

2017

Review of Appraisal and Acquisition Strategies

Jean Deken

Stanford University, jmdeken@slac.stanford.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives>



Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Deken, Jean (2017) "Review of Appraisal and Acquisition Strategies," *Journal of Western Archives*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26077/f26c-4d08>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/westernarchives/vol8/iss1/1>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Western Archives by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



Review of Appraisal and Acquisition Strategies

By Michael Shallcross and Christopher J. Prom, ed. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016. 196 pp. Softcover. \$29.99. ISBN 978-0-931828-00-3

Appraisal and Acquisition Strategies is a recent installment in the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) *Trends in Archives Practice* series of publications, which began appearing in 2013. The *Trends in Archives Practice* series is designed to be an "open-ended series of modules" that "features brief, authoritative treatments written and edited by top-level professionals that fill significant gaps in archival literature." The current volume, *Appraisal and Acquisition Strategies*, is comprised of three modules: Module 14, *Appraising Digital Records* (by Geof Huth); Module 15, *Collecting Digital Manuscripts and Archives* (Megan Barnard and Gabriela Redwine); and Module 16, *Accessioning Digital Archives* (Erin Faulder). Series editors Michael Shallcross and Christopher J. Prom have clearly chosen the authors well, and have had them structure the modules they have written so that each one contains a detailed technical treatment of its topic, as well as a list of further readings, several relevant case studies, and useful documentation samples and templates.

The introduction by Michael Shallcross, series co-editor and assistant director for curation at the Bentley Historical Library, is entitled "Collecting Digital Archives: Building Blocks for Success," and it nicely sets the tone for the slim volume, reminding practitioners that "No matter an archives' size or focus, sooner or later it will confront a moment when the opportunity to collect digital content becomes a necessity." As Shallcross indicates, the modules in this volume are very appropriately seen as building blocks in addressing the necessities of collecting digital content, as each one not only complements the other two, but also reinforces several concepts key to the understanding of and navigation in the digital archival environment. Shallcross identifies these key conceptual building blocks as being: 1. no "one-size-fits-all" approach (and according to him, "that's good news"); 2. a continuity of practice between traditional materials and digital content (something that I consider good news); and 3. a core element and characteristic of "sustainability" of appraisal and acquisition of digital materials.

Geof Huth's Module 14, *Appraising Digital Records*, expands on the themes identified in the introduction. Huth is the chief records officer of the New York State Unified Court System, having previously served in a variety of capacities in the New York State Archives for a period of over 20 years. His wealth of experience shows in both the content of his module, and in its wise, avuncular tone. He advises the new and the experienced archivist undertaking appraisal to take a giant step back, to "start before the beginning" and look at the entire digital ecosystem from which the

records have sprung. These digital ecosystems are marked by “fecundity, diversity and interdependence.” Fecundity is the quality of unchecked replication found in every contemporary digital ecosystem; diversity is the “kaleidoscopic variety of formats or versions of formats” of documents and storage media; and interdependence is “the creation and passage of information within and between institutions.” Huth emphasizes the necessity of the appraisal archivists’ getting to know not only the records creators, but the systems creators and managers, as an in-depth understanding of the digital ecosystem is required to identify what is record and what is non-record, what can reasonably be preserved, and how and when that preservation can most effectively be accomplished. Huth’s module is very strong on clear explanations and definitions, and his *Appendix A: Further Reading* includes helpful abstracts and evaluations of the works he cites.

Module 15, *Collecting Digital Manuscripts and Archives* is by Megan Barnard and Gabriela Redwine. Barnard is associate director for Acquisitions and Administration at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin, and Redwine is digital archivist at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Barnard and Redwine begin their module with “A Note about Terminology,” making what I have found to be a crucial point in dealing with born-digital materials. As George Bernard Shaw famously said about the U.S. and Great Britain, archivists, technologists and their publics are “separated by a common language.” The authors point out that “using terminology preferred by a single field or discipline can lead to confusion and misunderstanding when the vocabulary is not shared by all parties.” They further emphasize that terms commonly used by archivists carry different meanings and connotations to those outside the field, and caution archivists to “do their best to find common ground and not privilege their own specialized vocabularies.” They go on to clearly define terms used in the rest of their module. As do the other authors in this volume, Barnard and Redwine emphasize the importance of clearly articulating the organization’s mission as a foundation of all appraisal and acquisition decisions. The mission statement serves as a foundation for the collection development policy; and the collection development policy establishes what file types, formats and media will be collected; what hardware will be collected and retained; what actions will be taken regarding materials created by someone else, etc.

Module 16, *Accessioning Digital Archives* is by Erin Faulder, the digital archivist at Cornell University Library’s Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections. I found her module to be the strongest in the collection, ably combining a very thorough discussion of the concepts and prevailing theories underlying accessioning digital records with eminently practical advice on how and when to incorporate – or not incorporate – such concepts and theories into local institutional practices and procedures. As did the authors of the previous module, Faulder begins by carefully defining the key concepts she will be employing throughout her text, and cautioning her readers to pay careful attention to the nuances of technical terms. She emphasizes that materials need to be acquired in a “sustainable and responsible manner” based on a clearly defined collection policy that takes into account the repository’s present and future capacity to curate digital content. She also makes a

strong case for developing “realistic, iterative processes” that have in view the ongoing and future needs of archival institutions and patrons. Her explanations of the Open Archival Information System (OAIS) Reference Model and of the Producer-Archive Interface Methodology Abstract Standard (PAIMAS) are very fine: clear and concise discussion that explicates the concepts while at the same time cautioning that both “should be considered big-picture guides rather than precise implementation specifications.” Her module is also strong on its discussion of the technical aspects of digital preservation.

In general, I found *Appraisal and Acquisition Strategies* to be a very worthwhile read, and an excellent addition to my professional bookshelf. The case studies in each module are relevant, interesting, and very useful. The modules’ other appendices are equally strong, particularly Module 14’s Archival and Technical Appraisal Checklist and its Tools for Digital Records Appraisal; and Module 16’s Sample Accessioning Workflows. I believe that studying all three modules can be of benefit to any archivist—for example, government records archivists will find useful tips in the manuscripts module. The three modules share a common view point on important aspects of appraisal and acquisition, and reading them in sequence serves to strengthen their individual cases. All three emphasize the importance of a clear statement of the mission of the organization as the foundation of the acquisition policy of an archive and the base upon which all subsequent actions and processes will stand. They all emphasize good relationship building with institutional colleagues, with systems managers, and with digital records creators, and Module 15 goes into interesting detail about the importance of embarking upon discussions with creators about their digital work habits, and of influencing them to improve those habits in order to render their digital creations more robustly “preservable” and deliverable for the long term. All of the modules also discuss the necessity of dealing with privacy concerns, and of isolating materials until they can be scanned for viruses and malware. All three also touch upon the issue of ongoing and future costs of custodianship, and the need to factor an assessment of costs into the initial appraisal of digital materials and into the decision to accession or decline to acquire.

Two passages from the volume resonate particularly: Huth’s statement that “Archivists’ choice in this complicated digital reality is not between failure and success; it is between total failure and the possibility of success; it is the choice between nothing and something,” and Faulder’s advice that “the perfect is the enemy of the good, and the good can always become better.” So, my advice is to do something, beginning with reading this book; and make the good work you are already doing better.

Jean Marie Deken
Archivist and Manager
Stanford University
SLAC National Accelerator
Laboratory
Menlo Park, California