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The ICA Appraisal Manual: Basic Principles

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Appraisal Manual Chapter: Strategic Approaches to Appraisal *Thomas Mills, ICA Committee on Appraisal*

Introduction. Appraisal is the process of evaluating records to determine how long to keep them, including to decide if the records have sufficient long term value to warrant the expense of preservation in an archives. Appraisal is fundamental to the archival endeavor, because appraisal determines what records will be kept and what records can be disposed.

Appraisal is a modern notion. In the mid twentieth century, modern organizations began producing far more records than could possibly be preserved. Appraisal, to determine what to keep permanently, requires that we understand an organization's universe of records or its universe of records producers- or both. Managing the appraisal of an organization's universe of records is a crucial strategic decision. It is important because there is enormous amount, perhaps an overwhelming amount, of records that must be appraised. Archivists must do as much as possible with the available resources. Therefore, the approach we choose – how to organize, plan and allocate resources for appraisal work – is a strategic decision.

Strategic Approaches. There are many strategic approaches to appraisal. The approaches, or strategies, share a basic objective to obtain and organize information about the “records universe” so that archivists have sufficient information to conduct systematic analysis and make decisions. The strategy establishes a plan for collecting and analyzing information and for managing resources so that we can make sound, defensible appraisal decisions. There is no single right or wrong strategy. In fact, there are many options and the “correct” choice depends on the circumstances and needs of the specific organization.

The strategy or approach selected by an archival jurisdiction will, of necessity, reflect the mandate, mission, values, operating environment, and social concerns that impact the archival enterprise. By selecting a strategy the archives defines the broad intellectual framework and the rules that will guide the appraisal process. The choice of strategy will likely have a considerable influence on all appraisal decisions. Therefore, selecting the strategy requires great care. In fact, the choice of strategy may determine if the archives is able to appraise most records at all. There have been cases where the strategy is overwhelmed by the enormous quantity of records, most of which are never appraised. And there are cases where appraisal decisions are made but there is no ability or resources to effectively carry out the decisions.

There are four basic strategies that are used to manage appraisal. It is possible to “mix and match” from among these three, thereby creating many variations on the basic strategies. The three basic strategies are described below.

Inventory and scheduling. The inventory and scheduling approach involves a thorough survey and description of all records created by an organization. The description, or data collection, includes information about who created the records and why, as well as information about the uses and contents of the records. Once described, the information is analyzed in the context of primary and secondary needs (administrative, fiscal, legal needs) to define minimum retention periods and to identify records of potential enduring value. The latter records are then “appraised” in more depth.

In theory and often in practice, routine business records are quickly dispatched in this process, and obviously important records are also quickly identified and placed under schedule control. After these “easy” decisions are made, resources can be focused on more difficult appraisal decisions. The use of “general schedules” covering records common to many agencies is often used to simplify the inventory and schedule process. This approach was developed largely in the United States during the last half of the twentieth century. The focus is typically on the records themselves. The records are evaluated as products of administrative entities and operations. A prerequisite of the American system is that agency staff, not archives staff, have primary responsibility for conducting the inventories and preparing proposed schedules. The proposed schedules are then reviewed, modified if necessary, and approved by the archival entity. During the archives review, appraisal of potentially valuable records occurs and final appraisal decisions are made.

The inventory and scheduling strategy has several shortcomings. First, it requires an enormous amount of work to keep up with the massive quantity of records and the continuous changes in recordkeeping systems. It tends to result in passive setting of priorities, because appraisal usually occurs only after an agency requests or proposes a schedule. It also tends to ignore relationships among separate agencies and their records. The archivist is also dependent to a great extent on the quality of descriptive information received from an agency. Of course, there

is one very important strategic advantage to this approach – agency staff carries out much of the information gathering.

Functional Strategy. A second approach is functional appraisal. Rather than immediately inventory and evaluate records, an effort is first made to assess the relative importance of the business functions and resulting activities of the government organization. The outcome of this assessment is a set of priorities for applying appraisal (and scheduling) resources. Functional appraisal begins at the highest level of an organization and looks across the organization at functions regardless of administrative boundaries. The ultimate result is the identification of functional business units that carry out the core or most important work in the organization, and whose work has the greatest impact on the population served by the entire organization. The archivist then proceeds to identify and evaluate the record keeping systems in only the most important functional business units.

