

Pease Award

A Critical Analysis of Intrinsic Value

SHAUNA McRANOR

Abstract: Intrinsic value was established in the early 1980s as a criterion of appraisal to identify those documents to be retained in their original form. Although perpetuated as an “objective” concept and a new appraisal standard for a particular class of documents, it becomes apparent through critical analysis that its application ascribes value to documents in much the same way as any other value in the traditional “taxonomy.” What follows is an evaluation of the definition of intrinsic value, the criteria by which it is to be assigned, and its invocation in the appraisal process.

About the author: Shauna McRanor is working on her Master of Archival Studies (M.A.S.) thesis at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia. She received her B.A. in archaeology from Simon Fraser University in 1992 and continues to be involved in this discipline as a consultant to the public and private sectors. This article was written as part of the author's course work for the M.A.S. degree and was awarded the 1996 Theodore Calvin Pease Award for the best research paper written by a student in an archival education program. The award was made at the 1996 SAA annual meeting in San Diego.

The Society of American Archivists 1996 Pease Citation

The Theodore Calvin Pease Award is named for the first editor of the *American Archivist* and is given to the best student paper as judged by the current editor of the *American Archivist* and two individuals with expertise in archival research and literature. The 1996 selection committee consisted of Philip B. Epard, Megan Sniffin-Marino, and Terry Abraham. The award recipient receives a certificate, cash prize, and publication in the *American Archivist*.

The 1996 award winner, entitled "A Critical Analysis of Intrinsic Value," was written by Shauna McRanor in a course taught by Luciana Duranti in the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia. Ms. McRanor draws on the philosophical idea of intrinsic value as well as traditional archival theory in order to analyze the criteria for determining intrinsic value developed by the National Archives. The result is a well-reasoned and provocative paper which challenges many familiar assumptions about intrinsic value and the role that it should play in archival appraisal. The essay reflects a high degree of relevance to the archival profession and its current concerns, and it is marked by highly commendable scholarship, and excellent writing and presentation.

JAMES O'TOOLE HAS SUGGESTED that the desire to preserve the original physical form of a document, beyond legal reasons, may be rooted in an uncircumscribable, psychological dissatisfaction with reproductions, insofar as originals possess certain characteristics that cannot be passed on to copies. Although the possibility of *permanently* preserving every original document seemed to be an attainable feat heading into the 1970s, North American archivists began to question the motivation behind such activity.¹ Considering, however, that, at least since the time of Justinian, the obligation of European archivists has been to maintain the "*continuing . . . memory of . . . actions*," rather than eternal preservation, one wonders how North American archivists ever came to think otherwise.² Nevertheless, it took Leonard Rapport's encouragement for archivists in the "New World" to realize that records should be considered "*worthy of continued preservation*," rather than endless retention, and that finally enabled North American archivists to openly acknowledge that "appraisal standards can change, [and] that an appraiser's evaluation may be less than infallible."³

Indeed, with the stockpile of "permanent" records increasing in size at an alarming rate, and available space decreasing accordingly, archivists were forced to choose those archival documents that would endure. Hence, the notion that intrinsic value embodied original records with "unique factors" that precluded their destruction, surfaced formally

¹James M. O'Toole, "On the Idea of Permanence," *American Archivist* 52 (Winter 1989): 18.

²Luciana Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," *American Archivist* 57 (Spring 1994): 331 (emphasis added).

³Leonard Rapport, "No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981): 149 (emphasis added).

in the 1974 glossary by Evans et al.⁴ In other words, documents not accorded such value were copied and destroyed, whereas those with intrinsic value were both reformatted and retained in original form.

