

“If you cannot get rid of the family skeleton, you may as well make it dance”:¹ How one repository tangoed successfully with some controversial collection management activities.

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I’ve been asked today to touch on four activities—collection analysis, deaccessioning, collecting policy, and active acquisition/appraisal—and to do so “provocatively,” within 20 or 25 minutes. I spend an hour during my Advanced Appraisal workshop for the Society of American Archivists talking about deaccessioning alone, so what I say here will be quite a simplification and condensation—perhaps that will help me be provocative.

Some context. I have spent most of my 25-year career as an archivist working with what in the US we refer to as manuscripts collections and in the UK are apparently referred to as “private archives.” In doing so I have worked for a private state historical society in Minnesota with manuscript holdings of approximately 30,000 cubic feet **[SLIDE 2]**, where my sole employment for 11 years was developing collecting policies, identifying and soliciting new acquisitions, appraising solicited and unsolicited collections, building and maintaining relations with donors, and toward the end of my tenure devising reappraisal and deaccessioning projects.²

For the past 8 years I have directed the American Heritage Center in Wyoming **[SLIDE 3]**, part of a public—which is to say taxpayer-funded—university, with manuscript holdings of about 70,000 cubic feet.³ There I have the same responsibilities I had in Minnesota, except that they occupy only a portion of my time, and it is my responsibility to teach the archivists who work with me how and why to perform these tasks. Both the Minnesota and Wyoming repositories serve very broad constituencies, handle thousands of research requests each year, and maintain a very strong service ethos.⁴

¹ Quote attributed to George Bernard Shaw.

² The repository, the Minnesota Historical Society, while governed privately is funded publicly, and thus has something of a unique status. MHS, in addition to its manuscript collections, also administers the state’s public records archives, of approximately 40,000 cubic feet, and maintains other curatorial units for artifacts, art, maps, audio-visual, books, and oral history. The institution is far more than a repository, however, as it also runs the state’s historic sites system, includes a major museum, has a publishing program, and more. See <http://www.mnhs.org>.

³ The AHC, though its archives and manuscripts holdings are approximately equal to that of MHS, is overall a much smaller institution. While it does include a rare books library, and while like MHS it also administers the state’s History Day program (a competition for students in grades 6-12 to produce projects based on primary source research), the only other similarity it maintains to MHS’s overall operations are its public programs. See <http://ahc.uwyo.edu/>.

⁴ Both institutions served the lay public, students in grades 6-12, undergraduates, PhD candidates, “scholars,” journalists, documentary film makers, attorneys, environmental scientists, “fanatics” of particular topics or

It is, however, my present institution [SLIDE 4] that gives rise to the title of my paper, for it accumulated a plethora of skeletons in its closets during the tenure of one director hired in 1956 and forcibly removed in 1993. The professionalization of the Center's staff in the 1990s permitted the banishing of some of those skeletons, but when I arrived as director in 2002 the repository was still haunted. The skeletons remaining represented, particularly, the legacy of 25 years of unbridled collecting, with no plan and no constraint—also with no concern about making the growing tens of thousands of cubic feet of acquired material accessible to researchers.

The result was about 85,000 cubic feet of manuscript collections [SLIDE 5], touching on virtually every topical area of human endeavor, and extending not only from coast to coast but into Canada, Australia, South Africa, Asia, Europe, and South America as well. Just as the former director would not hear of planned (much less non-competitive) collecting, nor would he countenance making selections within a collection—he wanted and accepted *everything* a donor might wish to send, from desktop knick-knacks to random collections of books to self-taught (and truly hideous) artworks.

When I arrived, despite a decade of staff work processing and cataloging collections, progress was slow. The AHC was far behind its peers in percentages of manuscript collections cataloged on-line.⁵ We were hardly alone in having such a backlog of intellectually inaccessible material. In 2004 across the US backlogs represented a third of the collections of two-thirds of repositories.⁶ Why was this so? As my friend Dennis Meissner will later explain in more detail, we believe the largest portion of blame can be placed on outmoded methods of processing modern manuscript collections.

However, unregulated and unplanned acquisition and failure to rigorously and efficiently micro-appraise within collections contributed substantially to the backlogs as well. The only recent

personalities, and more. At Wyoming our first but not only priority is to serve as an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum, though we also welcome researchers from all 50 states and annually about 12 other nations—over 6,000 researchers each year in all. My university is also what is called a “land grant” school, meaning it was established through the granting of federal land to the state for the explicit purpose of creating a college that served the widest possible segment of the population, including life-long learning for those not formally enrolled.

⁵ By number of collections the figure was 20%, by volume of collection the figure was 24%. Either was below the ARL mean of 46%. Judith M. Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries: Results of the 1998 Survey* (ARL, 2001)p. 83. This was roughly the same percentage of AHC collections processed to something akin to professional standards. Though many of our collections had the most rudimentary content descriptions. Depending on whether the number of collections or the volume of collections was considered, by 2004 the AHC had at least partially processed 66% or 84% of its collections, respectively. These figures actually compare well to the special collections units at the US's elite Associated Research Libraries. Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries*, 99. Our online catalog is at <http://uwcatalog.uwyo.edu/>.

