



Appraisal for Archival Collections

Digital Stewardship Curriculum

Appraisal defined

“The process of determining whether records and other materials have **permanent (archival) value**. Appraisal may be done at the collection, creator, series, file, or item level.”

- A friend once said “appraisal is what separates archivists from packrats.”
- **Not** assessing for monetary worth (that is its meaning in the art/collectables world), but for **benefit to your repository and community**
 - **What is valued in your community?**
- Permanent value especially important in the digital lifecycle, since you will have to manage the content over time. You can't just park digital files and leave them alone forever
- Want to be able to have something to back-up appraisal decisions, such as collections development policies; not just a case-by-case basis;
- Ideally you document what you decide. For example, “removed all duplicate files or removed printed materials for separate cataloging.”

What is Appraisal?

- Identifying materials that are useful and valuable enough to have a place at your institution, in the long-term
- The appraisal process happens within a larger context of your institution's policies and goals
 - Specifically collecting policy and mission statement

- You may not be able to sustainably keep everything, so you can appraise and accept selectively
- Make sure you have a collecting/collections development policy in place to support your appraisal process

Why bother with appraisal?

- Lack of resources to accept and care for everything
- Not all files/records/papers/items have archival value
- Might not be valuable to your institution/community
- Not leaving a mess for your successors

- Keep the core of the collection;
- make sure the collection has focus; eliminate duplicates
- sometimes appraisal is light; sometimes it is deep
- For years archivists at WSU would come across notes in our backlog that “the collection needs appraisal” - you don’t want to leave that kind of legacy for the next person in your position

When is the best time to appraise a collection?

- Before accepting a collection
- During accessioning
- After it is already a collection at your institution - “Reappraisal”

- It is by far the easiest to appraise a collection before a donor gives it so you are on the same page.
- Accessioning is the second best time, ideally the collection is accessioned soon after it is donated so you can be back in touch with the donor, if necessary about returning unwanted materials (it is best to have that conversation before the donation). We will talk about accessioning next
- “Reappraisal” during processing is more challenging; after processing harder still. These decisions can be tough, but if you document them and follow your policies, your successors will thank you.

Other Considerations in Appraisal

- Cost
- Physical condition
- Order and completeness
- Authenticity/reliability

- Who created the record, and for what purpose?
- What are the significant activities undertaken?
- What records best document the significant functions?
- How significant are the subjects/topics documented in the records?
- How well do the records document the subject?
- Is the record unique, or duplicated elsewhere?
- Is the information in the record unique?
- How scarce is this information, in relation to other existing sources?
- Are there barriers to using the records, either technological (i.e., availability of playback machines) or intellectual (i.e., donor-imposed access restrictions)?
- What are the costs of preserving the records?

Cultural and Community Value

- What are the needs and priorities in the community you serve?
- How does this donated collection fit into these needs and priorities?
 - During Appraisal: Evaluate materials based on these measures of cultural and community value



Discuss or Reflect

What do you think are the key values of your community and institution? (List 2-3)

- Understanding values will inform policies and procedures
- If you have a coworker, colleague or friend - this is a great discussion to start. You can also reflect on this by yourself - write down:
 - What do you think are the key values of your community and institution? (List 2-3)

Credits

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