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The ethical balance in defining a collection policy

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NEA Session, Spring Meeting, Mt. Holyoke, April 30, 1994

The Archivist as Fulcrum: Weighing the Issues of Acquisition and Deaccessioning in an Ethical Balance

Elizabeth Mock: The ethical balance in defining a collection policy

OUTLINE:

1. Professional basis for developing a collection policy (which includes ethics as a factor). See G. Ham's SAA Manual on selecting and appraising records, article in AA on development of collection policies, and SAA code of ethics.

2. Background of UMB and its library

3. discussion of history of UMB collection policy

4. review of changes in policy over time

5. Summary:

Ethics versus pragmatism

Is ethics the determining factor? or important factor?

Ethics carries over to dealing with donors.

As members of a profession, archivists should consider the ethical basis for many of their policies and activities.

The definition of a collection or acquisition policy for an archival or manuscript repository can serve several purposes. Gerald Ham, in the recently published SAA Manual entitled *Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts*, lists seven. They are:

1. it serves as an intellectual or conceptual framework for archival decision-making, providing guides for collection development and appraisal decisions;
2. it is the ethical foundation of the acquisition program;
3. it enables the archivist to more easily explain to records custodians and donors why their records are significant and how they complement existing holdings;
4. it provides specific criteria for rejecting unsolicited collections;
5. it provides a strong justification for the hazardous and emotionally charged process of reappraising and deaccessioning;
6. it gives continuity to the acquisition program with changes in administration and staff; and
7. it enables repositories to make wiser use of limited resources by bringing collecting in line with available resources.

Today I am focusing on his second point - that a collection policy is the ethical foundation of the acquisition program. As Mr. Ham further states "a collection policy allows archival institutions to state their intentions - selection goals - to others and thus can help avoid competition and conflict in collecting. It is the *sine qua non* [or "essence"] of inter-institutional cooperation.

The Society of American Archivists' "Code of Ethics for Archivists" stresses that acquisitions of materials need to be made in accordance with a written collection policy which is supported by adequate resources and consistent with the mission of the parent institution, and that cooperation rather than wasteful

competition is crucial. I think the most important place to demonstrate your ethical balance in collection development is in a thoughtful, sensible, written collection policy to guide all aspects of your work acquiring archives and manuscripts and in dealing with donors.

To set the stage for describing the ethical basis for the development of the collection policy and the establishment of an archival repository as part of library at UMass/Boston, I suppose I should give a very brief history of the university, since that history plays an important part in this story.

The University of Massachusetts at Boston admitted its first students in the Fall of 1965. The university, from the beginning an urban, commuting campus, was housed in several buildings in the Park Square area in downtown Boston. As the only public university in the greater Boston area, and as an institution founded during the activism of the 1960s, it offered degrees in the liberal arts and sciences, and it emphasized non-traditional programs of special interest to a student body that was urban, older, working, and not served by the established private institutions of higher education in the city. The university continued to operate in the Park Square area until its new campus was built on Columbia Point in the Dorchester section of the city. Classes began at the new campus in the Spring semester of 1974. In addition to the Columbia Point Campus, the University maintained, until last year, a downtown campus in Park Square as the home of its College of Public and Community Services which was established in the early 1970s.

The energy of the library staff in those early years was focused on building the book and periodical collections, planning the library facility at Columbia Point, and working to support the developing curriculum of the university. All of this was occurring in a climate of uncertain financing, there were times of abundant funding and years of lean support.

A series of events and situations in the late 1970s presented the opportunity to the director of libraries to think about supporting the development of an archival/manuscripts department in the library, something (he once told me) he had not encouraged because of a lack of appropriate expertise among the existing staff, and the extreme unlikelihood of being able to justify the addition of an archivist position to the library. The contributing factors that set the stage for the library to consider a proposal for the creation of a department to collect archival and mss. material included: 1) the establishment of a graduate program in archival management as part of the university's history department; 2) the opening of the JFK Library adjacent to our campus in 1979; 3) the planning for the building of the Massachusetts State Archives on Columbia Point; and 4) the general growth of graduate programs and the increasing interest from our users in providing primary research support for faculty and student projects. The University was beginning to mature, it was a time to think about expanding the scope of library materials and building research collections in line with the interests and history of the campus. Additionally, since 1975, one of the librarians had been working to build a Dorchester local history collection. While she had gathered books and some family papers on Dorchester, the holdings had not really grown beyond a small collection of mostly secondary sources and vertical file material on the history of our immediate neighborhood.