⁶ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, “More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing,” *American Archivist*, 68:2 (Fall/Winter 2005), 210-13.

survey on the subject found that barely half of even the most elite special collections repositories in the U.S. had formal collection development policies.⁷ Instead, their only guidance are absurdly broad mission statements to, for example, "collect and preserve the materials and records of human culture relating to Minnesota and Minnesotans."⁸

There is probably some fear involved in failure to define policies—to the extent that we consciously prioritize collecting we run the risk of being criticized for our decisions. Moreover, US archivist Tim Ericson has accurately lamented the "unconscious assumptions of the age of scarcity which still distort our thinking."⁹ One of these is the tendency, as he puts it, "to see ourselves in the role of a twentieth-century Horatius-at-the-Bridge: the last line of defence between preservation and oblivion. This causes us to make utterly ludicrous decisions regarding acquisition by cloaking ourselves in the virtue of maintaining culture: If I don't save it, who will?..."¹⁰

But collecting policies are necessary to ensure that collection development is planned, rational, tied to institutional needs and priorities, and realistic compared to repository resources rather than haphazard, knee-jerk, based on the interests or whims of individuals, and largely impractical. Formal policies are more likely to result in integrated and inter-related holdings of maximum value to students, scholars, and other researchers.¹¹

Moreover, many repositories avoid appraisal as well as acquisition policies. As Barbara Craig of Canada has noted, "it would be misleading to say that archivists have universally embraced the necessity of selective retention. Many have neither easily nor quietly accepted the role of selector."¹² Too many archivists accept whatever the donor wants picked up and assume that

⁷ Panitch, *Special Collections in ARL Libraries*, 79.

8... From the Mission Statement of the Minnesota Historical Society's "Collections Management Policy," 1994.

⁹ Timothy L. Ericson, "At the 'rim of creative dissatisfaction': Archivists and Acquisition Development," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), 72.

¹⁰ Timothy L. Ericson, "At the 'rim of creative dissatisfaction,'" 69. Ericson is here updating Gerald Ham's analysis of the weaknesses of archivists' custodial mindset in, "Archival Strategies for the Post-Custodial Era," *American Archivist* 44 (Summer 1981), 207, 210.

¹¹ American Heritage Center, "AHC Manuscripts Collecting Policy" (2008), p. 1, at http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/administration/AHC%20Collecting%20Policy%20_3_%20rev%20_2_.pdf

¹² Barbara L. Craig, "The Acts of the Appraisers: The Context, the Plan, and the Record," *Archivaria* 34 (1992), 176.

appraisal will occur during processing if at all.¹³ And when processing does happen, sometimes decades later, appraisal too often occurs at a file or item level.¹⁴

The AHC's specific history serves as a perfect case study of the unwelcome consequences of unstructured collecting without appraisal and a strong propulsion for living up to the best practices of the archival profession (whether *widely* practiced or not).

So it was that I conceived and directed, during a five-year period, a full and formal collection analysis, development of a formal and public collection development policy, administration of a federal grant to support assessing all 2300 of our still unprocessed collections, supervision of an extension of that same grant to further reduce our cataloging and processing backlog by reappraising and deaccessioning more than 500 collections,¹⁵ cataloging the hundreds of unprocessed collections we retained, and development of a new process for active solicitation and collection acquisition without benefit of a dedicated staff person or any additional funding. Along the way we raised the stature and visibility of our archives at our home institution, within

¹³ Repositories therefore shelve hundreds of cubic feet of material from even single collections that will wind up being removed during processing but in the meantime reduce available shelfspace. I base this impression on personal experience (it was true at all four repositories I have served prior to my arrival), more broadly on what I learned from the attendees at the half-dozen "Fundamentals of Acquisition and Appraisal" one-day workshops I taught for the Midwest Archives Conference in the 1990s, and from the reaction I received after publishing an article suggesting that congressional papers archivists explain to congressional offices long before the shipment of any material just what common series the repository did and did not wish to receive. Mark A. Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," *Archival Issues* 19:1 (1994), 31-44.

¹⁴ Four of the most salient reasons for item-level appraisal, based on my experience and conversations, are the continuing commitment to encyclopedic knowledge of the collection by the archivist; fear of overlooking historically important documents; even greater concern about missing items that might be candidates for theft; and the widespread belief that archivists' responsibility entails identifying any and all documents that might be "confidential" or threaten the privacy of third parties in the collection. These four reasons are expressed in the comments found in two sources. First are the anonymous comments section of a survey conducted in 2009 of subscribers to the Archives and Archivists discussion list by Stephanie H. Crowe and Karen Spilman (email to Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner from Karen Spilman, 18 September 2009). The survey elicited 156 responses, though the number of responses to the various questions varied significantly. Roughly 80% of respondents worked in repositories that had implemented MPLP; 44% of respondents worked in repositories with 2–5 FTE; 19% worked at repositories with 6–10 FTE. The researchers requested that I not cite the URL where the raw survey data is found, as they hope to present it publicly soon (email to Mark Greene from Stephanie Crowe, 1 October 2009). Readers interested in their survey and its data may contact them directly. The second is a draft paper written by two archivists at an Association of Research Libraries university repository (email attachment to Mark Greene, 28 April 2008; hereafter cited as "MPLP draft.") See also Jeffery S. Suchanek, untitled paper, session #501, "More Product, Less Process (MPLP) Revisited: Choosing the Right Processing Strategy for Your Repository and Collections," Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Austin, Texas, 2009, 3, 4–5.

