



# Understanding Collections Development

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## **Purpose**

The aim of this publication is to help archive services to establish a Collections Development policy and plan, which reflects their own service's approach to collections development and will:

- Evidence why collections development activities are important and demonstrate the value of what the archives service does in this area
- Help the archives service meet the Archive Service Accreditation Standard under requirement 2.2 Collections Development

This publication is aimed at both established and new archive collections and services, and may be useful to any organisation keen to develop and safeguard their archives.

This publication should be read with reference to *Collections Development Framework and Guidance: Writing a Collections Development Policy and Plan* and with the *Collections Development Framework and Guidance: Case Studies* that give practical examples of collections development in practice.

## **What is Collections Development?**

Archive services are aware of the critical importance of their mission to collect records and to engage with a range of communities, ensuring that services and collections remain relevant in a rapidly changing environment, and that they represent diverse communities, now and in the future. Collecting, however it takes place, is the basis for all archival preservation and access.

Collections development refers to a series of functions and activities used within archive services that support the active development of collections. Activities that support collections development include the acquisition, and appraisal of records as well as identifying and assessing community needs and resource planning. These activities also include the deaccessioning of records, where appropriate.

Archive services may also develop their collections through programmes and processes which create records (such as oral history projects) and by reviewing their current holdings. These activities should be carried out with an eye to, and coordination with, other repositories, ensuring the responsible stewardship of collections. Coordinated collecting can also address gaps in and between collections, and builds connections between collections and archive services, to the benefit of all of those who use archives.

To deliver successful collections development, an archive services needs to be aware of its current user community and those in the community that it does not

currently reach or represent; the mission, values and priorities of its parental organisation; and the wider national distributed collection.

Originally conceptualised and developed within librarianship, the term ‘collections development’ has been commonly used by archive services since the 1980s, reflecting a growing acceptance in the sector of the importance of actively developing archival collections. Collections development policies – unlike collections policies that explain what will be collected - explain *how* collecting practices will be achieved and developed over time, identifying collecting priorities and strategies. Collections development plans detail the resources needed to deliver the policy and should prioritise activities essential to proactive collections development. Both policies and plans ensure that archive services have a “coherent and well-defined focus” around their collections, supporting sustainable growth by making sure that the most relevant, suitable and representative records are selected and maintained for permanent preservation.<sup>1</sup>

Much contemporary collecting is passive (accepting what is offered); routine (accruals from existing depositors and parental bodies); or reactive (responding to business closures or organisational changes). These are all valid approaches, which have enabled the preservation of many significant collections. However, these approaches do not support the strategic mapping of collections, or necessarily correspond to organisational priorities. Methods of collections development recast the focus of collecting as an active, dynamic and responsive process, ensuring that archives are reflective and representative of multiple perspectives, goals that are difficult to achieve through a passive approach.

User expectations, technological advances and organisational changes have all impacted archive services, and to fulfil their societal remit, archive services need to actively advance and develop the collections in their care through a planned, strategic approach. These steps will help to ensure that collections are inclusive, culturally relevant and appropriately support and reflect the service’s constituent community, allowing services to tell new stories about the past and to document the present.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cynthia K. Sauer ‘Doing the Best We Can? The Use of Collection Development Policies and Cooperative Collecting Activities at Manuscript Repositories’ *The American Archivist* 64 (Fall/Winter 2001) 308 – 349 (308).

<sup>2</sup> Community as defined in Archive Service Accreditation, i.e. the concept of a community to which the archive service is constituted to serve, including stakeholders and users in their widest sense.

## **Why have a collections development policy?**

The main benefits of having a collections development policy can be described under four headings: (1) Selection; (2) Planning; (3) Communications; (4) The wider context.

### **Selection**

A written collections development policy provides guidance to staff when selecting and deselecting material for their collections, defining the boundaries of collections activity. The document serves as a guide for each stage of handling, covering the selection, acquisition, appraisal, preservation and deaccessioning of records. This reduces personal bias by setting individual decisions within the scope and context of the aims of the collections practice, and identifies gaps within collections, ensuring consistency and continuity across decision making. Policies also can be a useful training guide for staff and can assist with succession planning.

