

## Shorter Features

CHRISTOPHER BEAM, *Editor*

The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require a full-length article. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Christopher Beam, Shorter Features Editor, the *American Archivist*, National Archives and Records Service (NNFD), Washington, DC 20408.

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### Collection Reappraisal: The Experience at the University of Cincinnati

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Collection reappraisal is a topic much discussed and little acted upon by archivists. It seems to be against their nature to conduct a comprehensive review of their acquisitions and consider the possible disposal or destruction of their collections. Yet most archivists are at least interested in the concept of reappraisal and infrequently even find the impetus to engage in a reappraisal project. The impetus for one such undertaking at the University of Cincinnati Special Collections Department came

from two sources. The first was a session on the reappraisal of accessioned records at the 1980 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists. Leonard Rapport's paper, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," seemed to this records manager to be a common-sense solution to an ongoing archival dilemma.

The second impetus behind this effort to reappraise the records stemmed from an event from which archivists' nightmares are made. During the renovation

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of the building housing the archives, the city fire marshal, after a surprise inspection, labeled the structure a firetrap. The marshal insisted that the entire staff and the collections be evacuated for the duration of the renovation work. As often happens at urban universities, it was difficult to find space, however temporary. The department's offices were transferred to satisfactory new quarters, but shelf space for the collections was more difficult to find. Eventually 7,000 linear feet of shelf space were located; however, the collections occupied 8,500 linear feet.

The initial response of the staff was to designate certain collections, totaling 1,400 feet, for dead storage until the return to the renovated quarters. This solution provided temporary relief by reducing accessible collections almost to the area of the new quarters, but it did not allow for the acquisition of new materials for a long time, possibly three years.

To solve this problem, the department staff responded in a way typical of university administrators: it formed an ad hoc committee. This committee consisted of the archivist, two research assistants, and the university's records manager. The group concluded that the only way to provide more space for future acquisitions was to evaluate the collections on hand to determine if they warranted the space they occupied. In all, 391 collections were analyzed on the basis of usage, historical importance to the university, and pertinent legal requirements. Three separate lists were then drawn up: those collections to be retained, those to be deaccessioned, and those whose status was questionable.

During the evaluation process several problems became apparent. Often the control records were too vague or incomplete to identify the content of collections. The committee also discovered

that there were no records specifically documenting the research activity of a particular collection. Inconsistencies within the system of identifying offices of origin and office title changes made it difficult to deal uniformly with related record groups. To overcome these problems, committee members frequently found themselves digging into many boxes, perusing antiquated provenance files, and relying on their own recollections to assess usage.

The committee met for three hours a week for six weeks while compiling the lists of collections for retention, deaccession, and further study. Some of the decisions to deaccession were easy: among items listed for deaccession were grade books of a mathematics professor from the 1920s, article reprints, and old calculators. Others, such as senior orations and office files of the assistant vice president for finance, were more difficult. After completing each list, the committee reexamined those collections considered to be of questionable value. It engaged in group discussions about the merits of each collection and the possible legal requirements for its retention. When necessary, the originating office or donor was consulted. Information about collections found to merit retention—with the title, size, span dates, and a general description—was transcribed on index cards. These cards were organized into a system of collection processing priorities and became a reference file for in-house use.

In order to inaugurate the deaccession process, the committee's plans for disposition were discussed with each office of origin or donor. In half of the cases, the office heads were unaware that the collection had been deposited in the archives and were surprised that the archives had kept materials such as rejected grant proposals and old grade books. Consequently, many disposition

decisions were easy to make.

Other cases were more difficult. In particular, two decisions by the committee created some controversy among the originating offices. The first was that the archives would neither accept nor hold from any college or department duplicate student records already in the registrar's office, since the archives already had the security microfilm of the registrar's official records. This decision was not popular because most colleges and departments at the university were reluctant to lose the free archival storage service and the convenience of easy access to their records in the archives. The committee's position forced many offices either to keep their own student records—a fairly large task in an institution of 40,000 students—or to follow good records retention practices with the assistance of the university's records management program, a service provided by the special collections department. Fortunately, the registrar supported the committee's refusal to accept duplicate student records, and offices were requested to take back their records or allow the archives to dispose of them. Every office eventually signed a document authorizing the disposition of its duplicate student records. The second decision of the ad hoc committee was to refuse inactive personnel files from colleges and departments, since the central personnel office had been designated the official repository for such records in the university policy.

After contacting all of the offices of origin, the records manager began the disposition process on the basis of authorizing letters from the department heads or college deans. The administrators indicated in these letters exactly what records were to be destroyed, transferred, or returned. Collections that were to be transferred or returned were boxed and shipped to their appro-

priate destinations. Because the University of Cincinnati is a state institution, university offices are required by state law to seek the permission of the State Records Commission before destroying any records. Once again the special collections department utilized the staff of the records management program to complete and submit the necessary forms. The State Records Commission granted permission for destruction, and the records specialist completed the forms necessary to certify destruction. Deaccessioned records were sent to the university's recycling center for a monetary return to the university of approximately \$100 per ton. The last step in this process was to correct all of the finding aids, accession records, and control files to indicate which records were destroyed or returned and when this action occurred.

The reappraisal effort of the staff of the University of Cincinnati was beneficial to the special collections department despite its origin in the midst of a crisis. The staff learned a great deal about the importance of proper maintenance of archival collections and even more about the process of reappraisal. With this on-the-job training, future appraisals will be considerably easier. Furthermore, as the traditional sources of funding for development continue to shrink, curators and archivists will have to focus on collection management rather than on expansion. Conversion to micrographics, increased conservation efforts, and especially the reappraisal of voluminous holdings will play ever increasing roles in this management process. No longer can the placement of records in an archives guarantee their immortality. Like appraisal, reappraisal must become a continuing practice in any archives to insure that scarce physical resources are effectively utilized.

Reappraisal decisions understandably are not easy to make. Archivists and records managers must be careful not to be influenced exclusively by changing research trends and usage. Rather they must examine what has been collected in terms of future use by researchers, effective use of space, and financial realities.

The experience of the special collections department at the University of Cincinnati is just one example of how one archives handled the reappraisal process. It is hoped that their efforts will help other repositories be ready when their times come.