Mix Two Parts Interest to One Part Information and Appraise Until Done: Understanding Contemporary Record Selection Processes

FRANK BOLES

Abstract: Over the past several years archivists have discussed a wide range of institutional and extra-institutional policies that affect the appraisal of records. This article attempts to conceptualize how the appraisal process operates and the various appraisal tools fit together. It concludes by discussing the efficacy of current archival vocabulary in accurately portraying what archivists do when they appraise.

About the author: *Frank Boles serves at the University of Michigan as an assistant archivist at the Bentley Historical Library and an instructor in the School of Information and Library Studies.* *He especially wishes to express his gratitude to Richard Cameron, who supplied a basic organizing idea exploited in this article, and Helen Samuels, who patiently corrected errors of fact and interpretation as well as suggesting helpful changes.*

DURING THE LAST SEVERAL years increasing attention has been focused on how archivists decide what to retain, and a literature has emerged discussing the factors that affect this decision. The criteria that archivists use to evaluate specific records have, themselves, been evaluated; the role of collecting policies has been emphasized and redefined; the ideas of collection management and documentation strategies have been introduced.[1] Despite important contributions in all of these areas, the relationship of these many subjects to one another has not been discussed. In this article the traditional idea of archival appraisal is divided into two distinct but hierarchically related concepts, labelled "institutional interest evaluation" and "document evaluation," and the relationship between these two concepts is explored. This division is useful in itself and also helpful in addressing the second theme of this article, the relationship between the many appraisal tools that are currently discussed in literature. Finally, the article suggests that the archival community might be better served if the traditional language archivists have used to discuss appraisal, with words like "value," were replaced with a new vocabulary that emphasizes policy.

The archival literature discussing acquisitions and selection has developed along two parallel roads. One has discussed document evaluation, the way archivists decide whether or not to retain a particular record. The other has discussed institutional policies and priorities, how an archival institution defines for itself what kinds of records it is interested in and will acquire. The literature in each area has occasionaly acknowledged that the roads intersect, but it has not analyzed the location and dimensions of these intersections.

Recognition of the relationship between record evaluation and institutional policy can be seen in several works regarding record evaluation. Theodore Schellenberg stated in the conclusion of his classic work on appraisal that "archivists of different archival institutions may also use different criteria in evaluating similar types of records, for what is valuable to one archival institution may be valueless to another."[2] Though cryptic, the reference indicates that Schellenberg believed archival retention decisions were in part the result of individual institutional choices. More recently and more directly Maynard Brichford has written that "the stated goals of each archival program are basic criteria for evaluation. The archivist who defines his program in terms of objectives and prepares a statement of appraisal criteria establishes standards by which successes and failures can be judged."[3] Frank Boles and Julia Young are even more direct in their assessment of the impact of institutional choices on retention decisions: "The way in which a repository defines, expands upon, and implements [acquisition policy] is the foundation of the appraisal process."[4] While recognizing a link between records evaluation and institutional goals and

[1]Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, "Exploring the Black Box: The Appraisal of University Administrative Records," *American Archivist* 48 (Spring 1985): 121–40; Faye Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies for Manuscript Collections," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 30–42; Jutta Reed-Scott, "Collection Management Strategies for Archivists," *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984): 23–29; and Helen Willa Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *American Archivist* 49 (Winter 1986): 109–24 represent examples of recent articles in these areas.

[2]T. R. Schellenberg, *The Appraisal of Modern Public Records*, as reprinted in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds. *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice* (Washington: National Archives and Records Service, 1984), 68.

[3]Maynard Brichford, *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning* (Chicago: Basic Manual Series, Society of American Archivists, 1977), 1.

[4]Boles and Young, "Exploring the Black Box," 137.

policies, archival authors writing about evaluation have not elaborated on the subject, preferring instead to discuss evaluative criteria by which to assess records.

