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Donor Volunteers as Archival Appraisers? Possibilities and Considerations

Charles B. Stanford
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ABSTRACT

Using examples from recent archival practice at two western land-grant universities, this article examines the potential benefits of enlisting volunteers from donor organizations to appraise as well as process the archival records of their own associations. The discussion addresses questions regarding the use of trained volunteers to perform appraisal activities, challenges in working with volunteers, and outreach opportunities for archival education among interested members of donor organizations.

Despite the substantial role of volunteers in public libraries and historical societies during the past century, volunteer assistance in American academic archives appears as a relatively undocumented and more recent phenomenon, usually involving retired individuals or students fulfilling course requirements.¹ Assigned tasks have included reception desk duty, data entry, and routine re-housing of documents, while archival appraisal has remained firmly within the responsibilities of the professional archivist. Prior to 2008, the Colorado State University Archives and Special Collections Department in the Morgan Library permitted only people affiliated with the university to work as volunteers, including one professor and a few public history graduate students completing a mandatory practicum in archival processing. In the subsequent two years, four individuals from the surrounding community requested and were granted the opportunity to volunteer with the

1. Very little has appeared in archival literature concerning volunteers in academic archives. For discussions of volunteer service in libraries, see Erica A. Nicol and Corey M. Johnson, "Volunteers in Libraries: Program Structure, Evaluation, and Theoretical Analysis," *Reference and User Services Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (2008): 154-63; Steven Howlett, "Volunteering in Libraries, Museums and Archives," *Cultural Trends* 12, no. 46 (2002): 39-66; and Mary Detweiler, "Volunteers in Public Libraries: The Costs and Benefits," *Public Libraries* 21, no. 3 (1982): 80-82.

archives. Similarly, individuals who recently worked with the Rio Grande Historical Collections in the New Mexico State University Library represented the first volunteers to serve in the processing room of that institution.

Each of the examples presented in this article describes an experiment in utilizing volunteer archival assistance, not only to process manuscript collections but also to engage in appraisal activities for specific collections housed within academic archives. In both circumstances, the volunteers were members or officers of the donor organizations, who approached the repositories with the request to assist in managing the collections of their associations. Their motivations for volunteering included the desire to use materials in the collections for their own needs as well as to ensure that their records were preserved, arranged, and described sufficiently for easy access by researchers. With minimal assistance and basic training by archives staff members, the volunteers in both cases accomplished these goals. In addition to the benefits received by the archival repositories from enlisting volunteers from donor organizations, the volunteers gained an opportunity to learn records management techniques during their work with the archivists. These new skills will enable them to more successfully organize their current records and thus lead to future collection donations that would require less processing by the receiving repositories.

Appraisal as an Appropriate Activity for Volunteers

American archival theorists, especially since the publication of Shellenberg's "Appraisal of Modern Public Records," have regarded appraisal as a central task for professional archivists.² In the sixty-fourth presidential address to the Society of American Archivists, society president Frank Boles reminded his listeners that archivists are "the selectors and the keepers of individual and collective memory," that appraisal is "the key to all our endeavors," and that selection "sets the stage for everything else archivists do."³ Riva Pollard stated that guidelines for the appraisal of manuscript collections must address the questions of "which people within society should be targeted for the acquisition of papers, and which materials within those papers should be retained."⁴ Archivists may shrink from the idea of permitting volunteers to participate in such a key process, even more from inviting them to take the lead. The following brief summary of archival discussion regarding appraisal provides justification for allowing a select group of volunteers to take part in these decisions.

2. Theodore R. Schellenberg, "The Appraisal of Modern Public Records," reprinted in *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings in Archival Theory and Practice*, Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds. (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Service, 1984).
3. Frank Boles, "But a Thin Veil of Paper," 64th Presidential Address of the Society of American Archivists, 14 August 2009, Austin, Texas. *The American Archivist* 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 21.
4. Riva A. Pollard, "The Appraisal of Personal Papers: A Critical Literature Review," *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 140.

One criterion for judging the value of records lies in their potential use. In her essay on collecting manuscripts, Mary Lynn McCree promotes the researcher-oriented view by encouraging the archivist to select personal papers to “create a collection that holds a continuing interest and relevance for scholars” and that “will be used over and over again for a variety of topics and points of view.”⁵ McCree also advocates seeking the “advice and help of scholars with special knowledge or experience” of the subjects in the collection, in addition to relying on one’s own subject knowledge or the interpretations of historians.⁶

Although McCree’s advice focuses on the acquisition of personal papers, this viewpoint can apply both to acquiring and to appraisal or re-appraisal of organizational records in a collecting repository. For organizational records, the distinction between record creators and researchers may be small; in many instances, the two groups are the same. Association officers have a greater understanding of their organization’s documents than an archivist viewing the records for the first time. In the examples described in the following pages, the volunteers who appraised the records possessed relevant knowledge and first-hand experience with the subjects of the collection.

