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# The Importance of Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Collegiate Archives in the Pacific Northwest

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Special thanks to the Washington State University Honors College for funding my research at the 2012 Northwest Archivists' Conference in Salem, Oregon. Thank you to my advisor Trevor Bond for his guidance throughout this project, to Cheryl Gunselman for her help with revising and editing, and to my interviewees for taking the time to talk with me.

# The Importance of Reappraisal and Deaccessioning in Collegiate Archives in the Pacific Northwest

Courtney Buehn

## ABSTRACT

This article examines the current reappraisal practices and procedures of archives, and investigates the need for official deaccessioning policies through the analysis of literature in the field and eight personal interviews conducted with professionals in universities in the Pacific Northwest. These persons were asked about the initial appraisal procedure of their repository, the current reappraisal process done without an official policy, and the factors that contribute to the decisions made concerning deaccessioning. Formal policies for appraisal and deaccessioning are important for responsible management of individual archival repositories, and also for the development of archival communities.

## Introduction

Surviving primary source materials shape what people know about history. Source materials are important because they are historical accounts contributing to the “cultural heritage...and social memory” of the world, and thereby need to be preserved in stable environments, such as archives.<sup>1</sup> Archival repositories are the safest places for valuable historical documents. Unfortunately, these facilities have a limited amount of space, so it is a problem when items have no research value or cannot be accessed because of extreme mold contamination occupy shelf space. For example, I helped dispose of moldy bank ledgers because they could not be handled safely and could contaminate other materials, and it was not known if they had ever been researched. After making sure the repository did not have a legal obligation to keep these items, the text blocks were separated from the covers and everything was thrown away.

Part of the problem is institutions have large backlogs of materials that need to be reduced. One step to controlling the backlog of an archive is to ensure the repository’s appraisal guide is updated. This provides archivists with more specific guidelines for the materials they should accept and for determining if a previously-

1. Randall Jimerson, “Deciding what to save,” *OCLC Systems & Services* 19 (2003): 140. For more information on the AIMS Project, see <http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/aims/> (accessed November 6, 2012).

accessioned collection fits the current collecting scope. This way there are fewer collections acquired that could accumulate and make the backlog larger and unmanageable. An effective method for managing the backlog is reappraisal, sometimes followed by deaccessioning. Though not “accept[ed] as a legitimate collection management activity [until] the early 1980s” and surrounded by controversy, deaccessioning is now an important aspect of efficient archives. There are many factors that must be addressed when discussing deaccessioning, including a state’s abandoned property law, how often collections have been accessed, if collections are considered processed or unprocessed, and how donors feel about the potential of their materials being discarded or transferred. By determining if individual collections are relevant to the scope of the archive’s collections, the institution focuses its collecting scope and potentially creates room for future collections. Transferring collections to other repositories after deaccessioning ensures that the collections will have a greater chance of being accessed. Deaccessioning is vital in the archival profession and should not be ignored, but rather implemented in all archival repositories in the Pacific Northwest and the United States. Institutions need to create policies addressing this issue, providing steps by which archivists may efficiently and successfully reappraise and deaccession items.

## Literature Review

The role of an archives facility is to house and care for historical materials in a safe environment where researchers can access them safely. If these facilities are not managed properly, valuable historical materials may be lost. Space is an issue because archivists wish to acquire important collections but may not have open shelf space. It can be difficult to create open shelf space because physically expanding the archives is costly. However, archivists hesitate to remove current collections because when a document is transferred to an archival repository, it becomes “imbue[d]...with particular value” because the item is deemed important enough to be housed in a special facility.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, if deaccessioning is done effectively and professionally, it becomes one solution to these problems. Deaccessioning gives archivists options for what to do with collections that no longer fit into the collecting scope of the repository, whether the documents are then transferred, returned to the donor, or permanently discarded. It is helpful to have a defined collecting policy to aid archivists in initially deciding which materials should be acquired, preventing potential deaccessioning later. References to deaccessioning have become a topic of scholarly discussion only in the last 20-30 years, so the practice is not widespread. Only in May 2012 did the Society of American Archivists (SAA) Council approve a document entitled *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning*, which presents a step-by-step process for the rationale behind deaccessioning, the preparation required before reappraisal,

2. James M. O’Toole and Richard J. Cox, *Understanding Archives & Manuscripts* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006), 120.

the process of reappraisal, the deaccessioning process, and steps for evaluating the project after it is completed.<sup>3</sup> Until 2012, “the U.S. archival profession ha[d] nothing official to say about deaccessioning—either as policy or procedure.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, reappraisal and deaccession topics “barely register[ed] within the archival profession in the United States, Canada, and Australia” in 2006, with deaccessioning as “a word never to be uttered aloud’ in [the] profession.”<sup>5</sup>

The taboo regarding deaccessioning is the result of archivists being wary about accidentally throwing away materials that should be kept, whether because of legal obligation or the potential historical value of the documents. The first published article advocating for deaccessioning (though the term was not specifically used) came from Leonard Rapport in 1981, who states: “We [archivists] have to keep...in mind [that], in addition to our obligation as archivists to do our best, as servants of the people, to preserve for them records of value, we have...an obligation not to make the nation pay for preserving what isn’t worth the cost of preserving.”<sup>6</sup> Rapport was one of the first authors to argue for reappraisal and deaccessioning in public archives, causing the issue of deaccessioning to become openly discussed in the archival field. In response to Rapport’s article, Karen Benedict argues: “An archivist cannot be totally confident that he has found material that was wrongly accessioned; he can only identify that which he now believes to have been wrongly accessioned,”<sup>7</sup> emphasizing that deaccessioning is based upon one’s subjective judgment. She states that deaccessioning should be viewed only as a “crisis management solution,” as it is “short-sighted, short-range, and meant to provide immediate results regardless of the long-term consequences of the action.”<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, Lawrence Dowler supports Rapport’s argument: “The failure to perceive deaccessioning as a legitimate function of appraisal and an essential and integral part of collection development...