In 1979, the concept took on a more central role upon its invocation by the National Archives and Records Service (NARS), following the demand of the General Services Administration (GSA) that the institution microfilm all its records and destroy the originals. The National Archives felt compelled to “rebut the assumption that all records were disposable,” and thus established the Committee on Intrinsic Value.⁵ Its purpose was to more fully define the concept of intrinsic value, enumerate the qualities and characteristics of records thought to possess such value, and prescribe its application in the appraisal process. The staff information paper detailing this endeavor was released in 1982.⁶

The task of this paper is, first, to critically analyze the Committee’s definition of the term by deference to common conceptions of intrinsic value in the philosophical and archival literature. Next, it will be argued that in order for appraisal methodologies and practices to be valid, they must be grounded in archival theory, the essence of which is discussed in light of the nine criteria delineated by the Committee as indicative of intrinsic value in original materials. Finally, the Committee’s prescription for the application of these appraisal criteria is briefly evaluated.

Concepts of Intrinsic Value

As defined by NARS, *intrinsic value*

is the archival term that is applied to *permanently* valuable records that have qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original form the only archivally acceptable form for preservation. Although all records in their original physical form have qualities and characteristics that would not be preserved in copies, records with intrinsic value have them to such a significant degree that the originals must be saved.⁷

The analysis of this definition against notions of intrinsic value found outside archival science is apposite to this discussion, as it highlights not only the subtleties of language, but also the need for archivists to be more diligent in assigning descriptive terms. Indeed, Luciana Duranti has implored archivists to be more “rigorous in their use of terminology;

⁴Frank Evans, Donald Harrison, and Edwin Thompson, comps., “A Basic Glossary for Archivists, Manuscript Curators, and Records Managers,” *American Archivist* 37 (July 1974): 424.

⁵Trudy Peterson, “The National Archives and the Archival Theorist Revisited, 1954–1984,” *American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 129.

⁶Committee on Intrinsic Value, “Intrinsic Value in Archival Materials,” in *A Modern Archives Reader*, edited by Maygene Daniels and Timothy Walch (Washington, D.C.: NARS, 1984), 91. Originally published as Staff Information Paper 21 (Washington, D.C.: NARS, 1982).

⁷Committee on Intrinsic Value, “Intrinsic Value,” (emphasis added). Although Leonard Rapport’s article was published a year earlier than the release of the Committee’s paper, the writers chose to use “permanent” in this definition, even though, in their discussion of destruction it is implicit that permanence was considered passé. Moreover, it is uncertain as to what is meant by “original” in the sense intended by the Committee. In her series of articles on diplomatics, Luciana Duranti used the term to mean the first record to be issued in a form that is complete and enforceable, and which confers upon a record the ability to provide the consequences desired by the creator. See Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part I),” *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989): 19. However, it seems more likely that NARS is using the term to mean the record’s form upon arrival at the archival institution, whether that be the original in the diplomatic sense, a copy, or a draft.

be certain that the terms they adopt reflect the substantive nature of the entity they name; and, with respect to those terms which, notwithstanding their ambiguity, are commonly used, be aware of what they are referring to at any given time.”⁸

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has defined intrinsic value as that which is “belonging to the thing in itself, or by its very *nature*; inherent, essential, proper; ‘of its own.’”⁹ Philosophical concepts of intrinsic value are similar, even though its very existence is much debated. One of the more common philosophical invocations of intrinsic value is in the sense that an object has intrinsic value if it is an *end* in itself rather than a *means* to some other end. Thus, as “ends,” things are of value in themselves and for no reason beyond themselves, thereby allowing their value to be termed “intrinsic.” As a “means,” on the other hand, Robin Attfield explains that something is “valued simply . . . to a further state of affairs beyond itself, [and thus] it is being regarded as of instrumental value only.”¹⁰ In another way, the concept can be used to refer to assumed, *non-relational* “intrinsic properties.” And finally, intrinsic value has been employed in philosophy to describe the “value that an object possesses *independently* of the valuations of the valuers;” that is, its “objective value.”¹¹

