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Functional Analysis and the Reappraisal of Faculty Papers: A Practical Application

Gregory Schmidt and Michael Law

In 2009, *Provenance* published an article examining the reappraisal and functional analysis of faculty papers in university archives.¹ The present article examines a case study of the practical application of the model that emerged.

The original article addressed the ways that faculty papers are appraised, arranged and described, as well as positing a course for reappraisal of existing collections. What emerged was an intellectual, but not physical, reorganization of the finding aid. Retaining the original location data, the materials were grouped into more logical subdivisions based upon the Records Disposition Authority (RDA) for Alabama state records. As personal manuscripts, the papers of faculty members are not official records, but by applying the RDA framework, the material which contributed to the functioning of the university as an

¹ Schmidt, Gregory, and Michael Law. 2009. "Functional Analysis and the Reappraisal of Faculty Papers." *Provenance: The Journal of The Society of Georgia Archivists* 27, 51-75.

institution, and the arrangement of once haphazard materials could now be far more logical.²

By addressing the finding aid alone, the project achieved many of the benefits of reappraisal without physically altering the collection or encountering the drawbacks of deaccessioning.³ Still, some of the benefits of reappraisal could only come from a hands-on rearrangement of the material. These benefits include easier retrieval and reference, better housing and preservation, and most especially space. While gaining space is an additional benefit of reappraisal, and should not be central reason for undertaking it, the gain is often significant enough to make the time investment worthwhile.⁴ It was with that in mind that the authors of the original *Provenance* article used the newly reorganized finding aid to restructure the physical collection to match.

The process of bringing the physical collection in line with the finding aid might be thought of as both a useful end of its own, and what could become a regular second step in the reappraisal process. It further simplifies the redesign of the finding aid, and engages the collection, which may have gone unseen in the intellectual redesign. While the rearrangement does affect the physical materials, it still does not bring deaccessioning into the process. It does, however, provide an overview of the collection and highlight parts or items that may be ripe for reexamination later.

² Chaudron, G. (2008). "The Potential of "Function" as an Archival Descriptor." *Journal of Archival Organization*, 6(4), 269-287.

³ Karen Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Records as Collection Management Tools in an Archives; A Reply to Leonard Rapport," *The American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (1984): 44.

⁴ Sheila Powell, "Archival Reappraisal: The Immigration Case Files," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991/92): 104-116.

The process, as undertaken by the authors, accomplishes two overarching tasks: giving organizational form to problematically arranged and described collections via the finding aid; and developing something of a pattern, or template, for instituting reappraisal across the collections on a regular basis. The process centers around the finding aid, and breaks reappraisal into three discernible stages. It requires the archivist to revisit the collection three times over a 15-25 year period. First, the archivist revisits the finding aid with some form of template (in the authors' case the RDA for Alabama). Then, using the finding as a guide, realign the collections. Finally, after giving the new guide and arrangement sufficient time to prove their worth, revisit the collection and compare usage and collecting needs.⁵

This was the heart of the initial idea behind reappraisal; reengaging older collections to see if they, and more specifically their arrangement and description, still hold up to modern appraisal standards. Deaccessions, gains in space, and improvements in housing and reference are all possible by-products of the process, but the goal is to make the collection better meet researchers' needs. If the collection is no longer of use (or never was), or if the initial handling by the archive left the collection less usable, reappraisal is the opportunity to bring collections up-to-date.⁶

Leonard Rapport initiated the conversation around reappraisal in the early 1980s and through peaks and valleys of interest it continues today.⁷ There was initial

⁵ Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 143-150;

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jackson, Laura Uglean and D. Claudia Thompson. "But You Promised: A Case Study of Deaccessioning at the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming," *American Archivist* 73 (Fall/Winter 2010): 669-685.

resistance from archivists fearing a backlash from donors and the public regarding possible deaccessioning and what they felt was renegeing of the archives commitment. Since then, the profession has taken on a more fluid perspective regarding permanence of collections, even going as far as forgoing the word “permanent” and replacing it with “enduring.”⁸ Resistance to reappraisal, therefore, revolves not around theoretical problems, but the practical capacity of the archive to undertake projects. It is true that reappraisal projects can absorb staff time and work space, but the typical return in shelf space alone often makes the investment worthwhile. In Auburn University's case, scarcity of existing shelf space and the dispersed nature of multiple accessions made the exercises worthwhile. In addition to addressing these practical concerns, the timing of reappraisal was especially opportune given Auburn's ongoing digital library and EAD conversion projects. This may not be the case for every library, but it while it is easy to say that backlogs take precedence over projects like reappraisal, not routinely doing so means allowing collections to go untouched and unseen for decades.