Likewise, the literature discussing institutional policies has suggested that they are related to records evaluation, but has not fully examined the relationship. Faye Phillips, for example, in explaining model collecting policies includes a brief discussion on both collection priorities and limitations and the de-accessioning of unwanted material.[5] According to Jutta Reed-Scott, collection management involves "four components: (1) collection planning; (2) effective selection; (3) evaluation or analysis of the collections; and (4) resource sharing and coordinated collection development."[6] A more direct connection between policies and record evaluation was drawn by Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett who explained that "the documentation strategy model . . . may broaden and strengthen analysis of archival documentation conditions and needs while at the same time more effectively channeling resources to influence desirable selection practices by a range of important decision makers."[7] Each of these authors, like those writing about record evaluation, establishes a link between institutional policy and the process of record selection. But they, like their colleagues writing about record evaluation, have focused on the immediate subject and have not discussed the way institutional policy and record evaluation interact.

Perhaps no one has yet explored the connections between records evaluation and institutional and extra-institutional policies and priorities because their relationship seems straightforward. Institutional policies define the kinds of information an archives seeks and retains, while appraisal criteria are used to select specific records. Such a simple explanation, however, hides important distinctions and makes further refinement of the relationship between the two sets of ideas appear unnecessary. Asking two questions brings out these subtleties and refinements. First, how do traditional record evaluation criteria interact with institutional interest evaluation policies? Second, how should the many acquisition techniques and strategies be ordered?

Before answering the first question regarding the interaction of institutional interest evaluation and record evaluation criteria, it is helpful to define these two terms. Institutional interest evaluation is meant to describe collectively the variety of devices used by archivists to define what kinds of information a particular archives is interested in or mandated to retain. Tools such as collecting policy and acquisition strategies as well as legal mandates and directives from institutional superiors would all fall into this category. Record evaluation criteria encompasses the many characteristics suggested by archivists to appraise specific records. The concepts in Schellenberg's writings about appraisal or the SAA basic manual discussing appraisal are typical examples of the kinds of ideas that would fall under this classification.

With these definitions in mind, appraisal can be understood to be a three-part activity, involving first the application of institutional interest evaluation, second the implementation of record evaluation criteria, and third—and most significant in terms of this presentation

[5]Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies," 41–42.
[6]Reed-Scott, "Collection Management Strategies," 24.
[7]Larry J. Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," *American Archivist* 50 (Winter 1987): 47.

because it is the least explored activity—the interaction of institutional interest evaluation and record evaluation.

Institutional interest evaluation defines what kind of information is desirable or important to an archival institution. It defines what the archives is seeking to document and the strategies used to implement these goals. For example, an archives may be legally mandated to retain records of a governmental agency and may choose to implement this mandate by a strategy consciously focused upon the records of senior administrators. Similarly, an institution may exist to document a geographic area and choose to implement this goal by focusing attention on economic and cultural institutions and figures. These kinds of decisions are closely linked to appraisal because they determine the basic character of what will be found in an archives. In the examples above, to focus upon governmental records created at the most senior level implies a conscious or unconscious decision to exclude operational or case records; to focus on cultural and economic institutions suggests a willingness to allow political and literary history of the area to remain undocumented. Obviously these examples are oversimplified. Fortuitous or cooperative archival arrangements may make it possible for an archives to ignore certain areas, secure in the knowledge that a sister institution is filling the gap. But the logic behind the examples is clear. Institutional interest evaluation sets limits that have the effect of excluding, intentionally or unintentionally, certain areas of history from the archives purview. As a result of institutional interest evaluation, some subjects are not documented.

The second part of appraisal is the implementation of record evaluation criteria or policies. These are the characteristics that define what makes records of sufficient value to merit retention. This is the traditional component of appraisal and needs little explanation. Familiar terms like evidential and informational value as well as less familiar terms such as value-of-information and costs-of-retention fall into this part of appraisal. Record evaluation criteria lead to the retention of a county chief executive's correspondence because of its detailed information regarding county policy, or the rejection of a regional opera company's business records because of their generally uninformative character. This is the selection of specific records for archival custody.

