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Review of Archival Accessioning

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Cover Page Footnote

Gracias a mi familia por creer en mi and thank you to my colleagues for your endless support.

Audra Eagle Yun, ed. *Archival Accessioning*. Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2021.

An essential book for all levels of archival professionals, *Archival Accessioning* addresses foundational methods and approaches to accessioning collections in various institutions. Audra Eagle Yun invited well-versed scholars to contribute an anthology of essays that expands on their in-depth knowledge of accessibility to archives, through scenarios and guided practices found in contemporary spaces such as federal institutions, universities, state and city archives, and community archives. The book's overarching argument is that archival accessioning is a functional program for all archival professionals working with all types of repositories and will allow for a better range of discoverability and access to collections. Accessioning can be understood as

...a foundational part of archival work, impacting every step in archival processing collections management thereafter. Archivists today understand the value of exposing hidden collections, yet it can be years between the time a collection is acquired and when it is actually processed. (1–2)

Curious individuals and professional archivists will appreciate the book as it dives into real-life matters like backlogs and principles of archives management. Moreover, readers will find that after digesting the book's content, the information will be useful for training employees or explaining to colleagues, administrators, and donors precisely what archivists do. The book is divided into two parts. The first part consists of an introduction and four chapters written by Eagle Yun. The second part comprises chapters 5 through 14, all written by scholars and archivists with considerable experience. Toward the end of the book, readers will find a bibliography, information about the authors, and an index.

Beginning Part One of the book, Eagle Yun presents in the introduction and chapter 1 concepts of archival accessioning suffused with historical outlines, principles, and traditional practices found in libraries and archives since the late nineteenth century. Eagle Yun appropriately asserts from the beginning that these same practices established by Anglo-American standards have also been sustained by Anglo archivists for over a century. Readers will gain a basic, but significant, understanding of the statistics showing the underrepresentation, or lack, of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in archives—a pivotal reason for the current climate in libraries and archives. Consequently, a conversation that highlights the sociocultural circumstances can assist in understanding why “archives are not neutral, nor is the work of accessioning” (3).

Chapter 2 dissects the steps to establishing an accessioning program—precustodial intervention, intake, baseline control, documentation, and access. Eagle Yun offers valuable questions to consider when accessioning new records. As a general rule, archivists should always ask themselves tough questions such as “what would be the user's interest in the materials?” and “Does

this record align with the institution's mission and value?" Not only does the chapter provide basic guidelines for assessment before accessioning, but it also acts as a guide to consider items that can be discarded, thus saving repository space and conserving resources.

Chapter 3 examines navigating discoverability and access to collections to promote the creation of an archival accessioning program. Eagle Yun expresses that implementing a premeditated accessing plan can lead to an improved, user-friendly public services program. Depending on the type of materials in question—born-digital, audiovisual (A/V), manuscript, etc.—archivists can consider ways to determine research access to processed and unprocessed collections.

Lastly, chapter 4 analyzes the formalities of retrospective accessioning, reappraisal, and deaccessioning of unprocessed and processed collections that can be done with a functional accessioning program. Even a simple collections survey can assist archivists in gaining control over archival holdings. Readers will find efficient examples of accessioning programs and steps in essays by Chela Scott Weber, Michael Rush, and Laura Uglean Jackson, while the remaining scholars have curated applicable scenarios. The following essays challenge traditional theories, methods, and practices in archives and encourage contemporary conversations that generate ideas, share experiences, and validate ideas recently applied to long-term projects in institutions and organizations.