¹⁵ This is the total from the time of my arrival to the time of revising this paper; as you will further along, the number of collections reappraised during our grant project was about 425.

our profession, and among researchers.¹⁶ In such ways, I would like to think, did our repository make our skeletons dance.

So down to cases. As British archivist, Agnes Jonker, notes,

the acquisition of private archives is diffuse, often led by serendipity and arbitrariness. In general, archivists find it hard to define an acquisition policy for the long term. In spite of [many articles]¹⁷ on documenting society, ...how do we find out what is 'significant', what is an 'important event', or what is 'representative', or a mirror of contemporary society? How do we decide that and based on what sources?¹⁸

I will return shortly to the assumption that the archival mission is to hold up a "mirror for mankind"¹⁹; for now, let me say that archivists finding "it hard to define an acquisition policy for the long term" is a problem not only in England, but in the States as well, despite stern calls for the development of formal collecting policies for at least the past 30 years.²⁰

UK archivist Ian Johnston has noted that even accepting the obligation to create a collecting policy

did not guarantee that archivists would actually utilise them to make more effective selection decisions. This was recognised in the USA [in the mid-1980s] by Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, who suggested that in order for collecting policies to be successful, they needed to be 'clear, focused, and refined', whereas 'as they now

¹⁶ These projects also provided the basis for most of our archivists to deliver papers at national conferences, thus helping to boost the stature and visibility of our professionals as well.

¹⁷ She cites the work of Hans Booms, Terry Cook, Richard Cox, Helen Samuels specifically.

¹⁸ Agnes E. M. Jonker, "No Privileged Past—Acquisition Revisited," *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 30: 1 (2009), 77.

¹⁹ F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38: 1 (January 1975), 13. See also Barbara Reed in the influential 1987 first edition of the Australian manual *Keeping Archives*, ed. Ann Pederson (Sydney: Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated, 1987), 100: "The task of constructing a mirror of society is difficult, but possible, and it is this role which archivists should seek to fulfill."

²⁰ Linda J. Henry, "Collecting Policies of Special Subject Repositories," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980): 57–63; Gloria A. Thompson, "From Profile to Policy: A Minnesota Historical Society Case Study in Collection Development," *Midwestern Archivist*, 8:2 (1983), 21-39; Faye Phillips, "Developing Collecting Policies for Manuscript Collections," *American Archivist*, 47:1 (Winter 1984), 30-42; Jutta Reed-Scott, "Collection Management Strategies for Archivists," *American Archivist*, 47:1 (Winter 1984), 23-29; Judith E. Endelman, "Looking Backward to Plan for the Future: Collection Analysis for Manuscript Repositories," *American Archivist*, 50 (Summer 1987), 340-55; David P. Gray, "A Technique for Manuscript Collection Development Analysis," *Midwestern Archivist* 12:2 (1987), 91-103; Christine Weideman, "A New Map for Field Work: The Impact of Collections Analysis on the Bentley Historical Library," *American Archivist*, 54:1 (Winter 1991), 54-61; Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with 'an Attitude': A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records," James M. O'Toole, ed. *Records of American Business* (Chicago, 1997), 161-229; Wisconsin Historical Records Advisory Board and Wisconsin Council for Local History, *Creating a Collection Development Policy for Historical Records*, September 1998 (<http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/libraryarchives/whrab/wclh.pdf>).

generally exist, acquisition policies are often open-ended statements designed primarily to grant a repository a perpetual hunting license for records'.²¹

Why is the development of collecting policies so abhorred on both sides of the Atlantic? One US archivist speculated that it had much to do with a reluctance to tackle a necessary precursor to development of collecting policies, collection analysis: "I am not sure that archivists know what the collecting gaps are, even though there is plenty of opportunity to plot out repository holdings; they seem not to want to undertake the drudge work of analyzing the data."²² Whether looking to fill in gaps or build on strengths, collection analysis is a requirement of collecting policy development.²³

Paraphrasing Jonkers, I would add that "the *appraisal* of private archives is often based on serendipity and arbitrariness" as well. Despite much promotion of appraisal theory,²⁴ in general appraisal approaches are so poor as to have driven F. Gerald Ham in the US to cry "Why must we do it so badly?" in 1975 and 30 years later Frank Boles to lament that "archivists are by and large scared silly of appraisal and most of them really don't want to do it...."²⁵ If archivists are scared of appraisal per se—that is, a rational, explicable, policy-driven decision-making process of selecting what comes under the archives' purview—what are they substituting instead?

A recent study of Canadian archivists offers a disturbing answer in the large percentage (74.28%) of respondents who report using "intuition" as one approach to appraisal. While "many [respondents] indicated that they used a combination of methods,"²⁶ the survey's creator goes on to note that "what does stand out is the strong showing of intuition as a valuable approach to appraisal.... comments about intuition were frequent."²⁷ She concludes that "There appears to be a real need for more concrete guidance for appraisal activities from

²¹ Ian Johnston, "Whose History is it Anyway?" quoting Frank Boles and Julia Marks Young, "Exploring the Black Box: the Appraisal of University Administrative Records," *American Archivist*, 48:2 (Spring 1985), 137.