### **Planning**

Policy documents provide a firm basis for future planning, helping to determine priorities. In turn, this helps to identify the resources to support the achievement of goals. Compiling a formal policy also helps staff to review existing collections strengths, inviting reflective practice. In turn, this assists with other collections management activities, such as determining cataloguing priorities, and helps to form a coherent collections strategy which is understood by staff and users.

### **Communications**

Collections development policies are useful advocacy tools when archive services are communicating with their parental organisation, users and funding bodies. They help to support the aims and objectives of their parental organisation, demonstrating the archive service's accountability and commitment to agreed goals.

Policies can also serve as a contract with the archive service's users, demonstrating what users can expect of the archive service in the form of collections. In particular, individual selection decisions can be justified on a standardised basis by reference to the policy statement, clearly defining and communicating the boundaries of collecting activity to users, including depositors and donors. Additionally, as funding bodies increasingly want to know how their support will fit within the stated goals of an archive service, collections development policies are useful points of reference when applying for support.

## The wider context

As archive services increasingly diversify their governance structures and form new partnerships, there must be a mutual knowledge and understanding of what individual archive services collect. Collections development policies can serve as the basis for wider cooperation and resource sharing whether locally, regionally or nationally. A mutual understanding and awareness of 'who is collecting what' also helps to end excessive fragmentation of archival collections through competitive acquisition practices and promotes an idea of joined-up collecting in which the most suitable home for archive collections is identified.

Methods of collections development should be ethical and responsible, in line with the statutory context that covers archives and other forms of cultural property. This includes but is not limited to:

- [Spoliation of works of art during the Holocaust and World War II period](#) issued for national bodies by the National Museum Directors Conference in 1998 and for non-national bodies by the Museums and Galleries Commission in 1999, and concerning the principles, proposed actions and guidance on spoliation.
- The UNESCO 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property, ratified in the UK in 2002, and the Dealing in Cultural Objects (Offences) Act 2003, that requires museums and other bodies to reject items that have been illicitly traded.
- Professional codes of ethics, such as those published by the [International Council on Archives](#) and the [Archives and Records Association](#)

Further legislation that may impact on the work of an archive service includes:

- Charities Act 2006 and predecessors
- Companies Act 2006 and predecessors
- Data Protection Act 1998
- Environmental Information Regulations 2004
- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002
- Isle of Man Public Records Act 1999
- Local Government (Records) Act 1962
- Local Government Act 1972
- Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985
- Local Government (Scotland) Act 1994
- Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 s60
- Manorial Document Rules 1959 and 1967
- Parochial Records and Registers Measure
- Public Records Act (Northern Ireland) 1923
- Public Records Act 1958, amended 1967

- Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964
- Public Records (Jersey) Law 2002, amended 2006
- Public Records (Scotland) Act 2011 and predecessors
- Re-use of Public Sector Information Regulations 2015

### **Framing Collections Development in Theory and Practice**

The need for archivists to actively manage collections has been noted in both professional literature and practice since the 1940s, moving away from an earlier approach where the archivist was seen primarily as the keeper of records. Rather than being “allegedly impartial custodians of inherited records,” Terry Cook argues that archivists have evolved into “intervening agents” responsible not only for setting standards for recordkeeping practice but for consciously shaping the archival record through practices such as appraisal.<sup>3</sup> This move away from notions articulated by Sir Hilary Jenkinson of the archivist’s role as ‘the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces,’ and as a custodian of records – represented a paradigm shift within theory and practice.<sup>4</sup>

The move towards more proactive management of records, including the creation, acquisition and disposal of records, was motivated in part due to practical concerns: the emergence of new technologies, which allowed for the mass creation and duplication of records. Faced with a problem of bulk, archivists began to develop more systematic ways of selecting records for permanent preservation. Conceptual frameworks such as Theodore R. Schellenberg’s taxonomy of primary and secondary values were popularised as a way to assist archivists with selection processes.<sup>5</sup> This shift, from the “preservation of records to the selection of records for preservation,” as termed by Margaret Cross Norton, saw archivists claim a role for themselves in the making of the archive as opposed to merely a keeper of the past.<sup>6</sup>

Further challenges to a custodial approach to archival work came with the turn towards social history, which resulted in a critique of archival holdings as still too narrowly concerned with the records of the rich and powerful, and lacking detail of the lives of ordinary citizens.<sup>7</sup> Planning for acquisition was viewed as a way to counter these past imbalances, facilitating a more representative historical record, connecting the acquisition of archives – those archives purposefully targeted and

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Cook ‘What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift’ *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997) 17 – 63 (46).

