Cultivating the Archival Enterprise in a University Setting: The Planning and Development of a Special Collections Department at USF St. Petersburg

James Anthony Schnur

Follow this and additional works at: https://digital.usfsp.edu/fac_publications

Recommended Citation
Schnur, James Anthony, "Cultivating the Archival Enterprise in a University Setting: The Planning and Development of a Special Collections Department at USF St. Petersburg" (2011). Faculty Publications. 3001.
https://digital.usfsp.edu/fac_publications/3001
Cultivating the Archival Enterprise in a University Setting

The Planning and Development of a Special Collections Department at USF St. Petersburg

James A. Schnur

Special Collections Department
Nelson Poynter Memorial Library
University of South Florida at St. Petersburg

Seminar in Special Libraries
Dr. John Knego
9 November 1993
Cultivating the Archival Enterprise in a University Setting:
The Planning and Development of a Special Collections Department
at USF St. Petersburg

STARTING A TRADITION

Classes began on the St. Petersburg campus of the University of South Florida in the late 1960s. At that time, approximately 200 books discarded from the Tampa Campus Library formed the entire collection of books in the library, a small room in the old U. S. Maritime Service Barracks. Nelson Poynter, editor of the St. Petersburg Times and long-time civic visionary, attended the ground-breaking for the present library in 1978. He suffered a fatal stroke that same day and died shortly thereafter. State officials named the library after Nelson Poynter, as a means of saluting his efforts to secure a university campus as the cultural and intellectual hub along Bayboro Harbor.

The collection has grown dramatically since the late 1960s. The current structure houses over 150,000 books, 800 periodicals, and nearly 3500 video titles. The Legislature has appropriated funds for the construction of a new library building—more than twice the size of the present structure—which will include a state of the art instructional media center, distance learning facilities, and a Special Collections Department. The information contained in this handout describes some archival ideas and practices that guide the library staff as it prepares for the opening of our Special Collections Department in the near future.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE ARCHIVES?

As defined by David B. Gracy, Professor of Archives at the University of Texas at Austin:

Archives are the records, organically related, of an entity.

"Organically related" assumes that an intellectual relationship exists between materials, known as provenance (the pedigree or life history of an item).

Archives are groups of information.

They contain information of continuing or enduring value. You need to look beyond the individual letter or document, and instead examine the broader organic relations. Archivists often use the French term respect des fonds, which means respect for the integrity of the group. While records managers tend to work with records during their "first life," archivists preserve items of enduring value in their "second life."

Archives hold unique materials.

Unlike traditional librarians, archivists rarely find citations of their materials on OCLC or rely upon artificially constructed classification schemes. Three or four LC subject headings can never adequately describe a manuscript collection. The archivist will encounter original and unique items with varying arrangement, description, preservation, and conservation needs. For example, archivists work with: correspondence (letters, telegrams, memoranda), diaries, minutes, printed materials (broadsides, clippings, certificates, ephemera), financial documentation...
(journals, ledgers), audio/visual materials (photographs, films, audio and video tape), creative works (literary notes, unpublished works, musical scores), legal materials (contracts, wills), scrapbooks, maps, charts, diagrams, artifacts, and machine readable records (datafiles, computer disks).

**APPRAISAL**

In a university archives, appraisal determines intellectual rather than monetary value. Stay out of tax trouble by crafting a statement such as "the library does not appraise or authenticate materials offered as gifts or proffered for any other purpose." You may evaluate the intellectual value of an item but never make an appraisal! We cannot keep everything and therefore must make decisions about potential donations. An archives must establish a collection development policy to serve as a guide. This policy should name subjects, time frames, geographic areas of interest, etc., as well as the types of formats you will accept. Take caution in what you accept, because once you obtain a collection you have made a long-term commitment to maintaining it.

Appraisal continues long after you have secured a collection: You must continually re-evaluate how individual collections fit within your institutional policies and collection development objectives. Remember, nothing is free in an archives: Every item you acquire will occupy precious space and cost money (salaries, preservation needs, storage containers, etc.).

Factors in appraisal:

1. **Evidential** value gives evidence of creator's actions. Although any Civics textbook has a copy of the Constitution, the original copy possesses unique evidential, enduring, and historical value.

2. **Informational** value emphasizes the importance of the content over the medium. For example, if a 1955 letter written to a state senator becomes brittle with age, we would photocopy the information onto acid free paper and discard the original.

3. **Administrative need** requires that certain materials remain within the archives for institutional purposes, regardless of researchers' needs.

Appraisal actually occurs at two levels:

1. At the **group** level when you first obtain the material
2. At lower levels as you first process the material, and later when you balance space needs against enduring value to the depository.

If materials have enduring value but do not fall within the purview of your collection development policy, suggest alternative repositories.

**ACQUISITION**

Two means of acquiring materials:

**Records Management:** obtaining materials within the organization. By maintaining a University archives, we can better understand the purpose and history of the institution.
Collecting: gathering materials from the community/ soliciting donations

Keep records about your records. You need to document when you receive materials, as well as proof that you own the materials. Remember, legal and physical possession are different in nature. The deed of gift serves as a legal document, transferring property to your institution and permitting you to make decisions about the collection. Five essential parts to any deed of gift: 1. who is the source, 2. who is the receiver, 3. what is the gift, 4. what are the conditions, 5. proof that the transaction has actually taken place.

