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Review of Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Archives and Special Collections

Edited by Laura Uglean Jackson. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019. 206 pp. Hardcover. \$90.00. ISBN: 978-1-5381-1600-5

Reappraisal and deaccessioning are key activities in special collections and archives that are often overlooked. Lack of staff time, hesitation to justify deaccessions to stakeholders, or simple inertia may leave an archive unpruned until matters have reached a crisis point. Most often these crisis points are the result of lack of storage space coupled with outdated or inadequate collection development policies.

This book provides an updated overview of best practices as applied in a variety of repositories holding a variety of formats. Thirteen chapters include case studies that range from a few boxes in a collection to a 20-year backlog of unprocessed materials. Editor Laura Uglean Jackson chaired the Society of American Archivists team that created the Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in 2012. The Guidelines were reapproved in 2017. The book provides case studies to illustrate the best practices and steps outlined in the Guidelines.

The first chapter sets the tone: “Good Intentions: Distinguishing Deaccessioning from Weeding” by Marcella Huggard. Huggard reviews the literature and accepted definitions of the two terms, which are often conflated. Examples follow, along with an excerpt from the University of Kansas processing manual that provides weeding criteria.

With deaccessioning defined, we move into the second chapter “Developing a set of Principles for Deaccessioning in the Archives” by Steve Hanson and Sue Luftschein. The authors propose eight principles that they developed for the University of Southern California Libraries but that are general enough to be of use at any repository. They were created to justify decisions *not* to deaccession materials when faced with administrative pressure to do so; if a collection did not fit all eight criteria, then it would not be deaccessioned. The authors are also careful to provide five additional guidelines for an actual deaccessioning process to minimize friction with stakeholders

Refreshingly, case studies are not limited to the United States. Among three chapters dealing with government archives one is from Canada, “Improving Access to Ontario’s Documentary Heritage: Deaccessioning at the Archives of Ontario” by Emily Chicorli, Aaron Hope, and Sean Smith. In addition to holding records of province-wide importance, the Archives of Ontario has traditionally also held the records of regions and municipalities within the province that were not equipped to

maintain their own archives. However, in the past twenty years many local entities have developed enough that they can hold their records locally. The Archives of Ontario has repatriated many records and has refocused on its mandate to collect records of province-wide importance.

A second chapter on government archives focuses on North Carolina. In their chapter “Implementing a Reappraisal Workflow at the State Archives of North Carolina” by Kelly Policelli and Carie Chesarino, the authors describe the two-pronged approach the state archives took to begin addressing a 20-year backlog of unaccessioned records measuring 40,000 cubic feet. The project was spurred by a 2013 reorganization of their state agency. First, at the macro level, staff revamped records scheduling to prevent records being sent to the archives too soon. Many records in the backlog had been transferred to the archives while still needed for day to day operations in the office that created them. At the micro level, staff also undertook series-level reappraisal and identified record types that should never have been sent to the archive in the first place. The authors provide diagrams of the old and new workflows, which illustrate the complex relationships between record keeping agencies.

The third chapter on government archives drills down to the city level: “Big, Bad, and Boring: The Comptroller’s Collection at the NYC Municipal Archives” by Todd Gilbert and Rachel Greer. As at the North Carolina State Archives, the New York City Municipal Archives underwent a reorganization that included the formation of a new Accession and Appraisals Unit. Gilbert and Greer describe the case study collection that they chose to use to help them create policies, procedures, and workflows for the newly formed unit. The authors provide the forms they developed in an appendix and also touch upon how they are incorporating ArchivesSpace into their workflow.

While not about government archives, the chapter “Reappraisal and Deaccessioning: Applying a ‘Dangerous Practice’ in New Zealand” by Elizabeth Charlton provides an overview of professional attitudes toward reappraisal and deaccessioning in both New Zealand and Australia. Charlton is the archivist for the Society of Mary in New Zealand, an international Roman Catholic religious congregation.

