

Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance

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Abstract: After briefly identifying some of the problems archivists face in administering modern records, the author discusses six elements of archival collection management: inter-institutional cooperation in collecting, disciplined and documented application of appraisal procedures, deaccessioning, pre-archival control of records, reducing record volume, and analysis and planning. The author suggests that there may well be other factors involved in collection management but concludes with an admonition to all archivists to seek alternative courses of action rather than habitually following practices of the past.

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In November 1974 the distinguished American historian John Hope Franklin stood before the bench in a federal courtroom in Chicago and stated his opinion on the merits of preserving the records of the past. He said you have to save everything because "there's no way to know what's going to be valuable ten, fifteen or a hundred years from now." The "everything" he referred to were the 1,507 boxes of assorted material that made up the gubernatorial papers of the Honorable Otto Kerner, Jr., former governor of Illinois, who was just then enjoying the shortest of leaves from a federal correctional facility in Lexington, Kentucky. Kerner's appraiser, Ralph Newman of Chicago—of Nixon papers fame—had appraised the governor's papers in excess of \$73,000. The Internal Revenue Service contended that the papers were worth somewhat less than that in the fair market. The IRS won its point.¹

How simple it would be for archivists to follow Prof. Franklin's dictum. If it cost nothing to accession and preserve records, we could save everything, no matter how trivial, and, of course, we would then have anticipated every conceivable research use. Society must regard such broadness of spirit as profligacy, if not outright idiocy. Instead, archivists—like most residents of the real world—must pick and choose.

The Kerner papers have much to say about the problems—economic and otherwise—of managing the historical record with limited resources in an age of abundance. Some of these problems are well known to archivists. Bulk is one. Kerner amassed more than 750

cubic feet of records during his eight years in office. Papers of 19th-century political figures held by the same institution—the Illinois State Historical Library—averaged ten cubic feet.²

Another problem is the redundancy of information in modern collections. Much of the data in such collections resembles more the noise and distortions of a badly tuned television set than useful information. One hundred five boxes of Kerner's papers, or approximately 52,000 items, were ceremonial invitations, many to snip ribbons at shopping centers.

Ironically, in spite of the bulk and redundancy of modern records, there is also a problem of missing data. What is missing from the Kerner papers, for example, is the governor himself. His papers, which are actually the records of the executive office, reveal almost nothing about the man, his thought processes, or his style of life, whether political or administrative.³ These records are a prime example of how modern telecommunications have brought about the death of what I call intimate recorded communication and reflection—the letter and the diary.

The impermanence of the modern record is still another problem in collection management. Many of Kerner's papers are electrostatic copies that have now faded beyond legibility. Modern technology has compounded this problem by producing records that are amendable, on mediums that are fragile and reusable. It is difficult to accession such records before the information disappears.

The preservation of modern collec-

¹United States Tax Court. *Otto Kerner, Jr., and Estate of Helena C. Kerner, Deceased, Otto Kerner, Jr., executor, petitioners v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue*, respondent. Docket No. 4686-73. Filed January 19, 1976; Trial transcript, p.80; and TC memo 1976-12.

²*Ibid.*, Exhibit A (Inventory of the Otto Kerner Papers); Telephone communication of the author with the staff of the Illinois State Historical Library, October 4, 1982.

³*Kerner v. Commissioner of Internal Revenue*, Exhibit I (Appraisal of the Papers and Records of Otto Kerner, Jr., by F. Gerald Ham).

tions may be prohibitively expensive. The Kerner files, accessioned in 1968, are still in a preliminary state of arrangement and description; and they are likely to remain that way. Recent cost analysis suggests that traditional processing of a collection of this size and complexity might easily cost more than \$62,000.⁴

The most difficult and least recognized collection management problem associated with modern records is the structural bias in the national archival record. Archival accessions programs have loaded repository shelves with too much documentation on certain aspects of American life and culture and almost nothing on others. The Kerner files and associated collections of gubernatorial and congressional records in the Illinois State Historical Library are a case in point; they comprise over 50 percent (4,500 of the 8,900 linear feet) of repository holdings.⁵ As a result of this emphasis, many other aspects of state history necessarily must go undocumented.

