Archival Collection Development: Building a Successful Acquisitions Program

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Archival programs have three primary objectives. The first entails identifying and selecting or collecting appropriate papers or records for permanent preservation; the second involves arranging and preserving them; and the final objective is to insure their accessibility by preparing finding aids and providing reference service. While many archivists, especially those responsible for the administration of large programs, spend a significant portion of their time preparing grant applications, raising funds, and training staff, all of these activities ultimately contribute to an archives' primary responsibilities—the acquisition, preservation, and dissemination of documentary information.

Certain aspects of archival administration, however, have received less attention than others in the archival literature. In particular, "collection development," the process by which materials of historical or otherwise enduring value are selected and acquired by an archives, requires a more thorough and systematic consideration. Current literature pertaining to collecting can be divided into three distinct categories according to its main focus or concern. There are works that deal with specific legal questions, such as literary property rights, copyright law, and physical ownership of papers and records. One also finds articles that deal with such financial aspects of manuscript acquisition as the determination of fair market value, tax appraisal, and gift policies. Finally, a number of archivists have written brief histories of their respective programs in which they chronicle their experiences as collectors. All of these works are to a certain extent both useful and relevant, but only a few take a broad view of the collecting process. However, in a
period when the archival profession is promoting institutional cooperation and a reevaluation of archival ethics and educational practices, there is a demonstrable need to re-examine collection development procedures.

Similarly, there is a need for a basic manual dealing with all aspects of the acquisition of archives and manuscripts. This article can do little more within its limited context than suggest the direction that such a manual ought to take. While the recommendations it includes are couched in general terms, they are based upon the experience of establishing an archives program at East Tennessee State University. In many respects, the Archives of Appalachia, which opened in 1978 on the ETSU campus in Johnson City, Tennessee, is a typical special-subject archives.4 As a didactic model, the Archives is also of some interest because it was given a broad mandate by the University “to collect” without the encumbrance of any further instructions. Thus, it began without a specific collecting focus or policy. The collecting strategies that developed during the first year of the Archives’ operation illustrate many of the broader concerns of this article. While some of the suggestions and observations that follow may prove applicable in other archival settings, the wide diversity among institutions—ranging from government and organizational archives to specialized manuscript repositories—makes it very difficult to establish universal truths. This particular case study is intended to furnish a critical framework for the evaluation of collection development policies in other institutions.

All archives should have a collecting focus that can be employed to appraise the relevance of each prospective acquisition. Potential accessions must, of course, meet other criteria as well, involving the quality or character of their evidential or informational value. A collecting focus is also essential to an archives program because it gives meaning and direction to staff field work. If successful, such a focus can bring together collections that complement one another, thereby making the archives a more attractive and valuable resource for its user constituency.

How does one select a focus? In many instances there is no choice. Universities, government agencies, and corporations, for example, engage archivists to manage their non-current records. The collecting focus of these types of repositories is usually confined to the
official records of the respective host institution. While this type of situation may limit the scope of many archives’ collecting activities, it is possible to exercise a more expansive interpretation of an official mandate through the use of oral history and the collection of the private papers of important individuals connected with the organization or institution.\(^5\)

Other archives, however, do not start out with such inherent limitations. While it is not difficult to fill one’s archives with paper, it is much more difficult to insure that one’s holdings individually and collectively justify the cost and effort of preserving them. A collecting focus can help by requiring the archivist to evaluate each potential acquisition in light of the institution’s larger mission and objectives. In selecting a focus for a collecting program, three questions should be asked: what is available? what is needed? and what are other pertinent repositories collecting? No matter how specific one may choose to be in defining an archives’ mission, there is invariably more material in existence than one could or would want to acquire. If time and resources allow, an archivist might conduct a survey of extant records or papers in a given geographical location or in a particular subject area, such as labor history, civil rights, or railroad development. Such a survey could reveal what records are in the field, who holds them, and whether they might be available for accessioning. Various state archival programs and special subject repositories have employed surveys to help develop or refine their collecting focuses.\(^6\)

Surveys need not be massive undertakings. In the case of the Archives of Appalachia, the staff circulated a form letter to scholars in the field of Appalachian studies, to community organizations, companies, and labor unions active in southern Appalachia, and to civic leaders and public officials. The Archives was assisted in this regard by the timely publication of a special issue of the *Appalachian Journal* (Vol. 5, no. 1, Autumn 1977) devoted to Appalachian studies programs. Since the Archives was dealing largely with people who were totally unaware of the needs of archives, its survey instrument began with an explanation of the basic aims of the Archives—to collect and preserve significant historical and research materials in southern Appalachia. It then queried those to whom it was addressed about the availability and physical condition of the papers and records in their custody and solicited their knowledge of
other holdings in the community. The rather limited number of responses received from this survey nonetheless contributed to the development of a useful profile of what was available in the region.