These definitions have implications for the sense of intrinsic value utilized by the National Archives, as quoted above. The Committee takes the position that the concept of intrinsic value “is *not* relative,” in that it is found in the “qualities and characteristics” of the object itself, and thus is not contingent on anything else. Although, in a limited sense, this is a valid use of the term, the Committee further specifies that *all* records have these same qualities and characteristics in their original form; however, those with intrinsic value have them “*to such a significant degree*” that the originals must be retained. Nevertheless, considering how “intrinsic” has been defined elsewhere, matters of degree (i.e., relativity) should not require consideration. It is in this way that the Committee’s use of the concept of intrinsic value is flawed: an arbitrary threshold is set, which, when crossed, presents justification for keeping a select few in original form. This probably explains the rationale behind the Committee’s band-aid statement that the “*application* of the concept of intrinsic value *is relative*.” Consequently, based on this inconsistency alone, there is a strong indication that the formulation of the archival notion of intrinsic value was less than rigorous, and thus, leaves little to suggest how the Committee’s guidelines for assessing this value can be of any use.¹²

Furthermore, if one takes the opposite view of the philosophical definitions of intrinsic value listed above—that is, all value is contingent, and therefore cannot reside in an object in and of itself—intrinsic value becomes, as in the Committee’s application of it, entirely subjective.

It is this polarization of the absolute versus the relative that pervades the few incidental discussions of intrinsic value in the archival literature. While these statements are not necessarily framed as commentaries to the Committee’s use of the concept, their mention serves to highlight the inconsistent use of vocabulary among archivists.

⁸Luciana Duranti, “Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part VI),” *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–92): 10.

⁹*Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (emphasis added).

¹⁰Robin Attfield, *A Theory of Value and Obligation* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 25; John O’Neill, “The Varieties of Intrinsic Value,” *Monist* (1992): 119.

¹¹O’Neill, “The Varieties of Intrinsic Value,” 120. These three philosophical notions are referred to elsewhere in this paper by the order in which they appear in this paragraph; that is, first, second, and third.

¹²Committee on Intrinsic Value, “Intrinsic Value,” 94.

For example, Hans Booms has clearly stated that “the value of a particular item only becomes apparent when it is set *in relation* to something else and compared with that other item.” Therefore, Booms rejects the third philosophical notion of intrinsic value listed above, in that “archivists cannot determine the value of documentation by seeking it in the documentation itself. They will not find its ‘*objective*’ value there. Documentary sources do not possess an *inherent value* discernible within the documents themselves. Documentary sources become valuable only when the archivist accords them value during the appraisal process.”¹³ This relativism is echoed by Terry Eastwood, who states that “the value people ascribe to the artifact or documentary object as object—for instance, as symbol or icon,”¹⁴ is hardly intrinsic. Implicit in his observation is the dismissal of the Committee’s unconscious categorization of the qualities and characteristics of original documents as being non-relational, “intrinsic properties,”¹⁵ which, in the second philosophical sense, must exist for an object to have intrinsic value.

This idea is supported by philosopher Barbara Smith, who argues: “What may be spoken of as the ‘properties’ of a work—its ‘structure,’ ‘features,’ ‘qualities,’ and of course its ‘meanings’—are not fixed, given, or inherent in the work ‘itself’ but are at every point the variable products of particular *subjects*’ interactions with it.”¹⁶

It may be concluded, therefore, that the “subjective” notions of intrinsic value proffered in the archival literature and elsewhere do not support the Committee’s “objective” sense of the term. Moreover, this implies that intrinsic value cannot be invoked in a way that does not ascribe value to records and, as such, perpetuates methodologies and practices that are partial to particular interests—a bias that has plagued the appraisal process for decades.

The distortion of the documentary heritage that results from the projection of value onto records provides ample ammunition to fuel archivists’ fight to have archival appraisal soldiered by solid theory, rather than by institutional idiosyncrasies and the pursuits of individual archivists. Therefore, it is necessary to discuss what archival theory entails, and to judge the validity of the appraisal criteria for intrinsic value, as devised by NARS, against these postulates of archival science.

