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Reappraisal and deaccessioning: A review of articles by Karen Benedict, Mark Greene, and Leonard Rapport

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In general, most archival repositories have, as one of their goals, the mission of collecting, preserving, and facilitating the study of the written word via records. These records are often retained to preserve historical information. Unfortunately, over the years, as a direct result of the sheer quantity of records, a number of archives have begun to experience accessioning backlogs. The sheer quantity of preserved records has, in many cases, resulted in archival institutions running into logistical issues due to the lack of funding to cover the storage and accessioning of these records. In this paper, we will review the writings of three respected authors in the archival field, Leonard Rapport, Karen Benedict, and Mark Greene. We will briefly examine their views of the problems facing archives regarding collection storage and accessioning. We will endeavor to ascertain whether the task of reappraisal, as well as deaccessioning, portions of select record collections, is a prudent course of action.

In an ideal world, federal, state, and private archives would have an unlimited budget and staff for collection processing. They would also have unlimited space for the storage of such records. And, all of their collections would have thorough collection descriptions as well as any relevant box, folder, or volume descriptions. Unfortunately, we do not live in an ideal world. In fact, within many archives, there are longstanding problems with unprocessed record collections. In many cases, these problems relate to the lack of staff or funding to help pay for collection processing and storage. And, another issue is the disposition of those records that are deemed to have limited or no informational value to the repository. An important issue being faced by many archives is the question of when to make the difficult decision to reappraise, and possibly deaccession, records.

It is important to first examine the basis for those records which are deemed worthy of retention. To establish the basis for this discussion, I refer to Theodore R. Schellenberg, a former archivist and historian, who was appointed to the position of Director of Archival Management at the National Archives. He was a strong advocate for the retention and preservation of only those records which were identified as having “evidential and informational value” (Rapport, 1981, p 146). Schellenberg believed that only those records which contained information on organizations and their function,

should be given priority for accessioning (Rapport, 1981,p. 147).

The three authors selected for this paper were chosen for their experience in the archival field. The first author, Leonard Rapport, was an archivist with the Civil Archives Division, a department within the National Archives (Rapport, 1981, p.150). Rapport's article, reviewed for this paper, is entitled," No grandfather clause: reappraising accessioned records," and was presented at the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists (Rapport, 1981, p.150).

Per Rapport, there is a dire need for selective reappraisal, and deaccessioning by archives. His example was the collection of the Wage Adjustment Board of World War II (1981, p.148). Originally accessed at 700 feet of records in 1946, it was later reduced to 175 feet after being appraised. But, when the records were reappraised in 1974, another appraisal was made of the collection. The holdings were finally reduced to 24 feet, a savings of 676 feet of storage space (Rapport, 1981, p 148).

Rapport argued for the need to reexamine collections for nonrelevant material. His argument was that reappraisal and the subsequent deaccessioning of improperly accessioned records would benefit the archive due to the savings in storage space, preservation material, and staff time (Benedict, 1984, p. 44). Rapport believed that every public, and possibly every private archive, contained at least some records which should not have been accessioned and processed in the first place (Benedict, 1984, p. 44).

To be fair, Rapport did acknowledge the need to identify records which were deemed to contain evidential or informational value. But, in his reference to Schellenberg's views, Rapport disagreed regarding the necessity of retaining every written record from every public official (Rapport, 1981, p. 147).

Rapport also discussed how one could identify obscure records for reappraisal. His example was a National Archives holding entitled, "Correspondence Relating to Unused Ticket Claims Filed Prior

to the Expiration Date” (Rapport, 1981, p.146). Rapport explained how these records were reviewed and later determined to be void of any redeeming values (Rapport, 1981, p.146).

The second author is Karen Benedict. Benedict is an archivist with a background in archival administration. She previously served on the Public Historian's editorial board. She was also appointed to the Society of American Archivist's Forms Manual task force. Her 1984 article, "Invitation to a bonfire..." was a rebuttal to the article written by Leonard Rapport.

In general, Benedict did not agree with Rapport regarding the need or effectiveness of collection deaccessioning. But, in defense of Benedict, she did make a realistic assessment of archival priorities and budgeting issues faced by archives when she commented that archivists do not regularly reappraise their holdings, or even finish processing unprocessed records, due to cost issues (1984, p.45). In Benedict opinion, it was of greater importance for the archive to finish processing their unprocessed collections before addressing the removal of unneeded records (Benedict, 1984, p. 45). I do not agree with Benedict on her position regarding the ineffectiveness of deaccessioning, but I do agree with her that the processing of records should take precedence over record reappraisal activities.