As a counterpoint to the researcher-oriented view of appraisal offered by McCree, Terry Cook asserts that the assigned value of records should focus on “why records were created rather than what they contain, how they were created and utilized by their original users rather than how they might be used in the future.”⁷ Cook’s theories focus on institutional records, drawing on his work as a government archivist, and they apply very aptly to the two cases treated here, which involve records of organizations. In these two examples, the volunteers had assumed the roles of archivists for their respective organizations, although the records remained housed in a repository in the care of a professional archivist. It is important to consider that the wide range of records held by many collecting repositories precludes the ability of the archivist to fully comprehend the perspective of each donor, or the context and functions of each organization represented. In such settings, Cook’s viewpoint necessarily calls for record donors to participate in the appraisal process.

Recent writings of Richard Cox advocate a stricter focus on evidence as the primary criterion for appraisal.⁸ In deciding which records provide essential evidence

5. Mary Lynn McCree, “Good Sense and Good Judgment: Defining Collections and Collecting,” in *A Modern Archives Reader*, 108.

6. *Ibid.*, 110-11.

7. Terry Cook, “Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal,” in *The Canadian Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*, Barbara L. Craig, ed. (Ottawa: Association of Canadian Archivists, 1992), 47.

8. Richard J. Cox, “Evidence and Archives,” *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 165-200.

of a group's most vital actions, the familiarity of record donors with organizational records can be a valuable help. In addition, Robert Sink sees appraisal as an activity "that should involve both records creators and users."⁹ The idea of inviting collection creators to be involved in appraisal, arrangement, and description (to better preserve contextual value from the creator's perspective) has also been addressed by Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan. They state that the well-informed ability of an archivist to appraise community records relies on "participation from experts: the community members responsible for record creation."¹⁰

The opinion that record creators possess "special knowledge" of their records or papers, incorporated with the views just presented, leads us to conclude that organization officers are uniquely qualified among archives volunteers to participate in appraising their own records. Accepting assistance from these collection donors makes sense, regardless of whether the repository follows the researcher-oriented or creator-based view in assigning value to records. The following examples provide evidence supporting this conclusion.

The New Mexico Garden Clubs, Inc. Records at New Mexico State University

The New Mexico Garden Clubs, Inc. (NMGC) Records, preserved as part of the Rio Grande Historical Collections (RGHC), provides our first example of successful volunteer-initiated appraisal and processing. Organized in 1972 as a division of the Archives and Special Collections Department of the New Mexico State University (NMSU) Library, the RGHC holds the records of numerous clubs formed for social, craft, service, and philanthropic aims in New Mexico, some federated throughout the United States and the western hemisphere. Together these collections provide rich documentation of social life in New Mexico during the twentieth century. Several clubs within a state or community share a core of prominent members, whose personal papers complement the club records.

Current staffing for the RGHC consists of one professional archivist (hired in 2007), one full-time staff member, and a variable number of part-time student workers. Like many repositories, the RGHC has a large backlog, accumulated over 35 years of donations. Some of these donated collections consist of every document accumulated by an individual or group, with little thought as to long-term value. Accessions from families, businesses, prominent individuals, and a variety of organizations arrive in varying states of order or disarray. In many instances, records of a local club may pass through the hands of several officers. These records typically

9. Robert Sink, "Appraisal: The Process of Choice," *American Archivist* 53 (Summer 1990): 456.

10. Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections," *Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007): 93.

arrive in fragmented and dispersed accessions with little or no evidence of formal or systematic appraisal by the organization.

In 2008 the RGHC staff began applying the practices of minimal processing (popularly known as MPLP) advocated by Greene and Meissner in order to move more quickly through their backlog.¹¹ In an effort to free up storage space, the repository has also moved toward active re-appraisal of its existing collections. This is a more demanding goal than minimal processing, as it requires focused attention to individual collections, often at file or even item level. In addition, the existing repository guide to appraisal consists of a one-page collections policy, which in the past had allowed the acquisition of a large number of unprocessed collections with little evidence of rigorous selection. Appraisal, routinely carried out after accession during processing, had not been well documented. In his critique of MPLP, Carl Van Ness addresses this as a problem common to manuscript repositories.¹² In the same issue of *American Archivist*, Greene expresses agreement with Van Ness' diagnosis of appraisal problems.¹³ Following the lead of Cook and Cox, the RGHC is now developing a more evidence-focused collection policy to govern appraisal—before, during, or after accession.

Using the minimal processing guidelines, the RGHC targeted several collections for the preparation of preliminary inventories that could serve as access tools until time and staff became available for more in-depth arrangement and description. Among the targeted collections were the records of the New Mexico Garden Clubs, Inc. (NMGC), which began in 1950 as a federation of garden clubs throughout New Mexico.¹⁴

The NMGC started donating records to the RGHC in the early 1980s, with some accessions originating from the state headquarters and others coming from individual clubs or districts. In addition to club records and scrapbooks, the accessions included

11. Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 242-44.
12. "Manuscript repositories also need to rethink their passive approaches to collection acquisition. Institutional archivists have decades of experience with appraising records in the field and preselecting and even preprocessing materials before they are accessioned. Manuscript archivists have only recently applied similar ideas. . . . What Greene and Meissner failed to contemplate in 2005 was the possibility that the backlog is, in itself, an appraisal decision. We often send records to the backlog because other collections have a higher priority." Carl Van Ness, "Much Ado about Paper Clips: 'More Product, Less Process' and the Modern Manuscript Repository," *American Archivist* 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 143.
13. "Most simply, it is my impression that many repositories do not do much if any appraisal when they acquire collections or record groups." Mark A. Greene, "MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore," *American Archivist* 73 (Spring/Summer 2010): 177. Greene backs up his impression with a convincing literature review.
14. Although the formal name of the organization uses the plural, this article will follow the practice of its members and officers in referring to it as a singular club.

sets of published bulletins from the NMGC as well as the National Garden Club, often with several copies of each issue. These bulletins were scattered in many places throughout the boxes. Since the RGHC practice is to separate publications and transfer them to the Special Collections, it would have been necessary to complete one task of physical rearrangement even with the newly adopted minimal processing standards. As Greene and Meissner's ideas were put into practice, it became clear that they sometimes apply more usefully to more cohesive collections than to records from federated organizations like the NMGC.¹⁵

The NMGC records had not been designated as a high priority collection, since there had been no reference requests and garden club members had not recently communicated with the repository or inquired about their records. This changed in March 2008, when Alverton Elliott from the club headquarters in Los Alamos visited the archives to research the history of a club scholarship program. Fortunately, his visit coincided with the preparation of the preliminary inventory. Although cautioned by the archivist about the disorganized state of the collection, he was unprepared for what he found when he arrived. Even with the assistance of the inventory, he needed several days to locate the information he sought.

For a researcher unaffiliated with the NMGC, this might have been acceptable. For an officer of the club, it was not. Elliott requested permission to bring club members to the repository to help put their records in order. This was a welcome offer for the archivist, who saw an opportunity to utilize the club members' specialized knowledge of their organization for detailed re-appraisal as well as processing. They would not only organize their records but also reduce their volume in a way that preserved the most essential evidentiary value, without great expense or time on the part of repository staff.

As the NMGC archives officer, Elliott reported to the club concerning the status of their records, and he recommended that the club contribute financially to the NMSU Library to assist with the costs of housing and preserving the club's materials. He also drafted a policy and organizational scheme to guide the club in keeping and donating their records in the future. Initially his proposals met with little interest, but in early 2009 the club donated \$250 to the Archives and Special Collections Department. Shortly thereafter, Elliott arranged to visit the department with other club members.

He arrived at the repository in February 2009 with NMGC President Colleen Hinker, Historian Beula Oyler, and Becky Fuller from the local Mesilla Valley Garden Club. The archivist met with them, reviewed Elliott's draft of their records policy, and discussed the types of documents that would be most appropriate to preserve. The

15. "If all collections resembled administrative records freshly accessioned from the university provost's office, 4 hours per foot would be the proverbial piece of cake." "Some collections possess an inherent structure that makes access largely intuitive; others do not." Van Ness, "Much Ado about Paper Clips," 138, 141.

archivist followed Elliott's lead, recognizing his designated "subject sequences" as series. Elliott's arrangement was in essence an appraisal policy, identifying the functions, events, and programs which he, as archives officer, judged worthy of long-term memory. After approving this plan, the archivist provided them with a work space and let them go to work. He and a staff member remained readily available to offer assistance throughout the process.

Once they started, the garden club officers needed very little help beyond retrieval of the accessions. Since they had established appraisal criteria with the guidance of the archivist, the volunteers made quick and confident decisions on their own. During processing, archivists in the RGHC routinely deaccession items such as blank forms, envelopes, and duplicate copies of documents. Beyond simply weeding such materials, the club officers discarded anything that did not fit within the appraisal framework they had set. Within a week, they had gone through each folder and decided what to retain, item by item, reducing nearly one hundred boxes to forty-nine. This item-level attention, normally reserved for very high priority collections, became possible due to the involvement of volunteers with a personal interest and high degree of knowledge about the collection.

These club officers discarded records purposefully, even ruthlessly. While they carried out the appraisal of their own records, they also sorted them according to the plan Elliott had created. Initially they set out one box for each planned series (or "sequence"). As they moved through the collection, they placed records in the appropriate boxes for the series, adding boxes to a series as needed. They also set aside some records to take back to the club for a final decision as to their disposal; for example, multiple copies of bulletins, which they might be able to put to use.

The volunteers used their series chart to sort most of the records, but they took a different approach with the scrapbooks. In cases where a scrapbook came from a defunct group or district, they decided to leave it in the RGHC as part of the club archive. The creators of scrapbooks from active clubs or districts were given the option to leave them in the repository, take them back to retain in their own office, or donate them to local libraries.

By the time they concluded their service project, the volunteers had arranged the New Mexico Garden Clubs records roughly at the series level. The preliminary finding aid includes a box-level container list. Elliott and his fellow officers plan to return to complete the physical arrangement of the records to the file or item level and assist in preparing the final folder-level inventory, which will then be added to the finding aid.

