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Managing Archival Collections

Deaccessioning

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Thoughtful deaccessioning procedures can be used to strengthen collections. Deaccessioning should not be done on a regular basis, but should be used as a tool during rare times, such as when a repository is (re)examining its collecting role and (re)writing collecting policy. It is sometimes useful to consider removing certain collections from the repository's holdings to ensure that the collection conforms to collecting guidelines. Strong deaccessioning rules need to be in place to ensure that deaccessioning is not done without considering the consequences. As with all collecting decisions, the archivist must be able to explain how the procedures strengthen the focus and research value of the overall collection. Removing inappropriate collections makes room for others that have more worth to the institution.

Considering Collections

The collection caretaker (the archivist, collections committee, etc.) may determine an item is appropriate for deaccessioning if it does not meet the repository's collection development guidelines, duplicates other materials in the collection, is deteriorated beyond repair, has conservation costs would be prohibitive to the Archives budget, or is more appropriate for another repository's collection.

Deaccessioning can raise many questions among supporters outside of an institution. Researchers and patrons usually do not like to see materials removed from a collection. They often believe that important pieces of history are being tossed. It is up to the repository staff to educate them about the purpose of deaccessioning. A clear collection development policy and effective public relations will help acquaint the public with the repository's long-range collecting goals and archival methods for accessioning and deaccessioning. It is vital that all areas of appraisal decision-making have been carefully considered to ensure that a gap in the historical record is not created with the destruction of material that is unwanted by a repository.

One must be prepared to justify all deaccessioning decisions by keeping meticulous records regarding items removed from the collections. Once a deaccession is documented with a thorough explanation of why it is being removed from the collection, the archivist must then justify the means of deaccession for administrative purposes and for possible public relations reasons. There is always the possibility that those in charge of shaping a collection will be challenged for their decisions. The repository should establish procedures for deaccessioning to avoid any confusion among staff, management, and donors, about how deaccessioned materials will be handled. Information about deaccessions should be recorded and kept with other Archives administrative tools.

Deaccessioning should not be performed at will. Institutions must have sound reasons for seeking to deaccession materials and must be able to justify final appraisal decisions that lead to the removal of a collection from the Archives. Some institutions revise their collecting strategies and deaccession materials every time a new administration takes control. This must be avoided through the creation of clear deaccessioning procedures that should appear as part of an organization's collection development policy.

Steps for Deaccessioning a Collection

List the reasons for deaccessioning material and record in as much detail as possible the rules and procedures relating to the deaccession. Keep a notebook of completed forms justifying appraisal decisions. Each form should:

1. Describe the collection
2. Cite the reason for its deaccession
3. State what will happen to the material after it is deaccessioned
 - Record the reason why the collection will be handled in this manner and list other repositories contacted for possible interest in the collection
 - If the material is in good condition and is to be discarded, describe collections that duplicate its information or list procedures that will be taken to ensure information is not lost
 - If material is in good condition and will be disposed, attach a copy of the appraisal justification
4. Cite the date and the authority for the deaccession (i.e. who approved it)
5. Record the date when the donor was contacted and attach a copy of the letter sent to the donor notifying him about the deaccession

List any applicable rules or regulations regarding the deaccessioning of this collection