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## Short Subjects: User Statistics and Records Appraisal

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## SHORT SUBJECTS



### FEATURE

#### User Statistics and Records Appraisal

Several years ago at a meeting of the Society of Georgia Archivists, Margaret Child of the National Endowment for the Humanities exclaimed, "There's just too much stuff." The "stuff" she was referring to is primarily the records of modern times which are making their way into archives and local repositories. Child believes that her cry and that of the modern records archivist "will soon become desperate." One reason for the voluminous records is no doubt the information explosion of our times, but also, contends Child, the failure by repositories to establish a formal collecting policy. Child's answer to this state of affairs in modern archives is for those repositories to formalize a "highly selective collecting policy coupled with a periodic review."

The second aspect of her proposed solution or recommendation involves reappraisal or, as Child puts it, weeding the collection. How does she suggest that archivists weed their collections? "Certain contemporary, particularly local collections," says Child, "should be allowed to self-destruct. If they are not used by historians within the life-span of the paper, I'm not persuaded that great effort has to be made to microfilm or preserve them."<sup>1</sup> In short, Child suggests that use made of the records can be a test of their research value.

Child's call for measuring the research value of

records by their use has been made by others in our field including Leonard Rapport and Maynard Brichford.<sup>2</sup> Brichford goes one step further by asserting that the validity of appraisal decisions can be tested through the use made of the records. In Brichford's view, user demand for records is in direct proportion to their value. He believes that "the proof of the archival pudding is not only in the eating, but in how often it is eaten and the nourishment and pleasure it affords."<sup>3</sup> One may or may not completely agree with Brichford. But, he does have a point. User demand of records can be a measuring stick for the reappraisal of accessioned records and for reaching those initial appraisal decisions. Through analyzing the uses of records we may ascertain research trends, patterns, and needs of users, which are all helpful, albeit not a panacea, in records appraisal.

How is user demand of records determined? One obvious approach is through the maintenance and analysis of user statistics. Perhaps less obvious to many is the fact that few published user statistics of archives exist. In fact, a search of the literature over the past several years reveals one article entirely devoted to analyzing users of archival records.

Knowing the information needs of researchers is essential to the task of the appraisal archivist. For that reason, user statistics can be vital to the archivist charged with making what Meyer Fishbein has termed "reasoned decisions" about the permanent value of records, records which, it is hoped, will meet the wants and needs of researchers and, therefore, be used.

What type of user statistics, then, are needed by the archivist? What does the archivist need to know about the researcher? Is it sufficient to record users in terms of mere numbers? User statistics consisting only of numbers and percentages have little meaning to the archivist making those often tough appraisal decisions. User statistics need be recorded and analyzed, for example, by profession,



avocation, or student status of the researcher; by subject of inquiry or research topic; by span of time under study; by expected result of the research (a term paper, book, article); by records actually consulted; by records or topic and subject of records desired but not available; by the researcher's perception of the usefulness of the records to his study; and by any apparent "gaps" in those records.

The list of needed data on users and user profiles no doubt could be longer, but the point is self-evident. Archivists, especially those responsible for making appraisal decisions, need more than to hear or read that "fifty researchers were in the search room last month" or "four of those people were doing historical research." What does the term "historical research" without clarification convey to the appraisal archivist? The archivist needs more details. What records are actually being used? How beneficial are they to the researcher? What records have been requested but are not available for research. The answer to these and more questions are sorely needed by archivists and particularly appraisal archivists. User statistics must be compiled, but in a manner that will foster the analysis of research use, demands, and wants. As Margaret Child, Leonard Rapport, and especially Maynard Brichford have more than hinted at, user statistics can be a vital and valid measuring stick for the appraisal and reappraisal of records.

Kathy Roe Coker

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "NEH Official Voices a Plea for Planning," Society of Georgia Archivists Newsletter, 4 (December 1981): 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," American Archivist 44 (Spring 1981): 143-150, and Maynard J. Brichford, Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and

Accessioning (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1979).

<sup>3</sup> Brichford, Ibid., 9.