As a follow-up to the club officers' work, Elliott and the RGHC archivist gave short presentations to the executive board and at the opening session of the sixtieth annual NMGC convention in Albuquerque on March 25-26, 2009. These presentations described the accomplishments of the garden club volunteers, outlined Elliott's draft archives policy for the club, and stated the desire of the repository to continue to work closely with donors such as the New Mexico Garden Clubs. The well-received presentations resulted in a unanimous decision by the board and general

membership to send an additional \$250 to the NMSU Library Archives and Special Collections Department for preservation work and digitization of several of the scrapbooks for greater accessibility. Later, board members discussed a possible total of \$1,000 in donations to the repository, which represented quite a change from the initial disinterest encountered by Elliott a year earlier.

With a well-planned records policy in place, future accessions of New Mexico Garden Clubs records can now be sent to the Rio Grande Historical Collections in an orderly manner and quickly added to the existing collection. NMGC officers have effectively taken control of their own archival records, although they continue to donate them to the repository for permanent housing, description, and research access. Through the work of the garden club volunteers, their records more closely resemble an institutional archive than a manuscript collection, and the arrangement is more consistent with the original order.

An example has also been provided for the National Garden Club, whose president was in attendance at the NMGC convention. Perhaps the National Garden Club will follow the precedent of associations such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs, whose Women's History Research Center has published an excellent guide for use by federated women's clubs in preparing their records for donation to a repository.¹⁶ Organizations following these guidelines may appraise their own records and donate them in an orderly arrangement, greatly simplifying the task of the repository archivist.¹⁷ This form of volunteer appraisal work, in which officers and members of associations select which of their records to donate to a repository, makes a significant contribution to "the key to all our endeavors," which "sets the stage for everything else archivists do."¹⁸

The American Music Therapy Association Collection at Colorado State University

In our second example of successful archival appraisal by volunteers, the volunteer not only assisted in appraising, arranging, and describing an archival collection, but also facilitated the donation of the records. Late in 1995, music therapy professor William B. Davis, Ph.D., approached the staff of the Archives and Special Collections Department in the Colorado State University's (CSU) Morgan Library to inquire about the possibility of preserving the records of the National Association for Music Therapy (NAMT). Founded in 1950, the Association focused on improving the

16. Women's History and Resource Center, WHRC Guidelines for Preserving and Writing Club History (Washington, DC: General Federation of Women's Clubs, 2008). Available online at <http://www.gfwc.org/images/gfwc/imageuploads/WHRC%20ResearchingWritingGuidelines%20-%20Mar%2008.pdf> (accessed October 5, 2011).

17. The New Mexico Chapter of the P.E.O. Sisterhood has been following this practice for many years.

18. Boles, "But a Thin Veil of Paper," 21.

education and clinical training of music therapists, as well as establishing standards and procedures for certification. Forty-five years later, Davis expressed concern that many of the documents relating to the history of the association might be lost if they were not preserved in a secure repository.

The timing was right to establish a music therapy collection, both for the association, preparing to celebrate the milestone of its fiftieth anniversary, and for the university archives, which had recently moved to a remodeled space that allowed for an expansion in its collections. In addition, the Center for Biomedical Research in Music at CSU had been designated as a Center of Excellence by the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, and the acquisition of the music therapy collection would support the research interests of the university.

In the fall of 1996 Davis and the university archivist sent a letter to the NAMT governing board that described the new archival facilities available at CSU and the preservation treatment that would be provided for materials deposited in the archives. The following January, the official donor relationship began with a signed deed of gift for NAMT archival records to be deposited with the Colorado State University Archives. Davis was designated as liaison between the music therapy association and the university, and during the ensuing decade he delivered to the archives more than one hundred boxes of historical materials forwarded to him by the association and its members.

In 1998, the National Association for Music Therapy merged with a similar organization, the American Association for Music Therapy (the AAMT, established in 1971) to form the American Music Therapy Association (AMTA). The historical records of the AAMT were also sent to Dr. Davis for preservation in the archives, and the leaders of the new, blended association began archiving their materials on an annual basis.

Volunteers had not been invited to work in the university archives prior to 1998, but during that year the archivist accepted Davis' offer to prepare a preliminary listing of the music therapy materials accessioned to that date. The resulting box-level inventory, completed in January 1999, offered a logical starting point for researchers interested in the collection and provided an additional step toward accessibility. As the music therapy records continued to accrue and researchers from other states began using the collection, it became obvious that a more detailed inventory and finding aid were needed. In early 2006, Davis proposed using six months of sabbatical leave to fully process the AMTA collection, under the supervision of archives staff.

At the end of the spring semester, another archivist at the CSU Morgan Library instructed Davis concerning the repository's standard practices of appraisal, series arrangement, preservation, and archival description. Together they discussed logical series that would enhance access to and understanding of the collection. Since the materials of the blended organization had accumulated in the archives over the course of a decade, full processing would necessitate imposing an arrangement order.