Beginning Part Two, Tammi Kim presents approaches to managing a significant, and possibly languishing, backlog with a focus on accessioning manuscripts and personal papers. The scholar introduces three key factors of an archival accessioning workflow: inquiry during the donation process (establishing administrative control), minimal processing (establishing physical control), and creating catalog records or finding aid (creating baseline descriptions) as the final product. The first point of contact with the donor or family is pertinent to the assessment of the records as it leaves a paper trail of information that will identify provenance and assist with the arrangement and description of the collection. The interaction between an archivist, or a representative of the archivist, and the donor(s) begins as a point of interest in establishing a relationship and administrative records that will be used to trace the collection back to the donor. Additionally, the engagement offers a chance to obtain biographical information about the family or individual, gather required signatures of a deed of gift or acquisition form, and assess any materials or objects that may or may not be within the scope of the collection policy. Kim points out that minimal processing, arrangement, and description can take place to determine the future use, size, and placement of the collection in the repository.

In an essay that grapples with the issues of accessioning institutional records, Virginia Hunt deploys two scenarios. The first scenario provides steps to create an archival program for institutional records, while the other demonstrates handling institutional records at a history center. Hunt contends that the establishment of an archival program should be tailored specifically for the

institution or organization depending on the bandwidth of a lone archivist or archival team, with consideration to the scope of the collection policy and the repository's capacity. The essay flows with interesting approaches to accessioning institutional records that will keep readers engaged. Hunt's first scenario is about a lone archivist hired to create an archival program for the historical records of a longstanding nonprofit organization. Hunt mentions five essential steps to tackle the challenges of identifying records, including forming a preservation of records committee consisting of stakeholders. This committee could aid in the process of collecting documents that fit the organization's mission. Moreover, this method can assist an archivist's decision to keep or weed out records. A second interesting point from the same scenario is Hunt's design of inventory spreadsheets and appraisal notes. Oftentimes records are accepted or transferred from other departments, however, they are not tended to immediately. In this case, a universal spreadsheet, or backlog spreadsheet if you will, could give internal authorities quick access to records that require accessioning in the future.

For those working in government archives, Dallas City Archivist John H. Slate and retired Director of Troup County Archives Kaye Lanning Minchew break down the common accession procedures that often occur with managing born-digital and paper records. Archivists will find relevance in this article as it demonstrates procedures regularly adopted by historical societies, small and large institutional archives, and community archives, such as interdepartmental transfers, ingesting electronic records, and appraisal methods that justify intrinsic value. Slate and Minchew briefly mention ways of accessioning records for First Nations that ensure the protection of the self-governing tribal courts, offices, and departments. In addition, Slate and Minchew describe the ways in which state archives prioritize accessioning records beginning with state governmental agencies, gubernatorial papers, public papers of state officials, and individual papers relevant to previously accessioned collections. And finally, the accessioning practices for local government archives vary depending on the city's regulation and staff capacity. Since local and state institutions accession collections created by individuals and organizations, practices on the local government level can vary between meticulous and flexible guidelines. While to some this may appear disorderly, these practices showcase employee autonomy in the way they work with donors and manage collections. Moreover, it shows how municipal clerks, city secretaries, county clerks, and county managers wear many hats (similar to archivists) while offering public services often found in public libraries. Scenarios that examine government archives on the federal, state, local, and tribal levels would shape a greater and more diverse perception of archival accessioning in these four sectors.

Kelly Spring brings value to this anthology by discussing practical methods to accessioning accrued records into a processed collection. In this essay, Spring considers critical questions such as "if you were to create preliminary inventories for accession, would they be accessible to researchers?" and "how will you manage an unprocessed series in a processed collection?" Spring discusses two options to address these questions: to add accrued records as an unprocessed series

into a collection or to accession and process records to add them into a collection. The author refers to resources published by the OCLC Research and Internal Council on Archives that support archivists' efforts to make processed and unprocessed collections available for research. Spring offers an appendix that consists of an Accessioning Tasks Checklist and Archival Collection Accession Worksheet for Curators, which can be included into and modified to fit any archival program.

Rachel Searcy's work complements Spring's by exploring practices that assist in minimal, moderate, and optimal methods to accession accrued records into unprocessed collections. An assessment of the size of the new records and of any previously donated materials that should be added to the collection will provide information about the physical conditions of the collections' content and retain the order of the material, if any. Searcy suggests that this agenda will help determine the collection's value if there are no existing long-term care challenges or accrual of new or previous donations. This method also offers more accessibility to the collection for research.