3. The development committee was chaired by Laura Uglean Jackson, an archivist interviewed for this case study. The complete guidelines can be found at: Society of American Archivists, “Guidelines for Appraisal and Deaccessioning,” SAA, <http://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-reappraisal-and-deaccessioning> (accessed 2012).
4. American Heritage Center, “Collections Management Policy,” University of Wyoming (November, 2008): 11.
5. Mark A. Greene, “I’ve Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell About It: Confessions of an Unrepentant Reappraiser,” *Archival Issues* 30, no.1 (2006): 7.
6. Leonard Rapport, “No Grandfather Clause: Reappraising Accessioned Records,” *American Archivist* 44, no. 2 (1981): 144.
7. Karen Benedict, “Invitation to a Bonfire: Reappraisal and Deaccessioning of Records as Collection Management Tools in an Archives—A Reply to Leonard Rapport,” *American Archivist* 47, no. 1 (1984): 45.
8. *Ibid.*, 46.

[is] irresponsible.”<sup>9</sup> Deaccessioning was highly controversial in the 1980s, but is recognized as a legitimate method for collection development in the 21st century. Since the controversial articles of the 1980s, “the majority of reappraisal and deaccessioning literature has appeared as case studies,”<sup>10</sup> including articles about the Minnesota Historical Society,<sup>11</sup> the State Archives of Michigan,<sup>12</sup> and the American Heritage Center in Wyoming.<sup>13</sup> Deaccessioning and reappraisal have evolved from controversial topics to sanctioned practices in the archival world.

However, when carrying out these procedures, archivists need to be aware of their legal obligation to keep certain collections, especially under state property laws. There are many cases where there is little or no documentation of ownership, which complicates the deaccessioning process because the repository is legally responsible for removing collections that it does not officially own. Also, retention schedules dictate how long certain records must be kept. These hurdles must be addressed before any deaccessioning happens, and instructions for this process should be included in future deaccession policies.

## Methodology

In order to determine how organizations have dealt with the current lack of official policy, I conducted scripted, open-ended interviews with archivists to learn how they are implementing reappraisal and deaccession practices (see Appendix A: Interview Questions). Prior, I received a Certification of Exemption for this research after completing the application through the Institutional Review Board at Washington State University. The case study sample consists of archivists from established collegiate archives in the Pacific Northwest. However, because the group of archivists interviewed was small, there is potential for further research encompassing more professionals from a greater variety of archival repositories. In developing the survey, I interviewed representatives experienced in deaccessioning from the American Heritage Center (AHC) at the University of Wyoming. The interviewees that make up the case study include: the Manuscripts Librarians Cheryl Gunselman at Washington State University (WSU) and Linda Long at the University of Oregon (UO); University Archivists John Bolcer at the University of Washington

9. Lawrence Dowler, “Deaccessioning Collections: A New Perspective on a Continuing Controversy,” in *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in an Age of Abundance*, ed. Nancy Peace (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1984), 117.
10. Laura Uglean Jackson and D. Claudia Thompson, “But You Promised: A Case Study of Deaccessioning at the American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming,” *American Archivist* 73, no. 2 (2010): 670.
11. Mark Greene, “What Were We Thinking?: A Call to Embrace Reappraisal and Deaccessioning,” *Provenance* 20 (2002): 32-49.
12. Caryn Wojcik, “Appraisal, Reappraisal, and Deaccessioning,” *Archival Issues* 27, no. 2 (2002): 151-160.
13. Jackson and Thompson, “But You Promised.”

(UW) and Larry Landis at Oregon State University (OSU); the Heads of the Archives and Special Collections Garth Reese at the University of Idaho (UI) and Donna McCrea at the University of Montana (UM); and the Records Manager and Archivist Tony Kurtz at Western Washington University (WWU).

The interviews began with questions concerning appraisal practices. Then, I inquired about the deaccessioning habits of each institution and the possibility of a future deaccessioning policy. In addition, I asked their opinions regarding different factors that contribute to decisions about deaccessioning. The diversity among responses reflects the variety of archival subjects and archivist responsibilities, exposing the difficulty in creating a policy for an archives department as a whole (see Appendix B: Interview Data Summary).

### **The American Heritage Center**

In order to learn more about the process of reappraisal and deaccessioning, I interviewed two experts: Laura Jackson and Mark Greene from the American Heritage Center, which holds “roughly 75,000 cubic feet of material.”<sup>14</sup> They were involved in the large deaccessioning project at the AHC, for which preparation began around 1995 and commenced in 2008 (though deaccessioning continues as needed). The repository undertook this project “because of [the] once-notorious past acquisition habits,”<sup>15</sup> where hundreds of collections were not initially appraised, creating a “29,500-cubic-foot backlog” of mysterious materials that may or may not have fit the collecting subject areas.<sup>16</sup> During the deaccessioning project, the content of collections was appraised and it was determined if a collection should remain in the repository, be transferred, destroyed, or returned to the donor.