As a trained music therapist as well as the designated archival officer of the organization, Davis was uniquely qualified to make decisions regarding the retention and arrangement of the collected materials. While sorting through the boxes, he identified names of particular importance to the early development of music therapy as a field of study, which an archivist or historian would not have recognized as especially significant. For example, early twentieth-century music therapy pioneers including Eva Augusta Vesceius, Isa Ilsen, and Harriet Ayer Seymour are not well known even within the music therapy profession. In addition, Davis' knowledge allowed him to select from among numerous audio materials in the collection unique recordings with great historical value, which he designated for extra care in preservation and replication on digital media. These little-known recordings include a concert by the Detroit Symphony featuring a symphony movement composed by a psychiatric patient at the Eloise State Hospital in Detroit. A second Eloise patient performed an entire solo piano concert broadcast on a Detroit radio station. These two recordings provide evidence of the type of intelligent, gifted patients sometimes residing in large state institutions during the late 1940s.

During the summer of 2006, with occasional assistance from archives staff, Davis sorted and processed the AMTA records. Following appraisal guidelines provided by the archivist, Davis decided to remove materials that were not specifically related to the association (for example, brochures soliciting business from the organization headquarters). In the case of documents containing personal identification numbers, he selected for retention only those with a significant relationship to the association (creating photocopies that obscured the sensitive numbers) and sent the others (which included college grade transcripts sent by individuals applying to music therapy graduate programs) to the shredder. He also weeded multiple duplicate copies, removed metal fasteners, and re-housed materials in acid-free folders. Davis then arranged the materials in logical series corresponding to the purposes and operations of each of the blended organizations. By the end of that year, he had completed processing the largest series in the collection. Using a template provided by the repository, he created a finding aid with a folder-level inventory of that series.

The resulting finding aid, although incomplete, provided much greater access to fifty-nine boxes of the collection. During the next two years, Davis and archives staff members were able to use the inventory to assist a growing number of researchers who were interested in studying the association records. Davis returned to the archives in the summer of 2009, accompanied by a music therapy graduate student, to continue the work of processing the collection. They examined and deaccessioned additional documents and completed a folder-level inventory for the accrued materials in the American Music Therapy Association series, leaving only thirty boxes of AAMT records yet unprocessed. The original 154 boxes of materials have now been reduced to 120, and the inventory greatly facilitates retrieval.

The advantages of allowing trained volunteers to fully process an archival collection are manifold. In this case, a most significant benefit lies in the familiarity of the processor with the subject matter of the collected records. With his extensive

educational background in music therapy and active involvement in the American Music Therapy Association and its predecessor organizations, Davis was able to make informed decisions concerning the retention and logical arrangement of materials in the collection.

Considerations when Working with Volunteers

The examples described above readily illustrate one challenge in the use of a volunteer workforce. The New Mexico Garden Clubs officers completed an immense amount of work during a one-week period, but more than a year later they have yet to return to complete their final folder-level arrangement. The music therapy professor at Colorado State University has found it necessary to work his archival processing efforts into a busy teaching schedule, over the course of numerous years. Since volunteers are donating their time, may have to travel long distances, and have other commitments and interests, archivists who enlist them should be prepared for delays in their workflow.

This difficulty can be mitigated by assigning tasks appropriate to the needs of the repository, and volunteer appraisal by collection donors can certainly be one of these appropriate tasks. A long delay in processing would more negatively impact a collection in high demand for research, or a grant-funded processing project, than the lower-priority New Mexico Garden Clubs Records. In the case of the NMGC records, the chief benefit of volunteer involvement has already been realized, despite the delay in achieving the final level of arrangement. The detailed appraisal and arrangement by the volunteer garden club officers far surpassed the minimal processing their records would otherwise have received, and the repository goal of re-appraisal has been met for this collection with a limited investment of staff time. Even with a box-level description, characteristic of the minimally-processed collections in the RGHC, the garden club records are more compact and much better organized due to the contribution of the volunteers.

In addition, the involvement of the garden club officers in appraising, processing, and crafting a records policy transformed the way the NMGC creates, uses, and organizes its records. As a result, future accessions of NMGC records will be more easily incorporated into the existing archival collection. Similarly, the experience gained by Dr. Davis in appraising and processing the records of the American Music Therapy Association now enlighten his work in transferring accruals to the archives. In both cases, the benefits of inviting volunteer participation far outweighed the disadvantages.

These successful experiences of working with donor volunteers led the archivists to consider numerous questions regarding volunteer involvement in archival processing tasks, with particular emphasis on the idea of donor volunteers performing archival appraisal. Some practical questions are listed below, with initial answers suggested by this experiment.

1. What kind of training and/or supervision is necessary to allow volunteers to appraise competently and effectively?

All archives volunteers need training in archival principles of preservation as well as processing practices followed by the repository, including such tasks as weeding multiple duplicate copies. In addition, “donor volunteers” who are given the opportunity to participate in appraisal decisions should have sufficient experience with the donor organization to possess a thorough understanding of the purposes and needs of their group. Additional training to prepare these volunteers for appraisal activities should equip them to make decisions reflecting the documentary needs of their association as well as the selection policies of the repository.

2. How much freedom should volunteers be given to appraise a collection?

This depends upon the level of the volunteer’s experience with the collection being processed. In the case of the AMTA records, Dr. Davis was uniquely qualified as a scholar with special knowledge of music therapy as a field of research, as well as a great deal of familiarity with the records of the American Music Therapy Association. His interest in preserving the collection derived from both the research potential of the documents and his role as part of the association which created the collection.