This age of overabundant records and information, combined with increasing scarcity of resources, is forcing archivists to replace their essentially unplanned approach to archival preservation with a "systematic, planned, documented process of building, maintaining, and preserving collections."⁶

This concept of collection management offers archivists a new way of thinking about their work. The concept suggests that the basic archival functions (appraisal, accessioning, arrangement and description, and conservation) are not discrete, isolated activities but are rather parts of a multi-step process or continuum. A key feature of collection management is the conceptual integra-

tion of acquisition and processing functions into a single system. Collection management must deal with records before they come into archival custody. Only by controlling what comes through their doors can archivists solve the major problems in modern records administration. They can do this by applying familiar ideas and practices more rigorously, by devising new and more sophisticated methods of selection and control, and by using resources in a more planned and efficient way.

There are many important elements in archival collection management. I shall discuss six: interinstitutional cooperation in collecting; disciplined and documented application of appraisal procedures; deaccessioning; pre-archival control of records; reducing record volume; and analysis and planning.

I. Interinstitutional Cooperation

The problem of structural bias in current archival holdings can be addressed through interinstitutional cooperation in collection building. Cooperation also enables archivists to make better use of limited resources to compile a more representative record of the past. To build such a record, however, archivists must alter their perspective on collection development. They need to look beyond an essentially introspective and isolated approach to archival accessioning and consider how individual institutional efforts might contribute to a broader regional and national historical collecting process.

To go beyond attitudinal changes to the coordination of collecting activity requires archivists to build interinstitutional linkages. How do they do this?

⁴Thomas Wilsted, "Computing the Total Cost of Archival Processing," *MARAC'S Dear Archivist . . . Practical Solutions to Archival Dilemmas* (Summer 1982): 2-3.

⁵Communication with the staff of the Illinois State Historical Library, October 4, 1982.

⁶Jutta Reed-Scott, "Collection Management Strategies for Archivists," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 23-29.

They face a severe structural problem because institutional archives exist to serve the administrative and other needs of the parent body, not an amorphous group called researchers. Furthermore, archivists' experience with interinstitutional cooperation is limited; and they have few models or plans to guide them. They lack such basic building blocks as well-articulated institutional accession statements. Most of all, they have insufficient data about current holdings nationwide to permit the kind of analysis that Jutta Reed-Scott has pointed out is an essential precondition or prerequisite for program planning and development.

What archivists do have, however, are some new structures that should help them solve some of the problems mentioned above. These structures are the statewide archival networks such as the Minnesota Regional Research Centers, the joint University and State Historical Society system in Missouri, and the Wisconsin Area Research Centers. Such regionally based centers, located on university campuses, serve as the archives, both public and private, for the surrounding multi-county area. They also serve faculty and students as well as a nonacademic constituency interested in family and community history. Usually there is a core area of collecting that is common to all centers—politics, community development, biography, and so forth. These regional core collections create a statewide body of complementary holdings.⁷

Rather than build collections indiscriminately or redundantly, archivists need a strategy to enable institutions to move beyond the complementary core collection to individual center specialization. Since, for the most part, each center serves a geographic region with

different characteristics, each should have the opportunity to document these differences. Building subject collections on a geographic basis is not entirely a logical enterprise, yet it is here that the cooperative network structure can provide some rationality. In Minnesota, for example, the network members agreed that only one center would document the activities of Depression-era farmer protest groups, while another center would document ethnic customs among Scandinavians.⁸ With limited resources for preserving the record, such rationalizations are not just common sense; they are imperative. Because collections are accessioned systematically, there is no wasteful competition. Such planned accessions better enable archivists to fill existing gaps in the historical records and to better serve the interests of the researcher. In addition to providing more representative and comprehensive coverage, collecting models can also assist in building important bodies of comparative documentation. Historical records that appear to document fragmented or isolated phenomena often become more important when they can be plugged into parallel collections elsewhere.

Coordinated interinstitutional collecting requires careful planning and program phasing. A first phase should involve the collecting of information about holdings, accessions focus or policy, and acquisition procedures of all cooperating institutions. The implementation of cooperative collecting strategies and programs should be a second phase. A necessary third phase will include steps to ensure program continuation. This would require that archivists establish mechanisms for continuous information sharing, for

⁷See "Survey of Archival Networks," in *The Midwestern Archivist* 6 (no. 2, 1982): 98-127.

⁸James E. Fogerty, "Manuscripts Collecting in Archival Networks," *The Midwestern Archivist* 6 (no. 2, 1982): 135.

monitoring, for conflict resolution, and for the modification and updating of policies and plans.