While these first two parts of appraisal are relatively familiar to archivists, the third part of appraisal, the interaction of these two areas, has not been discussed. Institutional interest evaluation and record evaluation are not co-equal, a hierarchy exists that defines the interaction between them. At the most abstract level, institutional interest evaluation usually functions independently of record evaluation criteria; it is possible to identify an area of study as important or interesting and to establish an archival mission and goal addressing that area without any reference to the actual records. In fact, initial institutional interest may not even be completely rational. Many archival repositories probably owe their founding to a desire to "do something" about a particular topic or area without originally performing any careful research or creating a thoughtful strategy to guide the impulse. Eventually, however, institutional interest interacts with real documents and record evaluation criteria. The less abstract the expression of interest, the more directly record evaluation criteria will inform, and begin to shape, institutional interest. For example, a repository's announcement of an interest in the political activities of its state's major agricultural producers is a very abstract statement with no direct link to the particular recorded information documenting that activity. The statement of institutional interest

simply assumes that satisfactory records exist. On the other hand, determining if a particular cherry-growing cooperative's records adequately document that organization's political activities hinges directly on the application of specific record evaluation criteria to the cooperative's records. On first analysis, it appears that when institutional interest evaluation and specific record evaluation criteria interact, institutional interest evaluation focuses the direction of an archives' appraisal activities; and within this established direction, record evaluation criteria determine if a specific record is important enough to merit inclusion in the repository.

When the relationship is examined from another perspective, however, the relationship does not seem quite as simple. While some record evaluation criteria neatly link with institutional interests, others stand independent of institutional interest. For example, it is relatively easy to apply a general record evaluation concept like informational value and ask if a particular cherry cooperative's records have enough information about politics to justify retention; however, the idea of institutional interest informing record evaluation criteria quickly breaks down when the evaluative criteria is of a technical nature. Technical record evaluative criteria such as the understandability or the legibility of a set of records transcends any evaluation of institutional interest. Whatever the archives' interests, if the archivist cannot decipher or understand a specific set of records, the records likely will be destroyed.[8] Despite the validity of this example, in many and perhaps most cases record evaluative criteria are linked with institutional interests. They answer questions regarding subject analysis or the nature of the record creator, questions that make sense only in the context of institutional interests.

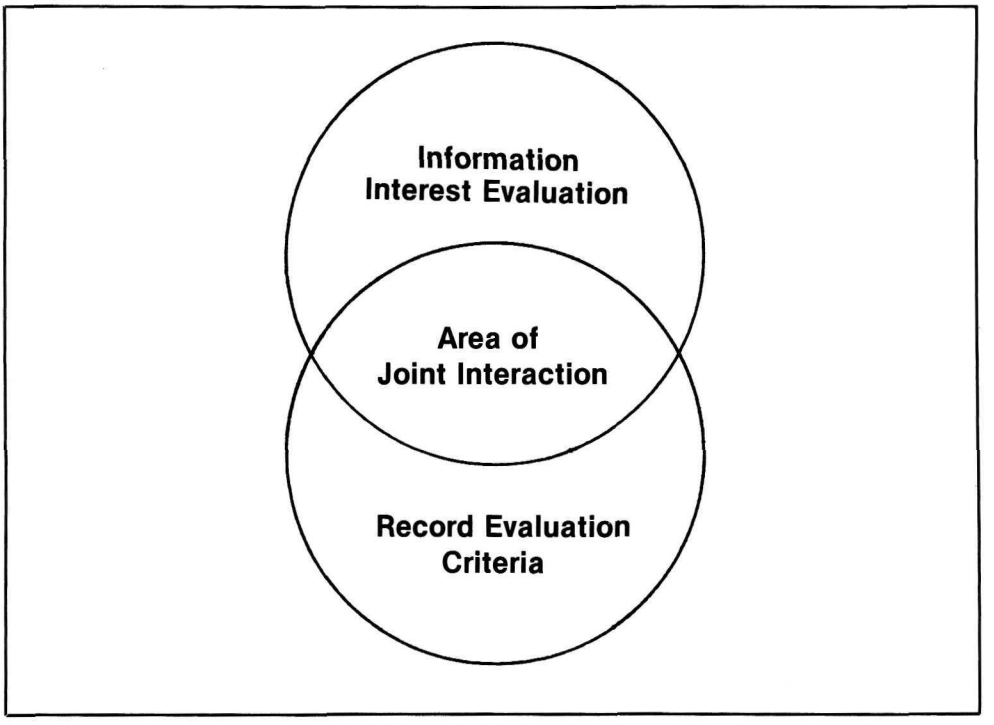
The relationship between the three parts of appraisal activity can be conceptualized as two hierarchically related, circular areas of concern or policies, that largely, but not completely, overlap.[9] (See Figure 1) Institutional interest evaluation almost always takes precedence, both when it stands separately from record evaluation criteria and when record evaluation criteria and institutional interests interact. The more abstract institutional interest policies usually receive priority over the more specific record evaluation criteria. For example, if an archival institution fails to find records that meet the established evaluative criteria, the archives is more likely to redouble its field program than to redefine the basic repository collecting interests. Only sustained failure to locate appropriate information would cause the latter action. Furthermore, when institutional interests and record evaluative criteria interact, institutional interests often inform and make sense out of specific evaluative criteria. Despite this general relationship, the circle of record evaluation criteria has at least a few components that are not influenced by the circle of institutional interest evaluation. These frequently technical evaluative criteria are as important to a particular appraisal as institutional interests.