<sup>4</sup> Hilary Jenkinson *The English Archivist: a new profession* (London: HK Lewis, 1948)

<sup>5</sup> TR Schellenberg *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Society of American Archivists, 1956)

<sup>6</sup> Terry Cook ‘What is Past is Prologue’ 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ian Johnston ‘Whose History is it Anyway?’ *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22:2 (2001) 213 – 229 (213-214).

selected for permanent preservation – to ongoing efforts to diversify archival holdings.

However, as archivists still faced ongoing challenges (an abundance of records; a scarcity of resources to care for all records; and further societal changes) practitioners and theorists deliberately borrowed from developments in library science, particularly the conceptual framework of collections development. Reported benefits of collections development activities included a sharpened focus of collecting activity; local and regional cooperation; and a more deliberate use of resources.<sup>8</sup>

As theories and practices have developed and evolved over the last century, collections development has been placed at the forefront of contemporary archival thinking. These different conceptual frameworks, (such as Hans Booms' approach to appraisal based on the societal value of records and the development of documentation strategy) impress upon archivists the greater social, cultural and strategic need for collections development to meet both the ongoing challenge of abundance and to address continuing concerns over the inclusivity and representative nature of archive collections.<sup>9</sup>

Reflecting on these changes, Hugh Taylor has suggested that the time in which archivists could afford passivity is over, noting that contemporary archivists must be both advocates for and mediators of records, "out there and fighting for the preservation of records."<sup>10</sup> Such a perspective is emblematic of the ethos of collections development: taking active steps in the preservation of a wide range of archival materials to ensure a documentary heritage that is well-rounded and inclusive, and afforded the richness of a multiplicity of perspectives.

## **Approaches to Collections Development**

### **Appraisal**

Appraisal is the theory and methodology of determining the value of archives to be kept for permanent preservation. The extensive body of professional literature on appraisal -covering paper, hybrid and digital collections - provides the

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<sup>8</sup> Jutta Reed-Scott 'Collection Management Strategies for Archivists' *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984) 24 – 29; Faye Phillips 'Developing Collecting Policies for Manuscript Collections' *American Archivist* 47 (Winter 1984) 30 – 42.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Booms 'Society and the Formation of Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources' *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987) 81 – 106; Samuels, Helen Willa 'Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy' *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92)

<sup>10</sup> Millar, 135.

theoretical and practical framework for examining records and establishing their value and significance, thereby supporting decisions on retention of archives.

## **Collections review**

Collections review is the process of gathering information about the collections held within an archive service and appraising it against the collections development policy. It seeks to compare collections against the priorities within the collections development policy. It can also be an opportunity to revisit collections. By examining the legacy of previous collecting habits, archivists are able to assess how comparable collections are with current priorities, and plan for the future.

## **Creation of records**

Ways of creating records, such as oral history projects have been used to record elements of culture or communities that do not traditionally generate documentation, or as a way to see history 'from below'. Although not without its critics, who view oral history as a fabrication of the historical record, supporters of oral history are strong advocates of the approach of capturing first hand, spoken accounts that enrich traditional archival collections.<sup>11</sup>

James E. Fogerty writes that oral history can be utilised to respond to gaps in existing collections, to go beyond collections to individuals, subjects and communities not yet reached and to document contemporary events that traditional methods of collecting cannot.<sup>12</sup> These projects also allow for different aspects of a person's life to be conveyed through different media, aspects that may not be apparent in a more traditional documentary genre.

## **Deaccessioning**

Deaccessioning is the formal documented removal of a collection or item from the accessions register or custody of an archive service. Although it is a normal part of collections development and management, deaccessioning should take place within an authorised collections development policy, and with due regard to the relevant regulations and legislation. Doing so will ensure that the deaccessioning process is transparent and accountable to the stakeholders of an archive service. It should not be driven by the need to save space or other resourcing restrictions, including budgetary matters, or in response to individual events or persons.

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<sup>11</sup> Terry Abraham 'Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice' *American Archivist* 54 (Winter 1991) 44 – 52 (46).

<sup>12</sup> James E. Fogerty 'Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives' *American Archivist* 46:2 (Spring, 1983) 148 – 157.



More guidance regarding deaccessioning is available on [The National Archives website](#).