In order to maximize coordinated interinstitutional collecting, archivists need to increase the number of statewide networks, such as those in Minnesota, Missouri, and Wisconsin. They also need to create new kinds of cooperation based on institutional type, such as university, church, or state archives. Labor and science and technology are examples of subject focus networks that might be created.

II. Disciplined Appraisal

Archivists must refine their criteria and techniques for records selection at the institutional level. This second element of archival collection management calls for a more disciplined approach to appraisal. Here one might consider the radical position of the New York State Archives: when in doubt, leave it out. "If there is any archival 'principal' that delineates our appraisal activity," reads their policy statement, "it is that any records are to be rejected unless there are definite and compelling justifications for their preservation."⁹

Traditional appraisal canons will continue to serve archivists well in arriving at a compelling justification. What they must do is apply these canons in a more rigorous, systematic, and documented way. A written analysis of controversial, complex, and significant appraisal questions is a vital step in this process.

Archivists need to consider, in addition to traditional appraisal criteria, other factors in their assessment. One factor is an analysis of the extent to which documentation in print has devalued the information in the archival record. T.R. Schellenberg took note of

this devaluation a quarter century ago when he wrote, "The volume of printed material is so great" that it is indeed questionable whether scholars would use and governments would be justified in preserving "any but a very small proportion of the unpublished public record."¹⁰ Today the bureaucratic process is amply documented with narrative and statistical reports, budgets and audits, investigations and hearings, and other documentation, much, if not most, of which is published. The point for archivists is that they must appraise documentation, not only in a larger interinstitutional context, but also in a larger information context. More than ever, archivists in their appraisal analysis must know intimately the associated printed record held by libraries. This is not to suggest that archivists passively allow librarians to make decisions for them or otherwise do their job, but rather that they make librarians partners in compiling and preserving the documentary record.

Another factor often overlooked in appraisal is the value of one set of records as a substitute source for another set that is unavailable for preservation. A graphic case in point are the records of American business enterprise. It is becoming increasingly clear that corporations, by and large, are not going to preserve a useful historical record, but governmental archives might. Activities such as the administration of justice, incorporation, licensing and regulation, taxation, the protection of labor and the consumer, and the promotion of business and economic activity produce enormous and comprehensive bodies of business and economic data that can provide a partial substitute for corporate documentation.¹¹

⁹Unpublished draft, "Records Appraisal in the New York State Archives" [1981?], p. 10.

¹⁰"The Future of the Archival Profession," *American Archivist* 22 (January 1959): 54-55.

¹¹F. Gerald Ham, "Wisconsin: Governmental Archives in an Academic Environment," *Government Publications Review* 8A (1981): 304.

Critical to the more disciplined appraisal process is a fiscal assessment of the cost of accessioning, organizing, and preserving the records. Archivists must learn to attach a price tag to appraisal decisions; but how are they to arrive at such a price? Only recently have archivists given any attention to measuring and analyzing these cost factors. A major cost, of course, is processing. Authors of two recent studies claim that personal papers may cost between \$32 and \$88 per cubic foot before they are finally put on the shelves.¹² Even the higher figure may be low for very complex collections. The price tag must also reflect conservation needs, which in many cases should include the cost of preservation microfilming. In addition, of course, there are long-term storage costs. A fiscal note should be an essential element of an appraisal report, but how relevant is such a note when certain considerations—research significance, institutional mission, or executive fiat—make accessioning mandatory? In such cases the fiscal assessment is absolutely essential to the planning and budgeting process, and the price tag becomes even more relevant and important.

Both traditional appraisal criteria and these other factors should be applied to the whole range of the historical record: photographs, sound recordings, television news footage, posters, handbills, and other ephemera. Selection, intellectual control, and physical preservation of these materials make even greater demands on the archivist's resources than do traditional paper records. For example, what information merits preservation out of all the continuous television news coverage of a given com-

munity? What should a university archivist do with the masses of unidentified and unmanaged photographs transferred annually from the public relations office? Will not identification and detailed processing of this material jeopardize the long-term preservation of, and access to, more vital university records? Does not preservation of the entire mass of photographs skew the historical record by placing too much emphasis on football and college presidents and too little on the longitudinal documentation of the institution?