To summarize the answer to the first question posed, the relationship between institutional interest evaluation and record evaluative criteria is hierarchical, but not linear. Institutional interests generally take precedence, both when acting alone and when interacting with evalua-

[8]Understandability is one appraisal criteria cited in both Brichford and Boles and Young. Legibility is mentioned only in Boles and Young. Both criteria, however, seem equally subject to Brichford's observation, "We should not bequeath puzzles to posterity" (Brichford, *Appraisal & Accessioning*, 8).

[9]The image created here is that of a Venn diagram defining two overlapping but distinct element sets. I am indebted to Richard Cameron for the basic ideas presented here.

Figure 1



tive criteria. The exact character of the interaction between institutional interests and evaluative criteria, however, depends upon the specific criteria involved. The influence can be greater or less, depending upon the circumstances; and, in a small but significant number of cases, the evaluative criteria stands completely independent of institutional interests.

The answer to the second major question posed earlier, the proper ordering of the many existing appraisal tools, can largely be surmised from the diagram explaining institutional interest evaluation and record evaluation criteria. Just as the archivist moves from general institutional interest evaluation policies to the more specific record evaluative criteria, it is logical also to arrange the existing appraisal tools from the general to the specific. Ordered this way, the basic appraisal policy tools used by archivists are (1) institutional collecting policy, (2) collecting and documentation strategies, and (3) identification of desired records. Each level can be represented by a single policy statement, but more likely each will be a group of interrelated policy statements. Each logically leads to the next in an ever-expanding tree of progressively defined decisions, each drawing sustenance from the basic policies while giving specific shape and substance to the more detailed extensions of the policy structure.

At the base of the tree stands repository collecting policy, the fundamental and most abstract statement of the repository's purpose. It defines the institution's interests and goals. Traditionally archival repositories have drawn such statements very broadly. For example, archives exist to maintain the records of an institution, document the history of a geographic region, record activity within a chronological period, or preserve information regarding a particular subject. On occasion and with justice, repository collecting policies have been criticized for being overly

vague and ambitious.[10] Even when unrealistic, however, collecting policies form a core that encourages and supports related, more detailed policies while excluding unrelated growth and grafts. This is the first level of appraisal, defining a basic interest in an area or topic to the exclusion of other areas and topics.

Growing from the core repository collecting policy is a group of mid-level interest appraisal policies that reflect institutional collecting preferences and strategies as well as cooperative activities such as multi-institutional collecting projects. These collecting strategies and documentation activities are the second level of appraisal. They represent the detailed branching of appraisal interests and objectives. Such branching can be very dense and full, sparse and incomplete, or highly uneven, depending upon a number of factors.

The most random patterns are found in institutions where expediency, happenstance, and serendipity have been given wide play. The completeness and symmetry of rationally developed policies are usually missing in this situation, and collecting strategy itself often degenerates into a series of personal initiatives and reactive decisions. In such a situation an archives focusing on agriculture's political influence might have a few records of lobbying groups, some documents collected by a short-term curator who believed that opposing viewpoints should be represented to round out the collection, and a tangential body of sugar beet producer business records collected and donated by a volunteer. In this example, unevenness is the product of the failure to rationally develop mid-level collecting and documentation goals and strategies.