Having thus identified, even in vague terms, a number of possible collecting themes, the archivist must choose a single focus or perhaps several focuses. To make this final determination, one must be aware of both what is "needed" by the research community and how well other repositories have already addressed these needs. In carrying out its survey, the Archives of Appalachia staff discovered that there were other archival programs in the region. Information of this sort may also be obtained from organizational directories published by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission and the American Association for State and Local History. Subsequent inquiries addressed to other repositories in the region should provide some idea of the nature and scope of their collecting efforts. Since there are more records worthy of preservation available than all of the archives in the country together could possibly accommodate, in most instances it is unnecessary and counter-productive for archives to compete for the same materials. By choosing a collecting focus wisely, one can avoid such wasteful competition.

To complete the delineation of a collecting focus, the archivist must establish a set of priorities governing the acquisition of collections based upon their value and the needs of potential users. This should be seen as part of the appraisal process. Scholars actively engaged in research involving the use of the types of documentation under consideration for accessioning can be very helpful by suggesting areas in which more papers or records are needed. Also, they often may provide useful leads as to where one might go in search of these materials, and may even be able to assist the archivist in sensitive negotiations with potential donors.

Some collections will have obvious research value, but many others may not appear attractive until their relevance to a user constituency has been established. Here again the advice of outside specialists should be solicited. One ought to always keep potential users in mind when developing a collecting focus. Failure to do so may result in the acquisition of collections that are of little interest or value to the archives' clientele. The implications of such a mistake for the future of a repository are quite apparent.
If selected wisely, a collecting focus should be able to help identify valuable records available in a community, region, or subject area and provide an archives with a clearly defined set of acquisition objectives. As an archives develops, it will succeed in attracting more and more users as well as additional donors because it will have created an identity that is distinct from that of other institutions in the region. The greater the effort made by new repositories to define and adhere to their collecting focuses, the better able archivists will be to serve their user constituencies and work together to preserve the documentation of our nation’s past. 8

In establishing a collecting focus for the Archives of Appalachia, the aforementioned methodology was employed. In the first place, it was discovered that very few archives existed in central southern Appalachia. Archives such as the ones at Berea College in Kentucky and at West Virginia University, that had operated in Appalachia for some time, had not collected in the immediate five-state region of east Tennessee, eastern Kentucky, southwest Virginia, southwest West Virginia, and western North Carolina that lies within one hundred miles of Johnson City, Tennessee. Furthermore, only one of these institutions was actively engaged in the collection of economic records; and no archives in the region appeared interested in the records of the grassroots and self-help organizations that abound in southern Appalachia. This, then, became the focus of the Archives—to collect the papers and records of persons and organizations active in the economic and social development of the region, especially in the twentieth century.

Despite this carefully selected focus, the Archives was criticized for encroaching upon the preserves of other repositories in the area. These charges stemmed primarily from the fact that the Archives chose a regional instead of a state or local collecting focus. Some colleagues in Kentucky did not like the thought of “Kentucky” records going to Tennessee! Even with these initial problems the Archives of Appalachia has successfully attracted the records of organizations with a regional focus, such as the Congress for Appalachian Development, as well as other collections from its immediate five-state area. Now that the Archives has firmly established its identity and collecting focus, these criticisms have subsided.

Having established an archival program with a collecting focus,
the archivist’s next task is to implement the program. As a first step, the archivist must begin to publicize the archives. In initiating a publicity campaign, the archivist should draft a clear statement of purpose. This document, which ordinarily should not exceed one letter-size page (no more than five hundred words, single spaced), should include a brief history of the archives, a summary of its general purpose and services, a roster of its personnel, a list of the types of records (e.g., diaries, correspondence, business files, photographs) that it seeks, and most importantly a clear, succinct paragraph articulating the archives’ collection focus. It is important to keep in mind that to most people the term “archives” conjures up images of dusty books and old newspapers. A prospective donor is apt to dismiss his or her letters and photographs as being of no consequence compared to an “old” newspaper or periodical. The archives’ statement of purpose should alert members of the archives’ potential constituency to its activities and suggest ways in which they might participate in these activities—either as donors or as users.