III. Deaccessioning

A systematic and continuing procedure for reappraising and deaccessioning records is essential for good collection management. All archives have collections that by any reasonable appraisal standard would not be accessioned today—collections that are redundant, fragmentary, or otherwise without redeeming informational content. Some were acquired through archival passivity, some through an indiscriminate collection program, and some for donor relations; but all were accepted in hopes that a more leisurely and thoughtful appraisal would be forthcoming. Unfortunately, to use Leonard Rapport's words, time has "burnished these records with a patina of permanence." Archivists now publish information about them in their finding aids and thus help to establish their bona fides as legitimate collections.¹³

Deaccessioning is not a novel strategy to museums and libraries, though they have been timid in its application. There is good reason for their timidity; it is a

¹²Wilsted, "Computing the Cost of Archival Processing," pp. 2-3; William J. Maher, "Measurement and Analysis of Processing Costs in Academic Archives," *College & Research Libraries* 43 (January 1982): 59-67.

¹³Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 144-145. Reprinted in *Prologue* 13 (Spring 1981): 49-55.

perilous business. There is so little to guide archivists—no literature, no previous practice. As David Stam recently pointed out, this is an area fraught with hostile emotion that tends to pit—and I metaphrase—the true “archophile” against the corrupt “archophilistine.”¹⁴ The perils seem much greater for private than for public archives; former custodians of the latter often wonder why the records were preserved in the first place. There is the fear that one incensed donor, proclaiming that valuable records have been destroyed, will put in jeopardy the whole collecting program, for both papers and money. The real peril of deaccessioning, however, is that fashion and ideology could wipe out an important dimension of the historical record. Having more archivists in more places saving more records spreads the burden of preservation in a spatial sense, but different judgments about the value of records over time spreads this burden in a very important temporal way. Deaccessioning should take place in an interinstitutional context to assure that archivists do not all throw out the same kinds of collections. It is essential that deaccessioning decisions be meticulously documented and that they reflect—as should all good appraisal decisions—collective judgment.

Deaccessioning need not be synonymous with destruction. Reuniting split collections is one variant, but archivists need to go beyond this simple and obvious step and identify those collections worthy of preservation that are grossly out of scope and negotiate for them a more suitable home. If they are risk-takers, archivists will consider the sale of

items of little informational but of some financial value: the autographed document or the stock certificate.¹⁵ Archivists need to develop a policy to deal with ethical and other problems relating to such disposal and to provide a modest financial benefit for the repository. One thing is clear: donor agreements cannot become the dead hand of the past; they must contain some option for reappraisal and deaccessioning.

Deaccessioning is not for the custodial archivist. Rather, it is a creative and sophisticated act of reappraisal that will permit holdings to be refined and strengthened. It allows archivists to replace records of lesser value with collections of more significance, and it prevents the imposition of imperfect and incomplete decisions of the past on the future. Deaccessioning must become an integral part of collection management.

Are such choices really so perilous? Certainly the present age of abundance has greatly lessened the value of any single set of records. While documents may be unique, very little of the information they contain is unique. This fact greatly lessens the impact of individual appraisal decisions. In testifying in the Kerner case, for example, Franklin stressed the significance of a few seemingly routine documents concerning a free Negro in the antebellum South. Such documentation from an age of scarcity indeed may have great value; but if such a population group existed today as a recognized class, we would have hundreds of cubic feet of social service records, television documentaries, and investigative reports to document it; and much of this material would no doubt be edited and published under

¹⁴David H. Stam, “‘Prove All Things: Hold Fast That Which Is Good’: Deaccessioning and Research Libraries,” *College & Research Libraries* 43 (January 1982): 6.

¹⁵There were no such marketable documents in Governor Kerner’s files, for Mr. Newman, with the donor’s permission, had removed them. How much better it would have been had the repository reaped the financial rewards from the sale of such items as the Lyndon Johnson and Adlai Stevenson autographed letters!

the sponsorship of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission.

IV. Pre-Archival Control

Collection management requires that the archivist participate in decisions about how record systems are organized and how records are stored before they come to the archives as historical documents. This pre-archival management of records is becoming increasingly important. As modern bureaucracies of all sorts—governments, businesses, and universities—adopt modern records management techniques for handling information, the decisions of information managers on file organization, access systems, and storage mediums will either facilitate or complicate the work of archival preservation. Increasingly, archivists will be accessioning packaged information systems with built-in storage and retrieval capabilities, not isolated record series or collections. The systems may be familiar paper or microfilm files, records in electronic data storage, videotapes and videodiscs, or complex combinations of several of these components. If the archivist can identify such systems and their custodians and, when necessary, influence their organization, the technical standards they must meet, or the type of documentation needed to facilitate their future use, then it is likely that systems with historical value can later be transferred to archival custody with most of the cost of processing and preservation already paid.