Benedict took issue with several of Leonard Rapport's suggestions. She felt it was dangerous for archivists to attempt to properly identify records of dubious value. Benedict suggested that deaccessioning should be conducted within the fold of a broader crisis management plan. In addition, she felt there was a potential danger for the archivist to deaccession records on an ad-hoc basis (Benedict, 1984, p. 44). Benedict also disagreed with Rapport regarding the methodology of record weeding. In her opinion, it was dangerous for the archivist to attempt a piecemeal dismemberment of the archive's holdings (Benedict, 1984, p.45).

To be fair, Benedict did agree with Rapport in that there was probably a percentage of unneeded records within every archive's holdings. But, Benedict took issue with Rapport's assumption of the archivist's experience and knowledge of the institution's holdings. Benedict argued that the

archivist's determination of collection content value was probably more closely associated with the archivist's personal opinion than on factors such as usage statistics (Benedict, 1984, p.47). I would have to disagree with Benedict and counter by suggesting that the experienced archivist, due to his or her knowledge and experience with the record content, as well as with patron usage, is knowledgeable as to which record groups are requested versus those which are not requested or accessed. Of course, one could argue whether usage statistics are an accurate barometer of collection importance.

The third article to be examined was by Mark Greene. It is entitled, "I've deaccessioned and lived to tell about it: confessions of an unrepentant reappraiser." Greene is a former president of the Society of American Archivists. He also served on SAA's Task force on intellectual property. Greene is an archivist with the American Heritage Center (AHC) at the University of Wyoming.

Greene was extremely blunt in his assessment of the need for archives to engage in collection deaccessioning. He stated, "our backlogs are bloated with stuff we should not keep,"...This is the dirty job we have said our profession would do. Lets us do it" (Greene, 2006, p.15). Greene admitted that it does require professional confidence, knowledge, time, and intellectual energy to accomplish the important tasks of collection analysis, reappraisal and deaccessioning (Greene, 2006, p.14). But, Greene argued that as part of a records management program, an archive should intelligently and effectively engage in an incremental deaccessioning review and survey of it's holdings (Greene, 2006, p.12). I agree with Greene on the importance of a periodic incremental review of holdings.

Greene explained how his institution, the AHC, engaged in the reappraisal of twentieth-century congressional collections and business collections, resulting in a reduction in the collection's size by 60% (Greene, 2006, p.14). His argument was that, as opposed to endless diatribes from archivists groaning about how they can't condone reappraisal and deaccessioning, they should instead roll up their shirt sleeves and get to work examining their collections for unneeded material.

To reinforce his point, Greene quoted Gerry Ham who said, "...reappraisal and deaccessioning

will permit holdings to be refined and strengthened. It allows archivists to replace records of lesser value with collections of more significance” (Greene, 2006, p. 9). Greene pointed out another issue regarding deaccessioning, namely institutional or donor backlash. Greene explained how donor reaction to news of deaccessioned material could result in the loss of bad press for the institution.

In conclusion, it would appear that an important aspect of this discussion was whether archivists had sufficient expertise and experience to effect an impartial review of the records in question. It is evident that authors on both sides of this issue were passionate in their views. In my opinion, an important aspect of this divisive issue is the value of the records or collections versus the cost of maintaining them. I would have liked to have seen two items: survey data regarding reappraisal and deaccessioning costs, as well as information on institutional procedures for record destruction.

It was apparent from the Rapport article that the lack of storage space and the volume of unprocessed records was an issue. I inferred from the Benedict article that Benedict, an archivist for an private insurance company, was not faced with the severity of issues that are being faced by state and federal governmental archives. Specifically, sufficient collection space, sufficient processing staff, and sufficient budget allocation. This could be due to a number of factors. The private sector could be identifying and retaining less records of value. Or perhaps there is a larger record retention budget available to companies in the private sector.

I have some work experience with record storage on the federal level. I previously worked in an archives storage warehouse. It was my observation that there appeared to be a problem regarding sufficient space for record storage. And, this problem seemed to be exacerbated by insufficient funding to fix problems such as leaking roofs and insufficient infrastructure. This problem may be due to the federal government’s propensity to create so many records as well as their mandate to retain them. The issue of required record retention may not be so severe in private industry. But, due to the rising costs of storage, archivists in federal, state, as well as private archives may soon be revisiting the idea of reappraisal, with the ultimate goal of deaccessioning, or reducing, at least some of their holdings.

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