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Biz of Acq

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The Initial Development of an Archival Program

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Column Editor's Note: I thought I would try something different this month. We have established the first archives for the School of Law here at the University of Missouri-Columbia. The experience has been challenging, very educational and at times frustrating. I realized that many small schools may be facing similar challenges as they try to develop programs to handle the historical record of their institution. As far as formal training, I took one archives-related course at the University of Maryland-College Park, completed a six-week practicum at the archives of the University of Virginia, and attended a seminar on book and paper conservation, but I am not a trained archivist. The point in relaying this to you is to emphasize that many times librarians find themselves assigned to similar projects. I was fortunate to have the human resources provided by the School of Library and Informational Science here at Missouri in the form of practicum students who wish to become archivists. Keith has been the practicum student from the project's inception and, therefore, it was only fitting that he write this account of our experience. I hope those of you faced with similar tasks now and in the future will find our account of and advice on such an undertaking valuable to your own program. — JM

The Initial Development of an Archival Program: Some Issues, Concerns and Solutions

by **Keith Housewright**
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Faced with the dilemma of ever-increasing numbers of documents combined with limited space and resources to handle them, many institutional administrators and records managers are beginning to realize the need for comprehensive archival programs which would document institutional history while systematically addressing these concerns. Such was the case recently at the University of Missouri School of Law, where thousands of documents that detail much of the school's history faced non-existent access and continued decay unless intellectual control could be established over them and the documents could be properly preserved. With those concerns in mind, an archival program was established at the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law from January—April 1996 by the technical services librarian who was appointed to head the project and the author as a part of a

student practicum in conjunction with the University of Missouri School of Library and Informational Science. This paper outlines many of the problems and concerns encountered during the establishment of this archives which hopefully will provide insight to any institution considering the establishment of a small archival program.

The initial development of an archival program provides any institution with a series of significant challenges. The appraisal of the documents for historical and research significance, preserving those documents retained, arranging them in a logical order which can be described in a finding aid for ready access, and providing security for the collection can put a serious strain on the resources of an established archives, not to mention an archival program in its initial phase. Archivists of established collections guide their accessioning, appraisal, arrangement and description decisions largely on the basis of the existing collection and existing collection development policies. The person responsible for a beginning collection however — hereafter referred to as the archivist — must not only help develop the policy to guide the collection in conjunction with the parent institution, but often has the additional responsibility of keeping interest in the project alive by promoting and selling its value to the institution. An archives cannot exist for long if it only collects materials in warehouse fashion. In order to ensure the continued funding and use of the archives, the archivist must create access and promote use of the collection, so that research into the history of the institution can be conducted and interest in the collection maintained. The quality of the access provided to the collection most often determines its ultimate success or failure.

The first task in developing an archival program should be for the archivist to complete a preliminary written inventory of the materials already collected for the program. Often this can be a harrowing and time-consuming experience, as the archivist first encounters the collection piled up in office corners or closets with little or no apparent structure. This preliminary inventory serves two important purposes. First, it allows the archivist to formally establish what is physically in the beginning collection. Second, the list will allow determinations to be made on issues of provenance and original order — archival con-

cepts which ensure that documents of separate collections are not combined and that the order imposed by the originating institution or individual is largely followed — and on the issue of arrangement. More importantly, the preliminary inventory gives the archivist the opportunity to approach the parent institution from a more informed position on issues of collection development policy, supplies required for processing, and on the nature and number of documents that will need to be processed.

The second task in this process is for the archivist and institution to decide just what the collection policy should be. This can be accomplished by further researching the parent institution's current mission statement, history and through institutional staff interviews. Issues to be considered in this policy include the nature and scope of documents to be collected and the process of accessioning those documents both from within and without the parent institution, including cooperative measures with other institutional records managers. Consideration must also be paid in the policy to the formats of materials to be accepted, restrictions on their access, and equipment required to handle those materials. In addition, activities supported by the archives to promote its use, including the publishing of a list of holdings and newsletters and the ongoing funding of the archives will need to be addressed. Although the development of this policy may take several months, the archivist can begin work on the collection once an outline of this policy has been established as a blueprint for its development. Remember that such a document will and should continue to develop as the archives grows as an institution.

The third task in the initial development of an archives should be the appraisal of documents already collected as compared with the goals established in the collection policy. Documents must be accessioned or rejected based on the criteria set forth in the policy, with particular emphasis placed on which documents might be valuable for future research. With time and space at a premium in most archival programs, documents must be appraised and a balance must be struck between the needs of the future user and the resources available to the archivist. With a clear and comprehensive collection policy

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available, the archivist's job is made that much easier. Given the often sizable number of documents an archivist will encounter in the beginning of such a program, combined with the different and sometimes evolving types and formats of documents produced by any dynamic institutional environment, appraisal will necessarily occupy a large amount of the archivist's time and energy. Archivists should allow time to outline and understand an appraisal plan, then remain faithful to it so as to keep their decisions objective and consistent.