This deed should clearly specify what all parties intend to do, as well as stipulate any restrictions or other terms governing use of the collection. Never accept long-term loans or other arrangements that do not offer clear title to the collection, and avoid unreasonable restrictions (such as "for use at the discretion of the donor," "closed until 2100 A.D.," "for scholarly purposes only.") Include a statement such as "any member of the general public may have access to this collection, which will be maintained according to standard archival practices." Remember, the transfer of records to other institutions or the disposal of unwanted items within a collection fall under the standard archival practices provision.

PROCESSING

Arrangement
The acts of confirming or creating order. Establish well-defined groups that make the placement of any single item obvious. Any unique item should have only one logical place within the collection. Do not worry about item-level control or description. Gather as much information as possible about the creator of the material to establish provenance (the office which produced the records, or the author or the gatherer of items in the collection).

Maintain original order: Within distinct groups, attempt to preserve the original order a logical order exists. The order and provenance tell more about the creator than any single item in the collection. Never mix, match, or separate records of the creator.

Group: body of organizationally related records, established on the basis of provenance, with a particular regard to the history of the creator.

Series: a set or block of records, distinguished by the function in which they arose, the way they were received, their form, or their content.

Sub-series: a set or unit of documents within a series that have a distinct form, content, or method of creation.
## Types of Arrangement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group:</th>
<th>USF St. Pete University Archives</th>
<th>Local and Regional History</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup:</td>
<td>Division of Student Affairs</td>
<td>Pinellas ACLU Collection Publications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Campus Lecture Series</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subseries:</td>
<td>Academic Year 1991-1992</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>File Unit:</td>
<td>Symposium on Spain, 3/92</td>
<td>Come Unity Newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document:</td>
<td>Letter to Ambassador Zappala</td>
<td>March 1974 issue of paper</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Description

The finding aid, inventory, or researcher's guide describes the material. All finding aids should include:

1. Physical description of the organization of the material
2. Sketch of the creator (who or what created the records, agency history, etc.)
3. Scope and Content note that provides a narrative to allow others to understand the body of materials by expressing the relationships that exist among items in the collection. Compare and contrast sub-series, dates, quantity of material, other descriptive traits. The Scope and Content note should do more than expand upon the physical description; it should also offer an opportunity for the archivist to add his or her perspective on the collection by describing the people, events, and issues important within this body of material.

## PRESERVATION

Archivists face a dilemma: they must balance the needs of present users with the security and long-term preservation required to maintain the collection for patrons of the future.

**Conservation** - physical treatment of items to physically support or chemically stabilize their condition (item-level treatment, such as mending a document).

**Damage** - occurs due to neglectful care, use, or handling.

**Deterioration** - occurs as part of the natural aging process. It can be retarded, but not halted.

**Preservation** - a broadly conceived term that denotes a wide variety of preventive activities that will maintain your holdings in either the original or other usable format (the sum of all actions you take).

**Reformatting** - action taken to preserve information (with paper, this often means either photocopying or microfilming). You need to evaluate the difference between informational and intrinsic value.

## REFERENCE

Closed stacks make reference service essential to archives. Archivists must understand the research process, attitude, and goals of their constituency. Researchers should have established a topic before entering the archives and should always question the reliability of the materials.
Three types of information the archivist should know:
1. Information in the records. Know your collections.
2. Information about the records. Provenance.
3. Related information. (Other sources in the library and elsewhere.)

Reading room policies. Have a written policy available for public inspection:
1. Set up a registration procedure and security procedures
   Have patrons provide essential information on a registration form.
   Establish identity of patron through student ID, driver's license, etc.
   Store personal effects away from the reading room. Only slips of
   paper and pencils, or quiet lap top computers, should be taken into the
   research area.
   Inspect papers and collections before patron departs.
   Assure that researchers exercise caution when using collections (i.e.,
   place items flat on the table, rather than along the edge).
   Permit researchers to use only one item at a time to ensure that
   materials from different collections do not mix together.
2. Conduct reference interview to ascertain the researcher's needs
3. Have patron request records through page slip or other means that can keep
   track of statistics and provide record of who used the collection
4. Offer consistent service

PUBLIC EDUCATION
Archivists must become proactive rather than reactive. Archivists do not work in a
mortuary, serving as caretakers for old, useless records. They cannot confine their
activities to the ivory tower of the library. Outreach allows you to share knowledge
of your repository, purpose, and holdings, as well as share with others your passion
for the value of archives and history.

Through outreach, you will: 1. support and sell your program, 2. promote the use of
your collections, and 3. promote acquisition of future collections.

Keep the lines of communication open with library and university administrators.
Use electronic mail to your advantage by establishing mailing lists that selectively
target faculty and staff within their areas of interest.

A CLOSING THOUGHT

... items lack research value if researchers do not know they exist.