The confidence placed by an organization in a founding member, elected historian, or archives officer should also count in the archivist’s decision. The officers of the New Mexico Garden Clubs had sufficient involvement with the association to give them detailed knowledge that made quick and decisive weeding possible. As they sorted their records, they accomplished what should have been done in the first place. Ideally, the leaders of an organization will arrange its records in a manner reflecting its purposes and values. Perhaps a future scholar writing a social history or an exhaustive study of the club might wish that its officers had not discarded anything, but club historians have already established the practice of updating their histories periodically to suit the needs of their membership.

There may be instances when a repository’s collections policy explicitly includes items that an organization’s officers see no need to retain. The policy should be made clear to the volunteers during training for the appraisal as well as during supervision of processing work. In some cases, comparing the collecting policy of the repository with the appraisal policy of the organization may show areas where the repository has been less discriminating in its collecting than it needs—or ought—to be. Therefore, working with donor volunteers may offer a much-needed re-examination of collecting policies that are vaguely formed or articulated.

This stimulus for re-examination can be exemplified by the experience of the Rio Grande Historical Collections division, which in recent years has moved toward a more rigorous and systematic appraisal policy beyond the accession level. When presented with the policy crafted by garden club archives officer Elliott, the RCHC archivist recognized its emphasis on essential evidence of the club’s actions, and

found in it an adequate and appropriate appraisal framework for the club's own records. Consultation with record creators in identifying "processes...worth remembering and the records that will foster such remembering" can serve as a starting point in building an appraisal policy that is flexible and adaptable, but also well-defined.¹⁹

3. Can a volunteer appreciate the complexities of appraisal? Do the benefits of volunteer assistance outweigh the potential difficulties if a volunteer wants to retain items in the collection that the archivist would discard?

This was not an issue in either case described earlier. The garden club volunteers in particular were willing to deaccession items they considered relatively unimportant in documenting the history of their organization. Regarding appraising for users, if we were to turn to researchers with special knowledge of the subject matter to inform our selection decisions, it is likely that additional materials would have been retained. Anecdotal evidence suggests that scholars are more reluctant to weed a collection than even the most faint-hearted of archivists.²⁰

With this in mind, it is likely that the question would become pressing if volunteer appraisals were drawn from expected groups of outside users. What kind of subject specialists would we enlist? Beyond the obvious subjects suggested by the surface description, these two collections could be considered relevant to studies of organizational behavior, anthropology, sociology, and psychology, as well as numerous interdisciplinary fields. The wider the scope of potential users, the greater becomes the pressure to yield to the unrealistic expectation of retaining everything.

As fields of scholarly inquiry expand, it becomes easier to imagine a potential research value for nearly every scrap of paper in a collection. After all, as Timothy Ericson put it, "some researcher, some day, somehow, might find the records useful in a 'study' of some sort."²¹ What value might a future historian find in the chatty personal notes included with checks or membership renewal forms? In some cases items of that nature are preserved, usually depending upon their antiquity and the importance of the individual who created them. The garden club officers decided not

19. Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007), 104.

20. As of this writing, a local historian is assisting the RGHC archivist in processing the papers of another local historian. Despite the presence of numerous duplicate copies of notes and multiple drafts of the same manuscripts, very little is being removed. Other RGHC collections, while organized carefully by the local historians who created them, have been found to include few primary sources and many copies of documents or publications available elsewhere, items that would normally be separated or deaccessioned by an archivist.

21. Timothy L. Ericson, "At the 'rim of creative dissatisfaction': Archivists and Acquisition Development," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-1992): 70-71.

to keep them, choosing instead to focus on records documenting the functions of their organization as a whole.

For a shorter answer to the above question, any items that the archivist prefers to deaccession could be returned to the donor organization. Based on the two examples from this study, it is more important to ensure that the volunteer processor possesses a thorough understanding of the types of items the archivist typically considers sufficiently significant to retain, as well as of the documentary needs of the organization itself.

4. Should volunteers be included in processing decisions regarding different levels of description (item, file, box, or series level) for a given collection?

In both examples presented here, volunteer involvement in early processing decisions was welcomed by the archivist. In the case of the NMGC, the club's archives officer took the initiative to draft a records policy and filing system for the club, which was reviewed and approved by the RGHC archivist for use in processing the collection. Similarly, following a discussion of series types with the CSU archivist, Dr. Davis used a repository template to develop a processing plan and series list for the music therapy collection. In each situation, the archivist was given the opportunity to utilize the knowledge of the collection donor about the organization in devising the most appropriate level of description for the collection.

According to the practices of the repositories, in both examples the collections received a more detailed level of description than would have been the case if only archives staff were involved. In addition, since the processing activities were carried out mostly by volunteers with limited involvement by the repository staff, the resulting fuller description was provided with minimal additional cost to the repository. The volunteers were rewarded with the satisfaction of knowing that their collections were better organized and more thoroughly processed, and the repositories gained greater research accessibility for the collections.