These situations and events coincided with some changes in my own professional life which enabled me to act as the agent for the library's move toward starting an archival program. In 1978 I had been a librarian at UMass/Boston for five years and had decided to enroll part time in the university's graduate history program to earn a second master's degree. Consequently I was able to join the new archival program in its first class, and in 1979 I became the program's first graduate. At this point I was faced with an important decision. I was interested in making a

career change from the library field to archives, but would have preferred to be able to continue my interest in, and commitment to, the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

I had been thinking of the possibility of approaching the Director of Libraries about establishing an archives department in the library, in light of the factors and situations I previously described. I was concerned, however, that any move toward creating such a program should be carefully planned, especially in regards to its collection policy. What we should do at UMass/Boston should not compete with neighboring or local repositories. If we could provide complementary material to the collections of our current and future archival neighbors at Columbia Point, all the better. In thinking about a collection policy, it was important to consider the educational program of the university; the areas of research interests of students and faculty; and the university's responsibility to its immediate neighbors, and to the larger academic community of which the university is part, for the preservation of records which otherwise might be lost.

In our early days of thinking about this, we believed some of the groups of records that could possibly be targeted in a collection policy included Dorchester local history, building on what had already been started. We were considering seeking the archives of private social welfare and charitable organizations, which could complement the holdings in the State Archives of records of public social welfare agencies and possibly help to provide a balanced source of materials at Columbia Point for the study of social reform, philanthropy and dependent groups. Another possible emphasis could be the records of local radical, alternative and community organizations. The Kennedy Library provided sources for study of twentieth century mainstream political history. The building of a collection illustrating radical or alternative movements, or other community-based organizations could possibly complement those collections.

Some of these suggestions grew out of discussions with faculty members who were trying to do research and saw the need for certain groups of records to be preserved in a repository; other suggestions resulted from the expressed concerns of local archivists who had been trying to deal with demands to document these subject areas; and still other ideas for collecting grew out of the recognition of recent and contemporary events and issues that had not yet begun to be documented in archival repositories. Some of these areas appeared very appropriate for concentration for our university in light of our history and programs.

A collection of papers of a local social activist was offered to our library in late 1979, and I used this occasion to approach the library director to find out if he would consider a proposal about starting an archival program along the lines I described. My suggestion was encouraged. We accessioned the papers of the social activist, and I began to investigate the possibility of developing collecting areas, and drafting a proposal for action. A few months later we were approached by a faculty member and a private social welfare agency about accepting an important collection of the agency's historical records -- this was just the event we needed to precipitate the commitment to an archival collecting program for the library. The director agreed to accept the collection, and I was allowed to begin working to organize a program for the acquisition of archival research material for the library.

The way this situation developed was very appealing to the library director. He saw my willingness to devote this extra effort to getting it going, and saw the fact that I appeared to have the knowledge and expertise to handle it (perhaps a very generous consideration on his part at that time I must admit). If this proved successful he would be able to see the start of an archives department for the library that could, in the future, answer demands for providing primary research material for the use of faculty and students of the university. And this all could be done without the significant investment of additional staff at that time. As a result of my

proposal and the offer of these two collections, the Director of Libraries redefined my job description to include the added responsibility of manuscripts librarian.

So, in the fall of 1980 the Archives and Manuscripts Department was off to a tentative start, with myself devoting some of my work time to the department. We formed a faculty/librarian advisory committee to help us more specifically shape our collection policy, and to help in our future planning. Also, throughout this process we benefited tremendously from the aid and advice of then director of the archives graduate program and state archivist, Nicholas Olsberg.