In a more structured setting, however, collecting and documentation strategies refine the collecting policy. With a more completely developed set of policies, the same archives mentioned above might consciously decide to concentrate on fruit and sugar beet producers, while ignoring the state's bean producers. Furthermore, sugar beet producers and peach growers in specific areas might be targeted because of those groups' intensive political efforts. Certain key individuals and organizations would then be selected and contacted regarding related records. Defining areas of institutional interest and selecting specific targets with the hope of finding specific information serve the same purposes as defining collecting strategy: they narrow the area of concern. Focusing energies on specific and achievable objectives leads to a concentrated pool of information. The energy expended to achieve this desirable result has, however, a second consequence. Concentration on particular mid-level institutional concerns means that other, potentially significant mid-level institutional interests may grow slowly or not at all.

While this unhappy consequence of mid-level decisions is sometimes recognized, some archivists do not link mid-level policy to the repository's overall appraisal structure since strategies and targeted records change over time. Some archivists seem to believe that regardless of what they decide to seek today, they always will have the opportunity tomorrow to employ different strategies and to target different records. A hypothetical example of such thought is the archivist collecting agricultural records who reasons that it does not matter very much whether the institution focuses on peach or cherry producers. The group that is more easily approached can be dealt with first, and the other can be contacted later.

Although narrowly correct, this approach denies the broader reality. Opportunities to collect or receive documents are not permanent. While growth, planned or unplanned, in one direction does not

[10]For example Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies," 31.

inherently exclude later growth in another direction, realistically such other possibilities may wither. Slowly the people involved move or die. Slowly the records are placed in other archival repositories or are simply lost. Sudden changes like a financial crisis or rapid expansion can radically alter the storage and volume of records. The archivist's ability to return to areas of institutional interest that have been dormant for five, ten, or twenty years in an effort to stimulate new growth is always risky and often fruitless. Because of this, mid-level appraisal policies involving elements such as collecting and documentation strategies are appraisal choices that may have dramatic impact upon the information that will and will not be in the archives.

The final extension of appraisal is the application of institutional interests and record evaluation criteria to specific records. The institutional interests that were defined in collecting policy and focused through collecting strategies and other mid-level institutional interest policies inform record selection activities. Record evaluation criteria also come into play, defining specifically what criteria records must meet in order to appropriately document institutional interest. This process represents the final articulation of appraisal. Despite careful application of the two preceding layers of institutional interest evaluation, some records will still be rejected either because they do not meet the defined institutional interests or because they are not of sufficient quality to meet record evaluative criteria.

Continuing the example previously used, records of a regional sugar beet growers cooperative may be evaluated by an archives looking for pre-established types of information and with particular record evaluative criteria in mind. Records of the president and the board of directors may be sought because the creators' positions in the organization make them important political decision makers. Records of the cooperative's state lobbyist may also be sought because of the close relationship between his activities and the repository's interest in records documenting political activities of agricultural groups. The correspondence series from the cooperative's general files dealing with political issues and mobilizing members to write letters to the legislature and other political bodies will also be preserved. Most of the marketing, financial, and membership records of the co-op, however, fall outside the archives' interest and thus will not be retained, even though the records were created by senior officers. Technical criteria also will lead to the rejection of a few otherwise interesting records. A virtually illegible roll of microfilmed political correspondence from the 1950s will not be retained because, despite its topical relevance, it is highly unlikely anyone could ever use the film.

