APPRAISAL, REAPPRAISAL, AND DEACCESSIONING

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ABSTRACT: The State Archives of Michigan conducted an extensive backlog reappraisal project to identify government records in its custody that did not possess archival value. During the course of the project, over 13,000 boxes were reappraised. The State Archives determined that 58 percent of those boxes did not contain archival records. The State Archives also determined that over 3,600 boxes were not authorized for transfer to the repository and never should have been accessioned. As a result of this project, appraisal and accessioning practices were streamlined to ensure that better decisions are made before records reach archival custody.

Over the years, archival appraisal literature has debated the appropriateness of reappraisal and deaccessioning as collection management techniques. Leonard Rapport’s article in American Archivist, “No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records,” published in 1981, raised so many eyebrows that the journal devoted an entire issue in 1984 to publishing responses from other archivists. One of the most passionate opponents of reappraisal in the 1984 issue was Karen Benedict, who feared that archival repositories that engaged in broadscale reappraisal initiatives may “seriously undermine” their program. Since then, the debate has continued. Timothy Ericson’s 1991 article, “At the Rim of Creative Dissatisfaction: Archivists and Acquisition Development,” focuses less on the justification for reappraisal and deaccessioning projects and more on encouraging archival repositories to define their “collecting focus” so their appraisers have “specific instructions” for determining which records will be preserved. A variety of factors, described later in this article, compelled the State Archives of Michigan to address these exact issues. The archives staff identified a need to define why the records we preserve have value and found that reappraisal and deaccessioning were useful techniques to prepare for the future.

It is not uncommon for an archival repository to have a backlog of unprocessed records, but the State Archives had a huge backlog of over 19,000 cubic feet of government records. The State Archives generally does not make unprocessed records available to the public, though they are made available to the creating agency. The staff is reluctant to make unprocessed records available to the public because they are not fully described according to the State Archives’ quality standards. In addition, it is possible that the records will be reappraised during processing. If the processor determines that the
records do not possess archival value, they will be deaccessioned and, therefore, the records would become unavailable to future researchers. This could cause a conflict if the records were made available to the public prior to processing.

The State Archives hired professional archivists for the job of processing archival records. However, because the processing staff of three full-time employees was also required to perform other duties, it did not seem possible that the State Archives would ever reduce the backlog to a manageable size. Since it was unlikely that the State Archives would be able to hire additional processors, the staff agreed that something needed to be done in addition to the ongoing processing activities to reduce the size of the backlog. For a variety of reasons, the staff was concerned that the backlog contained a lot of records with marginal value, so the State Records Archivist agreed to reappraise the unprocessed records.

The professional staff of the State Archives philosophically agreed that reappraisal and deaccessioning are useful collection management techniques, but the decision to initiate a reappraisal/deaccessioning project did generate some controversy. The staff debated issues similar to those raised in Leonard Rapport's article, such as whether past appraisal decisions should be reevaluated and what procedures should be used to deaccession government records. The staff debated which records should be eligible for such a reevaluation: processed records, unprocessed records, or both. The staff also debated whether it was worth the effort to reevaluate past decisions, considering the amount of work that needed to be done to reduce the size of the backlog of unprocessed records.

At first, the project was conducted on a pilot basis to determine what the benefits were of reappraising the unprocessed records from just two departments. The staff did not want to commit to a full reappraisal if only a small number of boxes would be deaccessioned. However, after these two departments were completed, the staff agreed that the project would produce many short-term and long-term benefits, so the project was expanded to a full reappraisal of the backlog of all executive branch records.

**How did the backlog get so large?**

There are several factors that contributed to the size of the processing backlog. In 1989, the State Archives moved into the newly built Michigan Library and Historical Center building. This new facility contained storage space specifically designed for the maintenance and preservation of archival records. The space was designed to accommodate 15 years of growth to the archival collection. At the time of the move, the entire archival collection consisted of over 21,000 cubic feet of records and was stored in the State Records Center, which does not possess a temperature-and-humidity-controlled environment. The new space accommodates approximately 70,000 cubic feet of records. Therefore, the availability of storage space allowed the staff to increase its collecting efforts.