The Essence of Archival Theory

In his recent article entitled, “What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?” Terry Eastwood noted “The whole quest for human understanding of the natural and social worlds contemplates in one way or another the nature of some object or phenomenon, and seeks to *explain* its character or properties. Any quest to explain the nature of a thing for its own sake, merely to know what its nature is, is theoretical.”¹⁷

Accordingly, the Committee’s mere enumeration of the qualities and characteristics of intrinsic value in records cannot possibly constitute a matter of high principle, because such an exercise does not seek to explain anything. Furthermore, because generalizations about phenomena must be derived through inductive or deductive reasoning, generaliza-

¹³Hans Booms, “Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources,” *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987): 82 (emphasis added).

¹⁴Terry Eastwood, “How Goes it with Appraisal?” *Archivaria* 36 (Autumn 1993): 115.

¹⁵O’Neill, “The Varieties of Intrinsic Value,” 120.

¹⁶Barbara Smith, *Contingencies of Value* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 48.

¹⁷Terry Eastwood, “What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?” *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 123 (emphasis added).

tions themselves cannot be directly observed. Given that the Committee, for the most part, dwells upon tangible characteristics, one can logically conclude, therefore, that they have taken a non-theoretical approach.

Even so, this has not prevented Trudy Peterson from referring to “the *theory* of intrinsic value in records” as the “only . . . major new construct in appraisal theory . . . proffered in the National Archives,” since the publication of Schellenberg’s, *The Management of Archives*, in 1965.¹⁸ Based on the argument presented above, however, the use of intrinsic value in appraisal may be best regarded as a *practice* of the National Archives, not as archival theory. Nonetheless, as Luciana Duranti suggests, this logical leap from practice to theory is rampant: “Most appraisal literature has resulted from pragmatic determination of the most convenient and/or politically correct practice, its systematization in a methodology, and the elevation of its assumptions to theory . . . The process needs to be completely reversed: the theory must determine the methods, and the methods must guide the practice.”¹⁹

Statements that support Duranti’s assertion are not difficult to find. For example, both Peterson and Richard Cox have classified intrinsic value as a subset of the Schellenberg secondary value “theory.” But some authors, such as Trevor Livelton, have argued that Schellenberg’s logic is fundamentally flawed, and that his value taxonomy should be viewed as a concept, rather than rigorous, dialectical thinking. Moreover, in light of recent FOI legislation, the criterion of use as the foundation for Schellenberg’s dichotomy of records and archives further undermines his appraisal constructs, thereby casting serious doubt on their validity.²⁰

Similarly, Jane Turner has clearly distinguished Schellenberg’s values that derive from these assumptions of use, as opposed to what is meant by archival nature. Her notion of value identifies strongly with other archival writers mentioned earlier, in that it is “a relative concept rather than an absolute or permanent one. It is *not* inherent in the records, but is relative to the perspective of the one ascribing value.” Archival nature, on the other hand, “is not relative to any perspective, but is *inherent* in the records themselves and is logically derived from the creation process.”²¹ Recalling that theory seeks to explain the nature of things, it is reasonable, therefore, that archival theory posits that archives are that entirety of archival documents made or received in the course of a practical activity, and in the process of their creation, acquire characteristics that are inseparable from them, and thus comprise their nature.

Thus, archives have been described to be, at their most basic, impartial as to creation, authentic as to procedure, and interrelated as to meaning. It is the contemplation of these generalizations that has led Terry Eastwood to remark that the capacity of archives to serve as evidence of activity (i.e., their “potential for accountability”) is, in fact, the only intrinsic value of archives—a value which is inextricably tied to their nature.²²

¹⁸Peterson, “Archival Theorist Revisited,” 129 (emphasis added).

¹⁹Duranti, “The Concept of Appraisal,” 344, n.58.