²² Frank G. Burke, "Commentary," *American Archivist*, 51:1-2 (Winter/Spring 1988), 50.

²³ And for a repository of any size, such analysis is indeed tedious and daunting. But it certainly can be done—*has* been done by sufficient archives as to remove doubt about its practicality and its efficacy. What it requires is what so many aspects of change management require: a purpose and communication of that purpose to the staff; acknowledgment and acceptance that the project will be a long-term one; and parsing out the work so that it does not lie too heavily on any individual or subgroup.

²⁴ The literature of appraisal in the US and Canada is so vast that it cannot be cited or even usefully summarized here. I can do best by referring readers to the extensive bibliography, developed first by Terry Cook, then supplemented by me and Frank Boles, in Boles' *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Archival Fundamentals Series II)* (Chicago, 2005), pp. 159-83. That bibliography contains well over 300 articles.

²⁵ Frank Boles, unpublished paper, Society of American Archivists, 2004.

²⁶ Barbara L. Craig, "Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada. Results from a Postal Survey of Practitioners' Experience, Practices, and Opinions," *Archivaria* 64 (2007): 21.

²⁷ Craig, "Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada," 27.

the profession in the form of standards of practice, and from institutions, in the form of clear policies and related procedures.”²⁸

With no standards forthcoming from our profession, we were left to develop institutional policies and procedures to guide our archivists. When the AHC decided to tackle collection analysis, collection policy development, and rigorous micro-appraisal, we had all those skeletons in our closets as incentive. **[SLIDE 6]**

We decided it made sense to combine the important and interdependent tasks of analysis and policy development.²⁹ Beginning in 2002 AHC archivists were assigned to the first set of a series of task forces, each lasting approximately six months, and each focused on one or more topical collecting areas.³⁰

Each task force was charged with 1) Analyzing the quantity and quality of AHC holdings in its assigned topical areas. 2) Determining the location and holdings of other repositories in the U.S. on the same topics. 3) Analyzing use records for extant materials and analyzing and prioritizing likely user groups for current and future collections. 4) Recommending a specific collecting policy for each topic. 5) Recommending, based on that collecting policy, existing collections at AHC for reappraisal. 6) Recommending, based on that collecting policy, appraisal guidelines for retained and yet to be acquired collections **[SLIDE 7]**.

The recommendations from each task force were forwarded to the AHC’s department heads for further discussion and (usually) revision. When all the topics had been covered, the policy was presented to the University’s deans and academic unit directors for further comment. A call for comments was sent to the entire University faculty. Finally, the revised draft was forwarded to the university’s provost for further review and ultimate approval. It was then posted online **[SLIDE 8]**.³¹

We had two important tasks facing us as a direct result of the analysis and collecting policy development: 1) What to do about the literally thousands of collections, ranging from a folder to 800 cubic feet, that were on our shelves but did not fit the new collecting policy? 2) Were we going to implement the new policy passively or actively, and in either event how would we

²⁸ Craig, “Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada,” 27. Canadian archivists “were just about evenly divided on the question asking whether their institution had a formal strategy for doing appraisal with just under half [46.8%] responding positively that their institution had such a strategy (or strategies in some cases) and just over forty-five percent [45.3%] responding that none currently existed”: Craig, “Doing Archival Appraisal in Canada,” 20.

²⁹ Collection analysis and the creation and maintenance of a formal and public collection development policy was a part of the AHC’s 5-year academic plan, finalized in 2004.

³⁰ The specific topics into which the collecting universe was divided for this work were borrowed from a major collection analysis and development exercise undertaken by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin (now the Wisconsin Historical Society) in the 1980s, amended where necessary to best fit the AHC’s collections.

³¹ http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/administration/AHC%20Collecting%20Policy%20_3_%20rev%20_2_.pdf

efficiently appraise potential collections and negotiate with and steward donors? Let's take the second task first. As US archivist Gerry Ham noted in the 1990s, "By fashioning well-focused and achievable collecting policies and paying greater attention to planned acquisition, the better archival collecting agencies have developed systematic and efficient field collecting programs to identify potential collections, contact their custodians, evaluate their material's worth, and negotiate for its transfer."³²

[SLIDE 9] Apparently, in Britain, as in the US, there is some despair that so few archives have joined the ranks of Ham's "better archival collecting agencies," at least expressed by Ian Johnston: "Fundamentally... archivists first need to recognise that the current situation, whereby the acquisition process is virtually ignored, cannot be allowed to continue."³³ He goes on to note that

Certainly, the notion of employing paid field workers, although an extremely appealing one, is beyond the basic financial resources of most UK archives. Yet, a number of...collecting projects [in the US and UK] were equally unable to afford such luxuries [and]... 'had to choose either strategies which could be implemented by existing staff or strategies for which they could obtain outside funding'.³⁴

This is just what we did at the AHC, which has no prospects for creating a full-time acquisition archivist such as existed for me in Minnesota.³⁵

[SLIDE 10] Given the uncertainties of outside funding I decided we must define a process that could be implemented by existing staff. So I asked each of our professional archivists,³⁶ in reference, processing, accessioning, digital programs, and elsewhere, to modify their job descriptions to define 5% of their overall work-time as devoted to acquisition and appraisal—that is, developing leads, contacting potential donors, meeting with unsolicited donors, appraising sought and serendipitous collections, maintaining relationships with donors, and the like. We arranged for each to receive a copy of the Society of American Archivists most recent manual on appraisal,³⁷ and had them attend the SAA Advanced Appraisal workshop (which I

³² F. Gerald Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Archival Fundamentals)* (Chicago, 1993), p 37.

