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LIBR 256 Discussion Posts – Acquisition Policy

Case one – De-accessioning

One of your archivists is a Zoroastrian who worships a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, who requires good deeds for help in his cosmic struggle against the evil spirit Ahriman.

One day you discover that she has been throwing away items in archival collections that she views as evil in order to effect her religious beliefs. These include such things as images of nude Zulus in tribal gear taken by a famous anthropologist, legal files of criminals from attorney's papers, etc.

Questions Presented:

1. Should religious beliefs play a role in what archives keep? Would that depend on whether the archives was the archives of a religious institution?

Any single archivist's personal religious beliefs should not influence archival de-accessioning decisions—unless those beliefs mirror the acquisition policy of the institution exactly. The only thing that should influence de-accessioning decisions is the de-accessioning policy as included in the official acquisition policy of the institution. Under the Trust section, the SAA's Code of Ethics for Archivists states that archivists "execute their work knowing that they must ensure proper custody for the documents and records entrusted to them. Archivists should demonstrate professional integrity and avoid potential conflicts of interest." (Society of American Archivists, Code of Ethics, para. 10). If the religious beliefs of the archivist in question are impeding her ability to ensure proper custody for the materials in the collection, then she has a conflict of interest—one that might possibly lead to termination.

As mentioned above, the only time such destruction would be acceptable is if it was done in accord with the de-accessioning policy of the institution. Maybe the archives experienced a shift in mission (assuming it was privately funded, and not a state or federal institution). For example, where it previously had a more encompassing geographic focus, perhaps its board and stakeholders decided that it should instead focus on Zoroastrianism. In this case, the archivist's actions would be justified if they followed the de-accessioning policy.

2. De-accessioning usually happens after you've acquired the collection. Would a clearly defined acquisitions policy help to avoid unwanted materials or collections getting into your possession in the first place?

A clearly defined acquisitions policy would *help* prevent unwanted materials or collections being accepted into the institution's collection. It certainly wouldn't be 100% effective as, for example, a stakeholder might insist on some collection of family papers or some non-profit or other institution's records being accepted. This might be a strong, interesting, and timely collection which may, in fact, shift the focus of the archives resulting in the re-writing of the acquisition and de-accessioning policy according to the new focus. Or, as Duckett attests, "often, collection fields develop out of the acquisition of one key collection which comes to the institution as a fortuitous accident" (1975, p. 63). Also, the focus of the archives will most likely shift over time, and some materials previously accepted under the auspices of the original acquisitions policy might be considered much less valuable under the newly revised acquisitions policy, resulting in their de-accessioning. There is a need for continuing revision of the acquisitions policy, the focus shifts it captures, and the de-accessioning it results in. Ham explains: "A good acquisition policy will

change over time, for it is not static but rather a living document that is refined and modified to reflect growth and changing conditions” (1993, p. 23).

Reference

Duckett, K. W. (1975). Modern manuscripts: A practical manual for their management, care and use. Available from <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/modern-manuscripts-kenneth-w-duckett/1005235866?ean=9780910050166>

Ham, G. F. (1993). Selecting and appraising archives and manuscripts [1st ed.]. Available from <http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/selecting-and-appraising-archives-and-manuscripts-f-gerald-ham/1101762795?ean=9780931828843>

Society of American Archivists. (2012, January). Code of ethics for archivists [Web page]. Retrieved from <http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics>

Case Two - Acquisition

You are the head of the archival processing unit for your university archives. At the monthly meeting with the curators, you are told that they are negotiating to acquire the collection of the Grateful Dead which contains 5,000 cartons (usually new collections are no more than 100 cartons maximum). You're told that the collection has strong support from a core faculty group. It also contains thousands of audio and videotape, a medium that the staff have no technical expertise. The curators say it's a great collection that will build the archives reputation but it's on a topic tangential to your acquisition focus on the 1960's Free Speech Movement. It will come with no money to process and no funds for preserving. It will also fill your existing storage.