²⁰Trevor Livelton, “Public Records: A Study in Archival Theory,” Master of Archival Studies thesis, University of British Columbia, 1991; published under the title *Archival Theory, Records, and the Public* (Lanham, Md. and London: Society of American Archivists and Scarecrow Press, 1996), 43–44 (page numbers refer to the thesis, not the published version).

²¹Jane Turner, “A Study of the Theory of Appraisal for Selection,” (Master of Archival Studies thesis, University of British Columbia, 1992), 3, 6 (emphasis added).

²²Eastwood, “What is Archival Theory?” 126.

Eastwood's statement, however, should not be interpreted as an ascription of value—that is, one that is determined a priori. On the contrary, as Heather MacNeil notes, “if we concentrate our energies on identifying and analyzing the various contexts of records creation and allow our understanding of the records’ value to emerge naturally as a by-product of that process,” it will not be necessary to make such overt value-judgments.²³

Therefore, given that the discussion heretofore has shown that archival theory is more cogently argued as ideas about the nature of archives—that is, contemplations regarding their impartiality, authenticity, naturalness, interrelationship, and uniqueness-in-context—rather than on physical characteristics or value according to use, a more thorough evaluation of the nine criteria for establishing intrinsic value in records can now be launched, based firmly in this theory.

Criteria for Establishing Intrinsic Value²⁴

1) Physical form that may be the subject for study if the records provide meaningful documentation or significant examples of the form.

Recalling the definitions of intrinsic value given earlier, it was stated that, in the philosophical realm, an object has intrinsic value—in the first sense of the term—if it is an end in itself, as opposed to a means to an end. Since this first criterion enumerated by the National Archives contemplates archival documents very much as ends rather than means, an argument for intrinsic value could be made in such a case. Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding the creation of archival documents—that is, the incidental way they are produced—implies that these objects are not ends, but means. Understood in this context, this criterion not only violates the notion of intrinsic value most suited to it, but it also contradicts archival nature, most specifically the impartiality of records as by-products of activity. Thus, archival documents should not be selected on the basis of their physical properties alone—as ends—for when appraisal is thereby conducted, the postulates of archival theory are contradicted and, moreover, the informational content of the records—a quality highly prized by NARS—becomes irrelevant.

2) Aesthetic or artistic quality.

This criterion is otherwise known simply as “aesthetic value.” This quality, like any other ascription of value, lends no credence to appraisal methodology. Considering that philosophers have been unable, after centuries of reflection, to define unequivocally the notion of aesthetic value, it seems ludicrous to accept such an arbitrary, subjective, and “fuzzy” notion into the archival appraisal process.

Even so, intrinsic value is often associated with non-utilitarian objects such as artworks. Thus, given James O’Toole’s assertion that archives may ultimately take on a symbolic, non-utilitarian function, it is perhaps not surprising that such records may be seen to possess intrinsic value.²⁵ It must be borne in mind, nonetheless, that archives are,

²³Heather MacNeil, “Archival Theory and Practice: Between Two Paradigms,” *Archivaria* 37 (1994): 13.

²⁴These criteria are presented verbatim from the Committee’s report, and are analyzed here separately and systematically following each criterion. For a fuller explanation of the guidelines, see Committee on Intrinsic Value, “Intrinsic Value,” 92–94.

²⁵James O’Toole, “The Symbolic Significance of Archives,” *American Archivist* 56 (Spring 1993): 234–55.

by *their nature*, utilitarian, regardless of to what use they may be subjected subsequent to their genesis. If one could ascertain that an archival document was created symbolically, however, one could counter that such an object is unlikely to be considered a record, simply because archival theory defines a record as a by-product, and not an end in itself.

3) *Unique or curious physical features.*

The motivations behind the ascription of intrinsic value to these physical attributes of archival documents suggests that this criterion is vulnerable to the same line of reasoning presented against the first criterion above.