## Documentation Strategy

Defined by Helen Willa Samuels, documentation strategy is an approach 'formulated to assure the documentation of an ongoing issue, activity or geographic area,' consisting of four activities:

- Identifying and defining the topic(s) to be documented;
- Establishing an administrative structure to develop, direct and monitor the strategy;
- Examining the available documentation;
- Selecting and placing the documentation within an appropriate repository.<sup>13</sup>

Crucially, documentation strategies do not start with surveys of the material already available in archive services, but start instead with an investigation of the topic to be documented and the information required to record the topic adequately. The central question at the heart of documentation strategy is what should exist within an archive service devised through the identification of functions and activities of any particular topic. As records increasingly cross institutional lines, collaborative working has been identified by many practitioners as key to successful implementation of documentation strategy, recognising the many individuals and institutions that are essential to the creation, management and retention of records.<sup>14</sup>

## Functional Analysis

Functional analysis involves the identification of an institution's primary functions, and the breakdown of each function into component activities. In carrying out such work, the archivist considers what documentation is necessary to record each of the institution's functions and activities fully, identifying those units within an institution that are most likely to produce documentation and those that are not. After a functional analysis has been completed, the archivist is then able to prioritise specific functions and activities for acquisition and development, in line with organisational goals.

## Macro-appraisal

Originating in the Canadian concept of 'total archives' in which public sector archives seek to collect both public records and personal papers, macro-appraisal focuses on records creators and records-creating processes in order to create an

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<sup>13</sup> Helen Willa Samuels 'Who Controls the Past' *American Archivist* 49:2 (Spring 1986) 109 – 124 (116).

<sup>14</sup> Cathy Williams 'On The Record: Towards a Documentation Strategy' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 33:1 (2012) 23 – 40 (25).

image of society through collections that most accurately represents its most significant features. Macro-appraisal assesses the societal value of the functional-structural context and culture in which records are created and used by creators, and the interrelationship of the public with that context.

### **Minnesota Method**

Developed by the Minnesota Historical Society to develop collections of business records, the Minnesota Method as devised by Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell, is a combination of several archival approaches including documentation strategy, appraisal and functional analysis.<sup>15</sup> It is a multi-step process, consisting of six key activities:

- Defining a collecting area; analysing the area and surveying other relevant repository holdings and policies;
- Research and surveying relevant documentary sources, and consultation with subject experts, researchers and records creators;
- Prioritisation, including defining the criteria for prioritization across sectors and regions;
- Defining functions and information most appropriate to particular collection areas and the relevant documentary levels;
- Redefining prioritisation and testing of the model;
- Updating research, consultation and collections analysis every three-seven years.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark A. Greene and Todd J. Daniels-Howell 'Documentation with 'An Attitude': A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records' in *The Records of American Business* ed. James M. O'Toole (Society of American Archivists, 1997)

## **Selected Further Reading**

### **Acquisition**

Brown, Richard 'Records Acquisition Strategy and its Theoretical Foundation: The Case for a Concept of Archival Hermeneutics' *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92) 34 – 56.

Ericson, Timothy L. 'At the "rim of creative dissatisfaction": Archivists and Acquisitions Development' *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92) 66 – 77.

### **Appraisal**

Booms, Hans 'Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources' *Archivaria* (Summer 1987) 69 – 107.

Cook, Terry 'We Are What We Keep, We Keep What We Are': Archival Appraisal Past, Present and Future' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32:2 2011 173 – 189.

Gilliland, Anne J. 'Archival appraisal: practising on shifting sands' in *Archives and Recordkeeping: Theory into Practice* ed. Caroline Brown (London: Facet Publishing, 2014) 31 – 62.

Henry, Linda J. 'Schellenberg in Cyberspace' *The American Archivist* 31 (Fall 1998) 309 – 327.

[Paradigm: workbook on digital private papers](#) *Appraisal and Disposal* (2008)

The National Archives [What is Appraisal?](#) (2013)

Tschan, Reto 'A Comparison of Jenkinson and Schellenberg on Appraisal' *The American Archivist* (Fall/Winter 2002) 176 – 195.

Schellenberg, Theodore R. *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Society of American Archivists, 1956)

-; [The Appraisal of Modern Public Records](#) (1956)

Williams, Caroline 'Studying Reality: the Application of Theory in an Aspect of UK Practice' *Archivaria* 62 (2006) 77 – 100.