5. How might involvement in appraising and processing their own records affect the way that members of an organization view the value of their archived documents?

The garden club officers were invited to participate as partners in selecting which evidence of their activities would be preserved, first for the purposes of their own institutional memory and second for any research inquiry that might come from outside their group. Similarly, the music therapy professor was given the opportunity to select and arrange the documents that would be of greatest value, first to members of his association and then to possible outside researchers. Therefore, the records do not reflect the detachment of a professional archivist as an expert in what is historically valuable, performed on old material sent by association members to the archives. On the contrary, they represent the deliberate engagement of records creators with their own historical documentation. The involvement of association

members in the process has generated excitement about the significance of their records, not only among the archives volunteers themselves but also among the membership of their associations.

The involvement of “donor volunteers” in appraisal decisions could offer clearer justifications for retaining some of the documentation of social history kept by the repositories, even through long periods of little or no use. It could also protect an academic repository from becoming, as expressed by Gerald Ham, a “weathervane moved by the changing winds of historiography.”²² By including record donors as partners in the care of their archives, we give our appraisal practices more depth and perspective. Our reasoning for decisions regarding what materials we collect and what we discard involves both users and creators. When the primary researchers include members of the donor organizations, involving them in appraisal blends the researcher-oriented approach with that advocated by theorists of government records such as Terry Cook.

6. Would encouraging collection creators to become involved in appraisal and processing increase financial donations to the archives?

This was certainly the case with the New Mexico Garden Clubs. In addition, Dr. Davis has recently engaged in conversation with a prominent supporter of the American Music Therapy Association concerning a financial donation to fund the digitization of unique audio materials in that collection. It is reasonable to expect that increased contact and educational outreach to members of donor organizations would lead to a greater appreciation of the need to preserve that organization’s historical records, and possible funding of preservation efforts.

7. Are there special factors to consider in encouraging “donor volunteers” to participate in the appraisal of collections preserved in academic archives?

“Special factors” would encompass circumstances specific (though hardly unique) to a repository, as well as opportunities for outreach work. The donor volunteers at the RGHC assisted a new archivist in accomplishing the goals of moving more quickly through the backlog, reducing volume, and imposing stricter appraisal standards on collections. The possibilities for long-term collaborative work are illustrated in the case of the music therapy collection at CSU, where the volunteer facilitated the donation of the collection and then assisted in its arrangement and description.

Both of the examples described in this paper involve organizational records housed in collecting repositories hosted by land-grant universities, which include outreach to the public as part of their land-grant mission. Welcoming archival “donor volunteers” into the appraisal process in a strategic and systematic way can offer a greater fulfillment of the university mission while increasing the visibility of the

22. Gerald Ham, “The Archival Edge,” in *A Modern Archives Reader*, 328-29.

special collections and archives programs to a wider public constituency. Repositories based in other universities might also find this increased visibility to be a welcome advantage.

One application of the archival outreach mission is that archivists could be sent from the university to train officers of targeted organizations to appraise and preserve their own historical materials. These visits could include discussions regarding types of records commonly considered archival, to serve the needs of both the organization and researchers from the larger society. If an association lacks storage facilities for their inactive documents, the university library could offer shelf space and assistance from archivists in organizing their materials, as has traditionally been done. Continued outreach activities might include visiting the organization officers and advising them on maintaining and organizing their active records, with a focus on creating their own records management policy.

Christine Weideman at the Yale University Library has reported on her efforts to enlist donors in completing more processing of collections before they are accessioned:

“On several occasions during the past year, this kind of conversation led donors to do the “ideal” themselves, or a variation of it, before turning the materials over to us. . . . This engagement with donors about how we arrange and describe the materials is part of a larger effort to educate them about the work we do and to invite them to participate in the process of preserving their materials. They do not have the storage space, reading room, or bibliographic databases necessary to preserve and make their collections available for research. If they want to, however, they can certainly assist with the arrangement and description of the materials ... To carry this process even one step further, when I think it is appropriate, I now ask donors who created the materials to write all or some of the series descriptions for our inventories.”²³

This type of proactive records management training would be very useful in cases similar to the American Music Therapy Association’s relationship with the CSU Archives, in which a representative of the donor organization began working with the repository prior to accession. In the ideal situation, a motivated association historian could work with the professional archivist to engineer a well-planned execution of the appraisal process from the beginning. Archivists in collecting repositories could enlist the help of donor volunteers in appraisal at several points during the life cycle of the records, from before the time of record creation to well after the materials have been accessioned. In this way, association officers might serve as volunteer appraisers before donation as well as during arrangement and description at the collecting repository. Well-trained donors who send perfectly processed collections to the

23. Christine Weideman, “Accessioning as Processing,” *American Archivist* 69 (Fall/Winter 2006): 277.

archives have already taken part as volunteers in the appraisal process, even if they did none of their work within the walls of the physical facility.

