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Review of The Ethical Archivist

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Review of *The Ethical Archivist*

By Elena S. Danielson. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010.
437 pp. Soft cover. \$49.00. ISBN 1-931666-34-2

When providing training in descriptive practices for archives, I often end up spending a significant amount of time discussing the complex nature of archival materials themselves. While for my purposes the focus is on physical and intellectual characteristics of archives that need to be described, Elena S. Danielson's excellent introductory work on archival ethics illustrates how this same complexity affects every other aspect of the archival endeavor, from accessioning to access, with the potential to introduce ethical dilemmas.

The relationship between archives and researchers is one based on trust, and Danielson's stated goal in writing on professional ethics for archivists is "to establish a standard of integrity that inspires confidence in the documentary record." (p. 296) She does this by examining a number of archival functions or tasks, exploring the ways in which ethical concerns affect decision making. These areas include acquisitions, deaccessioning, access, and confidentiality.

As both a cataloger and someone currently involved with descriptive standards, I particularly appreciated Danielson's extended discussion of the ethical imperatives behind that work. For example, citing article 6 of the SAA Code of Ethics, Danielson suggests that to meet our ethical responsibilities archivists should work to make both archival descriptions and digital reproductions of archival materials available on the Internet using open technological standards. She also discusses trends toward the commoditization of archival holdings by subscription services, calling for the expansion of ethical codes to moderate this move to profit from online access to archival materials in favor of providing a digital version of the traditional reading room — a "noncommercial, free learning commons." (p. 156, 163)

Throughout the book Danielson uses case studies based on real events to explore the myriad ethical considerations involved in archival work, as well as to suggest that there may not be a single correct answer to a given problem. At the end of each of the task-based chapters she also provides a list of questions about the topic at hand, allowing the reader to review their own local policies and their understanding of the accompanying ethical issues. Danielson also provides references to other works that provide more in-depth discussion of issues related to each topical area, including both general guides such as the basic manual series and specific resources such as *Navigating Legal Issues in Archives* by Menzi L. Behrnd-Klodt. Among the most heavily referred to is Karen Benedict's *Ethics and the Archival Profession: Introduction and Case Studies*, which is a useful companion to this volume.

Danielson provides a valuable discussion of how ethics matter, and how individual archivists, the archival community, and the historical record benefit from adherence to professional codes. Complete with appendices containing ethical codes, sample policies, and a broad bibliography, *The Ethical Archivist* is proper reading for any archivist.

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