4) *Age that provides a quality of uniqueness.*

Although the Committee correctly observes that “age is a relative rather than an absolute quality,” they also mention that, in appraising for intrinsic value, only one criterion out of nine must be met in order for a document to qualify as being intrinsically valuable. The notion that old documents must be kept by virtue of their age has been indicated by Meissner, who stated that “old age is to be respected.” This maxim was quoted approvingly by Schellenberg, and was further reinforced by Maynard Brichford.²⁶ It can be argued, however, that “ancient rarities” are the responsibility of the antiquarian, and that archives should never be selected for preservation *solely* on the basis of age.

Indeed, Barbara Smith has made an interesting and pertinent observation in her phrase, “nothing endures like endurance.” She elaborates on this statement: “What is commonly referred to as ‘the test of time’ . . . is not . . . an impersonal and impartial mechanism; for the cultural institutions through which it operates . . . are, of course, all managed by *persons*; and, since the texts that are selected and preserved by ‘time’ will always tend to be those which ‘fit’ (and indeed have been designed to fit) *their* characteristic needs, interests, resources, and purposes, that testing mechanism has its own built-in partialities accumulated in and thus *intensified* by time.”²⁷

Although, according to the Committee, intrinsic value “may be easier to apply to older records,” it must be understood that age, due to its necessary relativity, cannot constitute an inherent characteristic of archival documents and, thus, by extension, cannot reflect archival nature. Since appraisal must be rooted in archival theory, to undertake such an exercise based on age alone serves only to ignore such a necessity.

5) *Value for use in exhibits.*

It can be contended that this criterion, like most, forsakes the notion that archivists, like the records in their care, should be impartial. Archival exhibits may be questioned from an ethical perspective, in that most exhibitions, as Heather Gordon notes, “are based on *a priori* interpretation of the documents, and make it extremely difficult to present the material without corrupting its meaning.” For the purposes of this discussion, Gordon’s next thoughts are particularly relevant: “Any archival exhibition, whatever its institutional context, purpose, audience, and type, must respect the nature of archival material. It must protect that material’s impartiality, make all its administrative and documentary interre-

²⁶Theodore Schellenberg, “The Appraisal of Modern Public Records,” *National Archives Bulletin* 8 (Washington, D.C.: NARS, 1956), 256; Maynard Brichford, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), 2–3.

²⁷Smith, *Contingencies of Value*, 50.

relationships intelligible, and authenticate its meaning by showing, with the material items, their immaterial context."²⁸

Nevertheless, there are many archivists who believe that outreach is a fundamental role that the archivist must fulfill, and preparing exhibits is often considered vital to this purpose.²⁹ Notwithstanding this perceived function, however, records should never be selected primarily with this criterion in mind. On the contrary, archival documents should be appraised according to the characteristics of their nature, and only subsequent to this consideration should their use in exhibits be entertained.

6) Questionable authenticity, date, author, or other characteristic that is significant and ascertainable by physical examination.

It is imperative that the archivist focus his or her attention on diplomatic authenticity, rather than on the historical authenticity to which this criterion refers. The distinction between the two has been summarized this way: "Diplomatically authentic documents are those which were written according to the practice of the time and place indicated in the text, and signed with the name(s) of the person(s) competent to create them. Historically authentic documents are those which attest to events that actually took place or to information that is true."³⁰

It is the historian's vocation to ascertain the latter—the historical truth—in that it involves the interpretation of informational content. In this way, by attempting to appraise documents based on a criterion demanding historical truth, the archivist may compromise his or her impartiality and, in so doing, distort the documentary heritage. This, needless to say, must be avoided at all costs; therefore, it is the circumscription of diplomatic authenticity which should employ the archivist in this realm.

7) General and substantial public interest because of direct association with famous or historically significant people, places, things, issues, or events.