Because of the success of its deaccessioning project, many archivists speak glowingly about the facility’s model procedures. During the first significant deaccession work at the American Heritage Center, the facility deaccessioned 30 collections totaling 2,027 cubic feet in the 2004-2005 fiscal year and 510 collections totaling 5,650 cubic feet in the 2005-2006 fiscal year; none of this activity was assisted by grant funds, but “by shifting internal priorities and changing work flows.”<sup>17</sup> In 2006, the AHC received a grant that enabled the repository to reappraise 396 identified collections, deaccessioning 303 collections, equaling 8,847 cubic feet of material, from October 2006 to December 2008.<sup>18</sup> Newly-hired archivists reappraised and researched the collections on the reappraisal list of collections larger than 10

14. American Heritage Center, “Collections,” University of Wyoming, <http://www.uwyo.edu/ahc/collections/index.html> (accessed July 5, 2012).

15. Greene, “I’ve Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell About It,” 12.

16. Jackson and Thompson, “But You Promised,” 671.

17. Greene, “I’ve Deaccessioned and Lived to Tell About It,” 12.

18. Jackson and Thompson, “But You Promised,” 673, 678, 679.

cubic feet, and shipped some deaccessioned collections as far away as Australia and Germany. In total, between the years 2004 and 2008, the AHC deaccessioned approximately 16,500 cubic feet of archival material (equivalent to about three miles). Even after this large project, there are still “several hundred” collections on the reappraisal list.<sup>19</sup> Currently, the AHC deaccessions collections “here and there” as the need arises.

Before the project began, the AHC had to address Wyoming’s unclaimed property law because the archivists wanted to be sure that the repository had legal title to the collections on the reappraisal lists. After the AHC “conducted a project to solicit deeds of gift from previous donors” between 1989 and 1991, the archivists determined that the then-current abandoned property act for Wyoming would require the institution to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars, in an attempt to find previous donors, by sending a certified letter to the “donor’s last known address, and if the letter did not result in a contact, three advertisements had to be placed in newspapers likely to be read by the donor.”<sup>20</sup> In 1992, the law was changed to say the following:

[I]f the repository acquired materials before 1982 and had been out of contact with the donor and the donor’s heirs for at least ten years, the repository owned the collection. If a collection had been accepted after 1982 or if there had been contact with the donor during the last ten years, a certified letter had to be sent to the last known address with the offer to return the collection. If the recipient made not contact within sixty days, or if the letter was returned, the repository could legally claim the collection as a gift.<sup>21</sup>

The procedures employed in the AHC project were invaluable in the creation of the SAA deaccessioning guidelines, and every archivist in the United States could benefit from examining and adapting the guidelines for his or her institution. However, before reappraisal and deaccessioning should begin, repositories should ensure they have adequate appraisal guidelines, as this is one cause of large backlogs.

## **Appraisal Guidelines**

An important step in controlling the backlog of an archive is to refine its acquisition and appraisal guidelines. These vary depending upon the type of institution. Collegiate archives collect a range of materials that pertain not only to the university, but also to the history of the town, state, and region in which the institution resides. As inadequate appraisal practices are often the source of large

19. Laura Uglean Jackson, interview by author, Skype, May 18, 2012.

20. Jackson and Thompson, “But You Promised,” 676.

21. *Ibid.* See also: Wyoming Statutes 34-23-102 for full text.



backlogs, I began my interviews by asking about the appraisal practices of their facilities.

### **Types of Materials Collected and the Benefits of Appraisal Guidelines**

The varied positions of the professionals interviewed and missions of their institutions resulted in diverse responses. For instance, the university archivists were commonly more concerned with the documents created by the university, while the manuscripts librarians tended to focus on the papers of faculty members, alumni, or others who have had an impact on the history of the repository's region. Some of the archives described have very thorough collecting policies, such as Western Washington University, while others have less specific collecting policies and appraisal guidelines. Though thorough collection policies help in appraising acquisitions, archivists still face other appraisal problems, such as retention schedules and the merging of departments.

At Western Washington University, the collection development policy states the role of the University Records department, while the appraisal guide defines specifically what materials the archives should acquire and keep. There are two designations for the types of materials housed in the facility: university records and university archival records. "University records document both official acts and 'non-official' supporting activities or work product of the institution," while "university [archival] records have enduring 'permanent' value, typically for historical purposes but also including legal or administrative purposes."<sup>22</sup> The problem identified by Records Manager Tony Kurtz is the lack of consistency with the items designated "archival" and "non-archival." As these materials were acquired through a retention schedule, they were accessioned without thorough evaluation of which documents should be classified as archival and which should not. Thereby, documents of the same nature are labeled "archival" and "non-archival" depending upon the year they were accessioned. Because of his "strong familiarity with the institutional records" collected over the years, Kurtz created new appraisal guidelines for future acquisitions so these designations are more uniformly applied. Now, materials accessioned by the facility are initially appraised, thereby reducing the number of collections that are sent to the backlog.