When Rapport first posited his ideas about reappraisal, he did not envision it as a single-sitting project. Rapport was a constitutional records archivist at the National Archives, and over a 35 year career saw the rot of countless collections that were never touched, let alone reevaluated, even as the agency and the profession underwent drastic changes. Rather, he viewed the process in line with the *longue duree* notion of the historical record. Rapport introduced a process that would be evolutionary in nature and multi-stepped and multi-faceted in design and implementation. He provided no step-by-step instructions for the process, instead focusing on the reasoning and overall benefits of conducting reappraisal at all. He insisted

⁸ James M. O'Toole, "On the Idea of Permanence," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 10-25.

that records (and manuscripts by association) did not exist in archives merely for their own preservation; they are there to be used. That usage can be tracked and evaluated in intervals over time, and compared with developments and enhancements within the profession, and the place the records hold within the institution overall. The process, he wrote, could, and should take a generation to complete and consider all facets of the record's place in the overall collection.⁹

Some misinterpretations of Rapport's idea led some to feel that he was simply applying date stamps on the life spans of collections and blindly discarding the oldest records.¹⁰ This was hardly the actual case. What Rapport suggested was more along the lines of an instituted generational review. Once every twenty years or so the archivist should just take a good look around the holdings; especially those collections that have not seen light for that entire period. If there have been changes in the institution's mission, or advances in archival methods, the holdings should be evaluated in that light and kept up-to-date.¹¹ For the Malcolm McMillan Papers, that reexamination did not mean weeding or expiration. It showed the flaws of the original arrangement and description, and the promise of a new method.

Indeed, the authors reengaged the McMillan Papers twice over a three-year period; first intellectually via the finding aid, then physically re-handling the actual material. The product was a useful, logical finding aid, a thorough re-housing and consolidation (which saved a tremendous amount of space), and a more readily accessible, reference able, clean, precise, usable set of records. The process discarded no part of the collection, yet completely transformed it. The review period of a generation is now

⁹ Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause, 144.

¹⁰ Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire," 44.

¹¹ Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause, 144.

underway, and usage can be tracked with the knowledge that it is the materials themselves under review, and not their arrangement and description.¹²

Physical rearrangement also allowed the opportunity to begin evaluating some of the theoretical ideas established or referenced in the original article; namely, that the bulk of the process could be handled via the finding aid, without touching the collection, and the RDA guidelines could serve as a viable framework for manuscript collections despite not being official state or university records. The hope existed, for instance, that if enough patterns began to emerge throughout the reappraisal, there might be an effect upon the nature of the archival mission or collecting policies.¹³ This turned out to be somewhat true. McMillan was the long-time chair of the Auburn University History Department. As such, his papers, while still not officially university records did contain a sizable number of documents concerning the administrative end of his time as a faculty member. Many faculty can document the teaching and research products of their tenure, but a much smaller number can document much in the way of administrative action. This was particularly important in McMillan's case because of the length of time he served as chair, and the events of the somewhat tumultuous time during which he served.

Moreover, the legal and practical standards for handling some of those types of records are far stricter today than they were either during McMillan's tenure, or even at the time of original appraisal. This means that records that may have been kept in the collection as part of his personal papers would today possibly be extracted and

¹² Powell, "Archival Reappraisal," 104.

¹³ Tom Hyry, Diane Kaplan, and Christine Weideman, "Though This Be Madness, yet There is Method in 't': Assessing the Value of Faculty Papers and Defining a Collecting Policy," *American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 57.

made a part of departmental or college administrative records.