This criterion prescribes that archivists invoke highly arbitrary judgments in selection, and thereby conjures up the notions of *verstehen* and *Fingerspitzengefühl*, which have been used to describe appraisal methods that utilize the archivist's intuitive capacities, and that require "recourse to the phenomenon of experience."³¹ As Richard Klumpenhouwer has indicated, however, even though "*verstehen* justified the essentially subjective activity of appraisal in the eyes of historians, . . . appraisal by historical intuition remained a subjective, *anti-theoretical* activity."³² Insofar as this stems from a lack of attention to the nature of archival materials, this criterion for the appraisal of intrinsic value in records does not meet the requirements established by archival theory, and thus must be considered invalid.

²⁸Heather Gordon, "Archival Exhibitions: Purposes and Principles," (Master of Archival Studies thesis, University of British Columbia, 1994), 116.

²⁹See, for example, the "Public Programming in Archives" supplement to *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91) for various perspectives on archival advocacy.

³⁰Duranti, "Diplomatics (Part I)," 17.

³¹Booms, "The Formation of a Documentary Heritage," 84.

³²Richard Klumpenhouwer, "Concepts of Value in the Archival Appraisal Literature: An Historical and Critical Analysis," (Master of Archival Studies thesis, University of British Columbia, 1988), 44–45.

8) *Significance as documentation of the establishment or continuing legal basis of an agency or institution.*

Richard Cox has explained that the appraisal for legal value in records should be based on ensuring “the preservation of information that is needed for the legal protection of the institution.”³³ Accordingly, for this criterion, it is difficult to discern the difference between legal and intrinsic value. To further confuse the issue, the Committee explicitly states that “some records *without* intrinsic value also must be preserved in original physical form because such preservation is required by law.” In other words, some legal documents have intrinsic value while others do not. The usefulness of such an inconsistent and ill-defined criterion is questionable. Indeed, it seems more parsimonious to argue that a document is to be kept in original form for legal reasons, rather than to invoke intrinsic value, which heretofore has been found wanting in its applicability to archival documents.

9) *Significance as documentation of the formulation of policy at the highest executive levels when the policy has significance and broad effect throughout or beyond the agency or institution.*

This pattern of thinking devolves from Schellenberg and, before him, archivists of the German tradition, who assumed that the importance of an office and the importance of the records generated within it were correlative. Schellenberg explains: “In appraising the evidential values of public records an archivist must be particularly conscious of organization, for these values largely depend on the position of the office that produced them in the administrative hierarchy of the agency. In general, the records of offices decrease in value as one descends the administrative ladder of an agency.”³⁴

Archivists, however, “do not appraise structures and functions; [they] *analyze* structures, functions, competences, and associated activities, in order to appraise and describe archival documents meaningfully;”³⁵ that is, according to their nature.

Thus, the criteria outlined by the Committee on Intrinsic Value, and critically examined here, do not correspond with the established notion of appraisal, as founded in archival theory. All nine criteria can be fundamentally reduced to subjective ascriptions of value which cannot be argued from logic and, most importantly, cannot ensure that the records preserved as a consequence of selection are impartial testimonies of transactions.

Bearing this in mind, it is useful to analyze the application of the notion of intrinsic value to appraisal, and to consider some of the implications which arise from this exercise.

The Application of Intrinsic Value

Although the fundamental difficulties with intrinsic value have been discussed, there are some issues relating to its application that must still be addressed.

The first of these deals with the level at which appraisal should take place. The Committee recommends that this occur at the series level, in consonance with the consensus in North America that this is the best way to protect “the integrity and full informa-

³³Richard Cox, *Managing Institutional Archives* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 56.

³⁴Schellenberg, “Appraisal of Modern Public Records,” 249. Schellenberg’s notion of evidential value has been explained by Terry Eastwood to mean “the capacity of the documents to provide information about the organization and functioning of the creating body. Thus, evidential value can be distinguished from the *intrinsic capacity* of any given document to provide evidence of the action from which it arose, or its probative value. See Eastwood, “How Goes it with Appraisal?” 121, n.2.