A carefully drafted statement can be used with great effect in any number of ways. It can serve as the basis for a promotional pamphlet on the archives program or it might constitute the core of news releases prepared for newspapers, radio, and television. Individual letters to potential donors might also be based on the statement. In this case it is better to personalize such messages by having them typed individually, but the basic intention is always the same: to create a greater awareness of the program’s existence and needs. Some donors mainly read newspapers; others only watch television; and still others attend public lectures. Hence, some might be reached through an effective newspaper campaign, while many others will be missed if publicity efforts fail to use all of the mass media. Mail campaigns promise only a marginal return and then only if they maintain at least the appearance of a personalized approach. Some programs may wish to employ a newsletter similar to the one published quarterly by the Archives of Appalachia to communicate with its user constituency. However, such an approach is often inefficient and ineffective as a fund raising or collection solicitation tool, since it is too generalized in its approach to impress individual donors. Nonetheless, one may enclose newsletters with personalized letters or leave them with potential donors after per-
sonal interviews. Used in this manner, newsletters appear to have a more lasting effect.

If the archives' publicity campaign is successful, it may result in the receipt of a few collections, but more often than not the most tangible return from such promotional efforts will be a series of leads and perhaps a number of invitations to speak before various organizations. The only way to acquire collections on a systematic basis is through actual field work, and this means personal contact with prospective donors. In following up leads, one must meet people face-to-face. During these meetings, it will be necessary to carry on some of the same educational activities mentioned above, detailing what an archives is, describing the nature of its collecting focus, and informing a prospective donor how he or she might "participate in the program" by contributing papers or records to the archives. Community meetings may also be an extremely effective means of alerting people to an archives' activities. Communication with an audience is enhanced by the use of slides and a brief, formal presentation about the archives' program, what it collects, and how its collections are used. A few descriptive slides with an appropriate accompanying narrative can save many valuable minutes that could more profitably be used otherwise in soliciting new collections.

A business card or brochure that includes the archivist's name together with the archives' address, phone number, and hours is an important aid for archivists in the field. One will always need to provide potential donors and patrons with this information. Successful collection development is very much a matter of image. Brochures, newsletters, and business cards all demonstrate that the archivist represents a professional, "permanent" organization. This sense of permanence is absolutely essential if one plans to instill a degree of confidence in potential donors to the extent that they are willing to donate their treasured private papers or records to the archives. Similarly, it is important that the archivist conveys to audiences a commitment both to the preservation of materials left in the archives' care and to the dissemination to researchers of information concerning the availability of these collections. Beyond establishing the proper professional demeanor with potential donors, these practices should serve to strengthen one's standing both with the user community and among colleagues.

A well conceived collecting focus and an effectively executed
publicity campaign can help provide the basis for a sound collecting program. But to be successful, the archives must also establish a series of procedures to insure that the program is properly administered. At the heart of this system ought to be some type of lead file mechanism. Some archives use formatted index cards for leads. Others use elaborate file structures. The Archives of Appalachia employs a three-component lead file system. A "lead file" is established showing the lead's name followed by the word "LEAD" in capital letters (e.g., "Gordon Ebersole LEAD"). This step is taken to avoid misfiling lead files with other administrative files, such as those set up for accessioned collections which are referred to as "case files." All information pertaining to the lead is then placed in the file, including newspaper clippings, correspondence, resumes, and photographs. These files are arranged according to the name of the person to be contacted, even though the purpose of the lead may be to track down a collection with another name. This procedure is used to minimize confusion in corresponding with donors, a practice which has proven particularly useful in situations where a donor has custody of more than one possible acquisition.

After establishing a lead file, the Archives director writes a letter to the potential donor explaining the Archives' program and enclosing a brochure and one or more issues of the Newsletter. This letter will always include a specific reference to the collection(s) in the lead's possession. Unless the director has already met the lead, this letter is followed a week later by a phone call. This contact serves to further familiarize the potential donor with the Archives' program and sometimes to arrange a meeting between the lead and a member of the Archives staff. The most common way to obtain collections is through this final stage of person-to-person negotiations, although other archivists with differing temperaments and styles will approach collection solicitation differently.