After the documents have been appraised and their disposition determined, the archivist should decide what supplies to order so that the collection might be properly processed and preserved. Archival-quality containers and other materials tend to be quite expensive, especially to cover the costs of initial processing, so the archivist must balance budgetary concerns and appraisal decisions against resources available to handle them. Acquiring funds for these items is often difficult at best, especially considering the fact that many institutional administrators have no previous experience in purchasing them or a conception as to their cost. The archivist must search the major suppliers of archival goods for the best deal possible in order to maintain accountability. If some documents cannot be properly attended to — per archival standards — then they should be processed in the best manner possible to preserve them and a note contained in the finding aid should document future work needed to be done to complete the collection. This step ensures that archival conservation issues have been systematically considered across all records and documents, that any future processing directed on them is already prescribed and offer documentation of the initial processing of the collection.

Once appraisal is completed and supplies have been ordered, any staples, paper clips, or rubber bands must be removed from documents so that damage through rust or decaying rubber products can be avoided and documents can be archivally preserved. Any paper documents, such as newspaper clippings, already in decay should be photocopied for preservation purposes. In addition, any documents appraised as having artifactual value should be preserved through deacidification processes and encapsulation procedures per archival standards outlined elsewhere. Many guides to these procedures are available in libraries and from private companies and organizations, like the **Gaylord Company** or the **Northeast Document Conservation Center**.

Once preservation issues have been addressed, the documents should be arranged and described depending on their type and format. Arrangement of the documents must always be governed by provenance, and original order should be especially emphasized with personal manuscript collections that might be processed into the overall collection. One of the key early decisions in this process involves determining whether the documents — or parts of the documents — fall into the

category of personal manuscript or institutional records. Personal manuscript collections with an order imposed by their creator must be kept in that order so that their original context and subsequent research integrity can be maintained. The large majority of such institutional records, however, are records which were created within the organization as a matter of the course of business. These records can ultimately be sorted by whatever category the archivist sees fit as promoting access and ease of use to the collection, although the actual categories developed should generally follow the pattern of institutional use. The archivist, keeping in mind the organizational structure of the parent institution, has to determine what arrangement — whether by subject, chronological order, format, or a combination thereof — the documents best fit in to meet the needs of the institution and future researchers.

Once the arrangement has been determined, the archivist should describe each group of documents in a finding aid to the collection. This description should describe the major elements of the collection — referred to as the series in archival terminology — and be designed to best promote access to the collection. Although a few archival repositories take their description down to the individual document level, series level descriptions accompanied by a list documenting the materials within each series offers the best balance between providing access and the time and resources available to complete the project.

One of the most difficult archival issues is the handling of alternative formats within the collection. Quite often, institutions will have large photographic, micrographic, or audio/video collections which must be properly handled and stored. Photographic collections, which most often contain negatives, provide an excellent example of the advantages and disadvantages of processing alternative collections. One disadvantage of photographic collections is that they often require supplies which are expensive to acquire, but must be purchased to ensure proper care and maintenance. In addition, providing access to photos and negatives is often an intellectual chore that requires great time and energy. Time and labor costs may be augmented through the utilization of volunteers and student workers to clean and process the photographs and negatives. In addition, depending on the format of the photographic collection, special equipment may be necessary for viewing or copying of photographs. Whether or not to include this equipment or service, or to provide services through arrangements with local photographers, should be addressed in the collection policy.

Despite the above mentioned difficulties in processing, photographic collections make for excellent public relations, and quite often the proper care and maintenance of these collections can provide excellent justification for further funding of the archives. Visual collections often strike a chord with institutional executives interested in the history of the organization, and do so in a way that thousands of documents never could. Indeed the axiom "a picture is worth a thousand words," applies

to selling the archivist's work as well. Video collections and micrographics provide additional format problems, as well as many of the same advantages and disadvantages of photographs. The fast-growing development and evolution of electronic formats provides additional future concerns and illustrates the need for a comprehensive and dynamic collection development policy for any archival program in order to handle their disposition before they are accessioned into the archives.

Next, the finding aid to the collection must be developed. The arrangement and description of any archival collection remains largely useless unless it can be easily accessed, and the finding aid of a new collection is a key to whether it is a success or not. The quality of the finding aid most often results from the other work already done on the collection. If proper intellectual control has been established over the collection during the arrangement and description part of the processing, then producing the finding aid should take relatively little time and effort. In addition to the series descriptions and container lists, a short history of the documents and the organization should be included along with a scope and content note at the beginning of the finding aid in order to provide further context to future researchers. If time and resources permit, an index of the series categories should be developed as well to provide more detailed access.

Finally, issues of future accessions, use and maintenance of the collection, security, and hours of archives operation must be considered by the archivist and included in the archives policy statement and that of the parent institution as well. One of the potential difficulties encountered with starting a collection is that once the word is out that an archives is being developed within an institution, all manner of materials begin to arrive. In addition, the experience at the University of Missouri-Columbia School of Law reflects that requests for materials begin to come in even while the initial processing and set up is in progress. To survive these challenges, archivists must address the problems of handling these incoming documents and requests during initial processing in the collection development policy so that decisions on how to handle these concerns are guided by the relative objectivity of the document balanced against the need to promote the facility.

Developing an archival program from inception into a full-fledged working program requires much initial time and effort on behalf of the parent organization and the archivist. Cooperation and coordination between institutional administrators, department records managers, other staff and archivists must be paramount if the endeavor is to thrive. The archivist of such a collection must be guided by a thorough and comprehensive collection development policy, a sense of marketing ingenuity, and an understanding of the intra-institutional politics involved, in order to transform the small archives into a viable part of the parent institution.