Also at the time of the move, the State Archives increased the size of its professional staff. At this time, a new State Records Archivist was hired to coordinate the appraisal and acquisition of records from the Executive Branch, the Legislative Branch, and part of the Judicial Branch. The person who was hired for this position remained with the
State Archives for about two years. The position remained unfilled for five and a half years after his departure, during which time the remaining members of the State Archives’ staff assumed many of the duties of the State Records Archivist. However, due to a lack of dedicated resources, the front-end appraisal of records suffered. Staff tended to make conservative appraisal decisions at the front end; they accessioned anything with potential archival value and planned to weed the records on the processing table.

The Retention and Disposal Schedules developed by the Records Management Services also contributed to the size of the backlog. These schedules varied in their age and their quality; many of them did not provide sufficient information to make an archival appraisal decision. Thus, the archivists often selected and accessioned records that were not scheduled for preservation. However, changes to the schedule development process are helping to ensure that newer schedules are much more useful tools for facilitating archival appraisal decisions.

**Deaccessioning**

Government agencies that knew about the existence of the State Archives tended to know two things about the repository: first, the State Archives does not return records to agencies; second, the State Archives does not keep everything that is accessioned. Both of these issues created a negative impression about the repository among a significant customer base. As for the first issue, it is true that, unlike the State Records Center, the State Archives does not return archival records after they are accessioned. This protects the records from destruction, loss, and reorganization and there are no plans to change this policy. However, the State Archives is encouraging agencies to extend the active retention period for some of their records so this does not cause them a problem. The State Archives is also promoting the easy access of records at the repository.

The second issue required the State Archives to implement change. The processing archivists’ traditional practice was to simply destroy records they decided not to preserve. Occasionally, they contacted the creating agency and offered to return the records and, occasionally, the archivist made a notation on the agency’s Retention and Disposal Schedule to remind people not to authorize the transfer of additional records. Unfortunately, boxes waited for months or years until an authorized person from the agency could decide if he wanted the boxes returned or destroyed; schedules were rarely updated to prevent the transfer of additional records. The result was that agencies feared that the records they sent to the State Archives were not safe. They did not trust the State Archives to preserve their records.

The State Archives needed to make the deaccessioning process more consistent and to build trust among state agencies about its practices. The staff debated and tested several options and finally agreed to implement an internal policy that requires the State Archives to follow the same disposition procedures that the creating agencies follow. First, the State Archives worked with the Records Management Services to develop a general schedule for “non-records.” To summarize, this general schedule defines “non-records” to be duplicates, publications, insignificant drafts, “FYI” notes, materials that do not document significant activities of the agency, etc. A benefit of this general schedule
is that it authorizes the processing archivists to weed a lot of material (such as duplicates) that may clutter valuable records series.

Second, the staff decided that if the State Archives accessioned a records series that a Retention and Disposal Schedule already authorized for destruction, the processing archivists could deaccession it without notifying the creating agency. However, if the State Archives accessioned a records series that was scheduled for permanent preservation and the processing archivists decide that the entire records series does not possess archival value, the Retention and Disposal Schedule must be revised to authorize the disposition of the records before they are deaccessioned.

The State Archives can now tell agencies with confidence that, if their Retention and Disposal Schedule says they should transfer their records to the State Archives, they can be assured that the records will be preserved. The State Archives can also tell agencies that, if an appraisal decision changes, they will be notified before the records are destroyed because the agency must approve all revisions to their own Retention and Disposal Schedule. The State Records Archivist is responsible for notifying the Records Management Services when a schedule needs to be revised to reflect a new appraisal decision and the processing archivists when the new schedule is approved so they can deaccession the records (deaccessioning includes both destruction of records and their return to the creating agency to fulfill the remainder of the active retention period).

The State Archives decided not to publish the new deaccessioning policy because the changes were internal and did not affect how other agencies operated. Instead, the State Archives is using less formal methods for reassuring agencies that their records will be preserved, such as the records management manual and training.