Lacking such assistance, even at the simplest level of document transfer (microfilming), the archivist may waste scarce resources for records preservation. A sad example is much of the microfilming of court case files in hundreds of counties throughout the nation. Because archivists were not involved in

decisions about the arrangement, production, processing, and storage of these microfilmed records, and because some state archival agencies have inadequate standards for micrographics applications and quality control, archivists are faced with a Hobson's choice: either they accession bulky records that will be expensive to preserve and store, or they accept microfilm that does not meet minimum archival standards. Here collection management calls for an ounce of preventive assistance.

For many archivists, the voluminous office files of politicians and government officials are an even more familiar case in point. With good file management, scheduling, and micrographics (the key elements of a records management program), their storage areas and processing backlog would not be jammed with these papers. Fortunately, the sheer mass of congressional files is promoting better paperwork management. Recently, several congressional offices have adopted an automated information management system in which incoming correspondence is microfilmed and indexed by name and subject while outgoing letters are reduced to a compact set of computer-generated informational elements—in essence, canned responses. Without archival input, archivists risk management efficiency at the expense of losing the historical record; with it, they preserve the record and greatly reduce storage and processing costs.

This type of collection management is imperative if archivists are to accession information products of high technology such as machine-readable records. In many ways, these records are the collection manager's dream, offering a potential solution to several problems associated with modern records, including storage and access. Traditional processing costs are greatly reduced with

machine-readable records because they require no physical rearrangement, weeding, refolding, or container listing. Most objectives of archival arrangement are already built into the file; and, if the file documentation is in good order, a finding aid already exists. These records possess great advantages for our users. The information they contain can be rearranged, aggregated, compared, and subjected to statistical tests without the laborious tasks of sample selection, data collection, coding, and data entry.¹⁶

Problems of accessioning these records are formidable. The medium is fragile, the documentation is often haphazard, and the technology is sophisticated beyond the training and sensibilities of most archivists. To bridge the gap between the potential advantages of these files and the problems associated with accessioning and preserving them requires that archivists collaborate with their fellow information specialists in records management and data processing.

A caveat: Archivists should resist the temptation to accession pre-packaged records simply because they can do so economically. Smaller is not necessarily better. Just as the uncontrolled accessioning of political papers and university archives has recently biased the documentary record, so can the uncontrolled accessioning of packaged information systems bias the record of the future.

V. Reduction in Volume

Use of technology and sampling methodology to retain information while reducing the bulk of records is a fifth component of collection management. For some time archivists have been using some of the simpler forms of

information technology to reduce the volume of records. The capabilities of micrographics systems for data compaction and preservation are well known. The staff of the New York State Archives estimates that eventually 80 to 90 percent of their holdings will be stored in a microform format.¹⁷ Unfortunately, too many archival programs fail to use the systems and exercise the options available. With higher reduction ratios available today, storage capacity can be increased many-fold. For many applications, there are attractive alternatives to the traditional 35mm format as the single standard for all purposes.

Micrographics provides extremely low-density data compaction when compared to electronic data storage. For most archives, however, because of high costs, conversion of existing archival records to a machine-readable format will remain a low records storage priority.

What may have a high priority—if promise is borne out by performance—are optical disk storage and retrieval systems. Thus far, successful test results indicate that these systems may contribute more than any other technological development to better collection management, because they can solve two great problems: storage and permanence. An experimental system at the Public Archives of Canada (PAC), using a disc slightly larger than a phonograph record, has a storage capacity equivalent to 104,000 video frames or 100 reels of microfilm. Almost any image can be stored on such discs. The PAC experiment included prints, paintings, drawings, photographs (both black-and-white and color), paper documents, posters, maps, and motion pictures. Another virtue of the laser recording is

¹⁶Margaret L. Hedstrom, "Planning for a Machine-Readable Records Program" (Paper delivered at the annual conference of NASARA, Nashville, Tennessee, 23 July 1982) pp. 24-26.