Functional appraisal, in theory, seeks to understand the inputs, transactions, and outputs of records and information systems, and how records provide evidence of an organization's business transactions and activities. The archivist is also much better informed about records and information systems that are, or could be, shared between agencies or business units. Ideally, all or most of this work can take place without spending much time actually looking at the physical records themselves. Decisions about what to keep are made on the basis of information about functions and the record keeping processes that support the functions.

A possible weakness of the functional approach is that it sometimes neglects or misses records that have secondary value beyond the organization. In many cases, the records have secondary "informational" value that is entirely unrelated to the original business function that resulted in records creation.

Barbara Reed traced the functional approach back to nineteenth century Prussian traditions. A functional approach was refined in Germany in the 1950s and was adopted by many Eastern European countries in a variety of forms. In this tradition, the functional approach was sometimes extended beyond functions of an organization to assess the importance of a function to society in general. This "extended" functional approach could lead to greater attention to secondary value, and thereby offset the weakness mentioned above.

In the 1990s, some countries became disenchanted with the Inventory and Scheduling strategy because of increasing work backlogs, an "excessive" volume of records designated as permanent, and the failure to appraise records in electronic information systems. As a result, several variations of functional appraisal emerged, including Canadian "macro-appraisal," the Netherlands PIVOT project, and the Australian records management standard and its accompanying Design and Implementation of Record Keeping Systems (DIRKS) methodology.

The Australian DIRKS approach differed from the others in that it was designed as a tool for the design, development and management of record keeping systems. It had a purpose that included, yet went beyond, scheduling and appraisal. This approach has the strategic advantage of increasing the value of the archivist's contribution to the organization. The DIRKS approach places records analysis and appraisal firmly at the beginning rather than at the end of the records life-cycle. It also integrates records analysis work with the information systems development life cycle.

Macro-appraisal variations in Canada, the Netherlands, and Australia are works in progress. As they evolve, they show a tendency to combine of the inventory and scheduling and the functional approaches, and to maximize their benefits and minimize their shortcomings. In other words, they aim to combine the best of both strategies.

A simple variation of functional appraisal is to prioritize among all administrative units of an organization. This can be implemented easily at a variety of levels. The approach has been used with modest success in some US state governments and several manuscript repositories. By setting priorities at this level, the archives aims to mitigate the problems of overwhelming volume and of passively responding to agency requests.

Documentation Strategy. The third major approach is a documentation strategy, which focuses primarily on a subject or topic. A documentation strategy is an effort to place appraisal in a broad context. Documentation strategies seek to identify and evaluate the roles of all organizations and individuals in a subject or sometimes a geographic area. For example, the environment and the history of physics are two topics where documentation strategies have been used in US. A documentation strategy seeks to first identify all the likely owners of relevant record keeping systems and to involve all the owners, as well as potential users, in the identification and appraisal process. One major benefit of documentation strategy is to identify all interested parties and,

theoretically, to apply all available expertise to make an informed decision. Documentation strategy in theory has many benefits and can incorporate, as needed, parts of the inventory and scheduling and the functional appraisal approaches. However, in practice, it is very difficult because so many people are involved and because the process is thorough and therefore slow and resource intensive.

Risk Assessment. A fourth, newly emerging strategy is to use risk assessment to help set priorities as well as make decisions. Risk assessment is often used in business and in other disciplines to make essential strategic decisions. For archivists, it can help answer the question – what are the risks and potential costs to an organization if we fail to appraise records of a particular function or jurisdiction within an organization?

For example, the US National Archives and Records Administration has instituted a “resource allocation” system that helps to measure risk and set priorities for assisting agencies and conducting appraisal work. The resource allocation system assesses (a) the likelihood that functions have importance for ensuring individual or governmental rights and accountability, and for documenting the national experience and (b) the extent to which organizational units responsible for the function have scheduled records and transferred records to the Archives. The system also provides for special attention to reports of records in danger or reports of failures in information systems. The system, now in prototype testing, uses an extensive series of questions to gather data and weigh risks. As employed by NARA, the resource allocation system combines a functional approach and a records-centric approach.

Conclusion. Before embarking on an appraisal program, the archival authority must develop a plan and a strategy for accomplishing the program objectives. The four suggested approaches offer a menu of ideas from which to design a strategy to meet the needs in a particular place and time.

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