³³ Ian Johnston, "Whose History is it Anyway?" 227.

³⁴ Ian Johnston, "Whose History is it Anyway?" 222.

³⁵ While the Minnesota Historical Society was not alone in employing full-time "field archivists," it was among a tiny minority of US repositories in doing so.

³⁶ We currently employ 11 full-time, permanent archivists with faculty status at the University (it is truncated faculty status, in that they are eligible only for 5-year extended-term appointments rather than actual tenure), plus one additional professional archivist without faculty status (long story). These figures do not include me.

³⁷ Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*.

taught)³⁸ and SAA's Donor Relations workshop. Each archivist was assigned one or two topics from the collecting policy as theirs, and asked to produce an essay suggesting how they wished to further refine the collecting area in order to make active solicitation more practical, as well as to develop a first list of ten priority contacts.³⁹

[SLIDE 11] I have come to think of appraisal largely in the same broad terms as Dennis Meissner and I came to view processing—it had to become much faster, less precise, relevant to each collection, and with the goal of making more and more collections available to researchers. The foundation of the process, paraphrasing Terry Cook about macro appraisal, is that an inspection of records is the last thing that happens during an appraisal; the first is a thoughtful assessment of the activities of the records creator against the repository's acquisition priorities.⁴⁰ Those priorities can be identified at the level of the creator and, in the case of high-priority creators, by series.⁴¹

Collecting policies, in essence, define certain appraisal decisions in advance. Rather than having to physically examine every collection offered, the archivist will know ahead of time what sorts of collections to decline in order to spend time instead with others. Moreover, for certain types of creators, such as congressional offices and businesses, we have pre-defined the series to be acquired as well. Acquisition decisions will not be made case-by-case serendipitously or

³⁸ Unfortunately, even though most of our archivists were educated into the profession during graduate school, this was hardly a guarantee they knew much about appraisal. Jeannette Allis Bastian, "Teaching Appraisal in an American (U.S.) Archives Program," *Archival Science* 5 (2005), 373, says,

The study identified only seven programs out of a possible 57 in U.S. library schools and history departments that offer a separate appraisal course. In the majority of these programs, appraisal is often taught as a substantial component of an introduction or advanced introduction course. In the advanced introduction syllabi examined by the study, appraisal comprised as much as 18% of the entire semester. The study also found that of the actual appraisal courses offered, there was no one reading that was common to them all, and that while all courses generally taught similar content, there were only a few topic areas taught across all seven courses.

My workshop teaching of appraisal hews closely to Bastian's recommendation for pedagogy on this subject (p. 374): "The task of the appraisal educator is to convey a way of looking at records, an appraisal mindset, and then to give students a variety of tools through which to implement that mindset. Once the appropriate appraisal stage is set and the tools laid out, a judicious use of case studies offers a further step, a way to synthesize, to problem solve, and to actualize." In other words, I do present workshop participants with a variety of lenses through which to view appraisal in theory, as well as a case study exercise to explore the relationship of that theory to practice. See also Jeannette Bastian and Elizabeth Yakel, "'Are We There Yet?' Professionalism and the Development of an Archival Core Curriculum in the United States," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 46:2 (Spring 2005), 95-114.

³⁹ To assist in both endeavors, I have suggested to them, but not required, that they read Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with 'an Attitude': A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records," James M. O'Toole, ed. *Records of American Business* (SAA, 1997), 161-229.

⁴⁰ Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Toward a New Theory of Archival Appraisal" Barbara L. Craig, ed. *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh Taylor* (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 53.

⁴¹ For appraisal by creator, see Greene and Daniels-Howell, "Documentation with 'an Attitude'"; for appraisal of series within a high-priority set of records creators, see Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Papers," 31-44.

intuitively, but based on well-planned policies that approach the documentation universe broadly. These steps reduce the amount of time spent appraising, but only on the premise that the goal is not to ensure every “interesting” document is identified and preserved.

In addition, appraisal must shift from the processing table to the home or office of origin or the loading dock.⁴² Doing appraisal on site enforces speed and provides access to the knowledge held by the donor. **[SLIDE 12]** One cannot usually spend several days camped out in someone’s house, or disrupt an office for a week while carefully examining the contents of every folder in every file cabinet.⁴³ And appraising on site it is easier to see relationships in the context of creation, ensuring that meaningful aggregations are identified, selected, and packed in a useful arrangement reflecting functions and order as created, rather than trying to figure out these relationships on the loading dock or on the shelves later.⁴⁴

[SLIDE 13] The path to doing appraisal better, in a way that will not so significantly contribute to our backlogs, is relatively simple. As with processing, we must accept that the size of the modern collection is simply too great to permit the luxury of item-level,⁴⁵ and even often file-

⁴² Although this essay focuses on paper collections, the approach is true if the material in question is digital. For example, see Lucie Paquet, “Appraisal, Acquisition, and Control of Personal Electronic Records: From Myth to Reality,” *Archives and Manuscripts* (November 2000): 71–91.