### **Changing Archival Practice**

Cook, Terry "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift" *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997) 17 – 63.

-; 'The Archive(s) is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape' *The American Archivist* 74 (Fall/Winter 2011) 600 – 632.

Ham, F. Gerald 'The Archival Edge' *The American Archivist* (January 1975) 5 – 13.

Nesmith, Tom 'Reopening Archives: Bringing New Contextualities into Archival Theory and Practice' *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005) 259 – 274.

### **Collections Development (general)**

Cook, Terry eds. *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions – Essays in Honor of Helen Willa Samuels* (Society of American Archivists, 2011)

Green, Mark "[If You Can't Get Rid of the Family Skeleton, You May as Well Make It Dance](#)": [How One Repository Tangoed Successfully with some Controversial Collections Management Activities](#)' (2010)

Sauer, Cynthia K. 'Doing the Best We Can? The Use of Collection Development Policies and Cooperative Collecting Activities at Manuscript Repositories' *The American Archivist* 64 (Fall/Winter 2001) 308 – 349 (308).

### **Deaccessioning**

The National Archives [Deaccessioning and disposal: guidance for archive services](#) (2015)

### **Documentation Strategy**

Abraham, Terry 'Collection Policy or Documentation Strategy: Theory and Practice' *American Archivist* 54 (Winter, 1991) 44 – 52.

Cox, Richard J. 'The Documentation Strategy and Archival Appraisal Principles: A Different Approach' *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994) 11 – 36.

Marshall, Jennifer A. 'Documentation Strategies in the Twenty-First Century? Rethinking Institutional Priorities and Professional Limitations' *Archival Issues* 23:1 (1998) 59 – 74.

Samuels, Helen Willa 'Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy' *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92)

-- *Varsity Letters: Documenting Modern Colleges and Universities* (Society of American Archivists & The Scarecrow Press, 1998)

--'Who Controls the Past' *The American Archivist* 49:2 (Spring 1986) 109 – 124.

Williams, Cathy 'On The Record: Towards a Documentation Strategy' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 33:1 23 – 40.

### **Ethics**

Archives and Records Association [Code of Ethics](#) (May 2016)

International Council on Archives [ICA Code of Ethics](#) (1996)

Society of American Archivists [Code of Ethics for Archivists](#) (January 2012)

-- [Core Values of Archivists](#) (May 2011)

### **Functional Analysis**

Robyns, Marcus C. and Woolman, Jason 'Institutional Functional Analysis at Northern Michigan University: A New Process of Appraisal and Arrangement of Archival Records' *The American Archivist* 74 (Spring/Summer 2011) 241 – 256.

### **Macroappraisal and 'Total Archives'**

Cook, Terry 'Macroappraisal in Theory and Practice: Origins, Characteristics and Implementation in Canada 1950 – 2000' *Archival Science* 5 (2005) 101 – 161.

Millar, Laura 'Discharging Our Debt: The Evolution of the Total Archives Concept in English Canada' *Archivaria* (1998) 46, 103 – 146.

Society of American Archivists '[Macro Appraisal](#)' *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (2005)

### **Minnesota Method**

Greene, Mark A. and Daniels-Howell, Todd J. 'Documentation with 'An Attitude': A Pragmatist's Guide to the Selection and Acquisition of Modern Business Records' in *The Records of American Business* ed. James M. O'Toole (Society of American Archivists, 1997).

Hyry, Tom, Kaplan, Diane and Wiedeman, Christine "Though This Be Madness, yet There Is Method in 't': Assessing the Value of Faculty Papers and Defining a Collecting Policy' *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002) 56 – 69.

Society of American Archivists '[Minnesota Method](#)' *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (2005)

### **Oral History**

Fogerty, James E. 'Filling the Gap: Oral History in the Archives' *American Archivist* 46:2 (Spring 1983) 148 – 157.

[Oral History Society](#)

### **Representative Collections**

Cook, Terry 'Evidence, memory, identity and community: four shifting archival paradigms' *Archival Science* 13:2 (2013) 95 – 120.

Johnston, Ian 'Whose History is it Anyway?' *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22:2  
(2001) 213 – 229.

McKemmish, Sue 'Evidence of Me' *The Australian Library Journal* 45:3 (1996)