librarians should not depend on this manual unless they have had formal archival training or have the dependable guidance of an experienced archivist. Librarians-becoming-archivists will find it helpful to supplement proper training, and they will find it helpful as they instruct clerical workers. Its widespread use would assist accuracy and uniformity in the processing of archival materials that are not in the custody of professional archivists.

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David E. Horn