**Appraising Records**

In 1996, the State Archives of Michigan hired a new State Records Archivist who had very little practical experience appraising government records. The State Archives did not have a formal appraisal policy at the time, so there were no tools available to teach new archivists what types of records the staff had traditionally acquired. The new archivist also lacked a strong familiarity with Michigan government organization and history and did not know which agencies routinely transferred archival records and which agencies required active solicitation.

The new archivist responded to the situation by initiating two projects (involving multiple archivists on staff) that would develop tools to assist current and future staff with the responsibility of appraising and acquiring Michigan government records. The goal of these projects was not to influence a radical shift in the State Archives’ collecting practices (the scope and purpose of the collection), but to document why certain records were preserved and others were not. This would serve not only to generate a common understanding among staff about the State Archives’ definition of archival records, but also to educate others.

The first project produced a priority list of government agencies, ranking the agencies according to their potential to produce archival records. This potential was identified by the veteran archivists based upon their knowledge about the functions of and records produced by each agency. The analysis was totally subjective; no criteria were
used to rank the agencies. If the veteran staff was unfamiliar with a particular agency, the State Records Archivist was responsible for contacting the agency, reviewing retention schedules or inspecting records, and then making a recommendation for ranking. Agencies that received a priority 1–3 ranking create records with significant archival value and, therefore, it is worth the effort to seek out any of their records that might be absent from the holdings of the State Archives. Examples of these agencies include cabinet members, boards and commissions, the Legislature, the Office of the State Registrar, the Corporations Division, and the Bureau of Elections. Agencies that received a priority 4–5 ranking produce archival records, but of low reference value and, therefore, the State Archives will not actively seek the transfer of their records. Examples of these agencies include Civil Service employment records, Office of Services to the Aging, and professional licensing boards. Agencies that received a 0 priority ranking do not produce records with archival value.

The second project produced a formal appraisal policy. This project team was smaller and consisted of the two archivists responsible for appraising state and local government records. However, the entire professional staff reviewed the draft policy before it was approved. The team wanted to develop a policy that would define the State Archives' acquisition practices beyond the broad mission of "documenting Michigan government" to more specifically identify the government functions and information content that possess historical significance so the policy could actually guide decision-making activities. The team that developed the policy conducted a review of archival appraisal literature and attended an appraisal workshop taught by Mark Greene for the Midwest Archives Conference in October 1998. The most influential of these articles was one provided by Mark Greene at the workshop about the "Minnesota Method." This article contained appraisal criteria that focused on the content of a record (the reasons it is created and the information it contains) versus the physical characteristics of the record (completeness, preservability, etc.). This example of appraisal criteria provided a model for the team to follow.

The policy adopted by the State Archives of Michigan consists of several components: a mission statement for establishing the scope of the holdings, appraisal criteria for determining the value of the records based upon their information content, appraisal mechanics for determining the quality of the records, and, finally, a methodology for making appraisal decisions. When developing the appraisal criteria, the team used the priority list to identify nine broad categories of government services that produce archival records (Law and Legislation, Citizenship, Civil Protection, Economic Development, Natural Resources and the Environment, Health and Human Services, Labor, Transportation, and Education). Then, the team analyzed the types of archival records produced by agencies associated with each category to define why their content possessed historical significance. This allowed the team to develop appraisal criteria for each category "describing the type of information we want from what we collect," such as "records that map transportation routes/means over time." Armed with these tools, the State Archives' staff was prepared to make consistent front-end appraisal decisions and to reevaluate prior appraisal decisions.
Reappraisal Project

The State Archives decided to test these new appraisal tools by reappraising the processing backlog. The predominant staff viewpoint was that the project should not reappraise processed records because, as Karen Benedict states, "The average institution struggles to process those records that have not yet been made available to users. That step should take precedence over removing records which already have been made available." In 1999, the State Records Archivist, with the help of several student assistants, started analyzing every accession in the backlog, working with each department from the Executive Branch separately.

