

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ARCHIVES AT SMALL INSTITUTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** Whether you are given the responsibility for your institution's archival materials or are planning to establish an archives, you'll need a basic understanding and some practical guidelines to get started. This paper addresses the needs of one-person libraries that have to administer and preserve records of enduring value of their parent institution. The initiation of an archival program involves an organization's ongoing commitment and support for the availability of unique groups of historical records. With enough resources and an adequate facility, the archival staff can develop and implement goals, plans, and priorities. Archival functions include collection development, appraisal, arrangement and description, reference and access, outreach, and preservation. Additionally, the archival culture offers support, insight and resources.

## **Introduction**

Many organizations and institutions have an interest in keeping materials that document their activities and history, whether for administrative use or historical interest. Records may be stored in various places throughout an organization, making it difficult to locate, organize or retrieve items. A special event such as an anniversary or exhibit, or writing a history of the institution may also trigger the need to set up an archives. Collecting, preserving and making these records accessible can benefit the organization and researchers alike. Ideally an organization would hire a professionally trained archivist to manage its archival materials, although in many instances the archives starts out as part of the librarian's responsibility. In the absence of a professional archivist, an archival consultant can work closely with an organization to help initiate an archival program.

## **Basic Concepts**

It's helpful to clarify the various interpretations of the term 'archives' and 'archiving' from the beginning and to distinguish between library and archival work. For example, 'archiving' can be associated with the term "electronic archiving", which means different things to different people, including the electronic storage of journals and other published materials, or digitizing them for preservation and access. Libraries typically deal with published, discrete items whereas archives deal with non-published materials such as papers, manuscripts, and visual materials. Additionally when people think of archives they think of preservation; however it also includes reference, which requires processing, cataloging and access.

The term “archives” is a collective noun which has three meanings, all of which must be included in the goals and objectives of an archival program:

- The *materials* generated by individuals and organizations in the course of business transactions that are saved because of their enduring value. These records consist of any medium, including paper, film, photographs, sound recordings, and increasingly, electronic records.
- The *place or site* where archival materials are located.
- The *agency or program* responsible for selecting the materials of enduring value.

Organizations retain and preserve materials for many reasons – administrative, fiscal, legal, intrinsic, evidential, and/or informational – all of which comprise their *archival value*. Archivists often use the term “archives” to include *manuscripts*, which are the papers of individuals, an artificial collection of materials acquired from various sources, or individual documents acquired because of their significance.

### **Administration**

From the outset an archival program should comply with the institution’s mission, goals and objectives by providing support services to other offices and fulfilling archival tasks. The public or private nature of the institution, for example, will determine the activities of the archives. The first step in establishing an archives is to secure sufficient authority and flexibility to negotiate for the transfer of records from the organization’s offices. Ideally the archives would be independent of other departments and report to a central administration; nonetheless it needs a clearly defined status within the larger organizational framework. It’s also invaluable to know the scope of the archivist’s responsibilities, and who the supervisor is, as his or her support can be critical for the function of the archives. The administrative status should also enable the archives to work effectively with other organization offices that have related functions, such as a records management department.

A comprehensive archives policy is a written statement which should be approved by the governing board of the parent institution. One component of the policy is a *statement of authority*, which reflects the institution’s support and the scope of the program, and can be included in the mission statement. The *mission statement* states the purpose of an archival program and its connection to the organization as a whole, including what activities or groups the archives is documenting, the reason for initiating an archival program, what the archives collects, and whom the archives serves. A sample archives policy for IAMSLIC might look like the following:

## International Association of Aquatic and Marine Science Libraries and Information Centers (IAMSLIC) Archives

### Policy Statement

The purpose of the International Association of Aquatic and Marine Science Libraries and Information Centers (IAMSLIC) Archives is to collect, organize, describe, preserve and make available for research and reference use the archival materials of the Organization and those ancillary records of the Organization's Regional Groups which have enduring historical, legal, fiscal, and/or administrative value to warrant permanent preservation.