Similarly, John Bolcer, University Archivist at the University of Washington, states that the acquisition policy for his department is the university's general records policy. An issue for Bolcer is duplicated items, as multiple departments will have documentation on the same activities. This is why initial appraisal is essential to determining where documents should be filed. But, as Bolcer states, with "so many records [arriving] every year...[the department] never get[s] a chance to really lay

22. Tony Kurtz, interview by author, Salem, Oregon, April 26, 2012; Western Washington University Libraries, "POL-U4910.01: Managing University Archival Records," Western Washington University, <http://www.wvu.edu/policies/docs/2000-4000%20Academic%20Affairs/POL-U4910.01%20Managing%20University%20Archival%20Records.pdf> (accessed April, 2010): 1.

careful eye” on all the materials. Like Kurtz, Bolcer’s goal is to appraise and control the inflow of material before addressing the problem of the archive’s backlog.<sup>23</sup>

For Linda Long, Manuscript Librarian at the University of Oregon, the repository’s primary collecting subjects include Oregon’s history, Western literature materials, and creators of children’s literature during the “golden age” between 1940 and 1950. Like Kurtz and Bolcer, Long is focusing on developing the collections about the repository’s state, since it is one of the archive’s most important subject areas. This university’s guidelines are helpful because they can point archivists toward “collections [that] would enrich [the repository’s] holdings,” but also enable them to “hold back and tell donors” the repository is not interested in the materials because they do not fit into its collecting scope.<sup>24</sup>

Larry Landis, University Archivist at Oregon State University, is in the process of merging the Special Collections and University Archives sections into one department. His main concern is “refin[ing] the [appraisal] guidelines so they are very succinct” and encompass all the aspects of the new department.<sup>25</sup> Similar to Long, Landis’ department would like to expand the materials in a particular subject—in this case, Oregon’s underrepresented cultural and ethnic groups. Likewise, Garth Reese, Head of Archives and Special Collections at the University of Idaho, is also in the process of merging the University Archives and the Special Collections areas into a cohesive department and attempting to create a collecting policy that covers both sections.<sup>26</sup> For Reese, the present guidelines are helpful in communicating with donors and applying for grants to acquire new collections. At the University of Montana, Donna McCrea, Head of the Archives and Special Collections, said the main concern of the institution is the history of the region and the long-term preservation of these items. Similar to Reese, her main benefit from the facility’s guidelines is the ability to effectively communicate to donors. In some cases, the materials are “potentially more genealogical than scholarly,” and the guidelines are helpful in making the donor realize the difference.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike the other archivists, Cheryl Gunselman, Manuscripts Librarian from Washington State University, is more concerned with the content of the 681 collections (3,710 linear feet) in the unprocessed backlog. Her goal for acquisition is to contribute to the university’s “collective memory,” but also to “support the teaching,

23. John Bolcer, interview by author, Salem, Oregon, April 26, 2012.

24. Linda Long, interview by author, phone, May 8, 2012.

25. Larry Landis, interview by author, Salem, Oregon, April 27, 2012.

26. Garth Reese, interview by author, Moscow, Idaho, May 10, 2012.

27. Donna McCrea, interview by author, Skype, April 20, 2012.

research, and scholarly mission” of WSU.<sup>28</sup> The types of materials she helps acquire for the university include collections pertaining to the history of the Pacific Northwest, Washington State, and specifically to the Palouse region. In discussing the institution’s appraisal guidelines, Gunselman says “the WSU specific part of that statement is helpful” because it is “vague enough that it allows for generations of librarians to...shape the collection in their own way.”<sup>29</sup> However, the policy is not ideal because there is little “direct guidance in terms of looking for subject content” that the repository should be collecting. This has allowed many collections to be accessioned that should not be housed at WSU, but elsewhere.

Overall, the types of materials collected by the archivists in this case study relate to the history of the university and to the history and culture of the town, region, and state in which the repository resides. The institutions also have specific collections unique to the facility that may not relate to the collecting scope, but were acquired as a result of curricular emphasis, the practices of previous archivists, and other factors. As archivists revise appraisal guidelines, they focus on the collecting areas they believe should be expanded and that are important to the history of the university and the region. It is important that the guidelines are not so specific that the repository is not allowed to grow, but not so vague that collections are accessioned that do not fit into the collecting scope.

### **Past Collecting Practices**

A contributing factor to an unmanageable backlog is poor past acquisition practices, which was the issue at the American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming. When discussing past practices, professionals may be hesitant to speak ill of their predecessors. However, there was no indication in this case study that the interviewees hid information about their predecessors or their decisions.

One of the issues raised by my interviewees about past practices is their predecessors relied too heavily on retention schedules and did not evaluate materials as they were accessioned by the department. Presently, archivists are struggling to examine the contents of documents acquired through past retention schedules while attempting to evaluate the information acquired in current schedules. At this point, it would be advantageous for archivists to first focus on the material currently being accessioned so the problem of examining materials acquired through retention schedules does not continue to grow. If archivists see a trend of irrelevant items accessioned through a retention schedule, they should consider revising the schedule so only relevant material is sent to the archives, alleviating some of the time and effort needed to evaluate the incoming collection and better evaluate earlier accessioned collections for possible deaccession. Only then should archivists return

28. Washington State University Libraries, “General Collection Policy,” Washington State University, <http://www.wsulibs.wsu.edu/masc/generalcollectionpolicy.html>, (accessed September 27, 2011).