⁴³ Appraisal decisions must be made more quickly, by glancing at the contents of sample files, scanning file folders, assessing series, and asking relevant questions of the creator or office manager.

⁴⁴ This was recognized by Frederic Miller, *Arranging and Describing Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1990), 33: “On-site work is especially crucial for manuscripts since . . . the people on site are a prime source of information about the records.” If it is not possible to do appraisal on site, the same process will be applied on the loading dock when the collection arrives, and the questions asked by email, phone, or letter prior to the collection’s arrival. Unfortunately, appraisal at the home/office of origin introduces a sometimes paralyzing, fear— that judging some material unworthy in front of the donor or transferring unit will offend them. In my decades of experience doing field appraisal, I rarely faced this problem. If a question arose, however, I explained my reasoning for the negative appraisal, and if the accepted material encompassed, as it usually did, the portions of the material that the donor considered most important, the donor was satisfied.

⁴⁵ Regardless of where the activity takes place, appraisal will not entail a hunt for items and it will not encompass “weeding”. In the US, weeding generally refers to ultra-micro appraisal, which is to say at the sub-folder or item level. Weeding is for gardeners, not archivists. Why do archivists feel the necessity of such laborious work, work that slows appraisal and also processing to a painful crawl? According to Frank Boles, it is “—because they think they will be criticized for making mistakes [Also, w]hat archivists really see themselves as . . . are guardians of the past: . . . [that our mission is] . . . to receive from others their important material and then preserve and protect it....” Frank Boles, unpublished paper, Society of American Archivists, 2004. The guardian mentality Boles identifies derives from traditional archival theory, which holds that archivists are responsible for the moral and physical defense of archives, but has been reinforced, it seems, by the fact that three studies of the personality profiles of archivists in the United States, Australia, and Canada have *all* concluded that our profession is composed of more “guardian” personality types than the population as a whole. Barbara L. Craig, “Canadian Archivists: What Types of People Are They?,” *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 89. See also Ann Pederson, “Understanding Ourselves and Others: Australian Archivists and Temperament,” 1999, at <http://www.archivists.org.au/events/conf99/pederson.html>, accessed 26 January 2010, and Charles R. Schultz, “Archivists: What Types of People Are They?,” *Provenance* 14 (1996): 15–36.

level, appraisal. We must accept that we cannot afford to be 100 percent certain that no document that might possibly be of value to someone is discarded. We must accept that “good enough” is better than “one of these days.” As Gerry Ham noted fifteen years ago, “Today’s information-laden world has lessened the value of any single set of records; the documents may be unique but the information is usually not.”⁴⁶

What might be called minimal appraisal, similar to the minimal processing Dennis will later discuss in great detail, reflects an attempt to balance increasingly limited resources with the growing quantities of potential documentation, to keep user needs first but donor and resource allocator opinions a close second, and to finally become what we need to be as archival professionals—selectors rather than collectors.⁴⁷

So we had set to dancing those of our skeletons that represented poor knowledge of our existing collections, absence of a formal collecting policy, and necessity for an active acquisition program. That left perhaps the largest, most feared skeleton of all, reappraisal and deaccessioning.⁴⁸ [SLIDE 14]

But as we speak, a group of archivists from SAA’s Acquisition and Appraisal Section are working to develop best practices for archival deaccessioning;⁴⁹ the chair of that group is one of AHC’s junior archivists, who happened to have started with us in the grant-funded position

⁴⁶ F. Gerald Ham, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1993), 72.

⁴⁷ See Frank Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, 7.

⁴⁸ A major appraisal bibliography in 2000 included only 3.5% of entries specifically about reappraisal and/or deaccessioning Created by Terry Cook, it contained 315 entries for articles, manuals, and books. An updated version of this bibliography can be found in Frank Boles, *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, pp. 159-83.

⁴⁹ Sadly, SAA’s code of ethics has never addressed deaccessioning. The AHC policy was derived primarily from guidelines published by the American Association of Museums. American Association of Museums, *Code of Ethics for Museums* (Washington, D. C.: American Association of Museums, 1994), 8-9. See also, International Council of Museums (ICOM), *ICOM Code of Professional Ethics* <http://icom.museum/ethics_rev_engl.html>; American Association of Museums, Curators Committee, “Code of Ethics for Curators,” *Museum News* 62:3 (February 1983): 38-40; American Association of Museums, Registrars Committee, “A Code of Ethics for Registrars,” *Museum News* 64: 3 (February 1985): 42-46; Association of Art Museum Directors, “A Code of Ethics for Registrars,” *Professional Practices in Art Museums* (New York: Association of Art Museum Directors, 1992), 8, 17-22. Members of the Association of Art Museum Directors found to have broken the code can be expelled from the organization and their museums could be suspended from borrowing materials or developing joint exhibits with other AAMD member museums. The International Committee for Documentation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-CIDOC) has, in fact, developed specific information fields to document deaccessioning in collection management and cataloging systems: “Guidelines for Museum Object Information: Deaccession and Information Group,” <<http://www.willpowerinfo.myby.co.uk/cidoc/guide/guidedis.htm>>. The Association of Canadian Archivists, “A Code of Ethics for Archivists in Canada,” is on the web at <<http://archivists.ca/about/ethics.aspx?id=20>> . The American Library Association does not mention deaccessioning in its code of ethics, but its Office for Intellectual Freedom created a *Workbook for Selection Policy Writing*, <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oif/workbook_selection.html>, which notes that policies for “reevaluation (weeding)” are an essential part of a selection policy.