³⁵MacNeil, “Archival Theory and Practice,” 15 (emphasis added).

tional content of the records."³⁶ Even so, when appraising at the level of the series, rather than item-by-item, it is unclear how the collective whole can exhibit—as an aggregate of records—the qualities and characteristics upon which intrinsic value may be determined. Unless the series is extremely homogeneous, a single item cannot be used to represent the entirety. It would appear, therefore, that the application of intrinsic value would have to occur at the level of the individual document, and the Committee concedes that the archivist may have to utilize this option.

Nonetheless, pragmatic concerns have forced appraisal to the series level and higher, and the application of intrinsic value to these collectivities would seem problematic. Furthermore, the idea that integrity and “context is normally best preserved by considering the entire series,”³⁷ amounts to mere lip-service to the interrelationships among records, and by logical extension to the nature of archives, and is clearly too superficial to have any real meaning. Indeed, this is undoubtedly symptomatic of the lack of theory at the base of this particular practice.

Another application issue regarding intrinsic value relates to the appraisal of electronic documents. Given that the meaning of the term *original* as used by the Committee is not self-evident, and that the identification of electronic originals in archival practice is not well-established,³⁸ it would be prudent for the National Archives to be more precise in their prescriptions. Moreover, with the Committee’s fixation with physical form, the usefulness of the criteria for electronic records is further reduced when one recognizes that archival documents of this type do not have a material basis.

And finally, this paper comes full-circle by questioning the fundamental motivations behind, and the usefulness of, wholesale microfilming—its suggestion by the GSA being the prime motivator behind the Committee’s invocation of the concept of intrinsic value. Although the emphasis on secondary values among American archivists may be the axiomatic cornerstone of their methodology and practice, it is fundamentally incorrect to think that the preservation of information, as opposed to records, is the ultimate goal of the archivist. Even so, this remains the essential catalyst driving large-scale microfilming and migration strategies. It is dangerous, however, to devalue the original physical basis of the record, considering that it is the combination of the intellectual and physical components of the archival document that constitute its form. But even though reformatting may violate the integrity of the record—particularly when authentication does not take place—contingencies of space are acknowledged to be very real concerns. Nevertheless, microfilming and migration are expensive activities, and one must consider the additional, and perhaps unnecessary, drain on resources that accompanies the continual justification required for preserving originals, over and above the necessary requirements for accountability.

Essentially, though, the argument comes back to archival theory, recourse to which demands that archivists protect the innate characteristics that constitute the nature of ar-

³⁶Maygene Daniels, “Records Appraisal and Disposition,” in *Managing Archives and Archival Institutions*, edited by James Gregory Bradsher (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 63.

³⁷Committee on Intrinsic Value, “Intrinsic Value,” 92.

³⁸Luciana Duranti has stated that “[i]t is more appropriate to say that electronic records are all made as drafts and received as originals, in consideration of the fact that the records received contain elements automatically added to the system which are not included in the documents sent, and which make them complete and effective [I]t comes into existence as an original when its addressee decides to save it for the first time, because information which is not affixed to a medium is not a document It is fair to say that electronically produced records are generally used and maintained in the status of a copy.” See Duranti, “Diplomatics (Part VI),” 9–10.

chives. The urgent need for archival methods of selection and acquisition that incorporate archival theory could not be more immediate, and archivists must quickly disabuse themselves of practices that *ascribe* value to archives, as does the Committee's notion of intrinsic value. Indeed, it is vital that the acts of the appraisers not be seen by the public as capricious if, in fact, the profession wishes to move forward, and thus reaffirm its indispensable role in North American society.

How much longer will your special collection remain *'special'*?

In libraries across the country there are special collections that are irreplaceable. They are stored in special vaults, kept away from the students and scholars who seek their invaluable insights.

But these controlled,
lightless rooms

cannot keep these documents and books safe from acid paper problems or even time itself.

Let us roll back the hands of time and return your special collection to those who want to learn from them.

Call Toll Free: 1-800-236-0850



Northern Micrographics, Inc.
Digital Preservation
www.normicro.com