To strengthen and legitimize the development of the department, I believed that a decisive step was needed to urge it on. With the director's approval and encouragement, I submitted a grant proposal to the NHPRC to request funding for a feasibility study which would lead to the further definition of the department's collection policy and move us toward building those collections. At this point let me explain the three definitions in our collecting policy and then I can describe how we decided on specific aspects of two of those areas to target in the grant project. The first was defined as Local History and is described in the following way: "The beginnings of a Dorchester local history collection has been established from contributions from Dorchester residents and organizations to the Healey Library. The Archives Department is especially interested in documenting the history of Dorchester as a twentieth century urban community and how it has responded to the changes and conditions of mid and late twentieth century society." (Aside here about the mission of the Dorchester Historical Society). Under Social Welfare and Private Charitable Organizations, we state: "The Archives Department seeks to continue to build its collection of the records of local private social welfare and charitable organizations of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Collection of the archives of these organizations and institutions provide us with a record of both the history of the work of these agencies and of the people they served. The agencies

include orphanages, shelters, settlement houses, and social service agencies in the Boston area. The third area defined in the collection policy is Community Organizations. "In Boston, as in other urban centers, people often respond to the social issues and conditions of the day by organizing into voluntary community-based organizations. The community can be defined as either a geographical community, responding to an issue in a neighborhood, for instance, or as a community of shared interest responding to contemporary social issues. The Archives Department continues to seek archival and manuscript collections which document these aspects of the recent and contemporary history of Boston, its citizens, and its neighborhoods."

For the purposes of the investigation that we would undertake in the grant project we decided to more specifically define the groups we would survey. The proposed grant project was to survey records of organizations, institutions, and agencies in two potential collection areas: these included 1) 19th century private social welfare and charitable agencies; and 2) contemporary community organizations. While there were two distinct chronological periods involved - the nineteenth century and 1960-1980 - the contemporary period was not focused on a specific group, as was the earlier segment. Through discussions and preliminary research the contemporary segment was defined to focus on two areas of community voluntary associations: one, a "community of interest", peace, anti-Vietnam War, draft counseling and Vietnam education groups; and two, a geographical community, Dorchester, which is the Boston neighborhood where the university is located. This also would overlap with our aim to document Dorchester local history. We felt that the information we learned in dealing with these two types of community groups could be applied to others in need of investigation: for example, tenant and welfare rights, and alternative political movements. Information we would gain in a survey of these groups of records

would serve as the basis for firmly establishing our collection policy and perhaps begin the process for building the collection in the years to come.

We received funding for the study, and with myself as project director and a project associate, the study was completed in the Spring and Summer of 1981. The NHPRC funded feasibility study provided the opportunity to closely analyze the targeted collecting areas. It gave us the time and resources to do background research on the current availability of primary resources in these specified areas; to assess the likelihood of securing collections which could adequately document the subject areas; and to provide the means to consult with area archival professionals to make sure that we would not be in competition and to ascertain the best ways of cooperating. In addition to guiding us on the formulation of our collection policy, the grant project proved to be very beneficial to the development of the library's archival program in several regards. It helped to legitimize the program in the eyes of the university community; it provided visibility in helping our efforts to reach potential donors and researchers; and it provided the impetus for the library director to appoint me as the Librarian for Archival Development with responsibility to head the Library's Archives Department, a position I assumed in July 1981.

This new department of the library, authorized to collect, maintain, and preserve and provide access to archival and manuscript records in designated subject areas, was underway. We were successful in establishing this program by realizing what the library and the university were prepared to support at that time; by assessing the needs of records preservation in our geographic area; and by taking advantage of opportunities, perceived needs of our institution, and presented expertise. In other words, we were able to accomplish this by approaching the idea realistically and carefully; by looking at the situation at hand, and asking ourselves some crucial questions -- what resources would be available? -- what subject areas needed documentation and were appropriate to our institution? -- could attempts at

documenting these subject areas appeal to a granting agency if we took that avenue for building support? -- and what kind of support were we likely to receive from within the library and from the university administration? By seeking answers to these questions we were able to reach our goal of establishing the program. There was easily adaptable and appropriate space available for archival storage, office, and research use. The Director was willing to move staff around to cover this new department, even if it had the unfortunate effect of leaving my old department rather short-staffed. And I was permitted to work on special programs and bring in material for the archives.