spearheading our reappraisal and deaccessioning project during 2007-08. She is chairing the SAA committee primarily because, as one of the members put it recently, “Currently, there is **one** solid policy model—the one [the AHC] developed [SLIDE 15].”⁵⁰

Time limitations prevent me from outlining the disagreements about reappraisal and deaccessioning theory in the US. Suffice it to say here that I have never found any of the objections to such activities had the least merit...so long as the repository did four things: 1) developed a written deaccessioning policy, approved by the highest institutional official possible; 2) approached reappraisal and deaccessioning as normal collection management steps, and not as frantic emergency measures once shelf space is gone; 3) had a formal collecting policy in place; 4) conducted its project transparently rather than try to keep it a secret. At the AHC all these practices were followed.⁵¹

And following these practices, the Center completed what we believe to be the largest reappraisal and deaccessioning project of private archives in US history.⁵² During our grant to catalog our unprocessed collections, we surveyed 2,292 collections, of which 700 were cataloged and 1,592 identified for possible deaccessioning. During the second half of the grant, 414 collections on the potential deaccessioning list—all those larger than 10 cubic feet—were reappraised, of which **77% were deaccessioned**.

[SLIDE 16] Those not deaccessioned were cataloged, transferred to the university’s library, or deferred for additional research. The deaccessioned collections totaled **13,300 ft**. Fifty-five per cent of 77% of deaccessioned collections were transferred to other repositories.⁵³ We have

⁵⁰ Personal email from Linda Whittaker, Arizona Historical Foundation, 9 April 2010. Emphasis added.

⁵¹ Our reappraisal and deaccessioning policy and process is part of our collection management policy (<http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/about/administration/coll%20mgt%20policy%203d%20rev.pdf>); we undertook the project under no duress of shelving space; our new collecting policy identified what we **did** want, therefore it also defined what we **didn’t** want; and we publicized the project not only on our campus, but through our newsletter, delivered to 4000+ of our financial supporters, collection donors, and other interested parties. This mass publicity about what archivists in the US generally consider a politically suicidal, if not ethically suspect, activity, engendered a mere half dozen polite, curious, inquiries.

⁵² In addition to the AHC project, at the Minnesota Historical Society we reappraised the contents of our six post-WWII congressional collections, based on a newly developed set of appraisal guidelines, and reduced their size an average of 64% totaling 1,000 cubic feet. In several instances, because of the terms of the deeds of gift, we had to get permission from the donors—from sitting US Representatives, individuals who archival common wisdom maintained had egos so massive that they believed every scrap of their papers was of major historical importance. But our contact included an explanation of the what and why of our new guidelines, as well as an argument that by “focusing” their collections researchers would be able more easily to hone in on the material that reflected the congressperson’s most important accomplishments. We not only received permission from every individual contacted, we did not even elicit any questions much less concerns. Mark A. Greene, "Appraisal of Congressional Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," *Archival Issues* 19:1 (1994), 31-44 and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, "Reappraisal of Congressional Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society: A Case Study," *Archival Issues* 23 (1998), 35-40.

⁵³ 5% are still looking for an appropriate repository, 8% were returned to donors, and 9% were destroyed.

transferred collections to 164 repositories in 42 states and 6 countries, including to Bristol University's Theatre Collection and the British Film Institute. The Theatre Collection received the papers of stage actress Rosalinde Fuller, 7.30 cubic feet; the Film Institute received the small Thomas Chadbon papers, 2.28 cubic feet of scripts, letters, photos and call sheets for a film and television actor.

Reappraisal as a clear good rather than a necessary evil is what our donors and resource allocators perceived at the AHC. Of the 320 collections deaccessioned, three donors or their descendents were upset. Of these, two were completely mollified once I explained in detail the policy basis of our decision, and particularly that we had not targeted their particular collection.⁵⁴

Moreover, our university provost was delighted both because we had palpably demonstrated our new commitment to rational, policy-based holdings and because we were clearly committed to making the most rational, efficient use of our resources—not only of our shelving space but also of our processing personnel; every collection deaccessioned represented one less collection that we had to arrange and describe.⁵⁵ [SLIDE 17]

Reappraisal and deaccessioning are management tools. Reappraisal is simply the application of collecting and appraisal criteria to material already in the repository. I will go further, and declare that reappraisal and deaccessioning can and should be as *public and transparent* a part of our work as cataloging and reference, and will not harm the reputation of the repository—indeed, rather than fearing open discussion of reappraisal and deaccessioning as an admission of utter failure in the appraisal, collection development, and possibly space allocation decisions of the past, we can and should embrace these thorny conversations as important to defining the significant, difficult, rigorous, professional, and necessary work of archivists[SLIDE 18]. The fractious, messy, contingent nature of shaping the historical record through selection and deselection is *why* the education, skill, imagination, and experience of archivists are

⁵⁴ The one donor who remained upset represents 3 100ths of 1%. Thus the overall cost/benefit ratio for the deaccessioning project seemed quite acceptable. On the other hand, five of these donors actually went so far as to thank us for how we handled the whole matter, and three of those actually sent us checks in appreciation!