In an essay that focuses on legacy media and A/V materials, Lauren Sorensen provides recommendations for developing an accessioning program like the one found in chapter 2. A/V conservation and preservation through migration to modern media is an archival method to preserve analog formats that are susceptible to deterioration and obsolescence (115). Sorensen contributes a walkthrough, including figures of PBCore metadata standards, for managing A/V materials and implementing a functional accessioning program. An examination of these steps is followed by pertinent questions to ask before and during the process to determine the condition and quality of each format, what to do in case there is very little information on labels, and the best options to weed out multiple copies from an A/V collection. There are notable resources to which archival professionals and graduate students can refer, such as *Independent Filmmaking* by Lenny Lipton and *How Video Works* by Diana Weynand and Marcus Weise. There are also references to well-known associations like the Archivists of Moving Image Association and directories for local vendors that could supply in-house services or used equipment. The bibliography is worth exploring for further practical resources.

In "Digital Archive Accessioning," Erin Faulder asserts a technical approach to accessioning born-digital records. The author makes a strong argument that institutions can determine the minimum or maximum level to complete the preservation of digital records but should factor in the risks of potential data loss. By establishing and evolving over time strategies such as precustodial conversations, workflows, intake risks, and utilizing methods of baseline control and documentation of all accessioned materials, Faulder explains, archivists will strengthen their accessioning programs and reduce risks to collections (123–28).

Chela Scott Weber's and Michael Rush's chapters complement one another as they each grapple with the underlying issues of retrospective accessioning and deposits. In "Retrospective Accessioning," Weber discusses retrospective accessioning, which involves reviewing a portion of unaccessioned and unprocessed collections and designing a system of standards for records. This method requires baseline control, precustodial conversations, and documentation and administrative control. The process involves gaining physical and intellectual control and enacting stabilization interventions, gathering quantitative data through surveys, assessing physical conditions, and determining a timeline for the retrospective project. Rush's essay tackles the one percent of collections—deposits. Deposits are the portions of archives mostly to remain uncatalogued and unprocessed and are rarely requested by researchers or handled by employees. Whether it is a legacy or newly acquired, it is important to establish the provenance of the item, any existing recent or updated donor contact information, and the amount of time the item has lived in the repository. During a retrospective accessioning project, curators, and archivists could implement a strategy to conduct a shelf read to locate, understand the extent, and hire an appraiser to reappraise all deposits. It also offers a chance to resolve issues of space, labor, and mitigate any liabilities.

Laura Uglean Jackson introduces a scenario that considers backlog reduction by focusing on reappraising and deaccessioning collections that may not fit the archive's collection policy. Jackson suggests factors to consider and steps for this process. First, create a list of unprocessed and uncatalogued collections for reappraisal. Second, review statistics and assess items in unprocessed boxes, including their conditions. Third, evaluate ownership status (deed of gift or acquisition form). And finally, determine if the records align with the scope of the collection policy. Jackson recommends that once archivists have completed the reappraisal and determined which records to deaccession from a collection, they should discuss options to deaccession and transfer records with an archival team or committee. The *Guidelines for Reappraisal and Deaccessioning* created by the Society of American Archivists (revised in 2017) provides excellent guidance for such projects.

Small and large cultural institutions that have implemented or are considering establishing an archive will find a treasure trove of information in *Archival Accessioning*. The essays are effective in providing approaches that are accessible to all types of archives. While the introduction mentions archives in minority-serving institutions such as historically Black and tribal colleges and universities, *Archival Accessioning* passes over the opportunity to provide insight from archivists who work or have worked in these types of institutions. There is an opportunity to expand on the conversations found in the book to include scenarios that focus on community archives as well. Even so, professionals from small cultural institutions—whether archives, libraries, historical centers, or museums—that consist of a small team of archivists, or a lone archivist, will find examples and best practices that can be modified to strengthen their accessioning programs.