After the NHPRC project and with my now full-time archival position, my efforts and energies went into setting up policies and procedures for the department; seeking new collections to be added to our holdings; working closely with the graduate program in archives; and taking actions to build the visibility of this new department. The few attempts to try to build the program beyond its original boundaries were not successful. The library director, as an historian, understood the importance of archives and he was very supportive of my efforts to build the program within the library up to a point. Beyond this point, any further development would have meant a significant commitment of funding and staff from the University administration, and the director was not prepared to take this major step. It would have required competing with other university programs for support, and he did not believe the opportunity for success was present. I understood the situation and acknowledged that I should be content to maintain the department at its existing level. Efforts to build any program involve knowing when to push for additional support, and when to step back and wait for another, more appropriate time.

Over time, however, the need to assess the collection policy and adjust it has arisen. Some areas have been quite successful, others have gradually emphasized

certain aspects of the subject areas, not necessarily as I had anticipated, and still others were responses to unexpected developments. On the whole, I feel that the collection policy is essentially unchanged from the original plan, and in those areas that have evolved somewhat, we have followed the some ethical precepts as we did at the beginning. The most notable change in the past few years grew out of certain political decisions made at the university level, and actions on my part to try to cooperate with another university department in its attempts to build documentary collections. These actions involved material related to the history of the Vietnam War. When the original collection policy included anti-Vietnam War and peace movement organizations as part of the community and alternative movements section, we now expanded somewhat to support the goals of the university's William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences, which included the acquisition by the University of the archives of WGBH's *Vietnam: a television history*. The collections acquired by the Joiner Center had a decided emphasis on veterans' experiences and society's responses to war, and the WGBH collection included the anti-war movement as part of the history it presented. My interest in working cooperatively with the Joiner Center was from the point of view of wanting to avoid wasting university resources. It seemed to me that it would make more sense for the Archives and Special Collections Department to take on curatorship of the Joiner Center materials in exchange for some added resources for my department rather than them trying to totally support the management of such a collection independently. Though I must admit there were many times along the way negotiating with the Center that I wished I had not taken this ethical stand regarding university resources, in the end I believe that it has worked out, especially since they now fund the assistant archivist position in the library.

Another major collection which we anticipate receiving in the near future, also departs somewhat from our stated collection policy, but the reasons for

acquiring it are compelling. We have been contacted by Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Jr., and have been offered his papers relating to the Boston School Desegregation case. The Judge made his decision based on what he considers two crucial factors: 1) UMass/Boston played a key role in advising the court on the case and has been involved in a partnership role with the urban schools; and 2) he wanted the material to go to a public university. Also, from my own point of view, so much of the case centered on Dorchester and South Boston, the immediate neighborhoods of the university, it did make further sense for the collection to come to UMass/Boston.

I know that my experiences described here are not the normal situation most archivists face as they enter the profession. Most of us come into an existing repository with an established history of collecting materials, sometimes with a clear policy, sometimes operating under long standing traditions and practices. In the case at UMass/Boston, it was exciting to be able to be involved in the intellectual and ethical framework for the beginning of a program and to try to act according to those professional standards and principles I have learned so recently in graduate school.

In conclusion I suppose I want to emphasize again that as members of a profession, archivists need to consider the ethical basis for many of their policies and activities. Additionally, although it seems to me that many of the concepts presented as having an ethical basis could also be justified from the viewpoint of pragmatism. Since, I assume, none of us are acting independently but are part of a larger institution, or report to some oversight group, we will never be able to justify our actions and anticipate continued support if we are not operating under the tenants of ethical or professional behavior. Thank you.