Another variation of the outreach theme would involve creating a guide to record-keeping and donating to repositories, similar to that produced by the General Federation of Women's Clubs for the instruction of historians in individual clubs.²⁴ Although this type of guide would most effectively be accompanied by instruction regarding evidential needs and other factors that shape individual appraisal decisions, a basic list of commonly-preserved record types by itself could help association officers focus their donations on the most useful content and reduce them to manageable size before they are accessioned.

To the extent that archivists are able to enlist record creators as volunteers in the appraisal process before records are ever accessioned, the archivists can turn their attention to more proactive appraisal and macro-appraisal approaches. By educating those responsible for keeping records in various kinds of organizations, we help spread knowledge of archival principles (outreach) whether or not we subsequently decide to collect records from those groups (macro-appraisal).

Conclusion

We should ask more of donors than simply dropping off their old files at the archives. By deciding which old files to offer, donors already play a role in the appraisal of their records. Awareness of this fact can motivate archivists to assist donors in making better-informed decisions in closer accordance with the policies of the repository. By inviting members of our communities to learn through volunteer service about archival preservation, appraisal, arrangement, and description, we disseminate information, understanding, and interest in these principles more widely among the public that we serve.

Added to the outreach often conducted by archivists with donors at or prior to accession, the examples provided in this article illustrate valuable assistance that can be given by donors during re-appraisal. Such an approach affords a more detailed level of processing than might otherwise be justified where minimal processing is the preferred practice. It can also provide a better reflection of a group's history, operations, and character, as well as an accurate context to their records. At the same time, it would bring organizations into a more conscious and purposeful relationship to their own record-keeping.

Whether archivists work with donor volunteers after accession or throughout the life cycle of their records, these donor-repository relationships serve to strengthen the guiding principles of provenance and original order. Such collaborations also provide an excellent opportunity for the archivist to share knowledge of archival practices and to inspire greater appreciation for the importance and potential uses of records.

24. *WHRC Guidelines for Preserving and Writing Club History.*

Appendix 1

Example of a donor-created records policy—the New Mexico Garden Clubs, Inc. (NMGC) Files to Archive—State Organization

1. Spring Meeting
 - a. Call to meeting
 - b. Executive Meeting
 - i. Agenda
 - ii. Minutes (Include signed/approved copy, treasurers report and all attachments)
 - c. Board Meeting
 - i. Agenda
 - ii. Minutes (Include signed/approved copy, treasurers report and all attachments)
 - d. Annual Report
2. Fall Meeting
 - a. Call to meeting
 - b. Executive Meeting
 - i. Agenda
 - ii. Minutes (Include signed/approved copy, treasurers report and all attachments)
 - c. Board Meeting
 - i. Agenda
 - ii. Minutes (Include signed/approved copy, treasurers report and all attachments)
3. Bylaws
4. Correspondence to/from National Garden Club, Inc.
5. Correspondence to/from NM Districts
6. South Central Region
 - a. Correspondence to/from SC

- b. Meeting/agenda/minutes
- c. Awards
- 7. State Flower Show Schools (Finance reports, Registration, Exams, Rosters, Course material, etc.)
 - a. Procedures Manual
- 8. State Symposiums
 - a. Procedures Manual
- 9. State Conventions
 - a. Procedures Manual
- 10. State Scholarships
- 11. State Awards
 - a. Manual
 - b. Awards Issued
 - c. Awards Received
- 12. Audit Reports
- 13. Correspondence Other
- 14. Special Events/Literature Communications
- 15. Special Committee Reports
- 16. General Information

(Similar "subject sequences" were developed for district and local club records)

Appendix 2

Example of a donor-created series list—the American Music Therapy Association

(This series list was developed after consultation with the archivist, using the repository format.)

Arrangement

The materials in the collection have been arranged in three series corresponding to the American Music Therapy Association, created in 1998, and its two predecessor organizations, the National Association for Music Therapy and the Urban Federation for Music Therapy/American Association for Music Therapy, with subseries reflecting material types or dates of acquisition. Additions to the collection continue to accrue and include recent materials as well as books, articles, recordings, and photographs that, in some cases, predate all of these organizations.

Series I: The National Association for Music Therapy

- Subseries A: Governance documents
- Subseries B: Financial records
- Subseries C: Committee records
- Subseries D: Meeting minutes
- Subseries E: Handbooks
- Subseries F: National office annual reports
- Subseries G: Publications
- Subseries H: Conference programs
- Subseries I: Academic program records
- Subseries J: Clinical training facility records
- Subseries K: Correspondence
- Subseries L: Photographs, audio and video media
- Subseries M: Memorabilia/artifacts
- Subseries N: NAMT regional files

Series II: Urban Federation for Music Therapy/American Association for Music Therapy

Subseries A: Governance documents

Subseries B: Financial records

Subseries C: Committee records

Subseries D: Executive Board meeting minutes

Subseries E: National office materials

Subseries F: Publications

Subseries G: Conference programs

Subseries H: Academic program records

Subseries I: Correspondence

Subseries J: Photographs, audio and video media

Subseries K: Memorabilia/artifacts

Series III: American Music Therapy Association

Since the records of each year will now be added annually, these materials are arranged by calendar year, beginning in 1998, and within each year by the categories listed in the above subseries.