⁵⁵ Instead, of course, we shifted the processing burden for most of the deaccessioned collections to other repositories, but to repositories where the collections' topics would place them higher in the cataloging queue. In fact, less than a year after the end of the grant-funded deaccessioning we surveyed 100 repositories to which we had transferred collections. While 50% of these collections were, though after a relatively brief period, sitting in a processing backlog, a remarkable 38% had already been processed and were being used by researchers. Had I more time, I would briefly explore the important role deaccessioning must play in increasing collaboration among repositories—collaboration increasingly necessary as the universe of creators and documentation continues to grow and repository resources continue to remain static or shrink; collaboration increasingly necessary if we are to effectively come to grips with the growth—particularly in the UK—of community-based archives.

*important.*⁵⁶ In any event, the reappraisal and deaccessioning project represented, for the AHC, training the most fearsome of our family skeletons to dance.

Ian Johnston has recently complained that,

There has...been a lack of intellectual discussion in the UK relating to an understanding of precisely what the 'archival mission' might encompass. This raises those kind of concerns first voiced by [US archivist Frank] Burke in relation to the American profession: 'I am not sure for whom archivists are collecting or that what they are collecting is really wanted or needed.'⁵⁷

Burke here represents a belief many US archivists share, one that I champion, that users—and thus use⁵⁸—are at the center of the archival universe—not the “record,” not some abstract notion of “memory,” not even the goal of “documenting society.”⁵⁹ Or, in the classic words of Theodore Schellenberg, “use is the end of all archival effort.”⁶⁰

Archivists have for too long treated their collections as ends in themselves; the tidy boxes on shelves as the point of their work, taking pride in the growing numbers of things rather than a growing number of users. This resulted, to be sure, in the acquisition of some fabulous historical documentation, but too often such acquisition was driven more by the glory of bagging a high-profile donor or on arational intuition than on concern for building collections

⁵⁶ See Mark A. Greene, “I’ve Deaccessioned and Live to Tell About It: Confessions of an Unrepentant Reappraiser,” *Archival Issues*, 30:1 (2006), 7-22 and Mark A. Greene, “What WERE We Thinking? Embracing Reappraisal and Deaccessioning as a Collection Management Tool,” *Provenance* 20 (2002) 33-49.

⁵⁷ Ian Johnston, “Whose History is it Anyway?” *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 22: 2 (2001), 216.

⁵⁸ Use, by the way, I define to include not solely researchers in the reading room or viewing digitized collection material on our websites, but also viewing our in-house and traveling exhibits, employing facsimile packets in the classroom, listening to or reading scholars who have used our holdings, watching documentaries that highlight some of our photographs, etc.

⁵⁹ Mark A. Greene, “‘The Surest Proof’: The Use of Business Records and Implications for Appraisal,” *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), 127-69. <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12229/13253> **Republished** in Rand Jimerson, ed., *American Archival Studies: Readings in Theory and Practice* (Chicago, 2000), 301-44; Mark A. Greene, “Existential Archives: Looking To the Value Propositions of Archives and Special Collections,” ARL/CNI Forum, “An Age of Discovery: Distinctive Collections in the Digital Age,” October 2009, Washington, DC, <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/mm09greeneremarks.pdf> ; Mark A. Greene, “The Existential Archivist: Use as a Measure of ‘Better’ Appraisal,” 1999 Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, <http://ahc.uwyo.edu/documents/faculty/greene/papers/SAA%2099%20three.pdf> .

⁶⁰ Theodore R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York, 1965), p. 108. Apparently, Britain’s National Archives finds some merit in the employment of use as an appraisal criterion, too, according to Geoffery Yeo: “The UK National Archives now seeks comments from user groups on all its ‘operational selection policies’ governing selection of records for long-term preservation.” Geoffery Yeo, “Understanding Users and Use: A Market Segmentation Approach,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 26: 1 (2005), 25 — 53 (fn 10), citing Stephen Twigge, “Public Records, Public Consultation.” *Archives and Manuscripts* 31:1 (May 2003): 15 –24.

that would best engender and support use.⁶¹ For me, I believe US archivist Maynard Brichford was correct twenty years ago when he suggested that "use of the archives and the growth of its reputation" was "the surest proof of sound records appraisal."⁶²

⁶¹ With a less narrow window of time in which to present this essay I would have begun drawing to a close where I began, with a quotation attributed to Shaw: "This is the true joy of life, the being used up for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one...." As you have already heard me say, I believe firmly that the mission of archives is to be used, though whether for mighty purposes or trivial ones is actually not for us to choose. Everything an institution does should be supporting the end goal of increasing the use of its holdings.

⁶² Maynard J. Brichford, *Archives and Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago, 1977), p. 1.