This view presents a fully articulated appraisal mechanism in which institutional interests and record evaluative criteria unite to reach a decision about a set of records. It captures the overall operation of appraisal. This vision, however, differs in an important way from some recent archival literature by placing documentation strategy in the second, intermediate level of appraisal policy. Documentation strategy has been explained in a broad, universal context. Articles on the subject have focused on the strategy itself and examined the effect of the documentation strategy on other archival policies. Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, for example, write that "[archives and collecting programs] refine acquisition policies and appraisal priorities and methods in reaction to the documentation strategy statement."[11] The institution determines what the documentation strategy calls on

[11]Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," 26.

it to do, and acts accordingly. The impact of this downward perspective is reinforced by sweeping assertions regarding modern documentation problems. As Helen Samuels explains, "Individual institutions do not exist independently. Examination reveals the complex relationships between institutions and individuals. Government, industry, and academia—the private and public sectors—are integrated through patterns of funding and regulations. . . . the integrated nature of society's institutions and its recorded documentation must be reflected in archivists' effort to document those institutions."[12] Hackman and Warnow-Blewett use this perspective to argue that archivists' previous strategies are insufficient to deal with the resulting challenges.[13] Thus a broadly conceived problem and a universal, extra-repository approach, looking at archives from without, have characterized the explanations of documentation strategy.

The impact of documentation strategy changes, however, when the perspective of explanation shifts to the view of an individual institutional archivist. From the perspective of an institutional archives, repository collecting policy takes precedence over extra-repository policies. Samuels recognizes this point, acknowledging that "documentation strategies will not create subject collections or force any individual institution to assume more than its own institutional responsibilities." More importantly, she states that the Research Libraries Group's concept of core collection ". . . is comparable to an archival collection—the official records retained by an institution for its legal, administrative, fiscal, and historical needs. The size and the scope of the collection should be judged by local needs and constraints, not national norms. Archivists' legal obligations to their institutions are fulfilled by gathering the core collection."[14] Thus despite the sophisticated planning mechanism described by Hackman-Blewett,[15] for practical purposes the implementation of a documentation strategy completely hinges on the willingness and ability of individual, cooperating archives to accept designated records. An archival curmudgeon, a carefully refined repository collecting policy that does not define the repository's collecting mission in a way that facilitates cooperation in a particular documentation plan, or a funding source that requires the archives to focus on certain areas to the exclusion of others can effectively end a repository's role in a broader documentation strategy. As Samuels notes, the issues in implementing a documentation strategy are both intellectual and political.[16] For many reasons institutional policy supersedes documentation strategy.

The practical implication of this observation is that a documentation strategy is only one part of the institutional archivist's overall appraisal concern and becomes a factor only after the archivist has fulfilled institutional mandates.[17] Although Samuels acknowledges this,[18] she and others writing about documentation strategies have sought a wider role for such activities by assuming that the practical realities imposed by first having to meet an institutional mandate eventually will become unimportant as a limiting

[12]Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," 111–12.
[13]Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," 13–14.
[14]Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," 123, 114.
[15]Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," 20–27.
[16]Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," 115.
[17]See Judith Endelman's article "Looking Backward to Plan for the Future: Collection Analysis for Manuscript Repositories," pp. 351–52 in this issue for a similar argument.
[18]Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," 114.

factor. This belief is premised upon fundamental assumptions regarding archival resources. Simply put, the literature regarding documentation strategy presumes archival prosperity. Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, for example, write, "Archivists, therefore, need to articulate how archival records protect and serve the interests of members of the general public and specific sectors of it who do not directly use archives. By documenting and vigorously publicizing these benefits and beneficiaries, the archival community can better convince a variety of public and private resource allocators to provide appropriate support for archival work."[19] Samuels also solves the resource problem by postulating a growing resource base: "Documentation strategies should build upon the ongoing archival responsibility of an institution for its own records. The massive records created by IBM or the Digital Equipment Corporation are the companies' responsibility. Their administrative, legal, and historical needs require these organizations to establish and maintain archival programs." If such programs do not exist, Samuels suggests that "the archival community must provide education and encouragement."[20]

Such arguments run counter to the observed contemporary reality of archives and ignore archival history. To say that contemporary archival operations are underfunded is to repeat an archival axiom. As Edwin Bridges notes on the first page of the often-quoted *Documenting America*, "American state records agencies are in an impoverished condition and are currently unable to provide adequate care for their records." Bridges refers to the ". . . cycle of poverty in which these programs seem locked."[21] While his observation is specific to state record programs, Bridges's words restate a common theme within archival commentary: archival programs and activities are chronically underfunded.