The first step of the project was to identify the unprocessed records that needed to be reappraised. For this step, the project staff used the Argus database. From 1994 to 1999, the State Archives used Argus software by Questor to accession state government records (Argus replaced another database that was originally created in 1988). The State Archives continues to use Argus for collection management of the entire holdings of state and local government records and manuscripts, but in 2000, the staff began using Versatile software by Zasio for accessioning state government records and for maintaining intellectual control of them until they are processed.

The Argus database contains useful information about each accession, such as creating agency, accessioning date, and shelf location, but it does not indicate which records series are stored in each box. As a result, select information from Argus was entered in a Microsoft Access database. Then, additional information was acquired from the transmittal forms for each accession so the project staff could determine which records series were in the boxes and their inclusive dates. Next, the project staff identified which Retention and Disposal Schedule regulated the retention requirements for the records. This often involved tracing the genealogy of a record series from its initial version through several versions of superseded schedules and agency organizational changes to identify an active schedule. Once all of the data about the boxes were assembled into a single database, the project staff was able to identify which records series were stored in the backlog and how complete the run of a particular records series was. Armed with these data about the backlog, the priority list, and appraisal policy, the archivist began appraising records.

Many appraisal decisions could be made without inspecting boxes, but those with questionable content were pulled off shelves so they could be inspected. These inspections determined whether the records had been described accurately on the transmittal form and whether they possessed historical significance. Appraisal decisions were primarily made at the record series level, allowing for box-level exceptions. In some cases, the decisions that were made during the reappraisal project required a modification to the priority list, but the appraisal decisions did not require changes to the appraisal policy or the appraisal criteria.

Once the appraisal decisions were made, the deaccessioning policy mentioned above was implemented. The project staff determined which boxes the State Archives already had the authority to destroy and which Retention and Disposal Schedules had to be changed to authorize the deaccessioning of the remaining boxes.
Results

The project, completed on July 23, 2002, took a total of 41 months.16 During that time, the project staff appraised the records in the processing backlog from all 18 Executive Branch departments, which totaled 13,275 boxes.17 Of those boxes, the project staff determined that 5,533 (42 percent) contained archival records and 7,742 (58 percent) did not. Of the 7,742 boxes to be deaccessioned, 4,075 (53 percent) were already authorized for destruction, which means that they never should have been accessioned by the State Archives in the first place, and 3,667 (47 percent) will be held until a new Retention and Disposal Schedule authorizes their destruction or return to the creating agency. It is important to note that this project focused on reappraising records series and boxes and not on processing the contents of each box. When the staff processes these records in the future, additional materials will be identified for destruction.

This project and other simultaneous reappraisal projects conducted by the State Archives resulted in the identification of over 760 records series that are no longer scheduled for archival preservation.18 In fact, the State Archives reduced the number of records series that are authorized for transfer to the repository by over 30 percent. It has taken the Records Management Services a while to revise the Retention and Disposal Schedules to reflect the changes in appraisal decisions, but they recently completed a major project to remedy the situation; all of the new schedules were sent to the agencies for approval by November 2002.

Conclusion

Appraisal is a very subjective exercise; professional archivists always bring their own biases to the decision-making process. As a result, it is not realistic to expect a group of professional archivists to always agree upon every appraisal decision for every records series.

Throughout the course of these projects, the staff identified select records series (often voluminous case files) that were difficult to reappraise. As a result, more intensive efforts were conducted to resolve long-standing debates about the series’ value as an archival record. These “mini-projects” included attorney general case files, judicial case files, mental health case files, and correctional facility administrative records. Some of the appraisal debates over these records series had endured for decades, so the staff was relieved to finally resolve them.