Questions Presented:

1. Would you argue against this acquisition?

I would argue against this acquisition

2. What arguments would you bring forward to fend off this acquisition?

My starting tack would be to argue that the Grateful Dead collection did not correspond to the focus and scope of the archives. While some items in the collection may be related to the 1960's Free Speech Movement, the bulk of the collection would be specific to the Grateful Dead. Attempting to separate out those items relating to 1960's free speech movement in particular would destroy the integrity of the collection, and should not be undertaken for that reason. It would make most sense to offer the collection to another institution that focused on perhaps music history (e.g., the Archive of Contemporary Music <http://www.arcmusic.org/begin.html> or the Experience Music Project <http://www.empmuseum.org/>) or that focused specifically on the Grateful Dead (e.g., the Grateful Dead Archive Online <http://www.gdao.org/>).

I would then discuss the volume of the collection. At 5000 cartons, it is 50 times as large as a typical new collection. That most likely means 50 times the workload for the processing staff. Will additional staff be hired to cover the extra workload? Or is it assumed that the existing staff will simply process this collection and no others? I would actually calculate the amount of time

required to process the 5000 cartons. For example, say that there were four full-time processing people and that each person could process one carton per day. A typical collection of 100 cartons would take 25 days to process if the work was non-stop (e.g., no breaks for staff meetings or the like). The typical collection could be processed in one-and-a-quarter months. At this rate, the Grateful Dead collection would take over five years to process. During this time, the processing staff would be unable to work on any other collections. The sheer volume of the Grateful Dead collection would also fill the existing storage facility which, in essence, would prevent the acquisition of other collections perhaps more germane to the archives' focus.

Next is the question of the format of the materials and the experience of the staff. To fulfill the archives' mission of not only preserving but also making materials accessible for use, the audio and visual materials would need to be appropriately processed, preserved, and made accessible. Without staff training and the acquisition of hardware and software to manage the processing, preservation, and accessibility, the archives would be fundamentally unable to fulfill its mission.

I would also look into the research needs of the clientele. How representative is the core faculty group that supports the acquisition of the Grateful Dead papers? Are they a small minority of users of the archives? Would the primary or target users of the archives suffer due to the focus on the Grateful Dead processing to the exclusion of other collection processing? If the answer is yes, then this is another reason to not acquire the Grateful Dead collection.

Finally, I would focus on available resources versus the cost of preserving these materials. The scenario explains that no funds for processing or preserving will be provided, so we will the archives find the funding to hire more staff, train staff in audio/video preservation, buy hardware and software necessary to process audio/video materials, expand storage space to allow for other new collection acquisitions? I would research these costs and present a detailed explanation of the estimated cost to process and preserve the collection.

At present, the archives has neither the resources nor the focus to handle this collection.

3. If you lose the argument and the collection is accepted, what plans would you make to bring the collection to your institution?

First, I would look into acquiring additional storage as soon as possible. I assume that the curators will not stop looking for new collections to add to the archives, so we would need room to store these future collections in addition to the Grateful Dead collection.

I would ask if special funding could be acquired for additional staff, staff training, and hardware and software required to process audio/video materials. If such funding could be acquired, would it all be available at the outset of the project or would it be provided over several years? This information will be key in developing an implementation plan and schedule.

Next, I would try to survey the archives' existing researchers to determine who was working on what topics and who was waiting for specific collections to be processed. Using these results, I'd enlist the help of the archives staff and directors to re-prioritize any existing collections awaiting processing. Are there any that could wait one to five years? Are there some collections that should take priority? Where does the Grateful Dead collection fall in this prioritization?

Based on this prioritization, I would determine appropriate staffing. I might need to focus my entire staff on processing the Grateful Dead collection, or I perhaps could split my staff between several new collections, including the Grateful Dead one, instead.

Finally, I would inquire if the archives was changing its collection focus and scope based on the Grateful Dead acquisition. If yes, the acquisition policy and the de-accessioning policy should be updated accordingly.

Responses to students:

Anne

Bringing in the example from NFU's acquisitions policy was astute. The idea of de-accessioning requiring Director approval is important, and I would certainly assume that requiring some type of upper manager approval is very representative of real-world policies. Thanks for making this point, as it was not something that I considered in my post! :)