Not only are contemporary archives underfunded, archival history suggests that there is substantial resistance to the establishment of archival programs. Businesses, for example, have not rushed to set up archival programs. Local records are in a state of disarray. Also writing in *Documenting America*, Richard Cox reports that local public records have a long history of neglect, and he notes that "nearly every state report emphasizes that few local governments have adequate record programs. Some states characterize the neglect as complete, whereas others, including some with more developed programs at the state levels, are only willing to recount the problems in less bleak descriptions."[22] The long struggle to establish the National Archives also suggests that the American public generally and federal government resource allocators specifically have not viewed archival programs as a high priority.[23] To hope and work for a brighter future is a legitimate

[19]Hackman and Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," 45, f. 44.

[20]Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," 123.

[21]Edwin C. Bridges, "Consultant Report: State Government Record Programs," in *Documenting America: Assessing the Condition of Historical Records in the States*, ed. Lisa B. Weber (Atlanta: National Association of State Archives and Records Administrators, 1984), 1.

[22]Richard J. Cox, "Consultant Report: Local Government Record Programs," in *Documenting America*, 20. Cox has characterized care for local records since 1900 into four eras; a forty-year period of neglect followed by a brief interest in records management, and then fifteen more years of neglect. Cox optimistically labels the post-1975 period as the one of the "most hope and greatest activity." His optimism, however, is juxtaposed against the quoted NHPRC state assessment report findings.

[23]Donald R. McCoy, "The Struggle to Establish a National Archives in the United States," in *Guardian of Heritage: Essays on the History of the National Archives*, ed. Timothy Walch (Washington: National Archives and Records Administration, 1985): 1–16, offers a brief history of the extended efforts to establish a National Archives.

goal, but to ignore the present reality and past history of archival institutions and assume a too bright future as part of a basic archival strategy is a risky business.

If such projections of an expanded resource base prove false, that in itself would not preclude the theoretical possibility of some form of documentation strategy. A plan designed to reflect fiscal reality could be developed. Such a plan, however, would have to be based on assumptions consistent with the goals of a repository's mission and core collection. Using Schellenberg's classic terminology, repository holdings comprised of institutional records of evidential value would almost certainly include some documents of informational value to extra-institutional topics. A documentation strategy planning group could attempt to construct a documentation strategy based on these records. For example, at the hypothetical archives mentioned above, core holdings documenting agriculture's impact on politics might also contain information relevant to a documentation strategy in a second, non-political area. Long chronological runs of voter registration lists consistently annotated with politically valuable demographic information on race, religion, ethnicity, and occupation could also prove valuable to documentation strategy planners interested in the changing social patterns in rural areas.[24]

There are, however, two problematic assumptions underlying this scenario. First, while some institutional archives' holdings may prove useful on a broad range of social questions, all—or even most—records in institutional archives do not possess multiple extra-institutional uses. Second, and more importantly, for such cooperative documentation strategy to have maximum effect, institutional archives should maintain relatively uniform standards regarding how they document their legal, administrative, and historical positions. Uniformity would greatly facilitate planning by creating a predictable set of core collecting activities. These would introduce a strong element of stability into the documentation strategy planning. If documentation strategists knew that every, or even most, institutional archives shared certain appraisal policies and would consistently implement those policies over a long period of time, then they could attempt to construct a documentation strategy with significant confidence in the plan's durability.

Sadly, there is no strong reason to suppose such uniformity. An archives' core mission is highly dependent on the mandate and goals established for it by its parent institution. The variability created by the whims of parent institutions is compounded by the frequent autonomy and independence of archivists who actually implement core missions. This variability makes it difficult to mold a documentation strategy around core missions, since it introduces a strong element of unpredictability regarding what information a particular institutional archives will save. While the documentation strategy planning group could still try to establish a plan around the unique missions of specific archives and idiosyncratic implementations by individual archivists, the difficulties in successfully accomplishing this would make the task both extraordinarily challenging and not widely practical. The relatively unsatisfactory results archivists have experienced with past projects based on voluntary institutional cooperation would likely be repeated.

