

Organizing Large Collections

I love to organize. I was struck in graduate school by the words of my internship mentor who casually noted how much she loved organizing things when she was a kid. She told me that the joy that comes from organizing things is in one's blood. You either love to organize or you don't. I've always been an organizer. When I was a kid, I mainly organized scrapbooks of information. I cut photos and articles out of magazines and pasted them into notebooks that I would sometimes flip through again, sometimes not. It was mainly the act of organizing that excited me.

Moving from a love of organizing and puttering in organization to professional organizing can be the tricky part. The work of archivists, librarians and museum professionals is grounded in over a century of organizing theory. This is the mental transition every amateur organizer must come to recognize to properly maintain collections. Organizing can be intuitive, but we must follow the years of examples and discovery of our predecessors to maintain collections that make sense and are standardized in a way that is useful to potential users and patrons.

The famed portrait of artist Charles Willson Peale "The Artist in His Museum" is owned by the Pennsylvania Academy of Arts in Phila-

delphia. I think of this portrait when I try to reconcile the differences between archives, library and museum methods in my mind. When I try to make sense of my own cross-professional interests, I harken back to my art history days and think about how our early American "Renaissance" founders had appreciation for all facets of our world and tried to organize their interests to convey them to the public. They were transitional figures who moved collecting into a professional spotlight.



Centuries after Peale's museum experiment, we recognize that it is easiest to apply separate methods of care to diverse materials for their organization and the differing preservation needs. The needs of artifacts, books and historical records are generally considered separately and often housed independently. All formats of material should be considered by the researcher interested in a particular topic, but dif-

ferent kinds of materials may be catalogued in separate databases and located at disparate institutions. Due to computerization, we are working to blur the lines of demarcation by format, but a total elimination of distinctions between formats will not and should not occur.

Considering a disorganized collection of diverse materials can seem overwhelming. When we clearly distinguish between formats of material, it makes the task a little less daunting. We then further categorize materials by writing ideas out on paper to prepare for physical arrangement. The first step is to perform an survey that provides a broad overview of the collection. Go through drawers, shelves, and boxes and write a list of general characteristics of materials that you find. What formats, subjects, dates, and preservation issues exist among your materials? How much space do materials related to particular subjects encompass? Who created the materials in the collection? (Is there one author or creator or multiple ones?)

The survey should key you into strengths and weaknesses in the collections. Survey work should help you recognize patterns in your materials and assist with creating an overall organization plan for materials.

Archivists attempt to organize records based on the records' creators. We organize in groupings, whereas librarians and curators focus in on individual items. If your records are already grouped by the person who created them, your task will be rela-

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tively straightforward. If there is no such apparent arrangement, your task will be a little more difficult because you will have to create “artificial collections” from diverse sources.

To process your archives, begin by separating them intellectually from divergent formats of materials, to focus on the archives themselves. Then choose a grouping of records to work on within the larger collection. I like to start with the largest groupings of records. Physically separate this materials from the others. Make a table space for your work.

Stand back and take a good look at what you’ve got. Note similarities among materials. What large groupings of items exist? Can large group-

ings then be broken into smaller grouping. The levels of arrangement—records groups (fonds), series and subseries— provide an easily identifiable and workable way to organize papers. No matter the size of your collection, breaking it down intellectually into these grouping will help one avoid being overwhelmed by the organizing task.

The most difficult part of organizing is not the physical arrangement of materials, but the intellectual access one provides to a collection. Through the creation of finding aids, an archivist lists groupings of materials and notes outstanding qualities in a collection. The collection processor should also regard and make note of how a particular collection fits in with others within the same institution and collections outside of their organization. The act of organizing is made much more understandable by placing a collection in the context of other related materials.

When you are faced with a seemingly daunting task of a large scale organizing project, it is beneficial to work as an observer. Gather information about the materials to be organized. Aiming to understand a “big picture” perspective grounded in archival theory will make the nitty gritty work fall into place.



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*For more information about
ArchivesInfo and for access to past
issues of this newsletter see
www.archivesinfo.com*

*Join the discussion on Facebook with
the group Cross Professional
Collaboration in Museums, Libraries,
and Archives*

The following web sites provide information about the theory and practical aspects of arranging archives and organizing collections.

Definitions of archives terms—<http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/special-collections/papers/preface.htm>

Collections and Collection Description—British Library briefing paper comparing the use of the word “collection” in Museum, Libraries and Archives. <http://www.ukoln.ac.uk/cd-focus/briefings/bp1/bp1.pdf>

Organizing Archival Material—An easy to understand introduction http://aabc.bc.ca/aabc/msa/4_organizing_archival_material.htm

Arrangement and Description—a more advanced look at organizing archival collections with an emphasis on their description <http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/special-collections/papers/preface.htm>

The Accidental Archivist: Archives Work for Non-Archivists - <http://inarchivists.org/fall2005/Accidental.pdf>