29. Cheryl Gunselman, interview by author, Pullman, Washington, April 19, 2012.

to the materials their predecessors acquired through retention schedules and reduce the items in their backlog. However, archivists and records managers should always take into account the legal part of retention schedules; for example, if employee or asbestos records must be kept for a certain number of years, they should not be removed or destroyed before the declared date.

Sometimes, past acquisition practices lead to the development of unique collections, like the children's literature materials at the University of Oregon. In this instance, archivists received papers about a particular subject from people who suggested the papers of one another to the traveling professionals.<sup>30</sup> As time passes, collegiate archivists, such as those at UO, often refrain from adding to a repository's unique collections in favor of expanding the subject areas that pertain more to the scholarly mission of the university.

Among most of the older repositories, there is a trend of past archivists sometimes collecting materials with little consideration for what they contain. The younger departments, like at Oregon State University and the University of Idaho, do not have large backlogs and are focusing more on building the holdings of the repository. In either case, many archivists are beginning to revisit collections acquired in the past and reevaluate them for historical value and relevance to the repository's present topical areas of interest.

## **Deaccessioning**

With the adoption of formal reappraisal and deaccession guidelines,<sup>31</sup> the SAA recognizes deaccessioning as an adequate tool for managing archives rather than a controversial practice, as reappraisal and deaccessioning have been in the past. When archivists adopt these guidelines, they are taking the first step toward stopping the growth of a repository's backlog, focusing a repository's collecting scope, and making collections more accessible to researchers.

## **Reappraisal**

The first step to preparing for deaccessioning is reappraisal, which determines if the materials fit into the repository's collecting policy. Without this part of the process, the deaccession of unprocessed accessions would not happen because it would not be known if the materials were relevant or not. The challenge with reappraising previously-collected materials is present archivists substitute their "own judgment for that of an earlier appraiser, based purely on subjective grounds."<sup>32</sup> Many

30. Long, May 8, 2012.

31. Society of American Archivists, "Guidelines for Appraisal and Deaccessioning," SAA, <http://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-reappraisal-and-deaccessioning> (accessed 2012).

32. Benedict, "Invitation to a Bonfire," 45.

of the archivists who participated in the case study mentioned a wariness of judging the decisions of their predecessors as well as deaccessioning materials that are not presently popular but may hold more historical value for future researchers.

## Policies

None of the archivists interviewed have official reappraisal or deaccession policies for their departments, though the Special Collections departments at Western Washington University and at Oregon State University have a statement iterating that their department has the right to dispose of and transfer materials.<sup>33</sup> The Special Collections at the University of Idaho addressed deaccessioning at one time, but since the merger with the University Archives, there is not yet a policy that covers both departments. In light of the lack of formal policy, repositories follow their own practices when they need to reappraise or deaccession items.

## Practices and Recent Deaccessioning

At WWU, Tony Kurtz has not begun deaccessioning, but plans to in the near future. After gaining official custody of records from the originating offices, Kurtz is now ready to begin reappraising and possibly deaccessioning previously-acquired records. He knows an “appraisal policy [will not] cover everything because it is based on present interpretations,” and is therefore in the process of developing reappraisal and deaccession forms. Kurtz wishes to begin reappraising the repository’s holdings because some materials are not available to the public “in the way that they should be,” and other collections are not processed “according to archival standards.” He wants to “firm up” the initial appraisal of materials as they “come in the door” instead of relying on retention schedules, while simultaneously reappraising the unevaluated records that were acquired through past retention schedules. Similar to Western Washington University, there has not been any deaccessioning at Linda Long’s department at the University of Oregon. However, the UO archivists have an opportunity to create a deaccession policy and gain reappraising and deaccessioning experience through the grant the department received from the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), which will allow the archivists at the University of Oregon to reevaluate the collections in the backlog.

The University Archives at Oregon State University has deaccessioned collections, such as the records from a local law office that Larry Landis’ predecessor destroyed “on the advice of the university’s legal counsel.”<sup>34</sup> Personally, Landis has never transferred collections to other repositories, but deaccessioned only by

33. Western Libraries @ Western Washington University, “Western Libraries Special Collections Policy,” Western Washington University, [http://library.wwu.edu/specialcollections/SC\\_Policy](http://library.wwu.edu/specialcollections/SC_Policy) (accessed May 2, 2012); OSU Libraries, “Donating Materials to the Archives,” Oregon State University, <http://archives.library.oregonstate.edu/donating-materials-archives> (accessed July 8, 2012).

34. Landis, April 27, 2012.

destruction. One example is survey and research notes from a graduate student who attended OSU in the 1960s. After offering them to the university where the student taught, the documents were eventually thrown away. Though the department has a broad blanket statement about deaccessioning items of little value, Landis is considering an official policy for the future that would make the current language more succinct so as to cover the combined department.

John Bolcer at the University of Washington has deaccessioned collections because they should have been housed somewhere else. He believes that the reason the archive has collections that should be housed in another institution is because the archive at the University of Washington was the “first manuscript repository in the Seattle area,” meaning the institution has materials that are better suited for the King County Archives or the Seattle Municipal Archives. For example, the UW University Archives had papers from the Assistant Attorney General’s office from a branch of the office on the UW campus. However, none of the information could be accessed by the public—it was only available to people from that office. Coupled with the fact that the collection was taking up valuable space, Bolcer decided to give the papers back to the Attorney General’s office in batches, which are more manageable than sending the whole collection back at once. His department does have deaccessioning “practices,” but he does not know if there will ever be a need for a universal policy, since curators know the history of and work on a particular section of the archive.