The IAMSLIC Archives seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of the origins, aims, programs, and goals of the Organization and of the development of these aims, programs, and goals as reflected in the workings of the official IAMSLIC offices, committees, and Regional Groups. It provides information services that will assist the operation of the Organization in addition to serving research by making available and encouraging use of its collection by members of the Organization and the community at large. Official organization records include any and all documentation in any form produced or received by any member of the International Association of Aquatic and Marine Science Libraries while engaged in the conduct of official IAMSLIC business.

The IAMSLIC Archives seeks to provide adequate and appropriate conditions for storage and preservation of official organization records. In addition, it facilitates efficient records management to further assure that permanently valuable records are preserved and to encourage efficient use of space within the Organization's Archives housed at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. In collecting these materials, the Organization's Archives undertakes to recognize and honor matters of privilege and confidentiality.

Other administrative work includes the development of goals, plans, and priorities in the form of a planning document. The document should take into consideration the archives' mission and the organization's purpose and goals, and address areas such as policy review, staffing and supervising, and education. Other activities include position descriptions that help to define duties and reflect the varied responsibilities; and maintaining a budget. A useful addition is an archival advisory board comprising members from the organization and community who can bring archival expertise and political institutional knowledge to the program, and raise awareness about the archives in the organization. Board members can also inform the archivist about important projects and activities whose materials could be targeted for the archives.

### Collection Development & Appraisal

An archivist initiates the archival activity by collecting records and papers for the institution archives. A written *collections development* or *acquisition policy* provides the

procedures and activities needed for acquiring, identifying and transferring such materials. Offices in an organization or institution accumulate records that over time complete their life cycle; at this stage an archivist can assist with the transfer of materials to the archives, using the policy to help determine which materials have long-term value. Records lose much of their administrative value when transferred to the archives, and often get used later for reasons different from those for which they were created. The policy should also target areas of weakness in the current archival holdings documenting the organization's history, either by office or chronologically. The archivist should evaluate the organization's official records, the papers of affiliated groups or people, and any other materials relating to the organization, such as audio and visual recordings, oral histories, artifacts, and manuscript collections. The written plan also articulates what materials the archives does not accept, and defines acceptable donor restrictions. Statements regarding copyright and literary rights should if possible be assigned to the institution or appropriate governing board.

Part of the process of drafting a collection policy is conducting a records survey within the archives and throughout the whole organization. A survey enables the archivist to learn the various functions and responsibilities of all parts of the institution. It will also help to identify records of long term value and to anticipate future space and resource needs. A survey should begin with materials already stored or accumulated for the archives then proceed with all the institution's offices. A standardized survey form should include such basic information as:

- office of origin/creator
- date range
- quantity in cubic or linear feet
- location
- if possible- notes on the organization and content, and preservation

Enlisting the help of administrative staff in some capacity during the survey will draw attention to the "archival value" of their records, and improve communication and support for future collaboration. Although "taking stock" can be time consuming, the archivist will have a clearer picture of how records are created and maintained, and the archivist's role in the organization will also gain visibility and recognition. The survey results should be reviewed for the amount and quality or value of the records. Archivists look at the value of information and evidence contained in the records to determine if they are archival.

*Appraisal* is the process of determining which records fall within the scope of the collection development or acquisition policy. The process also involves the *disposition* of records, whereby inactive records are either transferred to the archives or destroyed. Records which merit priority in the selection process include those that document the institution's development and growth, and the activities of offices, departments, or committees responsible for policy making and approval. In most organizations less than five percent of records generated are permanent and of historical value. The archivist should also consult the institution's legal department for the legal retention period of

documents as well as any other kinds of restrictions. Confidential or sensitive materials are often invaluable to researchers, for example, and can be restricted as long as necessary rather than being discarded. Appraisal has no specific time schedule and can occur before, during and after the transfer of records to the archives.

*Accessioning* is the process of formally accepting custody of materials by keeping a record of acquisitions immediately upon their arrival in the archives. An accessions log documents the date of receipt, a unique identifying or accession number, the source of materials, and other identifying information such as quantity, date range, location, a description, access conditions, and notes. In addition, donors giving materials from outside the organization should sign a "Deed of Gift" form, which is a legal document transferring custody of the materials to the archives.

