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Introduction to “Collection Stewardship in the Age of Finite Resources”: A special issue for Journal of Western Archives

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Introduction

Ryan K. Lee

In the first quarter of the 21st century, archives are dealing with many unique challenges, one the largest and most overwhelming being the issue of space. During the late 19th century and through the 20th century, archivists were very adept at collecting and preserving records of historical and enduring value. While throughout these decades, issues like appraisal, collection development, and collection management were explored to address some issues, it has not been until recently that archivists have had to deal with the realities of finite space, staff capacity, and other resources head on and truly apply these concepts. Today, once-taboo concepts like reappraisal, deaccessioning, and managing donor expectations are starting to be more openly accepted as necessary for the survival of archives in the 21st century and beyond. But exactly how these concepts are to be addressed is still a work in progress. With that in mind, this special issue grew out of the need for more guidance and collective wisdom on these issues to provide all archivists with more tools and techniques with which they can address problems in their own repositories. I believe we have collected a wonderful body of work that will aid archivists in the American West and beyond as they struggle through these times of limited resources and as we work together toward our collective mission to document and preserve the historical record for generations to come. Here is a preview of what the reader will find in this special issue:

Our first article, "Secondary Processing at Utah State University Archives," Kelly Rovegno, Heather Housley, and Paul Daybell explore a new workflow for tackling issues found with the arrangement, description, and preservation of the University Archives during a remediation project. Called "secondary processing," the goal is to perform specific processing and preservation work in the areas where there is the most potential to improve access and discoverability, as well as address preservation needs overlooked in initial processing. This article provides a wonderful case study for how to use the MPLP framework to manage a large-scale inventory and finding aid project for an inherited collection.

In the second article, "Beyond Efficiency: An Impact Assessment of the UC Guidelines for Efficient Processing," Laurel McPhee (UC San Diego), Kate Dundon (UC Santa Cruz), Courtney Dean (Yale), Elvia Arroyo-Ramirez (UC Irvine), and Audra Eagle Yun (UC Irvine) evaluate how the *Guidelines for Efficient Archival Processing in*

the University of California Libraries have impacted backlogs, collection management policy, and day-to-day archival practices across the UC libraries over the ten years since being established. Their findings are informative not just for UC repositories but are applicable to any archive. While the authors found that the guidelines did have a significant impact on reducing backlog, their evaluation also uncovered other issues at play that need to be addressed to solve the backlog problem, including processing staff reductions; a resource imbalance that favors collecting over processing; and a capacity gap in collection management infrastructure—issues common to most archival institutions.

The third article is “A New Generation of Collecting Priorities: Case Studies from the Northwest.” Based on a presentation given at the annual Northwest Archivists, Inc. meeting in May 2023, Jodi Allison-Bunnell (Montana State University–Bozeman), Linda Long (University of Oregon), Trevor J. Bond (Washington State University), Chloe Nielsen (Anchorage Museum), and Amy Valentine (Anchorage Museum) examine how collection development policies and priorities have evolved over the past two decades as archivists are being challenged to diversify and broaden collections, while at the same time be more responsible stewards with limited budgets, space, and other resources. The article is an examination of four case studies from the authors’ respective institutions on how they are grappling with these challenges, and how their collecting policies have been altered to accommodate or address these issues, with an emphasis on LGBTQ+ and indigenous collections. While these case studies are specific to each institution, the lessons learned can be applicable broadly to any archival institution dealing with similar issues, including over-collecting by our predecessors and staff capacity within our own institutions.

“Documenting Wonderland: Conducting a Collection Survey to Inform Collecting Policies,” by Sara Pettinger (Purdue University) and Anne L. Foster (Yellowstone National Park) is the fourth article in this special issue. The focus of this article on an archive of a national park, in this case Yellowstone National Park, sets it apart. While there are similarities to academic and other archives, there are unique parameters for their collecting scope, including a small number of specific categories in which they can place their collections. However, this article can still serve as a model for archives of any size wishing to assess their collections to determine areas of potential adjustment within collecting policies. Critically assessing our extent collections, in light of limited resources now and into the future, can be a challenging and daunting project. But this article shows that it can be done, and there is much to learn from such assessments, even if we just take on one area of our collections at a time. The conclusion of the article also provides some interesting insights on collaborating across repositories that collect similar materials—something we can all learn from in this age of limited resources.

The final article in this special issue is “Stewardship and Sustainability: Applying the TCOS Framework to Reappraisal.” This is a work-in-progress article by a group from Brigham Young University Special Collections. Authors Karen Glenn, John Murphy, Cory Nimer, and Dainan Skeem provide a report on a reappraisal pilot

project they are attempting, which was based on OCLC's Total Cost of Stewardship (TCOS) framework. Reappraisal of collections used to be a taboo term to be avoided at all costs. But in today's age of limited resources, particularly space, it is something we must all come to grips with at some point, likely sooner than later. This brief report is a great example of how a large archive is taking this on, even if on a small portion of their collection, in this case faculty papers. While this is only a work in progress, with findings that will inform a future larger-scale project, there is still much that can be learned and applied from this article, including the costs and benefits of reappraisal.

On behalf of the editorial board of the *Journal of Western Archives*, I want to thank all those who contributed to this special issue. I also want to thank the Editorial Board and the peer reviewers for their time and wisdom to help make these articles better. To the readers, I hope you enjoy this special issue and take something from it that will aid you as, together, we attempt to adapt and adjust to the challenges and opportunities that define this age of finite resources.