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Managing Archival Collections

## Foundation for a Successful Archives Program

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For an institution to run a successful archives program it must have a strong sense of self. An archivist must be able to define the role her Archives plays in the community. Be prepared to show outsiders that you are organized and that your institution is a vital one with an important function. The first step toward achieving this is to perform a records survey and assessment that allows you to gain a better understanding of your program, its strengths, and weaknesses.

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### Archival Surveys and Levels of Arrangement

Before collection development policies are written, organizations must thoroughly understand the collections that they are currently maintaining. Perform a survey by browsing through all the archival materials in your possession. Record the location of records. Note common themes and record creators. Records should be identified as part of larger and smaller groupings of material within an institution. During your survey, consider that five different levels of these groupings exist — moving from larger to smaller — and that these levels form the basis of arrangement for all collections. These levels include repository, record group, series, file unit, and item.

The repository level describes the organization caring for the materials.

Record group refers to a body of related records established based on provenance. (See reverse side for more information about provenance. ) The record group generally refers to the institutional body, such as an agency or department that created the records, or to an individual creator.

The series level is a group of files or documents maintained together as a unit because they are related to a particular subject or function, result from the same activity, or have a common form. Series usually are identified by a common filing order, subject matter, or physical type (e.g., correspondence, minutes, receipts, and drawings). The series level is particularly important because it expresses the character of the collection. Additionally, the final description of a collection focuses largely on the series level, and thus is of particular interest to researchers.

The file unit level refers to how items are placed for filing purposes. Units may be file folders, bound volumes, disks, tubes, reels, etc. File folders, the most common unit at this level, usually are arranged in |

alphabetical, chronological, geographical, subject or numerical order. (Archivists generally spend the most time caring for their collections on the series and folder levels, and during the survey particular attention should also be paid to these levels.)

The item level of arrangement refers to items such as letters, memos and reports found within file units. Often, these are arranged alphabetically or chronologically.

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## **Assessing Your Collections**

During your survey, primarily note materials on the series level, but aim to gain an awareness of how the whole collection fits together. Begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the arrangement of the collection as a whole. Does the arrangement of record groups and series highlight the collections or cause confusion? Are all of your similar materials stored together or are they spread out all over your storage area without any cohesion? It is often apparent that a collection is much stronger (i.e. has more information about a particular subject) than you originally realized. One of the tricks to assessing a collection is determining how to arrange collections to highlight connections while maintaining the provenance of materials.

As the strengths in your collections become apparent, so will the collections' weaknesses. A particular series will jump out at you as very strong and others will be recognized as lacking useful information. This is when ideas about your collection development policy should begin to take shape. The policy will begin by focusing on your strengths. You then must work to eliminate your weaknesses by discussing their development or removing them from your collecting mission completely.

As part of your assessment, write a summary of your collection based on your survey findings. Use this description when writing policies for your collections and when working with others to define your role in the community. This evaluation of data will enable you to gain a better understanding of your repository and it will enable you to create better management tools tailored to your repository's specific needs. The goal is to uncover all the positive aspects of your collection AND your negatives. You should not aim to hide the flaws, but aim to fix them. An archival assessment should be honest so the information can be used in the future to benefit the organization. Some find it necessary to use an impartial outsider, such as a consultant, to perform this role.

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## **Provenance and Original Resources**

During an assessment, it is necessary to have an understanding of archival theories of arrangement and access so that a collection may be evaluated based on standards. Primarily, the

assessment should aim to keep donations created by an individual or institution together. This is known as maintaining provenance. It is often tempting for a repository (especially an historical society) to split a collection based on the subjects they find in a particular donation. Doing this can cause the loss of vital information about the way the creator of the records thought about a particular subject. It can also destroy other not-readily-apparent information about the records themselves.

The most difficult part of assessment is recognizing the need to keep a collection with a distinct provenance intact while balancing this with the need to define similarities among materials. An assessment allows one to gain an overall understanding of the repository's holdings in total, while defining connections on paper. Experiment in writing with various different ways to think about (i.e. organize) the collections to find the way that seems to best highlight the collections' strengths.

It is also important to know that archival collections include primary (unique and original) resources. When assessing a collection, I often find that a repository has mixed primary and secondary sources (published materials and photocopies). Secondary sources often dilute the collections' true strengths. Just as an original painting by Monet is much more valuable and has more information to tell us about the artist than even a masterful copy of his work, an original document is more valuable than a copy.

For more information on archival theory see <http://www.mannon.org/archives/archelp.htm>

Future issues of our newsletter will address these topics in further detail.