### **Arrangement and Description**

The next phase beyond the initial administrative stages of establishing an archives is the process of *arrangement*, which is the physical organization of materials according to the principles of provenance and original order. The principle of *provenance* states that materials created, accumulated or maintained by a person or organization should not be integrated or interfiled with records from another source, whatever the similarity in subject or format. *Original order* is the rule that records should retain the order and organization established by the "office of origin" or creator. This rule is more difficult rule to maintain when materials arrive in the archives without any recognizable organization, or with an order that has been substantially upset.

Groups of archival materials can be organized into five different levels, as set forth by Oliver Wendell Holmes. The hierarchical order from large to small includes repository; record groups or collection; series and subseries; file units; and items such as a folder or a reel of film. These levels are all defined by different criteria. An archival collection should be arranged and described, or "processed", according to the amount of use it will receive. The size of the collection, and resource and staff constraints may also determine the depth of processing. In the initial process of arrangement it is important to consider the relationship of a collection to other materials in the archives, and to discern the various arrangements within the collection itself.

The process of archival *description* enables the archivist to establish intellectual control over the materials by means of finding aids, guides, databases, and indexed. A finding aid consists of two parts. The narrative section contains biographical or historical information and notes on the content and scope of the materials; the second part consists of a box or folder list of the materials.

### **Reference and Access**

Like libraries, archives provide *reference* service to internal and external users. Unlike libraries, however, an archivist always brings the requested material to the patron and

oversees use of the materials. In most organizational archives internal users make requests for materials more than outside patrons. Internal users such as administrators rely on the archivist's knowledge of the collections to retrieve requested material quickly. Outside patrons should receive a form stating the archives' rules and regulations. The archivist should also interview all new users to understand specifically what is requested, and if necessary guide them in the use of archival materials. Issues such as photocopying, reproduction of materials, and copyright should also be addressed.

*Access* relates to the rules regarding availability and restrictions of archival materials. A written access policy, similar to the archives and the acquisition policy, is an official statement generated by the archives and should be a part of every archival program. The policy states the conditions of access to the archival materials. The Law requires restrictions to some materials, while others remain closed for a limited time. In the United States, archives should abide by the American Library Association's (ALA) and the Society of American Archivists' (SAA) joint statement on access and guidelines for access to original research materials.

### **Outreach**

Outreach activities encompass all aspects of archival work and help to increase awareness of users to the archives' holdings. Although this particular function develops slowly, any form of outreach helps build support for the program. Some initial, yet critical activities include meeting with administrative and department staff, submitting an article in the community or institution's newsletter, mounting a small exhibit of photographs or artifacts, and writing a brochure.

### **Preservation**

*Preservation* involves the stabilization and protection of materials through appropriate storage, handling and maintenance; it may also mean transferring material to different medium, such as microfilm. Activities range from housing materials in appropriate acid free sleeves or containers, to maintaining optimum temperature and humidity levels for various types of materials.

*Conservation* involves physically or chemically treating materials; anything requiring more than minor repairs is usually handled by trained conservators.

### **Conclusion**

There are numerous resources to help and support the process of initiating an archival program. Most activities require many steps that may take years to fulfill; however these can be broken down into workable parts and gradually implemented. Archival literature, workshops, regional and national organizations, and the archives listserv are invaluable sources of information. Additionally, visiting other archival repositories can provide insight into how other organizations manage their archival materials. To alleviate staff

shortages, students and interns can assist with basic yet time-consuming tasks including rehousing materials and typing lists. Grant money, no matter how small, can help purchase supplies, hire part-time help, or fund an exhibit. Over time, an institution's investment and efforts in preserving and making accessible its records will reap many benefits and rewards.

### HELPFUL LITERATURE & RESOURCES

The seven titles in the Archival Fundamentals Series available from the Society of American Archivists (SAA) provide a foundation for modern archival theory and practice.

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#### Web Sites

The Society of American Archivists  
<http://www.archivists.org/>

American Institute of Physics  
<http://www.aip.org/history/>

Association of Records Managers and Administrators, Inc.  
<http://www.arma.org/hq/>

Institute Archives at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
<http://libraries.mit.edu/archives/>

Scripps Institute of Oceanography Archives  
<http://www.scilib.ucsd.edu/sio/archives>

Smithsonian Institution Archives  
<http://www.si.edu/organiza/offices/archive/start.htm>