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LIBR 256 Discussion Post - Ethics

Case Two

The collection of personal papers of your university's founder, Chump Chablis (1857-1917), is held at the Library of Congress. They have provided at no cost a microfilm copy of the entire collection for your archives. After you receive the microfilm, you have it reviewed for errors and completeness by your photograph curator, an alumna who has been at the University for over 30 years.

A few weeks later after she has completed her review of the microfilm, you get a telephone call from the President of the University ordering you to remove and destroy a portion of microfilm. You later find out that the photograph curator informed the president that this portion contains personal memoirs in which the founder discusses his homosexual experiences. The president tells you to remove that portion from the microfilm because "people can find that stuff at the Library of Congress if they want."

Questions Presented:

1. Assuming you are an employee-at-will and you don't want to lose your job, what strategies would you follow to meet the President's wishes and your professional ethics?

Initially, I would attempt to persuade the President to keep all content available and open. I would explain that, like other professional organizations, the Society of American Archivists follows a Code of Ethics. In particular, the Authenticity section of this code states that "archivists may not willfully alter, manipulate, or destroy data or records to conceal facts or distort evidence" (Society of American Archivists [SAA], 2012). I would also share that the Code of Ethics requires archivists to "maximize ease of access" to materials. Both of these ethical guidelines require that the papers should be used in their entirety. I would also explain that the archive owes the Library of Congress the professional courtesy of treating the materials it shared responsibly and in accordance with the SAA's Code of Ethics. (Prior to this, I would have contacted the Library of Congress to determine if there were any restrictions placed on the papers by the donors, just to be certain the entire collection was open.) Finally, I would try to convey the fact that the founder's words are the most accurate primary source for understanding the man as a full, complex human being—even those parts of his life which the President may find concerning.

If the President remained insistent that some of the material should still be removed, I would propose an alternative. I would suggest that we attempt to divide the papers into university-related/public materials and personal memoirs. Assuming such a division could be made, I would then suggest that we either place the personal memoirs on some sort of restricted access that required special permission to view, or that we only accept the university-related papers from the Library of Congress and alert researchers to the fact that the personal memoirs could be accessed through the Library of Congress (and provide them with the appropriate contact information). This alternative ensures that the university-related content is still locally available to enhance our archive. Equally, the restriction is based on the difference between personal memoirs and university-related

papers, not on the President's concern over the founder's homosexual experiences (which could very easily be considered unfair and discriminatory).

I would ensure that I documented this process and the ultimate decision in keeping with the Judgment provision of the SAA's Code of Ethics.

As an aside and assuming I was her manager, I would also talk to the Photograph Curator to gently request that she alert me to content that she feels might be a cause for concern in future donations. Given her tenure, I would have no issue with her going directly to the President, but do feel that she should have *also* informed me of content which she felt might be questionable based on her knowledge of the university's culture and the President's dispositions.

Reference

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>