Two chapters concern university archives. The first, “Clear Policies, Clear Transparency, Can’t Lose: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning at UCLA University Archives” by Katherine Lawrie, provides an overview of earlier, foundational works on the topic and describes the project archivist approach that UCLA took to tackle its backlog. Lawrie describes how the work of the project archivist was integrated with that of permanent staff and provides a step-by-step outline on how to build clear policies and transparency to maintain the repository’s trustworthiness.

The second University Archives chapter focuses on the University Archives’ relationship with a single campus department at Kansas State University, “Burns Like a Prairie Fire: Improving Access to University Records through Reappraisal” by Cliff Hight. Hight uses the Office of Student Activities and Services for the case study and

offers an alternate definition of reappraisal as simply delayed appraisal, since in so many cases excess records were never properly appraised in the first place. Sample documents and a reappraisal framework can be found in the appendix.

Another two chapters discuss non-paper formats and the unique challenges they bring. “Deaccessioning in Hybrid Archives and Museum Collections at the University of Florida” by John Nemmers, et al, details how the university dealt with an influx of two hybrid collections; one from a defunct historic site in St. Augustine and the other from the Panama Canal Museum. The authors list out five lessons learned and share sample forms that they developed, including a condition report. They also describe how they used cultural heritage institution best practices to inventory museum artifacts and handled interactions with the board of directors for one of the museums.

“The Deaccessioning and Transfer of the KOVR-TV News Film Collection” by Dylan McDonald and Julie Thomas concerns a collection of over 6 million feet of news film donated to California State University, Sacramento. The collection had been accepted in the 1990s because it qualified as a gift in kind that would count toward a capital campaign underway at the time. CSUS was never able to provide access to the collection and it was ultimately transferred to the Center for Sacramento History. This case study discusses issues of copyright that should be taken into consideration when dealing with this kind of collection. Although the story had a happy ending, the authors point out the lack of documentation surrounding the recent deaccession process is what created a tricky situation.

One of the thorniest issues in reappraisal and deaccession is donor relations. Current staff are sometimes unable to keep promises made to donors by their predecessors, as in “A Gentleman’s Agreement: Donor-Driven Deaccessioning and the Ethics of Collecting” by Adriana P. Cuervo. The Institute of Jazz Studies had accepted regular donations of video recordings of oral history interviews and live musical performances from a single donor over many years. Staff had assured the donor that the materials would be digitized and freely available, despite the fact that he did not have permission to do so from his interview subjects, nor the right to distribute recordings of the live performances. In addition to these ethical hurdles, the Institute simply did not have the resources to digitize the materials. The collection was ultimately transferred to another institution, though the relationship with the donor was permanently damaged.

Dissatisfied donors may also want their materials back. In “Your Cooperation in this Matter has been Splendid” Ruth E. Bryan discusses how her institution returned selected items from an artist’s personal papers. The artist’s children wanted scrapbooks of family photographs returned and argued that they never should have been donated in the first place. The author is careful to point out that the only reason they entertained this request was because the donor’s son had worked as a student assistant in the department. The chapter provides insight into how to handle delicate situations in which people represented in archival materials feel that their privacy is being violated.

Repositories have the best chance of leaving all parties satisfied when the appropriate documentation is in place from the beginning. Vincent J. Novara traces the history of a successful deaccession of a collection on mechanical instruments in his chapter “So Happy Apart.” The curator of the Special Collections in Performing Arts at the University of Maryland at the time accepted the donation because he thought the collection was a good fit and the institution hoped to cultivate the donor for financial contributions. However, students and faculty never consulted the collection, only enthusiasts who demanded a lot of staff time. Ten years after the collection was acquired, the author was appointed curator and decided to refocus on their mission to serve the university. The collection clearly did not serve that mission and ultimately detracted from it. Thankfully, there was an appropriate gift agreement in place with the donor and the University of Maryland was able to transfer the collection to Stanford University and simply informed the donor of this after the fact.

This book is a useful addition to the archival literature and goes a long way to demystifying the reappraisal and deaccessioning process.

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