Regardless of whether or not extraction is possible or practical, the collection can be linked to university records via the finding aids. Encoding the finding into university and non-university series and employing descriptive standards equal to those of university records provides a cross-reference function without disturbing *respect des fonds*. It is in this context that EAD formatting can be complimented and extended through Encoded Archival Context (EAC). EAC is designed specifically for this function of identifying and linking inter-relationships between record sets. As EAD, and further EAC, become more standardized, this type of relational description will become easier, and more routine. This means that particular tags and headings can be regularly applied to new accessions of faculty papers upon initial processing.¹⁴

Beyond the finding aid, however, there are multiple benefits to reexamining collections. For the McMillan Papers, the benefits that the authors had hoped for, as well as some that were unforeseen, began to emerge during the rearrangement.

The most important product of the work was the gain in shelf space. That was an initial goal for the process. With few exceptions, some gain in space will be nearly automatic with any re-housing and/or re-folding of any collection. For the McMillan Papers the gain was immense. Again, without deaccessioning a single item, the bulk size of the papers was reduced by roughly forty percent. The gain will, of course, not be that significant for every collection, but for archives like Auburn University's, where

¹⁴ Richard V. Szary, "Encoded Archival Context (EAC) and Archival Description: Rationale and Background." *Journal Of Archival Organization* 3, no. 2/3 (2005): 217-227.

every foot of space is precious, any gain makes a strong argument for reappraisal.¹⁵

The McMillan Papers arrived in the archives in three separate accessions. By the last, the papers amounted to fifty-three records center boxes, ninety-seven note card boxes, and a set of microfilm which was extracted and made a part of Auburn's overall microfilm holdings. The note card boxes are rife with notes McMillan kept during his half-century study of southern history. Even subdivided into sets, the note cards lack context with the rest of the collection. By and large, the cards are summaries of texts that McMillan read during the research conducted for his own manuscripts.

To deaccession the note cards would, in part, mean falling victim to Gerald Ham's fear that persistent reappraisal would make archives merely a weather-vane for current historical trends.¹⁶ Even properly contextualized, the notes represent research in an area that has dramatically changed since McMillan was an active historian of the South. Many of the texts he consulted and annotated in the cards are now out of date. It is conceivable that modern researchers could make use of the cards as they are, but it is questionable. A large part of reappraisal is understanding where to draw the line between conceivable use and likely use.

In any respect, the reappraisal project that may well target those note cards for deaccessioning or perhaps some type of sampling, is presently at a more preliminary stage. By Rapport's reckoning the McMillan Papers are in what may be called a "testing phase." By first addressing the finding aid, and then the physical arrangement of the papers, the stage is now set to track any variations in the type of usage the papers receive.

¹⁵ Greene, "I've Deaccessioned," 12.

¹⁶ F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (January 1975): 5-13.

In addition to the gain in shelf space, and the more logical arrangement, another benefit was consolidation of the papers from their disparate shelves. After transferring papers from ringed binders into file folders, removing empty folders, and tightening empty box space the collection went from 53 RC boxes to 31. Besides clearing usable shelf space, the reduction also allowed for bringing all of the collection together in one set of closed stack shelving. This makes reference and retrieval significantly simpler and faster. It also increases the value of shelf browsing to have the full collection housed together.

During the re-housing process, there was a folder to folder matching to align the physical collection with the new finding aid. The process brought to light problems with the original cataloging. For instance, some folders were empty, and others were not precisely where they were described to be. This means that not only now is the new finding aid less chaotic in its order, it also more accurate in its descriptions and location data.

In all, the two authors spent roughly three days in consultation, listing, rearranging and EAD formatting of the finding aid. At a second interval there was another four days spent re-housing and realigning the physical materials. That is the time of two archivists for seven days. That time frame compares well to any processing time standards.

The fairly spare amount of time devoted yielded a gain of twenty-two cubic feet of space, a drastically more logical and usable collection, a finer context for linking faculty manuscripts to university records, and a template for engaging further collections. It is not difficult to argue that the expense in time was well worth the resulting benefits of the process.

Especially if it can fit into broader digitization, or reformatting projects, the McMillan Papers are a clear example of successful, multi-stepped reappraisal.

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