
Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections

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Since the early 1980s, the debate over whether archival repositories should Reappraise and deaccession records and personal papers has simmered in the background of professional discourse. Occasional flare-ups, starting with Leonard Rapport's 1981 article¹ advocating for the practice, as well as Karen Benedict's response² three years later, mark one of the hotter periods of this debate. Periodically, publications on the topic would appear in *American Archivist* or discussion would spark around the topic on the now decommissioned Archives and Archivists listserv. However, with the publication of this text, editor Laura Uglean Jackson and the book's authors move our profession past this debate as they reframe the question from "should we" to "how do we" ethically and responsibly reappraise and deaccession in our repositories.

Uglean Jackson is uniquely positioned to edit *Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections*. Her work with the University of Wyoming's American Heritage Center (AHC) led to publications and presentations that helped kick off the most recent series of debates on the topic of deaccessioning.³ The focus of her National Historical Publications and Records Commission-funded research was to address the overwhelming backlog of unprocessed materials at the AHC. Her presentation at ARCHIVES 2008, "Not Afraid to Let Go: Procedures for Deaccessioning," played a key role in the Society of American Archivists's creation of the Reappraisal and Deaccessioning Development and Review Team, of which Uglean Jackson served as chair from 2009 to 2012 and oversaw publication of the *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning* in 2012. Amid this work, she also copublished her case study on the AMC project with D. Claudia Thompson.⁴ She continued her engagement with the topic through the Technical Subcommittee for Guidelines on Reappraisal and Deaccessioning (TS-GRD), which published revised *Guidelines*⁵ in 2017.

The wide variety of institutions and perspectives represented are a strength of this book. While not every scenario will apply for every reader, almost all readers will be able to find an example to which they can relate. At its core, the book challenges readers to reconsider the records life cycle. No longer is the terminus either destruction or transfer to a repository. Rather, in archival custody,

a record is reborn and begins its process again, finding new uses and new points for evaluation. The authors frankly acknowledge what we all know to be true—sometimes collections come into our repositories with minimal or no appraisal. Retention schedules and institutional collecting priorities change over time. Sometimes, our institutions are not the best home for the records, but no other home is available, so we take the materials to save them. Occasionally, we agree to acquire records that we might not normally collect to obtain highly valuable materials, and we willingly take the chaff with the wheat. But now that we are buried in chaff, this book provides examples of how to apply rigorous appraisal standards to our holdings and how to find better homes for those materials that are being underserved by their current custodial arrangements.

Uglean Jackson opens *Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections* with an introduction that provides historical context for reappraisal and deaccessioning, followed by Marcella Huggard's chapter distinguishing deaccessioning from the day-to-day weeding of duplicative or extraneous materials. Weeding is "a small, individual, finite decision that can be made with relative ease and likely few long-term effects" (p. 1), while deaccessioning involves the removal of larger portions such as series or record groups. Deaccessioning has the potential for long-term effects for institutions, donors, and records themselves and, as such, needs to be approached consistently, relying on established policies and procedures.

Criteria for reappraisal feature prominently across the chapters of this book, which can be compared due to the varied institutions profiled. For example, in the second chapter, "Developing a Set of Principles for Deaccessioning in the Archives," Steve Hanson and Sue Luftschein discuss how they developed principles for deaccessioning at the University of Southern California (USC) Special Collections by asking what principles would allow them to justify not deaccessioning their holdings. The resulting principles lay out a thoughtful, transparent, and defensible approach to reappraisal and deaccessioning that takes into consideration issues such as their collection development policy, deeds of gift, donor relations, and fully documenting the decision process. However, as an institution with a mandate to support research and teaching, USC could consider historical use and current usefulness of materials as a factor for reappraisal that may not apply as well to another type of institution.

A government archives, like the State Archives of North Carolina, is bound to the state records retention schedule to guide its appraisal decisions, regardless of how frequently records are used. In chapter 7, "Implementing a Reappraisal Workflow at the State Archives of North Carolina," Kelly Policelli and Carie Chesarino discuss how reappraisal was closely tied to a project to revamp the North Carolina state records schedule. Policelli and Chesarino demonstrate how working closely with records management staff can strengthen

appraisal processes and ensure that records are properly scheduled. With an updated records schedule, the State Archives staff was able to begin to reappraise a backlog of over 40,000 cubic feet of state agency records scheduled for transfer and accessioning. A strong records management program tied to systematic reappraisal allowed them to cut over a fourth of their backlog.

The New York City Archives, profiled in the eighth chapter by Todd Gilbert and Rachel Greer, represents another reappraisal and deaccessioning process at a repository governed by retention schedules. Of all the case studies, this chapter was the only one that gave me pause. Titled, “Big, Bad, and Boring: The Comptroller’s Collection at the NYC Municipal Archives,” the “Big, Bad, and Boring” refers to the shorthand the archives developed to describe its initial criteria for selecting materials to reappraise. Working in a government archives myself, I have definitely had records creators who thought their records were so mundane that no one would care about them, or that the records were “dusty” or “bad,” so surely no one would care if they were just thrown out. These records creators were not looking at the big picture and considering the larger historical context of the records. As I started this chapter, I found myself worrying that the description could be taken out of context by stakeholders who might not be inclined to parse the intricacies underlying it. Ultimately, when I analyzed the whole chapter, I found that the processes these words represent are in fact nuanced, careful, and well thought-out, but I could not completely shake my first impression of concern that not everyone will take the time to understand what is actually being said.