¹⁷Unpublished draft, "Conservation Policies and Programs for the New York State Archives", January 1982, p. 15.

its stability, which surpasses that of most means of writing on paper and all means of magnetic tape recording. Fidelity, color, and audio qualities are excellent. A third virtue is the accessibility of the information—almost instantaneous retrieval by random access. Finally, the discs are easily duplicated, providing wide availability of material.¹⁸

Compaction of data, however, whether on microfilm or in electronic data storage, is not always an affordable or even a wise, collection management strategy. There are other methods to reduce bulk without significantly impairing the research value of records. These methods were much on the minds of officials at the National Archives and Records Service in 1981, for they were under a court order to develop a retention plan for the massive files of the FBI, some twenty-five million cases totaling about 300,000 cubic feet, dating primarily from 1939 to the early 1980s.¹⁹ How does one even examine files of this magnitude for appraisal purposes? Their numerical organization suggested that statistical sampling might prove a useful tool. Further, such a methodology had worked for Michael S. Hindus and his colleagues in the appraisal and selective retention of the less voluminous records (a mere 35,000 cubic feet) of the Massachusetts Superior Court from 1859 to 1959. In this case, the project staff first considered archival storage; none was forthcoming. Microfilming had a prohibitive price tag of over one million dollars, and computer coding was like-

wise out of the fiscal question. Statistical sampling seemed to work.²⁰

Using the Hindus Report as a conceptual model, the NARS task force selected a stratified sample of 1,800 cases from the 214 FBI file classifications, collected basic information from each case, and produced a computer-generated classification profile to assist them in assessing the research potential of each file classification. The task force's retention sample will reduce the volume of the files by about 83 percent.

The Hindus Report and the FBI Case Files Appraisal Project have given archivists two pioneering examples of how to reduce the bulk of records while preserving intrinsic research value. No future archivist can justify consigning important data to the scrap heap because of its bulk without first carefully analyzing the applicability of systematic sampling for appraisal and scheduling. Indeed, complex and difficult as it may be for all archivists, the application of mathematical approaches to sampling, as Frank Boles has pointed out, is as "unavoidable to the curator of large twentieth-century collections as the leap from item by item cataloging to group description."²¹

If the National Endowment for the Humanities provides the funding, some social scientists cum archivists will combine statistical sampling with compaction by electronic data storage. The Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research in Ann Arbor, Michigan, has requested a grant to sample Bureau of Labor Statistics

¹⁸Unpublished paper, "The Video Disc as a Pilot Project of the Public Archives of Canada" [1980], 14 pp. For a description of a more recent experiment, see the following two articles on the "Library of Congress Optical Disk Pilot Program": Carl Fleischhauer, "Research Access and Use. The Key Facet of the Non-Print Optical Disk Experiment," LC Information Bulletin (12 September 1983): 312-316; and Ellen Z. Hahn, "A Report on Print Project Activities," LC Information Bulletin (31 October 1983): 374-76.

¹⁹*Appraisal of the Records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation: A Report to Hon. Harold H. Green, United States District Court for the District of Columbia*. Submitted by the National Archives and Records Service and the Federal Bureau of Investigation. 9 November 1981. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Services, 1981.) 2 vols. Summary.

²⁰Michael Stephen Hindus, Theodore M. Hammett, and Barbara M. Hobson, *The Files of the Massachusetts Superior Court, 1859-1959: An Analysis and A Plan for Action* (Boston: 1980), pp. 3-9.

²¹Frank Boles, "Sampling in Archives," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 130.

records on the income and expenditure activities of American families in the years 1888 to 1936. Data from a stratified statistical sample will be put into a machine-readable data file. With a valid sample in hand, the archivist can replace 400 cubic feet of records with a reel or two of tape.²²

VI. Analysis and Planning

The first five elements have dealt largely with what and how archivists accession. The sixth deals with how archivists manage those accessions once in their custody. It is the application of analysis and planning to basic archival procedures which enables archivists to make better choices in the use of limited resources. As a prerequisite to such analysis and planning, archivists must have data about archival activities as well as methods to analyze and transform this data into usable information. They need to measure what they do, especially their rates of processing and reference services; and they must assign a realistic cost to their activities. This information is essential, not only for appraisal purposes but also for planning and management of all archival functions.

Recent authors offer us some promising beginnings in this badly neglected field. An SAA task force has drafted recommendations for standard statistical reporting for archives of all sorts; William Maher has done pioneering work in applying financial analysis to basic archival activities; and Thomas Wilsted has given archivists a specific case study in applying cost analysis to archival processing.²³ This type of analysis needs to be extended to other

archival activities, particularly reference services, conservation, and micrographics. The tools for better measurement and analysis are here; the next step is to apply them routinely to archival practice.