To keep track of the status of each lead, the Archives maintains a series of "lead file log sheets." The log lists in chronological order letters sent, replies received, and the status of each lead. While this is time consuming, it insure that the Archives staff will follow every lead to its conclusion and serves as a permanent record of the nature and scope of the Archives' collecting activities. The third and final component of the lead-file system is a "lead locator file." This file of three-by-five index cards lists each lead by geographical location (by
state and thereunder alphabetically by town). When a member of the field staff plans a collecting trip or arranges to visit a prospective donor, he or she will search the locater file for other leads in the general vicinity. Through the use of this simple file, the field representative can make the best possible use of each trip.

Lead files prepare the field worker to negotiate knowledgeably with potential donors; log sheets systematize communications; and locater files render field trips more economical. At the end of this process, the archivist will also need a series of legal forms through which the donor transfers physical custody and literary property rights for his or her papers or records to the archives. Without a clear line of provenance from the creator of donated documents to the archives, no archivist can claim ownership of these documents for his or her institution with any degree of confidence. Failure to immediately obtain some type of formal deed of transfer may haunt the archives at a later date. If the donor for some reason refuses to sign such a document, the particulars of that refusal should be noted in the collection's case file for future reference.

However, in most instances a donor who has agreed to transfer his or her papers to the archives is quite willing to sign a deed of gift. Indeed, many may willingly sign over to the archives rights that they do not even own, such as the literary property rights to all materials in their respective collections. It is not necessary to explain the distinction between literary and physical property rights in this article, but both the archivist and the donor ought to be aware of the limitations on the latter's legal rights to transfer physical materials and their intellectual contents to an archives.

It is advisable to employ different forms for different types of donations. The Archives of Appalachia uses a release form for oral history interviews, a deed of gift form for archives, manuscripts, and photographs, and a deposit agreement form for collections placed in the Archives on permanent loan. While both oral history releases and deed of gift forms are widely used, the deposit agreement is less common and is usually employed as a contract between an institutional donor and an archives. In the case of the Archives of Appalachia, this document formalizes the transfer of large bodies of records to the Archives and obligates it to provide specific services to the creating organization but does not alter ownership of the files; thus they remain the property of the donor. In return for providing
reference services to organizations and offering secure, permanent storage for their records, the Archives receives the right to make them available for research use.

Any archives employing a deposit agreement should be careful, however, to include a clause requiring that depositing individuals, institutions, or organizations agree to reimburse the repository for the entire cost of processing and storing their records should the depositor decide at a later date to withdraw them from the archives. In this manner the archives’ investment of staff time, supplies, and other resources will be recovered even if the collection itself is lost. It might be argued that such a clause could frighten away prospective donors. While this may be true on occasion, it is better to risk losing a few collections than to jeopardize substantial investments made in processing and servicing large collections of institutional records.

When drafting legal documents to finalize the transfer of a collection from a private individual or institution to an archives, archivists would do well to seek legal counsel. A deed of gift or deposit agreement is a contract that carries with it obligations for both parties. The document should be simple enough so that both the prospective donor and the archives staff understand it. A complicated legal document may intimidate potential donors. If one is obliged by one’s institution to use lengthy contracts, sufficient time should be taken to explain the document to donors in order to eliminate problems and misunderstandings that might otherwise arise.

The final stage in any collection development program should always include a means of self-evaluation. One obvious measure of an archives’ success will be a demonstrated ability to acquire numerous important collections. But the accumulation of linear feet of paper is perhaps the least critical measure of a program’s accomplishments. Do the collections acquired by the archives accurately reflect its collecting theme(s) or focus? Does the focus encompass documentation of importance to the archives’ user constituency? Is the archives unnecessarily duplicating the efforts of other archives? Have the archives’ collecting activities been kept in balance with processing and storage capabilities? Have members of the archives’ staff honestly represented themselves and the archives’ program to donors and have they adequately documented the archives’ right to its holdings? Finally, has a sincere effort been made to publicize the availability of collections for research use?
The theory and method of archival collection development is not a simple matter. Collecting is part of the larger fabric of archival administration. The professional and ethical considerations of collecting spill over into many other aspects of an archivist's job. Few archives, even those serving a specific parent institution, can afford to ignore changes in the ways records are produced, stored, and used. As technology and research interests change, so too should the focus of collecting programs. Through a critical awareness of changing environments and a systematic approach to their dynamics, well established programs can gain new vigor and new archives can construct solid foundations upon which to grow.

FOOTNOTES

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10. See Trudy Haskamp Peterson, Marie C. Malaro, and Marie P. G. Christine (note no. 3).