At the University of Idaho, Garth Reese, like Bolcer, has had experience deaccessioning items that should be housed in other repositories; for example, half of a donor’s papers were housed at UI and half were at the state historical society. The final decision was to move all of the donor’s papers to the state historical society since he was a retired state administrator. Reese says there is a plan to develop a deaccession policy or a “best practices” document that includes both the University Archives and the Special Collections, but that he first needs to “get many different constituencies in place” so everyone who is needed is involved.

At Washington State University, Cheryl Gunselman has done some deaccessioning, mainly concerning mold-contaminated items hazardous to other materials.<sup>35</sup> There has not been any recent deaccessioning due to the research value of the collection’s information. She says ideally, she would like to develop a policy in a couple of years, and then receive a grant to undertake a large reappraisal project for the unprocessed collections in the backlog. For recent deaccessions, she has attempted to leave “a really good paper trail” so that future archivists will know what happened to the deaccessioned materials.

Donna McCrea, at the University of Montana, says she deaccessions “all the time,” particularly scrapbooks that do not have the same research value as other

35. For example, the large mold-covered bank ledgers in collection Cage 335 were disposed of to protect the surrounding collections on the shelves.

historical papers. Recently, a set of photographs were sent to another repository because they were “not so interesting that they needed to be kept.” The main issue in McCrea’s department is the lack of staff and resources, which has led to a large backlog in need of reevaluation. When the need for a deaccession policy arises, McCrea says she would develop a statement, explaining that the archives “will periodically reappraise and deaccession materials that are no longer appropriate for the collection,” coupled with a written procedure. Currently, the everyday activities of her department are more important than developing a reappraisal or deaccession policy, which is also the situation for developing a policy at the archive at WSU.

When asked, all of the archivists knew of the Society of American Archivists’ guidelines for reappraisal and deaccessioning and would utilize them in creating their own policies. It is important to note that “the ideals exceed the realities” in that not all repositories have the resources to perform all of the SAA’s guidelines, so each institution will have to tailor the guidelines to fit its unique situation.<sup>36</sup>

## Factors

There are many factors that contribute to an archivist’s decision regarding deaccessioning a collection, including the information the collection contains. Archivists consider how long a collection has not accessed, the need to verify or obtain legal title using the state laws governing abandoned property, if the repository needs more shelf space for future collections, and the opinions of donors about the possible transfer of their materials. However, there is debate about deaccessioning in order to create empty shelf space. Karen Benedict says “it is a serious strategic mistake for the head of an archives to suggest that, to conserve space, the staff should search the holdings for records that can be discarded,” implying that creating space as the sole reason for deaccessioning is not a good enough reason.<sup>37</sup> Mark Greene also agrees with this statement, saying that deaccessioning should be “done as part of a project, not as a series of disjointed decisions,” since this could result in inconsistent deaccessioning among the archivists at the repository.<sup>38</sup> Inconsistent deaccessioning could potentially lead to distressed discord between a repository and its donors, and among the archivists at the institution. To better understand some of the potential issues, questions were asked about some of the factors that contribute to deaccessioning.

## Processed vs. Unprocessed Collections

In archival repositories, there is a designation between processed collections and unprocessed collections. When collections are fully processed, the contents of the

36. Reese, May 10, 2012.

37. Benedict, “Invitation to a Bonfire,” 45.

38. Greene, May 24, 2012.

collection have been organized and are accompanied by a finding aid describing the collection. Unprocessed collections have had very little work and organization done to them. All of the interviewees recognize the designation between unprocessed and processed collections, but the difference does not affect their decisions concerning deaccessioning. Their decisions are based more on the content of the documents. However, there was some concern about removing a collection that had “intellectual work and resources” put into it, and that may have been cited in someone’s research.<sup>39</sup> The issue with cited collections is a “point of contention among archivists” because no archivist wants to have to tell a researcher that the facility no longer houses certain materials.<sup>40</sup> Also, a few archivists raised the issue about making a judgment on the decisions of past archivists by reappraising and possibly deaccessioning processed collections. This issue arises especially when collections have not been accessed for many years, sometimes decades.

### **Collections with Little Use**

When collections that do not fit the collecting scope are processed, sometimes the materials remain on shelves for many years without being accessed. This becomes an issue when archivists want to accession collections that would improve the repository’s holdings, but there is not enough space because other irrelevant collections are taking up space. Of the archivists interviewed, most say that a collection’s use would not be a factor at all, but Tony Kurtz and Larry Landis say it could be a minor factor that would be discussed if the collection was considered for deaccessioning. However, other factors are more important, such as the content of the collection, and none would make a decision to deaccession based solely on a collection’s usage.

One of the main issues with determining a collection’s use history is that many repositories, though they do have call slips for when someone requests materials, do not have a complete record of which collections are used. For example, an archivist may look at the information in a collection, but make no record of having used the collection, so it is difficult to determine if a collection has truly never been accessed. As this is unreliable information, it is very difficult for archivists to consider the length of time a collection has not been accessed when deliberating deaccessioning, so they rely on other factors.