The need for informed decision-making, based on analytical planning, is especially urgent in the area we call processing—that is, in the controlling of our collections through arrangement and description. Because this activity so often is unplanned, many large and complex collections go unattended while huge sums are invested in processing others to unnecessary and wasteful levels of detail. Although the methodology of arrangement and description—controlling collections at various levels—provides a marvelously efficient and flexible approach to records processing, the rigid application of this methodology has produced the opposite result. Archivists must learn that the ideal level is not the same for all collections. For some, the series, subgroup, or even collection level will do quite nicely; and, even within a single collection, various components may best be controlled at different levels.

To apply these notions to concrete situations, archivists need to document procedures, such as the preparation of written processing plans for all but the smallest and simplest accessions. In these plans, analogous to appraisal reports, archivists should review and elaborate on appraisal assessments with recommendations for further weeding and compaction, specify the appropriate level of organization and description, provide a conservation needs assessment, and determine the level and type

²²NEH grant No. RT 20344-83 (Family Life and Conditions in the United States, 1888-1936).

²³"Draft Recommendations for Reporting on Archives and Manuscript Collections," *SAA Newsletter* (July 1982): 11-13; William J. Maher, "The Importance of Financial Analysis of Archival Programs," *The Midwestern Archivist* 3 (no. 2, 1978): 3-24; Maher, "Measurement and Analysis of Processing Costs," pp. 59-67; Wilsted, "Computing the Total Cost of Archival Processing," pp. 2-3.

of staffing required for the various steps in processing. Decisions in each of these areas should take into account the importance of the records; the extent and nature of their anticipated use; the difficulty of providing reference services at different levels of control; the serviceability of the original file order; and, finally, the costs of various levels of processing. The staff of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have given archivists a model for analysis and planning in arrangement and description in their recently issued processing manual and other writings.²⁴

Planned use of resources also is essential in determining appropriate levels of conservation, not only within collections but at the institutional level as well. At one time an item-level conservation approach might have seemed ideal, but it is now as archaic as item-level description. Just as it was necessary to move to collection-level description, so archivists must find an appropriate balance between improving collective conservation conditions (both in terms of shelf storage and ambient climate) and the labor-intensive activities of deacidification and encapsulation. Clearly, there are some documents in every archives that require heroic preservation efforts because of their intrinsic value. For most of our deteriorating collections, however, microfilming is presently the appropriate conservation technique. Mass microfilming is costly, however, and many of our collections do not deserve even this treatment. Many can wait, particularly those whose value vis à vis the cost of their preservation is unclear. Storing collections until their value is clear (that is until it is time to reappraise them) thus becomes part of good conservation and collection management practice.

Planning for processing and conserva-

tion activities are only two examples of how archivists can better manage scarce and diminishing resources. They need to apply these concepts to the whole range of archival activities. Collection management also demands planning at still another, higher level. Archivists must make planning decisions about these various activities. For example, it may be better management practice to assign a staff member to work with the state's congressional delegation in Washington, D.C., to establish records management programs than to have an archivist commence all accessioning and arrangement activities only after the papers have appeared on the loading dock. Such decisions require archivists to make value judgments; to make cost analyses; to think in nontraditional ways; and, above all, to make difficult choices.

The elements outlined in this article are not the whole of collection management; undoubtedly there are other elements that deserve discussion and inclusion. There is, however, one primary notion common to all these elements: the need to identify and evaluate alternative courses of action. For too long archival practices have followed the dictates of conventional wisdom and unexamined habit. The preservation demands of modern records make following such dictates increasingly costly in real dollars. These are the overt costs, but what of the hidden costs? The cost of foregone opportunities? The sacrifices made in pursuing less effective alternatives? In choosing options, archivists need to evaluate these opportunity costs, as economists call them. Wise choices will enable archivists to operate on what is called the production frontier, where they can make optimal use of limited resources for greatest output. Only on this frontier can archivists cope with the age of abundance.

²⁴Karen T. Lynch and Helen W. Slotkin, *Processing Manual for the Institute Archives Collections M.I.T. Libraries* (Cambridge, 1981); and "An Analysis of Processing Procedures: The Adaptable Approach," *American Archivist* 45 (Spring 1982): 155-163.