This book posits that reappraisal and deaccessioning are just other functions of a responsible repository, yet it acknowledges that these processes can be difficult for stakeholders to understand and accept. For the most part, the case studies provide successful and positive outcomes for both donors and their holdings, but, in some cases, deaccessioning can be at odds with donor expectations. At the University of Florida (UF), the staff was faced with two hybrid collections that were minimally appraised at acquisition and whose purpose had shifted over time. Chapter 3, “Deaccessioning in Hybrid Archives and Museum Collections at the University of Florida,” details how UF staff developed an appraisal policy while managing the concerns and needs of various donors. They have maintained open and active communication with their donors, soliciting their advice and input to help determine significance of the donated objects. UF staff have also shared their policies with their donor community and are consistently and uniformly documenting their decision processes.

When records retention schedules are a factor for reappraisal, this can create an environment with less stakeholder pushback on the process. In chapter 4, “Clear Policies, Full Transparency, Can’t Lose: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning at UCLA University Archives,” Katharine Lawrie presents an example from the

University Archives at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Despite initial pushback, mostly from Special Collections staff about the potential negative consequences to the institution's reputation as a trustworthy repository, the archives staff was able to point to the University of California records retention schedule to justify and provide a transparent process that overcame concerns and included stakeholders. Retention schedules also played a role in the reappraisal of records at the Kansas State University Archives. In chapter 5, "Burns Like a Prairie Fire: Improving Access to University Records through Reappraisal," University Archivist Cliff Hight describes how he not only used the schedules to address records that were inappropriately accessioned into his custody, but also to open the door to discussions with records creators about what records they create.

Several of the case studies illustrate examples of sensitive donor relations playing a large part in the reappraisal and deaccessioning process. In chapter 10, "A Gentleman's Agreement: Donor-Driven Deaccessioning and Ethics of Collecting," Adriana P. Cuervo chronicles a difficult, but very relatable, situation where records were acquired over many years based largely on personal relationships between the donor and staff members who overpromised the institution's ability to make the materials available. Ultimately, the materials were returned to the donor, but Cuervo nicely illustrates "lessons learned" and how professional guidelines can direct our work. In chapter 11, "Your Co-operation Has Been Splendid in This Matter': Returning a Selected Portion of a Living Donor's Personal Papers," Ruth E. Bryan shares her experiences when faced with a request by a donor's son who felt personal materials had been donated inappropriately to the repository. This case study in particular demonstrates how individual circumstances may require different reappraisal choices than would normally be made.

Deaccessioning often includes finding a more appropriate repository for materials. My favorite example of this comes from the Elizabeth Charlton's chapter, "Reappraisal and Deaccessioning: Applying a 'Dangerous Practice' in New Zealand." I initially expected the case study to focus on government record-keeping practices, but the text quickly shifts to a discussion of a deaccessioning process at a small religious archives. This chapter highlights the possibilities of finding the right repository for records that do not fit an institution's collecting scope, as the Society of Mary-Marist Archives in Wellington ultimately did in transferring materials to archives in New Zealand, Australia, France, and the United States.

Another international example of deaccessioning materials to transfer to more appropriate repositories came from the Archives of Ontario. In this case, the Archives of Ontario had long functioned as the "repository of last resort," but, as communities and municipalities develop the infrastructure to support

their own archives, records are being returned to their creating communities. Vincent J. Novara describes another example of deaccessioning in chapter 12, “So Happy Apart: Stewarding a Collection to Its Ideal Institution,” how the University of Maryland Performing Arts Library found the right home for an eclectic collection at Stanford University. The final case study by Dylan McDonald and Julie Thomas in chapter 13, “The Deaccession and Transfer of the KOVR-TV News Film Collection,” lays out complicated legal and custodial issues they encountered in transferring the KOVR-TV News Film Collection from California State University, Sacramento Library, to the Center for Sacramento History.

As I was reading *Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections*, I felt the inclusion of the *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning* as an appendix would have strengthened it. Multiple chapters refer to the guidelines as fundamental to process and policy development; not having to put the book down and look up the *Guidelines* online would have made for a smoother reading experience. Perhaps inclusion of the “Guiding Principle” section—ideally from both the 2012 and 2017 versions of the document—could be considered for inclusion in any further editions. Even so, this book is likely to become a required text in many introductory archival theory and appraisal classes. It provides a succinct, historical summation of the debates that have surrounded reappraisal and deaccessioning while also offering examples and templates that have utility across a wide spectrum of collecting repositories, and ultimately shows how the *Guidelines* can become practice.

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- ¹ Leonard Rapport, “No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records,” *American Archivist* 44, no. 2 (1981): 143–50, doi.org/10.17723/aarc.44.2.b274w3126t430h52.
- ² Karen Benedict, “Invitation to a Bonfire: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Records as Collection Management in an Archives—A Reply to Leonard Rapport,” *American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (1984): 43–49, doi.org/10.17723/aarc.47.1.gt26318774q20241.
- ³ For an overview of publications on reappraisal and deaccessioning, see the bibliography in *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning*, Society of American Archivists (2012, revised 2017), https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/GuidelinesForReappraisalDeaccessioning_2017.pdf, captured at <https://perma.cc/72QL-ARJ8>.
- ⁴ Laura Jackson and D. Thompson, “But You Promised: A Case Study of Deaccessioning at the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming,” *American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (2010): 669–85, doi.org/10.17723/aarc.73.2.297691q50gkk84j4.
- ⁵ Society of American Archivists, *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning*.