### **State Laws**

When a repository is considering a deaccession project, it is important that the archivists know the abandoned property law for their state. If there is no deed of gift for a collection, the contents could fall under the state’s abandoned property law. As

39. Gunselman, April 19, 2012.

40. Jackson, May 18, 2012.



mentioned before, the American Heritage Center successfully lobbied to change the unclaimed property law in Wyoming so the repository could save money by not having to advertise excessively in an attempt to find donors. However, laws for abandoned property are not uniform for every state.

In the state of Washington, the abandoned property law states that property is abandoned if it is held by a museum or historical society “for five years or more and remain[s] unclaimed.”<sup>41</sup> When an archive is required to give notice of abandonment, it must first mail a certified letter to the donor’s last known address. Then the institution must “publish notice, at least once each week for two consecutive weeks, in a newspaper of general circulation” in an attempt to find the donor.<sup>42</sup> Only after these two methods do not produce a donor can the facility take ownership of the materials. The law could be a barrier because institutions may not have the financial resources to run multiple newspaper advertisements to find donors.

The law in Oregon for notifying a donor about the termination of a loan is very similar to the abandoned property law for Washington; the only difference is the newspaper advertisements must be run for three weeks instead of two.<sup>43</sup> Montana’s law is very similar to the law in Oregon.<sup>44</sup> In the exact opposite situation, Idaho does not have an abandoned property law. Although present-day archivists are not as concerned about their state’s abandoned property law, these laws could have been barriers preventing past archivists from discarding unwanted or hazardous collections. On the other hand, all of the professionals interviewed expressed concern about the reactions of present and future donors to deaccession activities.

### Donor Relations

Donors are a large part of an archive because they donate materials to the institution, thereby making their opinions important to the facility. When an archive decides to deaccession a collection, whether it be to transfer or destroy materials, it is important to contact the donor of the materials because donors like to know what is done with their documents, even when the deed of gift says the archive has sole ownership of the collection.

41. Washington State Legislature, RCW 63.26.020, <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=63.26.020> (accessed July 1, 2012).

42. Washington State Legislature, RCW 63.26.040, <http://apps.leg.wa.gov/rcw/default.aspx?cite=63.26.040> (accessed July 1, 2012).

43. See Oregon Revised Statutes 358.415-358.440; full text: Oregon State Legislature, Chapter 358—Oregon Historical and Heritage Agencies, Programs and Tax Provisions; Museums; Local Symphonies and Bands; Archaeological Objects and Sites, <http://www.leg.state.or.us/ors/358.html> (accessed July 1, 2012).

44. Montana Code Annotated 22.3.505, accessed July 1, 2012, [http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca\\_toc/22\\_3\\_505.html](http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca_toc/22_3_505.html).

During deaccessioning at the American Heritage Center, one heir was angry because his relative's collection was moved to another institution without his knowledge. However, most of the donors reached during the project were happy about their donations going to a facility where they are better-suited to the collecting scope; some donors even helped pay for the transfer of the materials. In some cases, the archivists offer to give materials back to the donor instead of discarding them. For example, of the 303 collections deaccessioned by the AHC between 2006 and 2008, 28 of them were sent back to the donors.<sup>45</sup> Though archivists do everything they can to find the donors of collections that do not have donor files, sometimes the person cannot be found, which is why abandoned property laws can allow repositories to claim ownership of collections without a deed of gift.

In the present day, archivists should obtain signed deeds of gift from donors that explicitly state what can and cannot be done with the materials so there is no confusion between the archive and its donors. By being open about deaccessioning activities and telling donors about the destination of their materials, instead of attempting to hide deaccessioning activities, donors and researchers will be more accepting toward the actions. In order to change the negative feelings toward deaccessioning, archivists should not be afraid to share their deaccessioning experiences. If the truth is hidden, the donor could become angry or frustrated later if his or her materials are deaccessioned without prior knowledge of the possibility.

## **Conclusions**

With archives running out of space for new materials, collections acquired in the past that do not have historical value or do not fit the collecting scope should be removed to make room for relevant collections. Besides revising appraisal guidelines and making smarter acquisition decisions, deaccessioning is one of the most effective methods to gain more shelf space. Even though deaccessioning decisions incorporate many factors and can seem a daunting task, more archivists realize the value of deaccessioning collections by transferring them to another repository, returning them to the donors, or discarding them. Not only does this make the institution more efficient and provide clearer subjects areas, but, by transferring materials between repositories, archivists communicate with each other and can create an international community of like-minded people. This process also reminds archivists that their institution is not the only place with information on a particular subject, resulting in professionals working together toward the common goal of providing researchers with the documents they seek; facilities can scan or loan items to one another if a researcher is unable to travel to another repository that has additional information on a certain subject.

There is a community that has been formed by the American Heritage Center's transfer of approximately 209 collections to "164 repositories in 42 states, 2 Canadian

45. Jackson and Thompson, "But You Promised," 678.

provinces, and 5 countries outside of North America,<sup>46</sup> including four (WSU, UW, UI, and OSU) of the seven archives examined in this case study. Not only did this project create space for the AHC archive collections, it provided other repositories with collections that enhance their holdings. This connection can evolve as archivists begin developing the deaccession policies for their own departments.