“Appraising is at best an inexact science, perhaps more an art . . .”19 Good practitioners of the art of appraisal generally have many years of experience to use as a guide. The priority list and appraisal policy were created to strengthen the scientific component of the decision-making process so that new archivists could continue the collecting tradition of the State Archives. The State Archives’ staff wanted to ensure that public records would not be appraised or reappraised according to “transitory criteria.”20

These projects produced a lot of short-term benefits. For example, they resulted in better-informed and more consistent appraisal decisions by the State Records Archivist. Furthermore, thousands of boxes will be deaccessioned before valuable time is invested
in processing them, which allows the processing archivists to focus their efforts on records with confirmed archival value. The processing backlog is now at a more reasonable size and more space is available for incoming records. The reappraisal database is a useful tool that the processing archivists can use to identify records they want to work on and it is a useful tool for the reference staff because it provides more comprehensive intellectual control over the unprocessed records than does Argus. The staff is also using the database and the new Retention and Disposal Schedules to identify gaps in the State Archives’ holdings, so they can contact the creating agencies in search of the missing records.

While these short-term benefits serve to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the staff, these projects will also have a long-term impact on the State Archives’ ability to fulfill its mission to document Michigan government. For example, the State Archives has streamlined its business processes for conducting up-front appraisal and for accessioning and deaccessioning records so the backlog should be populated only with archival records in the future.

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NOTES

4. The State Archives of Michigan is a section within the Michigan Historical Center (MHC). The State Archives is responsible for the identification and permanent preservation of Michigan government records with historical significance. In 2001, the MHC moved organizationally from the Michigan Department of State to the newly created Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL).
5. The State Records Center (SRC) is operated by the Records Management Services. The SRC offers free off-site temporary storage for state agency records. In addition, to operating the SRC, the Records Management Services is responsible for establishing records management policies and procedures, establishing retention periods for public records, educating state employees about records management, and designing efficient and effective record-keeping systems. In 2002, the Records Management Services moved organizationally from the Department of Management and Budget to HAL. Both the State Archives and the Records Management Services now report to the director of the MHC.
6. The full text of “General Schedule #1—NonRecords” can be found on-line at <http://www.michigan.gov/recordsmangement/>.
11. Throughout the course of the project, three student assistants were hired. Their terms of employment did not overlap. They worked a total of 812 hours on the project. The professional staff time committed to the project was approximately 10 percent of one FTE for 41 months.
12. Screen shots of the databases mentioned in this article:

**Figure 1: Argus Screen Shot**

![Activity Report](image1)

**Party Tab**
- **Party Name:** Michigan Department of Corrections, Marquette Branch Prison, Warden’s Office

**Description Tab**
- **Description:** 24 Record Center boxes
- **Activity Group Id:** A
- **Description:** State Agency or Branch of Government
- **FLAG:** Pending

**Admin Tab**
- **Activity ID:** 96-I
- **Activity Type:** Direct Transfer
- **Department:** State Archives of Michigan
- **Legal Status:** Accession
- **Legal Status Date:** End Date: 8/22/1998
- **Begin Date:** 8/22/1998
- **Description:** 24 Record Center boxes
- **Activity Group Id:** A
- **Description:** State Agency or Branch of Government

**Figure 2: Versatile Screen Shot**

![Screen Shot](image2)
13. There were several reasons for switching to Versatile, but the overriding reason was that the State Records Center began using it to control its inventory of boxes. In 1997, the State Records Center began bar coding boxes and eliminating human-readable box labels. If the State Archives wanted to know what the contents of these boxes were when we took custody of them, we needed Versatile.

14. The three databases mentioned in this article, Argus, Versatile, and Microsoft Access, all operate independently of one another.

15. It is important to keep in mind that transmittals are often filled out by untrained staff who frequently inadequately or inaccurately describe the records in the boxes.

16. Work on the project was interrupted on many occasions as student assistants left and as other activities occupied the time of the archivist.

17. We did inventory the records we received from the courts and the legislature, but decided it was not necessary to reappraise them because their archival value was readily apparent. Furthermore, we decided which judicial case files we would preserve when we were developing the appraisal policy.

18. Other projects conducted in collaboration with the Records Management Services to reappraise records included several different reviews of boxes stored at the State Records Center and a comprehensive review of approved Retention and Disposal Schedules.