That the feasibility and applicability of documentation strategies appears limited does not mean that the strategy is without any use. Within an appropriate sphere it is a potentially useful model that can help address significant problems. Unless the

[24]The dual character of evidential and information values within institutionally maintained records has been noted in Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," 117, but the argument as it is created here is not a part of her or any other article.

underlying realities of American archival practice are radically changed, however, documentation strategy must function within the limits imposed by institutional goals and priorities. Within that framework it may serve as a useful tool, but it has no role outside of that framework. To summarize, there are three levels of appraisal tools. Most basic is institutional collecting policy. It is supplemented by various mid-level appraisal tools including documentation strategy and collecting strategy. Finally, there are the various evaluative criteria, frequently used in conjunction with the first two levels of appraisal in order to determine the desirability of specific records to a particular repository.

The word "value" has been used with great reluctance in the preceding discussion. When archivists talk about appraisal, they almost always use this word, talking about evidential value, informational value, and subject value, just to name a few. The linkage between the words appraisal and value makes sense historically, but for many contemporary archivists the linkage may not accurately convey the meaning of appraisal. In the same vein, within contemporary archival settings, the word value may unwisely constrain thinking regarding the full scope of appraisal. Much—indeed perhaps most—of what occurs in archival appraisal is the establishment and implementation of policy decisions. Tools like collecting policies, acquisition strategies, and even the use of record evaluative criteria with reference to repository goals, all call for the archivist to make and implement policy, not render value judgments. To say, for example, that a given repository will collect records pertaining to the history of its state is not to render a value judgment regarding the relative importance of records pertaining to the other forty-nine states. Rather, it is a policy decision. To implement a collecting policy by focusing upon political and agricultural records is not to render a value judgment regarding the relative importance of economic or social documentation. It is simply a policy decision made among several attractive alternatives. To emphasize certain record evaluative criteria over others because of the preferences of a majority of repository users is not to say that one set of criteria is inherently more valuable than the other, but rather to recognize that the majority of users prefer information created and accessed in particular ways. When archivists appraise, they are largely dealing with policy decisions, not value judgments.

When archivists discuss appraisal in terms of values there is a tendency to see appraisal as an isolated activity independent of other archival and non-archival activities. More importantly, when appraisal is thought of in terms of value, it is empowered with an almost moral force, a biblical dividing of wheat from chaff.[25] By portraying appraisal as a set of policy decisions, this sense of isolation and force is diminished; appraisal becomes one of many institutional policies and priorities. As with any set of policies, appraisal may support, cast doubt upon, or come into conflict with other institutional policies. Appraisal decisions, like all other policy decisions, must enter the arena of decision making and be justified based on their relative merits. If archivists wish their superiors to support archival appraisal policies and resource allocators to acknowledge the ramifications of

[25]This view was clear in a conversation at the Bentley Library among the 1984 Mellon fellows about a paper that eventually developed into Boles and Young, "Exploring the Black Box." One fellow, noting the existence of a module that consciously included policy and political concerns into the appraisal process expressed dismay. In his view, archives existed to preserve valuable records and factors such as cost, not to mention politics and policies, were totally inappropriate in an appraisal decision. To consider them was to "take the low road" to appraisal. Upon reflection the rejoinder that it was neither a low nor a high road, but rather a well-traveled one, was offered.

appraisal decisions through increased funding for space, processing staff, preservation, and all the other aspects of archival care established by the decision to retain records, then archivists must be willing and able to argue for the importance of appraisal policy in comparison to other important institutional policies.

In addition, considering appraisal as policy helps rationalize the entire appraisal process. Appraisal goals must be rationally established and described to create policy. Rational policy should then be systematically applied to specific record retention decisions. The appraisal process becomes a rational exercise in policy creation and implementation.

Portraying appraisal decisions as policy has important implications. While in some ways the change is simply semantic, the words are important because of what they indicate about the archival approach to appraisal. Policy connotes rational planning and development; values, a judgmental and perhaps vaguely defined cultural function. Policy and planning are key to archival development within appraisal. An understanding of how the elements of appraisal interact and how the many appraisal tools that exist relate to one another is critical to rational, logical appraisal decisions.