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Review of Government Information Essentials

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Review of *Government Information Essentials*

Edited by Susanne Caro. Chicago: ALA Editions, 2018. 256 pp.
Softcover. ISBN: 978-0-8389-1597-4

Susanne Caro, editor of *Government Information Essentials*, has ten years of experience working in all levels of government information. Currently, she is Montana regional coordinator for the Federal Depository Library Program, and is the government information librarian for the University of Montana in Missoula. Previously, she was state document librarian and coordinator of the New Mexico State Depository Program. She is also the author of *Digitizing Your Collection: Public Library Success Stories* (2015).

In her new book, Ms. Caro attempts to fill gaps in information available to librarians, and by extension, archivists, working in the area of government documents. Understanding the broad variety of specialized niches at play, she captures the expertise of experienced government information librarians to write chapters addressing many issues that are not dealt with in other sources. Government documents is a broad topic, ranging from international to local, including everything in-between. Caro has given herself and her collaborators an immense task. The book contributes well to developing an improved understanding of government records management, with much work remaining.

The book explores five areas of government records, and people managing them. The first area, *Advice For The New Document Professional*, provides advice to new government records librarians, recounts the experiences that an individual may have in the process, and gives advice for someone new to middle management of government records. The *Collection Management* section of the book provides information and advice to the reader on how best to develop and maintain records collections. *Working With Collections* continues the discussion from the previous section, elucidating how once you have the collection, how to work with it. *Teaching and Training* proceeds to help the reader who has developed and become familiar with their records to then share this information with a wider public. Finally, *Advocacy and Events*, gives advice to the librarian or archivist to develop their field and engage a larger segment of the population.

As a beginning archivist, administering a government open records portal, the first and last sections were the most useful to me. *Networking and Training: Essential Tools for Collaboration and Learning*, is an informative chapter for anyone just beginning in the field. Hayley Johnson, author of the chapter, notes the relatively

small number of individuals working in the area can make developing a professional community more difficult, so refers to a variety of entities that the beginner may approach for advice or help. She recommends finding a mentor, attending conferences, and reading government records specific journals. All of this may seem obvious, but for an individual who is still training, who may feel like they can barely keep their head above water, it is a valuable reminder that there are many ways to gain experience and develop professionally. Mostly, though, she encourages the new government records handler to dive in to the work, get your hands dirty, so to speak, and look at new ways of doing things; advice that is useful at any stage of an individual's career. Shari Laster's chapter, *Advocating for Transparency and Access to Information*, is also of particular note for its emphasis on the work of advocacy that is useful for a librarian or archivist working to share government records with the public. Noting that people working with government documents must negotiate diverse activities with intellectual labor, the chapter is fundamentally an inspiring manifesto, encouraging those in the field to strive toward better transparency, "to advocate for policy pertaining to the public good of government information access and preservation." She encourages those working in the area to seek out new ways to make the information we work with available and useful to the public. She also notes that, "by drawing on our understanding of the systems that present barriers, we are positioned to be aware of and quickly respond to the obstacles through direct advocacy and by supporting the work of other advocates for transparency and open government." Anyone working in a public archive, whose purpose is to make government transparent and responsive to its citizens, will find advice and inspiration in this chapter.

Federal Maps and the Depository Library, by Valery King, is also a welcome piece of reading. Maps are a fascinating and often neglected component of the government archive. King briefly walks the reader through the history of which federal government agencies have produced maps that will likely be in a library or archive, then progresses through cataloguing, classification, storage and weeding. The area that is undeveloped in this chapter is discussion of the current state of maps in the depository. More discussion of why maps should have a place in the archive, the benefits and drawbacks that physical maps have, versus digital, should have been explored. Instead, King mostly says that the reader should find that information somewhere else. Her list of sources and resources will guide an archivist looking to expand their understanding of maps under their care.

Considering the editor's previous work, more discussion on digital government records, how to work with government agencies that are utilizing digital documents, and how to provide public access to these, could have been expected. This is a growing area, with various government entities attempting to find the most efficient and useful way of providing digital documents to the public. It is also a quickly developing area, with many entities looking for examples of effective means of interfacing materials between government and the public. Webb and Martin's chapter, *The Hunt for the Elusive*, went some way into this, but was focused on historical research, primarily into federal records. This is a useful but limited

exploration of areas to focus digital research of historical sources in. It would have been useful to accompany this chapter with another that explored more in depth how documents that are being developed now might be better conveyed to the public, or ways in which state or local government documents can be made more available, digitally, to the public.

The other criticism that can be made of the book is that it focuses exclusively on national government records. I cannot speak for the needs of government records librarians. Perhaps this covers much of what they need to know. However, for archivists dealing with government records there would be great benefit in including discussion about state and local government records. I could be asking too much in this, though; this need would probably be better served with a separate book, allowing enough space to fully explore these issues.

Government Information Essentials is a useful book, exploring many neglected areas involved in caring for government records and making them useful and accessible to the public. Though it is written with librarians in mind, much of the information is directly transferable to archivists.

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