Reappraisal and deaccessioning are necessary aspects of an efficient archival facility. With the SAA in support of this method, it is time for institutions to recognize the benefits and implement a policy to begin reappraising and deaccessioning materials that do not belong in the archives' holdings. As a foundation, an archivist should consult the guidelines approved by the SAA,<sup>47</sup> and then confer with other repositories that are in similar financial or resource situations. Once the guidelines have been drafted, the archivists within the institution, in conjunction with the head of the institution (or other authoritative figure), should discuss and approve practical and functional guidelines. This way, everyone involved knows the process the archivists will follow.

Ensuring the contents of collections fit in the archive's topical areas should remain the ultimate goal, but also remember that each collection is important to someone and should be handled with care and sensitivity. Deaccessioning a collection should not create negative donor relations, but enhance the trust donors have with institutions to care for their historical documents. The archivists reappraising should attempt to make consistent assessment of the materials, and avoid personal and cultural biases as much as possible. During reappraisal, each collection should be considered on its own merits, but also in relation to the facility's entire holdings because collections have their own history in relation to one another. Finally, archivists should be open about the deaccessioning that happens in their departments to help broaden the acceptance of the practice. It is a delicate balance that needs to be maintained.

Further research on this topic should be done regarding deaccessioning at other types of archival institutions, as each has different concerns. Other potential research could be revisiting the findings of this article a few years after the Society of American Archivists officially published its reappraisal and deaccession guidelines online, in order to see how practices and policies at individual archives change. Publishing more research about deaccessioning will not only show its applicability for all archives, but also help reverse the reluctance toward the practice. As archivists implement this method into their repositories, deaccessioning will become an effective practice in all archival institutions in the United States. Deaccessioning can reduce backlogs to more manageable sizes and allow archivists to spend more time developing the key collections in their respective repositories.

46. Ibid.

47. Society of American Archivists, "Guidelines for Appraisal and Deaccessioning," SAA, <http://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-reappraisal-and-deaccessioning> (accessed 2012).

## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Interview Questions for the Pacific Northwest Archivists**

1. What are the guidelines for your general acquisition policy?
2. How are these guidelines beneficial to your department?
3. How did the guidelines used by previous department heads for acquisition compare to your current acquisition policy?
4. Though there is no policy, has the department recently reappraised/deaccessioned any collections? If so, for what reason(s)?
5. Do you think a deaccessioning policy is needed, or will be needed in the future?
6. Is there a plan to develop a reappraisal or deaccessioning policy in the near future?
7. Do you see a difference between deaccessioning processed collections versus unprocessed collections?
8. Does the fact that a collection has not been accessed in 30 years make it eligible for deaccessioning?
9. Do you think that state law was part of the reason past archivists were weary of deaccessioning, particularly concerning surplus property laws?

#### **Interview Questions for the American Heritage Center Archivists**

1. When did the large deaccessioning project at AHC begin and end, or is it continuing? Do you have an updated number of cubic feet and number of collections deaccessioned?
2. What were (are) the methods used in deaccessioning collections? Auctions? Transfers? Other?
3. What part of state law had to be changed in order to undertake this large endeavor? How exactly was it changed?
  - a. What were the steps involved in this process?
  - b. Do you think that state law was part of the reason past archivists were weary of deaccessioning, particularly concerning surplus property laws?
4. After this large deaccessioning project, do you find it easier to make

deaccessioning decisions?

5. Is there any current deaccessioning activity at the AHC?
  - a. How well did the five-year deaccessioning plan work? What aspects worked well and what would you change for future deaccessioning projects?
6. How effective, do you think, are the reappraisal and deaccessioning guidelines drafted by the SAA a year ago?
  - a. What feedback have you received concerning these guidelines?
7. Do you see a difference between deaccessioning processed collections versus unprocessed collections?
  - a. Does this affect how you determine which items to deaccession?
  - b. Does the fact that a collection has not been accessed in 30 years make it eligible for deaccessioning?

## Appendix B

### Interview Data Summary

|                                      | Department                                  | Deaccession Guidelines     | Issues                                       | Reasons for Deaccessioning      | Appraisal Guidelines                              | Considering Changing Policies? |
|--------------------------------------|---|----------------------------|--|---------------------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| <b>Washington State University</b>   | Manuscripts, Archives, Special Collections  | No                         | Large backlog                                | Hazardous mold                  | Material contributing to scholarly mission of WSU | Yes                            |
| <b>Western Washington University</b> | University Archives                         | Broad statement            | Did not originally have custody of materials | None yet                        | Historical and administrative records             | Yes                            |
| <b>University of Washington</b>      | University Archives                         | No                         | Running out of space                         | Records better housed elsewhere | General records schedule                          | No                             |
| <b>Oregon State University</b>       | Special Collections and University Archives | Broad statement            | Need more succinct collecting guidelines     | Not permanent items             | University materials                              | Potentially                    |
| <b>University of Oregon</b>          | Special Collections and University Archives | No                         | Running out of space                         | None yet                        | Three levels of collections, focusing on Oregon   | Yes                            |
| <b>University of Idaho</b>           | Special Collections and Archives            | Not covering both sections | Small budget for acquiring collections       | Materials that are not unique   | Idaho and Pacific Northwest history               | Yes                            |
| <b>University of Montana</b>         | Archives and Special Collections            | No                         | Not enough space                             | No interest in items            | History of Montana and region                     | Yes                            |